



Opening Address by

**Mrs. Pamela Benson, Chairman Consumer Complaints Committee,
Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago,
at the launch of the Authority's Consumer Advocacy Initiative,
Tuesday March 25th 2014, Office of the Authority, Barataria**

- Members of the Board of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago
- Management and staff
- Participants
- Mr. Wendell Etienne- Moderator
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Ladies and gentlemen good afternoon. I must start by thanking you for demonstrating interest in the work of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago by attending the launch of this organization's Consumer Advocacy Initiative.

In an address to the United States Congress on March 15th 1962, the late President John F Kennedy stated "consumers, by definition, include us all". They are the largest economic group, affecting and affected by almost every public and private economic decision. Yet they are the only important group... whose views are often not heard.

We are all consumers of multiple services and products. Today however we will be focusing specifically on consumers of telecommunications and broadcasting services, which are used for among other things, entertainment, education, healthcare, personal security or keeping in touch with friends and family. We can all agree therefore that services such as mobile and landline telephone, Internet, subscription television, play a major role in our daily existence.

Consequently, any interruption in these services either as a result of the malfunction of a device or service disruption, can result in frustration, particularly after several attempts have been made with the provider to have the problem rectified.



Ladies and gentlemen the role of TATT is to develop Trinidad and Tobago's telecommunications and broadcasting sectors.

The legislation upon which TATT is established, the Telecommunications Act, outlines the wide scope of responsibilities which this organization has acted on since July 1st 2004, the date on which we became operational. Liberalization of the telecommunications and broadcasting markets were first on the agenda resulting in consumers now having greater choice in mobile, fixed line telephone, Internet, free to air and subscription television services.

Specific to consumer protection, the Act mandates this organization to *“investigate complaints by users, operators of telecommunications Networks, providers of telecommunications and broadcasting services or other persons arising out of the operation of a public telecommunications network, or the provision of a telecommunications service or broadcasting service, in respect of rates, billings and services provided generally and to facilitate relief where necessary”*.

This year 2014 TATT is celebrating its 10th Anniversary and within the last ten years of operation we have received and acted upon approximately five thousand five hundred complaints from consumers of various services and embarked upon a number of consumer protection initiatives.

In spite of this however it is evident that consumers of telecommunications and broadcasting services in Trinidad and Tobago are not as empowered as they ought to be to manage some issues regarding their services.

Consequently ladies and gentlemen, this matter was placed very high on TATT's agenda during discussions leading up to the finalization of a strategic plan for the period 2013 to 2016. Accordingly, TATT has embedded Advocacy as one of its Key Strategic Imperatives and Objectives in the plan.

Advocacy by definition, is the act of pleading for, supporting or recommending on behalf of others. Therefore the consumer advocacy initiative being launched today relates to the act of pleading for, supporting or recommending enhanced quality of service for and on behalf of consumers of telecommunications and broadcasting services in Trinidad and Tobago.



Success of the foregoing requires collaborative efforts on the part of TATT, consumers as well as service providers.

Role of TATT in Consumer Protection

With respect to TATT we have from inception embarked upon a range of consumer protection initiatives including the following:

- Establishment of a facility to act upon complaints from consumers of telecommunications and broadcasting services
- Establishment of a toll free consumer complaint line 800-8288
- Appointment of a Consumer Complaint Committee which reports to the Board of TATT
- Proactive monitoring of broadband and fixed network key performance indicators at regular intervals
- Consistent dissemination of consumer empowerment information by way of print and electronic media as well as via exhibitions, workshops conferences and ICT Open fora hosted quarterly by TATT.

TATT is now also currently actively pursuing the following aimed at undergirding all consumer related initiatives:

- Reviewing current and new Telecommunications Quality of Service Standards
- Finalizing a Quality of Service Framework
- Amending the Telecommunications Act to ensure among other things, enforcement of rebates to consumers
- Finalizing a Consumer Rights and Obligations Policy and working towards the passing of associated regulations by Parliament to protect consumers from infringements by providers

Role of Service Providers in Consumer Protection

Service providers have a critical role to play in protecting consumers. Each entity that provides a public telecommunications and/or broadcasting service does so on the basis of adhering to provisions outlined in a Concession to which they co-sign.



