
ROLE OF CONSUMERS AND HOME ECONOMISTS IN PAKISTAN IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION*

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Abstract

The possible role any consumer could play in promoting sustainable consumption or development is associated with the degree of choice a consumer has and factors influencing his choice. The purpose of this paper is to review literature and data so as to assess the prospects of empowering Pakistani consumers for enhancement of their role in promoting sustainable development. Illiteracy, lack of needed information of, poor access to available information, lack of laws, poor implementation of laws emerged as the major factors limiting the potential of Pakistani consumer in parroting sustainable consumption. Development of software for translation and transformation of needed information in local languages as readable matter and as audio recordings; proliferation and networking of consumer originations; and networking and activation of home economists to promote and support sustainable consumption are the three identified strategies that could lead to enhancement of the potential of Pakistani consumer in promoting sustainable consumption.

Keywords: Home Economics, Pakistan, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Consumption is associated with availability, access and purchasing power. Consumers having enough resources to chose from a range of products and services could exert an influence on the market and economy. The choices a consumer makes are influenced by his ideology, perceptions of utility and knowledge about the efficiency of the product. Thus the possible role any consumer could play in promoting sustainable consumption or development is associated with the degree of choice a consumer has and factors influencing his choice.

Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to review the characteristics of Pakistani consumers and the society so as to assess: 1) the potential of Pakistani consumers in promoting sustainable development and 2) the prospects of empowering Pakistani consumers for enhancement of their role in promoting sustainable development.

Methods

1. Review of literature and data to identify factors associated with sustainable Consumption
2. Review of literature and data to assess the presence of conditions needed for

sustainable development in Pakistan, particularly those related to the role of consumer.

3. Critically reviewing the information retrieved so as to assess possibilities of enhancing the role of Pakistani Consumers in promoting sustainable development

Results

Factors associated with sustainable Consumption

Changing consumption and production patterns is one of the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development, as recognized by the Heads of State and Governments in the Johannesburg Declaration (Hans L & Nath B, 2003; UNU., 2002). Consumers generally have a positive, but unfortunately passive relation to sustainable consumption. Majority of consumers want to be sustainable and responsible, but in the everyday life factors like stress, price, transparency, trust, availability, lack of time, traditions etc make the individual consumer not acting in line with his or her ideals.

With the advent of globalization, markets have become a battlefield where companies compete for dominant position at any cost. Under these conditions, any potential benefits from market

efficiency give way to unhealthy competition. Consumers are the victims of this positioning battle because they are used to finance it. Located on the “demand” side of this equation, consumers are at a clear disadvantage in product safety, quality and pricing. Greater efficiency and effectiveness in regulatory bodies will bring healthier competition to markets. When competition works, it brings lower priced, better-quality goods to the marketplace. Regulation helps governments and consumers to keep powerful business interests in check.

The main conditions for operation of a market that effectively promotes efficiency are (R.Brown, 2007) :

1. rivalrous competitors in numbers resulting in optimal productivity, including containment of profits to normal return on capital levels, and
2. Adequate information and an effective margin of consumers educated and informed to make maximizing decisions.

The basic determinants of the potential role of consumer in promoting sustainable consumption are: 1) the level of empowerment of consumer in any economy and 2) attempts being made by public and private agents to empower the consumer.

Thus the three specific factors identified (by author of this paper) to be associated with the sustainable consumption are:

1. Status of consumer in any economy
2. Attempts being made by public and private agents to empower the consumer
3. Attempts being made by public and private agents to promote sustainable consumption

Status of consumer in Pakistani economy:

An average consumer in Pakistan has very little potential for playing an active role in promoting sustainable consumption because of lack of education, lack of information, poor access to law enforcement of agency, lack of regulations to protect unethical marketing, and poor implantations of existing laws and regulations.

- a. Lack of education: A vast majority (57%) of Pakistani population is illiterate (FBS.,

2007) and thus is unable to make use of written information about his rights, laws or the characteristics of products; or communicate to official authorities in relation to violation of rights or other matters. Even among those who can read and write any local language the level of education is very low and limits their ability to communicate and comprehend laws and scientific information.

- b. Lack of information: Due to overall standard of education and research and status of consumer in the country, in a vast majority of cases the information needed by the consumer is not available anywhere in the country e.g. for numerous products being sold for human consumption no estimations have ever been made about chemical composition and safety of the products.
- c. Lack of access to information: In case where information is available anywhere in the country the access of consumer is very limited because of lack of comprehensive system of outlets. Number of libraries is limited and there is no system of regularly updating libraries and promoting their use. In majority of case publications about rules and regulation or accepted standards of products, and information given with or on the product is only in English language and thus has no use for people not knowing English language.
- d. Lack of regulations to protect unethical marketing, and Poor implantations of existing laws and regulations.

