

QUESTION 5/1

Consumer protection and empowerment, and meaningful accessibility for all, especially for persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs

1 Statement of the situation or problem

The rapid advancement of telecommunications/ICTs is reshaping how individuals engage with the digital economy, access essential resources, and work, learn, communicate, access essential services, and interact with governments, businesses, and communities.

These innovations offer significant opportunities for socio-economic development, particularly in developing countries and to contribute to universal sustainable digital connectivity, by expanding access and improving service delivery.

However, this transformation also introduces new challenges for regulators and consumers, especially in ensuring equitable access, affordability, and reliability.

As telecommunications/ICTs become more embedded in everyday life, consumer protection and empowerment frameworks must evolve to address the complexities of emerging technologies within the telecommunication/ICT sector and their impact on diverse populations, and to maintain consumer trust, particularly among aging populations, persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs.

Consumer vulnerabilities can arise when individuals face barriers or challenges that limit their ability to make informed decisions about accessing telecommunications/ICTs safely. These vulnerabilities may stem from personal circumstances as well as other factors.

The World Health Organization estimates that over one billion people live with some form of disability. Global demographic trends show that by the mid-2030s, more than 265 million people worldwide will be over the age of 80. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that 750 million people aged 15 and above worldwide are illiterate, i.e. they cannot read or write; and two-thirds of them are women.

These realities highlight that digital accessibility and integration of inclusive features and design principles need to be cornerstones of inclusive development, to enable communication for all.

Outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and United Nations General Assembly also underscore that accessibility is essential for ensuring participation for all individuals, including persons with disabilities, older persons, youth, and migrants, as stated in the Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In the context of increasing convergence and the advent of advanced communication technologies, consumer protection remains a highly relevant subject and a moving target. The telecommunication/ICT sector is dynamic and technology and business models keep changing, giving rise to new consumer-protection issues. Further, Member States are at various stages of telecommunication/ICT penetration and adoption of new technologies, and policy/regulatory evolution, and accordingly face different challenges making exchange of information and best practices very important.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and resulting widespread use of telecommunications/ICTs underline both the importance of digital connectivity and also the need for sharing of best practices so as to harness the benefits of telecommunications/ICTs while protecting the interests of consumers.

There is a need to promote the responsible use of telecommunications/ICTs as well as ways of fostering consumer trust in new technologies while protecting competition and innovation.

Member States must prepare for improved collaborative regulation. Consumer protection is an important policy aspect of telecommunications/ICTs. Various models of policy and regulation, including better self-regulation by service providers and co-regulation, need to be explored.

Consumer protection is necessary to foster consumer trust, which in turn would encourage the continued uptake of new technologies in a manner that is safe, secure and respects consumer rights. The protection of vulnerable users such as new users, especially those from economically disadvantaged populations, women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities, must be given special attention.

The rapid advancement of telecommunications/ICTs is reshaping how individuals engage with the digital economy, access essential resources, and participate in society. These innovations offer significant opportunities for socio-economic development, particularly in developing countries, by expanding access and improving service delivery. However, this transformation also introduces new challenges for regulators and consumers, especially in ensuring access to affordable and reliable broadband. As telecommunications/ICTs become more embedded in everyday life, consumer protection and empowerment frameworks must evolve to address the complexities of emerging technologies within the telecommunication/ICT sector and their impact on diverse populations.

Innovations in telecommunications markets have introduced new regulatory challenges related to consumer protection and empowerment. Consumers are often influenced by market dynamics, service offerings, and technology design. In that context, regulators should create clear, objective, transparent, and predictable standards and guidelines for market conduct, to aid consumers in informed decision-making. In some countries, Consumer choice and behavioural insights can serve as valuable tools that help design specific regulatory interventions to address particular challenges and promote transparency and fairness in the telecommunication/ICT markets.

The current global context — characterized by technological acceleration, demographic shifts, and rapidly changing markets — and global demographic trends — including aging populations, rising numbers of persons with disabilities, and widespread literacy challenges — highlights a need for policies that integrate both universal and meaningful accessibility and consumer protection and underscore the urgency of mainstreaming accessibility and inclusion in ICT design and regulation.

Accessibility guarantees that everyone can use telecommunications/ICTs effectively, not only persons with disabilities but also the increasing elderly population, migrants who do not speak the native language and persons with low levels of literacy.

Consumer protection ensures that users can participate in an environment that is transparent, fair, and empowering. If telecommunication/ICT products and services are not designed to be inclusive, many individuals will be excluded from the benefits of the digital economy.