Some examples of those provisions pertaining to protecting consumers include:

- Publishing rates prior to them taking effect
- Making tariffs available and easily accessible on providers' public websites
- Ensuring customer bills accurately reflect services used
- Ensuring service interruptions are avoided or kept at a minimum
- Providing customer care assistance which must include fault clearance for eighteen hours a day.

Role of the Consumer in their Own Protection

Consumers among other things have an obligation to pay their bills on time that have been accurately calculated and are prohibited from tampering with equipment placed on their premises by providers such as cable boxes.

Consumers should try on a regular basis, access information that will help them to make wise choices and

Consumers should seek opportunities to have their voices heard. This of course does not refer to obtrusive, raucous or offensive behavior at providers premises, but rather strategically highlighting inadequacies in service provision or product offering individually or collectively.

Advantages of Consumer Advocacy

The above demonstrates the necessity for cooperation of all parties i.e. the regulator, provider and consumer, for efficient and effective telecommunications and broadcasting markets.

As while the regulator assumes its role of enforcing rules and regulations, there will always be the need to partner with consumers towards guiding providers to excellent service delivery.

This is the intent of TATT's Consumer Advocacy Initiative - to encourage consumers to influence service providers towards excellent service delivery. While TATT currently intervenes on behalf of consumers faced with service or equipment challenges, people power can in many circumstances be more effective than legislative intervention. As a matter of fact ladies and



gentlemen, significant national and global regulations are very often built or adjusted as a consequence of persuasion of a people.

In Trinidad and Tobago we can think about recent legislation to protect persons from attacks by dangerous dogs and globally legislation in many countries to eliminate the use of mobile telephones while driving to reduce vehicular accidents, climate change, violence against women and children and the list can go on.

In a society there are the creators and enforcers of rules, however the most potent input comes from the persons who those rules and laws have been developed to protect. This potent input comes from people power, exercised through demonstration of popular opinion. This is how modern society advances. I am sure we can all think about at least one nation that has lagged behind the rest of the world as the people have no opportunity to offer an opinion on any matter.

Sustained consumer advocacy while not common in Trinidad and Tobago is prevalent in other parts of the world. In the United States the Consumer Advocacy Group of America is a widely recognized non-governmental organization whose mission is to provide consumers with the maximum protection from fraudulent and misleading advertising and sales practices. We are all aware of globally recognized regulatory bodies in the United States such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Communications Commission.

Yet there still exists powerful consumer movements such as the Consumer Advocacy Group of America. Why? Because voices of the people still need to be heard.

Yes the ultimate protection of consumers is undoubtedly the responsibility of governments and regulatory bodies such as TATT. However consumer protection efforts become even more forceful when aligned with voices of the consumers themselves. The United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in its Guidelines for Consumer Protection states “Governments should, within their own national context, encourage the formulation and implementation by business, in cooperation with consumer organizations, codes of marketing and other business practices to ensure adequate consumer protection. Voluntary agreements may also be established jointly by business, consumer organizations and other interested parties.



Ladies and gentlemen, the issue of protecting consumers of telecommunications and broadcasting services has had to be escalated over the years as a consequence of rapid advances in technology use and the plethora of providers offering new and improved devices and services in response to consumer demands.

The following figures quoted in TATT's Annual Market Report, would provide a clear picture of technology use in Trinidad and Tobago in 2012.

- Fixed line telephones 286,000
- Mobile telephones 1.9 million in a country with a population of 1.3 million
- Internet subscriptions 646,000
- Subscription television 198,000

In such a vibrant environment there will no doubt be lapses by services providers to the detriment of consumers who will always be the first to be aware.

