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CELEBRATING THE WORLD CONSUMER RIGHTS DAY ON 15TH MARCH: ENSURING THAT THE AFRICAN CONSUMERS BENEFIT FROM THE AFCFTA AGREEMENT AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY UNDER THE 4TH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION – A REVIEW OF ARSO INITIATIVES.

As the world marks the World Consumer Rights Day on 15th March, celebrated every year for raising global awareness about consumer rights and needs, the focus and debate on the role of Standardisation in protecting



Consumer Rights and Interests and the over-riding responsibilities of ARSO and the Standardisation Community, have come into sharp re-view, with highlights on how Standards facilitate the safeguarding of the Consumers Rights and Interests and **What consumers want from products and services** and the related regulatory frameworks, and why, therefore, Consumers need to be part of the standardisation process. Consumer participation in standards improves products and services. Putting the role of the ARSO Consumers Committee (ARSO COCO) into perspective. ARSO takes cognizance of the theme for the 2022 Consumers Day, the “Fair Digital Finance”. (Summit Arora, 2022).

By Definitions, a Consumer is any natural person to whom particular goods or services are marketed in the ordinary course of the supplier’s business. According to US President JF Kennedy on 15th March 1962 Consumers, Consumers are the largest economic group in the economy, affecting and affected by almost every public and private economic decision, ***If consumers are offered inferior products, if prices are exorbitant, if drugs are unsafe or worthless, if consumers are unable to choose on an informed basis, then their money is wasted, their health and safety threatened, and the national interest suffers.*** (Valant et al., 2015; UNCTAD, 2017). Given this situation, the Consumer protection agenda has ever grown stronger, with the main objectives of: **improving consumer safety; enhancing knowledge; improving implementation, stepping up enforcement and securing redress** as well as **aligning rights and key policies to economic and societal challenges and necessary regulatory Frameworks** (Valant et al., 2015).

Already Africa is being considered as one of the fastest-growing consumer markets in the world. In light of the increasing affluence, population growth, urbanization rates, and rapid spread of access to the internet and mobile phones on the continent, Africa’s emerging economies present exciting opportunities for expansion in retail and distribution with consumer expenditure growing at a compound annual rate of 3.9 percent since 2010, \$1.4 trillion in 2015, and expected growth of \$2.1 trillion by 2025, and 2 and \$2.5 trillion by 2030 (KPMG, 2016; Hattingh *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the profile of goods and services that Africans purchase will shift, from basic necessities toward more discretionary safe and Quality products. Already in some countries, the establishment of modern, branded trade has contributed to growth with more extensive product ranges and more competitive pricing, and for which standardisation continues to play a key role in ensuring Safety and Quality, within the demonstrated Consumer needs and rights and in the context of the WTO TBT Agreement with regards to regulatory requirements for the protection of human (consumers) life and the environment.

Already the COVID-19 has influenced policy re-orientation to diversify from an over-reliance on commodities and global value chains and supplies towards Manufacturing, Industrialisation, Value-addition, Export-Diversification, Regional Value Chains, intra-African trade of Made in Africa (AfCFTA) products and enhancing the utilisation of Digital platforms and e-commerce, hence the need for standardisation strategies that target African Consumers to benefit from these opportunities. **This comes with the need to address the four freedoms, within the Consumer rights, namely: the free movement of people, goods, services and capital, and with them the benefits from lower prices, more safe, quality and affordable product varieties.**

It is in this regard that ARSO has established the ARSO Consumers Committee (ARSO COCO), with membership both from the member States and the private sector, with the overall goal being to facilitate the highest level of consumer protection at the African continental market place. **ARSO COCO provides a platform to articulate consumer interests in the fields of standardization and conformity assessment for consumer goods and services with particular considerations to: improving consumer safety; enhancing knowledge; improving implementation; stepping up enforcement and securing redress as well as aligning rights and key policies to**

economic, societal and environmental challenges. With membership drawn from ARSO Members, ARSO COCO is currently operating under the following Working Groups:

- **WG 1-Child product safety / Sécurité des produits pour enfants**
- **WG 2-Food safety / Sécurité alimentaire**
- **WG 3-Household appliances / Appareils ménagers**
- **WG 4-Environmental protection and eco-labelling / Protection de l'environnement et éco-étiquetage**
- **WG 5-Cosmetic product safety / Sécurité des produits cosmétiques**
- **WG 6-Medical products safety/ Sécurité des produits médicaux**
- **WG 7-Automotive parts/ Pièces automobiles**
- **WG 8-Data protection/ Protection des données**
- **WG 9-paints/ peintures**

as this focuses on the potential benefits the African continent can reap from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4 IR). The 4IR characterized by the fusion of the digital, biological, and physical worlds, as well as the growing utilization of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, robotics, 3D printing, the Internet of Things, block chain and advanced wireless technologies, among others, presents significant opportunities as well as challenges for Africa and if aligned policies and procedures.



For his, ARSO has developed and launched (on 9th December 2021) the ARSO 4 IR Standardisation strategy (4 IR SS), to enable the continent adapt to the rapid changes of the 4IR and leverage it to opportunities within the AfCFTA Agreement. Through the preferred Theory of Change (ToC), the 4 IR SS identifies activities that would ensure that the continent, especially Consumers, benefits from the Digitization through **Balanced standardization policies and collaboration between state and non-state actors; Balanced data policies; Capacity building and skills development to enhance productivity; Continuous experimentation for**

cyber-physical systems; and Integration of measurements, learning and reporting, and information dissemination.

The Lagos Plan of Action of 1980, under paragraph 250, L on Intra-African trade expansion calls for “Buy in Africa” and “Made in Africa” hence strategies the need to counter the African consumers fascination with what comes from abroad, ranging agro-food industry, to crafts, tourism, and even fashion (Diara Ndiaye, 2020). Already, ARSO and the African Union have, also developed the Made in Africa Qualification Guideline to address the Challenges of Rules of Origin (establishing the nationality of products produced in Africa), Intellectual Property and the Standardisation (Quality and Safety issues) issues, meant to increase visibility of the brands of African goods (products) and services, and enjoyment of Trade Preferential offered under the AfCFTA, all meant to increase the Consumers trust and confidence in Africa Products. The Guideline will play a critical role in **improving market access and enhancing the competitive advantage of Africa (AfCFTA) products and leverage this linkage between standards and trade as driving force for any country’s economic growth.**

For all these initiatives, the ARSO 4 IR Standardisation strategy (4 IR SS), the ARSO COCO and the Made in Africa Qualification Guideline, remain pivotal to addressing the Consumers Interests and needs, as reflected in the 1962 US President John F Kennedy address the US Congress regarding the four basic consumer rights, later called the Consumer Bill of Rights and the 1985 United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, viz: **The right to safety, The right to be informed, The Right to choose, The right to be heard, and later in the right to satisfaction of basic needs, The right to redress, The Right to Consumer Education, and The right to a Healthy Environment.**

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