Universal design principles and accessibility standards must be integrated from the outset to ensure that digital products and services are usable by all. To achieve meaningful and sustainable digital transformation, consumer protection must be rooted in inclusive policy development and the active participation of all stakeholders, ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital age on the basis of inaccessibility.

Only by pursuing both agendas — consumer protection and accessibility — in an integrated way can societies build digital ecosystems that are equitable, sustainable, and truly inclusive — ensuring no one is left behind.

2 Question or issue for study

The Question will continue to cover the topics in the scope of possible revision of the Final Reports on Questions 6/1 and 7/1 for the ITU-D study period 2022-2025, and new topics targeted at new deliverables for the ITU-D study period 2026-2029, as appropriate.

Studies under the Question will focus on the below issues:

2.1 Innovative Consumer Awareness and Empowerment Strategies

- 2.1.1 Share good practices by regulators, service providers, and civil society that enhance consumer awareness.
- 2.1.2 Share methods to equip consumers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to advocate for their rights and navigate telecommunication/ICT services effectively and conscientiously.
- 2.1.3 Share strategies focusing on consumers in developing countries, where digital literacy gaps remain wide.
- 2.1.4 Share good practices to address the challenges for consumer confidence and protection.
- 2.1.5 Developing guidelines and good practices to address emerging consumers' protection issues related to new and emerging Telecommunications/ICT services and Technologies (in collaboration with Question 5/2).

2.2 Protection of All Users

- 2.2.1 Examine how data disaggregation and comprehensive policies can help identify and support all users especially persons with disabilities (PwDs) and persons with specific needs.
- 2.2.2 Sharing best practices and experiences on how to protect all users, especially persons with disabilities (PwDs) and persons with specific needs, from risks experienced by consumers in the telecommunication/ICT market, such as lack of transparency.

2.3 Market Analyses for Smarter Regulations (in collaboration with Question 4/1)

- 2.3.1 Identify and share best practices on consumer protection and empowerment frameworks and mechanisms including effective strategies and initiatives to increase consumer awareness and decision-making process.
- 2.3.2 Assess how regulators can improve the consumers' decision-making process to strengthen transparency, fairness, and accountability in the telecommunications/ICT market.
- 2.3.3 Study how consumer decision-making can inform the design of more effective and fit-for-purpose telecommunication/ICT policies and regulations and its contribution to lower compliance costs.

2.4 Modernizing Regulatory Frameworks

2.4.1 Telecommunication/ICT policy and regulation being adopted for consumer protection by NRAs and other national, regional and international organizations to enable digital transformation, while balancing the interests of all stakeholders, including consumers and service providers. This would include institutional and regulatory mechanisms to promote cross-sectoral and cross-border collaboration along with revisiting policy and regulatory approaches, such as co-regulation and self-regulation. In particular it would include:

- i) Sharing national experiences of consumer protection challenges and empowerment, and promotion of consumer information awareness and rights.

2.4.2 Methods and tools to protect consumers from unsolicited commercial communications, online fraud and the misuse of personally identifiable information as an integral part of telecommunication/ICT policy.

2.4.3 Explore regulatory toolkits that address challenges such as online fraud, fraudulent practices carried out, unsolicited commercial communications, and the misuse of personally identifiable information

2.4.4 Enhancing and updating the regulators' toolkit to promote consumer safety.

2.4.5 Consider proactive models of regulation that go beyond reactive enforcement, aiming to promote consumer trust.

2.5 Embedding Universal Design and Accessibility Standards:

2.5.1 Share best practices for integrating accessibility features at the design stage of telecommunications/ICT products, platforms, and services.

2.5.2 Specific legal, economic and financial measures adopted by national authorities in the interests of protection of specific categories of telecommunication/ICT users (new users, especially those from economically disadvantaged communities, older persons, persons with disabilities, women and children). This should include mechanisms to promote the creation of useful information and practical tools to be used for promoting consumer awareness to better enable consumer protection, including surrounding the use of new technologies.

2.5.3 Ensure that telecommunication/ICT solutions are inherently usable by all, including persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs.

2.5.4 Mechanisms/means implemented by policy-makers and regulators and operators/service providers to incentivize self-regulation or co-regulation that promotes confidence among all the actors involved, especially the consumer.

- 2.5.5 Means that may be adopted to foster effective consumer protection, cooperation and information-exchange among policy-makers and regulators.
- 2.5.6 Inclusive design and accessibility in telecommunication/ICT services: Share best practices for embedding accessibility features from the design stage, including using AI as a tool, to ensure usability for PwDs, and people with specific needs
- 2.5.7 Mainstreaming accessibility in public telecommunication/ICT services: Promote strategies that ensure e-government and other public service digital platforms are accessible to all, especially for PwDs and people with specific needs including through new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs.
- 2.5.8 Exchanging best practices on ICT accessibility in the planning and design stages that are mainstreamed in the development of smart cities and rural areas to leave no one behind in the concept of “smart for all”¹.(in collaboration with Question 1/2)
- 2.5.9 Study how universal design principles can empower persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs and enhance usability for all users.