Absence of an entry on ‘consumer’ in the indices of law books in Pakistan is not only indicative of the absence of consumer concerns in the juridical debate and statutes of Pakistan but also very depressing and disturbing from the standpoint of a consumer. The legal scene does not appear promising for the consumers given that consumer related laws are largely absent and where they exist at all, no effective implementation and enforcement mechanisms are available. The consumers are being exploited for they are largely unaware of their rights as well as ignorant about the possible legal remedies available (CRCP 2001).

The government representing the consumer suffers from a conflict of interest. For example, seeking to generate tax revenues from sales and supplies, the need to accommodate the organized influence and pressure from the suppliers, especially the powerful multinationals, and at the same time representing the consumer (Sarwar & Hafeez, 2000).

Attempts being made by public and private agents in Pakistan to empower the consumer:

Apparently there are no active and focused programs being run by Government to empower the consumer. "In Pakistan, almost all governments since independence have remained indifferent to the consumer concerns, largely because of the nonexistence of independent consumer rights initiatives and poor understanding of the causes, implications and consequences of malpractices of business sector and civic agencies vis-a-vis the rights of the consumers" (CRCP, 2001).

Endeavors in the direction of increasing literacy, level of education, promoting use of telephones and internet, empowering media, promoting higher education and research have potential to have apposite influence on the status of consumer. The major constraint in almost all cases is the very poor implementation of regulations and laws, and corruption. Virtual impact of almost all the development strategies is nearly nullified due to corruption, lack of accountability and poor use of allocated resources. Any how the campaigns made by government on media do have impact of consumers' practices.

With in the private sector there are a few NGOs working directly for consumer rights. The focus of a few is general consumption while of others is particular commodity.

Attempts being made by public and private agents in Pakistan to promote sustainable consumption:

The idea of promoting sustainable consumption is supported by a few Private sector NGOs working towards empowerment of consumers.

Consumer Rights Commission of Pakistan (CRCP) (CRCP, 2005) is a rights-based civil

initiative registered under the Trust Act, 1882. Established in 1998, CRCP is an independent, non-profit, and non-governmental organization. It largely works through local fund-raising and engaging volunteers. It is not supported by any industry or commercial sector. It is the first national consumer organization in the country, which approaches the issue of consumer protection in comprehensive and holistic terms. Its vision and strategies have significant cross linkages with both market practices and issues of governance.

The Network for Consumer Protection (The Network for Consumer Protection, 2008), commonly known as "The Network", is a national, public interest, non-profit, non-partisan organization. Their mission is to protect and promote the interest of all Pakistani consumers: by educating them about their rights and responsibilities; by providing them independent information about goods and services; and by informing them about government's performance as protector of their rights, especially the poor consumers. The Network produces periodical and issues-specific publications.

LEAD Pakistan (LEAD, 2007) has mission to create, strengthen and support networks of people and institutions promoting change towards sustainable development – development that is economically sound, environmentally responsible and socially equitable

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP, 2007) is an independent, voluntary, non-profit organization which is not associated or affiliated with the government or any political party. It is committed to act with impartiality and objectivity in all matters. Among its main aims are spreading awareness of human rights among the people, mobilizing public opinion, collecting information and disseminating knowledge about human rights abuses.

The abovementioned organizations are playing an important role not only in providing information and motivating consumers for action but also in facilitating action against violation of consumer rights e.g. to empower consumers, Consumer Protection Council of

Helpline Trust (established by CRCP) has started a complaint registration process that can be used online also (HELPLINE TRUST, 2007).

Besides these NGOs electronic media is also contribution in consumer motivation by having robust information and communication about consumer issues through several programs.

Possibilities of enhancing the role of Pakistani Consumers

Development of Translation and Text Reading Software:

Availability of, and access to authentic information is basic prerequisite for empowerment of consumers. In absence of such information, consumers are excluded from policy making and social development programs. Furthermore, unavailability of accurate information discourages action and facilitates corruption, and leads to increased vulnerability of the consumer to exploitations. If consumers have relevant information, their capacity to participate in policymaking and taking actions to protect their rights would increase.

For empowering Pakistani consumers the valuable information being collated by NGOs needs to be translated in local languages and made available to public in printed and as audio recordings and made easily available for use, borrowing and purchase The printed matter. Attention towards availability of information could be raised through media.

Experts of information technology should design software for translation of documents from English to Urdu/local languages and from written to audio files. This development could be a breakthrough in making relevant information accessible to majority of Pakistanis.

Developing a network of consumer originations

The existing organizations could be given support to broaden their circle of action so that consumer dissatisfaction could be channeled in positive and constructive directions. At present

consumer concerns and consumer dissatisfactions are vulnerable to be exploited for political interests.

Possible Role of Home Economists

Home economics is being taught at school level in a large number (but not in all) of public schools throughout the country. Home Economics Association can serve as a liaison between these institutions and teachers. This can lead to development of consumer movement among teachers and students of home economics and their families. Experts of Home Economics could provide valuable information about standards of consumer good and conduct researcher to understand behavior preferences and potentials of consumers.

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