

## Empowering Consumers for Sustainable Development

### ***Exploring the Link between UNGCP and SDGs***

*The Briefing Paper explores the nexus between consumer empowerment and sustainable development, tracing the evolution from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It emphasises consumers' pivotal role in driving sustainable economic growth and consumption patterns, highlighting how their choices can influence production decisions and ultimately shape progress towards the SDGs.*

*It emphasises the importance of empowering marginalised communities and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, echoing the SDG principle of 'Leaving No One Behind.' Further, the paper examines the interplay between the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP) and the SDGs, demonstrating how consumer protection and empowerment mechanisms can advance various SDG targets.*

*The paper concludes by advocating for greater global collaboration and attention to consumer empowerment in international forums, stressing the need for collective efforts from stakeholders. It also calls for further research to integrate sustainability into consumer protection regimes and emphasises the critical role of consumer awareness in realising the SDGs and fostering a sustainable future.*

### **Introduction**

When the United Nations (UN) adopted its MDGs in September 2000, the concept of sustainability held little significance for the majority of people across the globe. Yet, by the end of 2015, the MDGs were seen to have been broadly successful. According to the UN MDGs Report of 2015, there was a remarkable reduction in global extreme poverty, decreasing from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015, with substantial progress primarily observed since 2000.

In the same year, 91 percent of the global population accessed improved drinking water sources, compared to 76 percent in 1990. The report also highlighted that almost 2.1 billion individuals across the globe had gained access to improved sanitation, and the prevalence of open defecation had nearly halved since 1990. Furthermore, the proportion of the urban population residing in slums in developing regions declined from around 39.4 percent in 2000 to 29.7 percent in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

While notable accomplishments have been realised on a global scale, the advancement has been inconsistent among regions and nations, resulting in notable disparities. A substantial number of individuals, particularly the impoverished and disadvantaged, have been left without sufficient progress. The pursuit of global environmental sustainability has exhibited varied outcomes over the past 15 years.

Considering the pressing environmental issues confronting the world, including climate change, food and water insecurity, and natural disasters, significant efforts were still required. To carry forward the global efforts, countries in September 2015 agreed to set the world on a path towards sustainable development through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agenda embraced 17 SDGs and set out quantitative objectives across the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development – all to be achieved by 2030.

## **Consumers: Key Architects of Sustainable Development**

Given that the underlying objectives of SDGs are to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and share prosperity, sustainable economic growth is vital as defined in Goal 8.<sup>2</sup> In the global market of goods and services, consumers drive the economy according to their demand or consumption patterns. They hold the power to influence production decisions, based on what goods and services they purchase or consume.

So, if consumers prefer to buy sustainable products and services it would result in a higher demand for such products and services. The rise in demand consequently puts pressure on firms to see that they produce sustainable products and services to stay in business. Consumers may also opt for a sustainable way of living by reducing their consumption.

<sup>1</sup> The Millennium Development Goal Report 2015. Accessed at [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015\\_MDG\\_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%20201\).pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%20201).pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Goal 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Therefore, the role of choices and decisions made by every individual forms the crucial point of influence which cannot be ignored in the process of achieving the targets of the 17 SDGs. This implies that an empowered and aware consumer will contribute significantly towards achieving many of the targets of SDGs.

While goals like SDG 12, which talks about responsible production and consumption directly, highlight the role and responsibilities of consumers to achieve sustainable development, one needs to understand the crucial role of empowered people/consumers to push for the change we are striving to achieve through Agenda 2030.

Additionally, on a global scale, the poor and the most vulnerable often lack access to basic goods and services, exposing them to hazardous practices and leaving them voiceless in the marketplace. A just, inclusive and equal global society is expected to provide equal opportunities in all forms to each individual without any form of discrimination. This involves raising awareness among the marginalised about their rights, equipping them with skills to make informed choices, enabling them to advocate for their rights, and ensuring access to resources for their development - an embodiment of the commitment to 'Leaving No One Behind.'