2.6 Inclusive Design and Accessibility in Telecommunication/ICT Services:

- 2.6.1 Promote strategies to ensure that e-government services and platforms are accessible to all.
- 2.6.2 Investigate how new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs can enhance inclusive design of public service delivery

2.7 Employment and Economic Inclusion:

- 2.7.1 Examine how accessible telecommunication/ICT solutions can improve work environment and access to employment opportunities, especially for persons with disabilities and persons with specific needs.

2.8 Data, Evidence, and Monitoring

- 2.8.1 Develop national capacity for data collection and analysis on telecommunication/ICT accessibility.

¹ ITU Academy training course - Smart for all: beyond smart cities, building inclusive and digitally accessible environments and communities (*Available in: Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish*)

3 Expected output

- a) A report to Member States and Sector Members, consumer-protection organizations, operators and service providers, setting out guidelines and best practices for consumer protection in the provision of all telecommunication/ICT services, to include:
 - i) Guidelines on increasing consumer awareness
 - ii) Best practices on collaboration and consultation to promote multistakeholder input on policies and regulations for consumer protection
 - iii) Guidelines and information-sharing about policy frameworks that protect consumers, promote competition and innovation, and enhance customer care, with the advent of new and emerging telecommunication/ICT technologies such as IoT.
- b) Organization of seminars and workshops on the above topics related to consumer protection.

4 Timing

An annual progress report is expected at each study group meeting. Other deliverables, including annual deliverables, workshops and the revision of the report of the previous study period, could be sent for study group's approval when ready, as appropriate.

5 Proposers/sponsors

ITU-D Study Group 1 proposed the continuation of this Question as modified herein.

6 Sources of input

- 1) Collection of related contributions and data from Member States and ITU-D Sector Members, and those organizations and groups listed below.
- 2) Updates and outputs of ITU-R and ITU-T study groups; relevant Recommendations and reports related to consumer protection.
- 3) Collection of information on the impact on developing countries of new technologies, business models and ongoing digital transformation.
- 4) Outputs of WTDC Resolution 9 (Rev. Kigali, 2022), including relevant Recommendations, guidelines and reports.

7 Target audience

Target audience	Developed countries	Developing countries
Telecom policy-makers	Yes	Yes
Telecom regulators	Yes	Yes
Telecommunication/ICT consumer-protection organizations	Yes	Yes
Service providers/operators	Yes	Yes
Broadcasting operators	Yes	Yes
ITU-D programme	Yes	Yes

a) Target audience – Who specifically will use the output

Beneficiaries of the output are expected to be consumers, telecommunication/ICT operators and policy-makers/regulators worldwide.

b) Proposed methods for implementation of the results

Activities include conducting, observing and sharing best practices, and developing comprehensive reports serving the target audience's interests.

8 Proposed methods of handling the Question or issue

a) How?

- 1) Within a study group:
 - Question (over a multi-year study period)
- 2) Within regular BDT activity:
 - Programmes
 - Projects
 - Expert consultants
 - Regional offices
- 3) In other ways: To be defined in the work plan

b) Why?

To be defined in the work plan.

9 Coordination and collaboration

The ITU-D study group dealing with this study Question should coordinate closely with:

- Other ITU-R and ITU-T study groups dealing with similar issues, and in particular other relevant ITU-D groups, for example the ITU-D Working Group on Gender Issues and child online protection.
- Relevant international and regional organizations, as appropriate.
- The Director of BDT shall, through the appropriate BDT staff (e.g. regional directors, focal points), provide information to rapporteurs on all relevant ITU projects in different regions. This information should be provided to the meetings of the rapporteurs when the work of the programmes and regional offices is in the planning stages and when it is completed.

It is worth mentioning that it is beneficial to the membership that collaboration be incentivized with other study Questions and Sectors in the investigation of other networks and service platforms which can be combined with broadcasting to implement new experiences in content delivery, for instance ITU-D Questions 1/1, 4/1,2/2 and 5/2; ITU-R SG1, SG5 and SG6; and ITU-T SG9 and SG16, each of the groups within their mandates and within their scopes of work.

10 BDT programme link

Links to the ITU-D priorities of the Baku Action Plan, specifically to "Affordable connectivity" and "Enabling policy and regulatory environment". Further information will be in the work plan.

11 Other relevant information

As may become apparent within the life of the Question.