

MAKING DIGITAL MARKETPLACES FAIRER

STATEMENT BY SENATOR THE HONOURABLE
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MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY
ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD CONSUMER RIGHTS DAY 2018



The rapid growth of e-commerce in society has resulted in dramatic changes in our consumer landscape. Over the past decade, e-commerce has increased at an average annual rate of twenty percent (20%). Recognizing this trend, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has responded with strategies to increase levels of e-commerce awareness and consumer protection. The remaining focus on the digital domain as part of the global consumer rights movement continues in 2018 with a theme which emphasizes **Making Digital Marketplaces Fairer**. This year World Consumer Rights Day challenges us to examine various issues in the electronic marketplace including electronic commerce (e-commerce), online security, redress, state policy and responsible and ethical online business practices.

The digital environment creates limitless opportunities and risks which cannot be disregarded. The fundamental steps needed to limit consumer vulnerability require informed and pro-active preventive action by all interest groups supported by cogent regulation. Equally critical are established systems to ensure that purchasers receive value for money and are adequately aware of their rights and responsibilities when engaging in electronic e-commerce.

Consumers must exercise due diligence when conducting online trade by ensuring the use of secure and authenticated platforms and that there is complete disclosure regarding purchasing, return and shipping policies, warranties, taxes and fees. Online merchants must also play a prominent role in protecting consumer interests as major stakeholders in shaping e-commerce.

The Government, in recognizing this symbiosis, has approved a new National Consumer Policy (NCP 2018-2023). The new Policy will be implemented in the upcoming months with the support of legislation currently

under review. The NCP harmonises the existing Consumer Protection and Safety Act, Chapter 82:34 and aligns with the CARICOM Model Consumer Protection Bill (2016). The new legislation will ensure that consumers of goods, services and more importantly of digital content receive similar protection. Additionally, the policy guarantees consumer safety by enforcing industry codes of practice and proposes the establishment of a Tribunal to provide efficient, inexpensive and binding modalities for settling consumer disputes.

In response to the international industry trends which now embrace digital commerce, the Government is also implementing a National e-Commerce Strategy which will ensure that both business persons and consumers are adequately resourced to benefit from e-commerce within an enabling and supportive legal and regulatory environment. The strategy will also foster business and consumer confidence in the establishment of a larger digital economy.

The Consumer Affairs Division (CAD) has a leading role to play in the implementation of the NCP and the National e-Commerce Strategy through public outreach, education and advocacy. The CAD remains committed to strengthening consumer protection mechanisms and providing redress even in the expanding digital marketplace. The CAD is accessible via social media on **Facebook: @consumeraffairstt**, via **e-mail at consumeraffairs@gov.tt**, or **via the Consumer Protection Unit at 623-2931 exts 1905-15** and at the Division's various offices to treat with any issues or concerns of citizens in this regard.