## UNGCP and SDGs Interlinked

The UNGCP adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1985 saw the introduction of the first set of international principles governing consumer rights.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, with the changing landscape, exposing consumers to an increasing array of global challenges, the Guidelines underwent revisions in 1999 and 2015, incorporating new provisions.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the 1999 revision incorporated sustainable consumption not only into the Objectives and General Principles but also introduced a dedicated new section titled 'Promotion of Sustainable Consumption' (Section G).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection. Accessible at <https://unctad.org/topic/competition-and-consumer-protection/un-guidelines-for-consumer-protection>

<sup>4</sup> [www.consumersinternational.org/what-we-do/consumer-protection/global-policy-cooperation/un-guidelines-for-consumer-protection/](http://www.consumersinternational.org/what-we-do/consumer-protection/global-policy-cooperation/un-guidelines-for-consumer-protection/)

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (as expanded in 1999). Accessible at [www.un.org/esa/sustdev/publications/consumption\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/publications/consumption_en.pdf)

Consequently, the updated UN Guidelines now encompass various aspects related to sustainable consumption, such as the promotion of research in this area, advocacy for recycling and sustainable government practices, endorsement of life cycle thinking and eco-products, and the establishment of standards for overseeing environmental claims. The newly added section, encourages governments to actively develop or strengthen effective regulatory mechanisms for consumer protection, particularly focusing on aspects related to sustainable consumption.

The table provides insights into the reciprocal influence between the implementation of the UNGCP and the SDGs, highlighting the intricate connections between these global initiatives. The SDGs are categorised below into three primary sections aligned for convenience according to the targets of the goals, emphasising human capital, safeguarding the environment, and promoting an equitable and just society.

The table elucidates how consumer protection and empowerment serve as impactful drivers and mechanisms for advancing the attainment of SDGs across various domains, showcasing their efficacy in supporting the broader goals of sustainable development.

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
<b>HUMAN CAPITAL</b>		
Goal 1: Poverty eradication	Policies for promoting sustainable consumption should take into account the goals of eradicating poverty, satisfying the basic human needs of all members of society and reducing inequality within and between countries.	<p>Extreme poverty, defined as living on less than US\$2.15 per person per day at 2017 purchasing power parity, had been steadily decreasing for decades.</p> <p>Unfortunately, COVID-19 reversed this trend, causing a significant increase in 2020. The number of people in extreme poverty rose to 724 million, exceeding pre-pandemic estimates by 90 million and erasing about three years of progress in poverty reduction.</p>

<sup>6</sup> Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023. Accessible at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/>

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
<p>Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</p>	<p>When formulating national policies and plans about food, Member States should take into account the needs of all consumers for food security and should support and, as far as possible, adopt standards from generally accepted international food standards.</p> <p>Member States should maintain, develop or improve food safety measures, including, <i>inter alia</i>, safety criteria, food standards and dietary requirements and effective monitoring, inspection and evaluation mechanisms.</p> <p>Member States should promote sustainable agricultural policies and practices, conservation of biodiversity and protection of soil and water, taking into account traditional knowledge.</p>	<p>In 2022, chronic hunger affected 9.2 percent of the global population, roughly 735 million people, marking an increase of 122 million from 2019. Additionally, an alarming 29.6 percent of the world's population, equivalent to 2.4 billion individuals, experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, indicating a rise of 391 million people from 2019.</p> <p>Despite global efforts, 2022 saw 45 million children under the age of 5 suffering from wasting, 148 million with stunted growth, and 37 million being overweight. Achieving the 2030 nutrition targets requires a significant shift in direction.</p>

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
Goal 3: Ensure health and well-being for all, at every stage of life	<p>In advancing consumer interests, particularly in developing countries, Member States should, where appropriate, give priority to areas of essential concern for the health of the consumer, such as food, water, pharmaceuticals, energy and public utilities, and also address the specificities of tourism.</p>	<p>The global maternal mortality ratio (MMR) decreased slightly from 227 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2015 to 223 in 2020. This figure remains over three times the target of 70 set for 2030.</p> <p>From 2015-2021, the global under-5 mortality rate dropped by 12 percent (from 43 to 38 deaths per 1,000 live births), and the neonatal mortality rate decreased by about 10 percent (from 20 to 18 deaths per 1,000 live births). Despite this improvement, 5 million children died before their fifth birthday in 2021, down from 6.1 million in 2015.</p> <p>Childhood vaccinations have seen their biggest drop in 30 years, while tuberculosis and malaria deaths have risen compared to pre-pandemic levels.</p>
Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.	<p>In most countries, primary education is compulsory and provided by the State. Yet, today, an estimated 250mn children around the world are unable to read and write despite having spent three or more years in school. Improving learning outcomes requires strategic reforms and interventions at all levels.</p>	<p>Between 2015 and 2021, primary school completion globally increased from 85 to 87 percent, lower secondary completion from 74 to 77 percent, and upper secondary completion from 53 to 58 percent. However, the rate of progress was notably slower compared to the 2000-2015 period.</p> <p>By 2030, an estimated 300 million children and young people may lack essential numeracy and literacy skills.</p>

