

KUALA LUMPUR, June 26 (Bernama) -- There is certainly absolute truth in the saying that 'the only thing constant is change'. Take the consumer movement for instance, at one time the complaints chronicled around rotten fish or dented food cans, today the grouses revolve around the high cost of living. In short, consumer issues have become complex and with the waves of globalisation hitting hard, there is no doubt that the grievances affecting consumers are bound to 'evolve'. Consumers of the 21st century are more concerned with the quality of living at their disposal.

The biggest challenge in raising consumerism awareness is in generating interest. Malaysians are not interested in consumer-related issues. They are just not bothered. When we hold public talks, it is so difficult to pull in the crowd. Even if we get the crowd, 98 percent will comprise senior citizens," lamented Darshan Singh, the director of the National Consumer Complaints Center (NCCC).

The NCCC, which comes under the Selangor and Federal Territory Consumer Association, was set up by Era Consumer in 2004.

**YOUNGSTERS MUST TAKE INTEREST**

Darshan told Bernama the involvement of younger generation was paramount and until and unless that was done the consumer movement in Malaysia would be getting nowhere.

"Another reason is funding. There are many things that we want to do to enhance consumer protection in this country but are unable to do so because of the financial constraints.

"We do not receive any grant from the Government. Consumer protection is one of the most important aspects of civil society and this crucial point has been overlooked by the Government. So we are left to make do with whatever resources we have," he said.

**COMPLAINTS GET NOWHERE**

Darshan said 'complaining' is not a way of life for Malaysians and one reason for this was due to the ineffectiveness of the way the complaints were handled by the Government agencies.

"There is no proper information on how to go about highlighting grievances concerning a thing bought or service received. Majority of the consumers shy away because they feel their complaint will get nowhere and it will just be a waste of time for them.

"A big number of people expect others to fight their battles for them and are not willing to do anything themselves. That is why NCCC was established. We want to provide independent avenues for consumers to lodge their complaints. We try and teach consumers how to assert their rights and take up their cause when they fail to find any resolution."

He said the current situation was such that if consumer advocates like NCCC did not intervene, the likelihood for the potential complainant to drop the case was great.

Darshan said the NCCC receives an average of 90 telephone calls per day. Not all however are complaints. Some call to either provide or seek information.

"We have also created an online complaints form at [www.nccc.org.my](http://www.nccc.org.my) and we encourage people to use it to lodge complaints. In a month, we log in 1,000 complaints. These are the type of consumers we hope to see more, who take the trouble to defend their consumer rights."

**EDUCATION SYSTEM'S ROLE CRUCIAL**

Lamenting that the education system has failed miserably in creating prudent and well-informed consumers, Darshan said the pro-industry government policies did not take into account consumer protection.

"We do not have any subject in school that deals with consumerism. The efforts seem to be focussed on creating Consumer Clubs in secondary schools. I believe that consumer education should begin in primary schools and the Government should engage consumer bodies to assist. A comprehensive consumer curriculum has to be developed. This will definitely instil knowledge among the young at an early age.

"E" Darshan said NCCC has always advocated the 3 "E" i.e. education, ethics and enforcement in its efforts at strengthening consumer protection in the country. "If consumers are equipped with knowledge, they will be able to effectively assert their rights and this will force the traders to be more ethical in conducting their business as they would know that they can no longer short-change customers." And finally enforcement should step in to weed out errant traders who blatantly disregard consumer interest. Once these three are in place I believe we can achieve a positive result in protecting consumers. At the moment all these three areas are out of sync." When it comes to complaining, Darshan said there is no such thing as a petty complaint. A complaint is a complaint. "We want to cultivate the habit of complaining among Malaysians. Each and every complaint filed with NCCC is investigated, the issue identified and addressed. If we find there is no case then the complainant is informed of that. But from my three years' with NCCC there is always an issue in every complaint received. From every complaint received we structure our consumer education and advocacy work." **CONSUMER BODIES ARE NOT ADVERSARIES** Traditionally consumer education or empowerment programmes and complaints handling is left to consumer organisations but that is not so in Malaysia. "Here consumer organisations are seen as adversaries. They are branded akin to opposition parties when the truth is that consumer organisations are non-religious, non-racial and non-political entities." "We want to work with the Government, not for the Government. The same sentiment goes to the industry players. We should not be seen as enemies. It is heartening to see the industry opening up and accepting us as an avenue to solve consumer disputes," he added. Darshan also suggested that the Consumer Affairs function of the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs be transferred to the Prime Minister's Department. "This has to be done because at present there is a conflict of interest here. How is the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs going to protect the consumers when it's also to promote the industry growth?"

-- BERNAMA