The role of Consumer Advocacy in Trinidad and Tobago's telecommunications and broadcasting sectors could therefore include the following:

1. To provide a strong corporate consumer voice on areas of default by providers of telecommunications and broadcasting services, particularly for disadvantaged members of rural communities and the differently abled.
2. To provide a means by which consumers residing in remote corners of the national community may have issues of default by service providers resolved.
3. To empower ordinary members of the national community by providing relevant information to protect themselves.
4. To provide a platform from which stakeholders, can communicate with consumers and vice versa, on matters of mutual interest.

Fundamental to TATT's consumer advocacy initiative are three important pillars;

1. Engaging consumers



2. Empowering Consumers and
3. Protecting consumers

Engaging Consumers

Engaging consumers would be the first step towards successful consumer advocacy and will depend largely on the willingness of consumers to spend time and exert effort towards contributing to receiving better service from providers.

This workshop ladies and gentlemen is TATT's first step towards formally engaging consumers. Over the coming months TATT will be providing you with a wide range of information via e-mail and post and we look forward to your valuable input through your responses.

Empowering Consumers

TATT plans to escalate its public education efforts with the aim of further empowering consumers. A European Union document titled "Consumer Empowerment in the EU" has provided a number of valuable points on consumer empowerment. The document states in part:

- Consumer empowerment is both a function of the skills, knowledge and assertiveness of consumers themselves, and the protection, rules and institutions designed to support them as they play their part.
- Consumer empowerment depends on knowledge of consumer rights and information,
- Empowered consumers can better identify the best prices and quality, rewarding the businesses which are most efficient and best at innovating to respond to consumer demand.
- Empowered consumers who complain and assert their rights are the most effective consultants in helping businesses to innovate and improve.
- Empowered consumers know who to turn to when they have a problem, whether it is a public authority responsible for consumer issues or a non-governmental consumer organisation.

The aim of consumer empowerment will be to enable individuals to act discriminately, allowing them to become capable of making informed choices of goods and services, and conscious of their rights and responsibilities.



TATT's consumer empowerment drive will include the following:

- Hosting of workshops with community groups,
- Establishment of a Facebook forum
- Continued development and distribution of audio visual public education material

Protecting Consumers

According to the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, Governments should provide or maintain adequate infrastructure to develop, implement and monitor consumer protection policies. Special care should be taken to ensure that measures for consumer protection are implemented for the benefit of all sectors of the population, particularly the rural population and people living in poverty.

Therefore legislative strength is foundational to the protection of telecommunication and broadcasting consumers in Trinidad and Tobago

The objects of the Telecommunications Act include establishing conditions for “promoting and protecting the interests of the public by –

- i. promoting access to telecommunications services
- ii. ensuring that services are provided to persons able to meet the financial and technical obligations in relation to those services
- iii. providing for the protection of customers
- iv. promoting the interests of customers, purchasers and other users in respect of the quality and variety of telecommunications services and equipment supplied

As mentioned earlier this Act is in the process of being amended to bolster TATT's consumer protection thrust. This should take place by the end of this year.

Outlining the specific rights and obligations of consumers, is the Authority's draft Consumer Rights and Obligations Policy (CROP) and associated regulations. The passing of these regulations in Parliament and subsequent implementation will serve to solidify the role of the Authority in consumer protection.



Protection of consumers must be tripartite. The regulator, the provider and the consumer. In launching this initiative TATT has underscored the critical importance of the collective voice of the consumer.

Ladies and gentlemen enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic Trinidad are a number of fundamental human rights and freedom, of which all citizens ought to take full advantage. Included is the freedom of thought and expression which I take this opportunity to urge consumers to utilize.

This right can either be utilized individually or collectively by persons with a common cause. We are all aware of the power of collective agreement. This is something consumers of telecommunications and broadcasting services in Trinidad and Tobago need to consider - starting with you, the attendees at today's launch.

Following this address there will be two presentations which will be very informative. I urge you to pay careful attention and during the question and answer segments we look forward to hearing from you. Your input will be critical to the development of this initiative. So please, ask questions, provide comments and feedback.

At this time I want to thank you for attending this event and I look forward to hearing from you.

I thank you