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
	<p>Consumer education should, where appropriate, become an integral part of the basic curriculum of the educational system, preferably as a component of existing subjects.</p>	<p>In early 2021, less than 10 percent of low-income countries had adequate resources like soap, clean water, masks, and sanitation for the safety of learners and staff, in contrast to 96 percent in high-income countries.</p>
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>		
Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.	<p>Member States should, within the goals and targets set for the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, formulate, maintain or strengthen national policies to improve the supply, distribution and quality of water for drinking.</p> <p>Member States should assign high priority to the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes concerning the multiple uses of water, taking into account the importance of water for sustainable development in general and its finite character as a resource.</p>	<p>Despite great progress, billions still lack safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene access. Achieving universal coverage by 2030 demands a substantial increase in current global rates: sixfold for drinking water, fivefold for sanitation, and threefold for hygiene.</p> <p>Water use efficiency has increased by 9 percent, yet water stress and scarcity persist in many regions. In 2020, 2.4 billion people lived in water-stressed countries, further exacerbated by conflicts and climate change.</p>

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Member States should promote universal access to clean energy and formulate, maintain or strengthen national policies to improve the supply, distribution and quality of affordable energy to consumers according to their economic circumstances.	<p>Around 660 million people will lack electricity access, and almost 2 billion will still use polluting fuels for cooking by 2030.</p> <p>Renewable sources provide nearly 30 percent of electricity consumption, but challenges persist in the heating and transport sectors. Developing countries see a 9.6 percent annual growth in renewable energy installation, but international financial support for clean energy remains insufficient despite significant demand.</p>
Goal 12: Ensure responsible consumption and production	All Member States should strive to promote sustainable consumption patterns; developed countries should take the lead in achieving sustainable consumption patterns; developing countries should seek to achieve sustainable consumption patterns in their development process, having due regard for the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.	<p>High-income countries have a material footprint per capita 10 times higher than low-income countries. Efforts to halve per capita food waste and losses by 2030 are significantly off track.</p> <p>In 2021, despite 828 million people facing hunger, 13.2 percent of the world's food was lost from farm to consumer, showing little change since 2016 and falling short of the goal to substantially reduce post-harvest food losses by 2030.</p> <p>In addition, the global data from 2021 indicated a resurgence of fossil fuel subsidies, with governments spending an estimated US\$732bn on subsidies for coal, oil, and gas, nearly doubling the US\$375bn spent in 2020.</p>

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	<p>Sustainable consumption includes meeting the needs of present and future generations for goods and services in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.</p> <p>Responsibility for sustainable consumption is shared by all members and organisations of society, with informed consumers, Member States, businesses, labour organisations and consumer and environmental organisations playing particularly important roles.</p>	<p>The commitment of developed countries to provide US\$100bn annually in climate finance from 2020 to 2025 remains unfulfilled. In 2020, developed countries delivered and mobilised US\$83.3bn in climate financing for developing nations, representing a 4 percent increase from 2019 but still falling short of the target.</p> <p>Moreover, over 70 percent of climate finance from developed countries to developing nations between 2016 and 2020 came in the form of loans. To address climate change impacts, the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at the 2022 United Nations Climate Conference (COP 27) represents a recent effort to enhance financial support channels for the countries most affected by climate change.</p>
Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	<p>Member States should promote conservation of biodiversity and protection of soil and water, taking into account traditional knowledge.</p>	<p>Illegal fishing practices result in annual losses of 11 to 26 million tonnes of fish, valued at up to US\$23bn.</p> <p>Plastic pollution is a significant problem, with over 17 million metric tonnes of plastic polluting the oceans in 2021. This figure is expected to double or triple by 2040. Plastic production has increased fourfold in the last 40 years while recycling rates remain below 10 percent.</p>

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		The ocean's average pH is currently 8.1, approximately 30 percent more acidic than in pre-industrial times and changing rapidly. Ocean acidification poses a threat to marine life, disrupts the food web, and undermines critical services provided by the ocean, including our food security.
Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss		<p>Over the past two decades, nearly 100 million hectares of net forest area have been lost. Global forest coverage declined from 31.9 percent in 2000 (4.2 billion hectares) to 31.2 percent (4.1 billion hectares) in 2020.</p> <p>Agricultural expansion is the primary cause of nearly 90 percent of global deforestation, with cropland accounting for 49.6 percent and livestock grazing for 38.5 percent. Oil palm harvesting alone contributed to 7 percent of global deforestation from 2000 to 2018.</p>
<b>EQUITY</b>		
Goal 8: Inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all	The UNGCP do not directly speak about economic growth but does speak about economic democracy through well-regulated markets, which can promote sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all.	In 2022, young women (32.1 percent) were more than twice as likely as young men (15.4 percent) to be not in education, employment, or training.

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
Goal 9 Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.	The UNGCP do not directly speak about economic growth but does speak about economic democracy through well-regulated markets which can promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and innovation.	<p>In 2022, global manufacturing growth decelerated to 3.3 percent from 7.4 percent in 2021. Progress in least-developed countries (LDCs) falls short of the goal to double the manufacturing share in GDP by 2030.</p> <p>Global CO2 emissions from energy and industrial processes increased by 0.9 percent to a record high of 36.8 billion metric tonnes.</p>
Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.	UNGCP speaks for safety and sustainability not just in rural areas but for all sectors including urban areas.	<p>Over 50 percent of the global population currently lives in urban areas, and this is expected to increase to 70 percent by 2050. About 1.1 billion people live in urban slums, with an additional 2 billion expected in the next 30 years.</p> <p>In 2022, only 51.6 percent of the urban population has easy access to public transport, with significant regional differences. Developing countries and cities still have a long way to go in developing safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transportation systems.</p>
Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.	An intergovernmental group of experts on C P Law and policy, operating within the framework of an existing commission of the Trade and Development Board of the U N Conference on Trade and Development will provide the institutional machinery.	<p>In 2022, net Official Development Assistance (ODA) from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries reached US\$206bn, reflecting a 15.3 percent real increase from 2021. This increase was mainly driven by domestic spending on refugees and aid for Ukraine.</p>

SDGs	UNGCP	Status (Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 <sup>6</sup> )
	Member States should take appropriate steps at the national or regional levels to implement these guidelines.	However, in 2022, net bilateral ODA flows to African countries saw a real-term decrease of 7.4 percent compared to 2021.

Both frameworks indeed underscore the significance of human rights, consumer rights, environmental sustainability, and ethical conduct. This recognition of common values emphasises the interconnectedness of responsible business and consumption practices and broader global development goals, reinforcing the idea that both businesses and empowered consumers, by adhering to ethical and sustainable principles outlined in the UNGCP, can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

Therefore, the need arises to address this interconnectedness and interplay between consumer empowerment and sustainable development. Addressing them is essential for fostering a synergistic relationship between individual choices and broader societal objectives.

## Global Collaboration for Sustainable Progress

Given that the world grapples with complex challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and economic inequalities, it becomes imperative to place consumer protection and empowerment at the forefront of global discussions. While consumer protection has made strides at the national level, there is a pressing need to elevate its importance in international forums and discussions. Regrettably, the topic often lacks the attention it deserves.

For example, during the G20 summit in 2017 and 2018, global stakeholders collaboratively initiated and successfully conducted consumer summits on the sidelines. However, over time, this dedicated focus on the topic disappeared, and subsequent summits failed to exclusively prioritise consumer protection.

Addressing this interconnectedness between consumer empowerment and sustainable development involves concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including civil society organisations (CSOs), policymakers, and regulatory bodies. Each plays a crucial role in shaping an environment where consumer empowerment and sustainable development can mutually reinforce each other.

Civil society, in particular, acts as a crucial connecting link between stakeholders. They significantly contribute to awareness, information dissemination, research, and advocacy for SDGs, serving as agents of accountability and data reporting. The experience during MDG implementation highlighted their critical role in advancing goals and promoting good governance in collaboration with governments. Therefore, recognising their importance is key to effective SDG implementation and enhancing their global impact.

## Conclusion & the Way Forward

In conclusion, the imperative recognition of consumer empowerment and protection as integral components of the sustainable development agenda demands global attention. The collaborative efforts among stakeholders, coupled with the elevation of consumer protection in international discussions, can pave the way for a world where consumers actively shape a sustainable and equitable future.

However, the scarcity of literature delving into the integration of sustainability into consumer protection regimes highlights a critical gap in our understanding. Comparative analysis of consumer protection legislation is essential to assess the extent to which sustainability is incorporated into laws and policies, emphasising the need for further research and exploration in this area.

Finally, the realisation that achieving the SDGs hinges on enlightened and empowered consumers underscores the pivotal role of consumer awareness and consumer groups. By prioritising consumer empowerment, we can contribute significantly to meeting the SDGs and fostering a sustainable and prosperous future for all.

This Briefing Paper has been prepared by Simi T.B., of and for CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training.

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