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Enhancing Consumer Protection in Somalia: The Role of the Somali Bureau of Standards in Market Surveillance.

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Abstract: Background and objective:

Consumer protection is a cornerstone for developing a resilient and sustainable economy, especially in emerging markets like Somalia. As Somalia rebuilds and expands its consumer markets, substandard and counterfeit products account for an estimated 75% of goods sold in local markets, posing significant threats to public health, safety, and economic growth. The Somali Bureau of Standards (SoBS) plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by setting national standards, conducting market surveillance, and ensuring that products meet safety and quality benchmarks. Despite these efforts, 60% of Somali consumers remain vulnerable to fraudulent practices, underscoring the need for enhanced regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms.

This study examines the critical role of SOBS in protecting Somali consumers, analyzing the current gaps in market oversight and the socioeconomic impact of weak consumer protection systems. It highlights the challenges faced by Somali markets, including limited technical capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and low consumer awareness of their rights. The article also explores strategies to strengthen market surveillance, improve product certification rates, and foster collaboration among stakeholders to enhance consumer safety. By addressing these challenges, Somalia can build consumer trust, encourage local business growth, and position itself competitively in international trade, ultimately driving economic

development and safeguarding public well-being.

Keywords: Consumer protection, Somali Bureau of Standards, market surveillance, counterfeit products, product safety, national standards, regulatory frameworks, public health. international trade, business growth.

1. Introduction

Consumer protection serves as a cornerstone of any thriving economy, ensuring that goods and services meet quality and safety standards while protecting citizens from harm. It fosters trust between consumers and businesses, supports market stability, and lays the groundwork for sustainable economic development. In Somalia, as markets grow amidst ongoing economic recovery and development, consumer protection has taken on heightened importance. The proliferation of counterfeit, substandard, and expired products in local markets poses severe risks to public health, erodes consumer confidence, and undermines the integrity of trade. Addressing these challenges requires not only a strong regulatory framework but also decisive action to uphold standards and instill public trust.

The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) has become a pivotal institution in the country's journey toward stronger consumer protection. Through robust market surveillance and quality control measures, SOBS aims to shield citizens from unsafe goods, bolster ethical business practices, and strengthen Somalia's reputation in regional and global trade.

Highlighting the government's commitment to consumer protection and trade development, His Excellency **Dr. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud**, President of the Federal Republic of Somalia, underscored the critical role of quality control in his opening remarks at the first Somalia International Investment Conference in Mogadishu: *"My administration is focusing on enhancing key economic infrastructure, trade policy, and quality controls to maximize regional economic and global cooperation. We have a lot to export soon, and the market for exporting Somali products will increase. That is why we established a special agency controlling the quality of Somali exports as well as the quality of Somali imports. **The time has finished when Somalia was a dumping place for expired products and low-grade products.**"*

This statement reflects the broader vision of Somalia's leadership to transform the nation's trade practices and regulatory capacity. By placing quality assurance at the center of its economic agenda, the government acknowledges that protecting consumers is essential not only for public health and safety but also for Somalia's long-term economic ambitions.

Market surveillance, a key focus of SOBS, involves the systematic monitoring, inspection, and regulation of products in the market to ensure compliance with established standards and laws.

This is especially critical in Somalia, where a large portion of market activity occurs in informal settings, often beyond the reach of formal regulatory frameworks. SOBS has taken proactive steps to combat the sale of expired food products, counterfeit goods, and items that fail to meet quality and safety standards. By enforcing these measures, the Bureau not only safeguards the health of Somali citizens but also cultivates a business environment that rewards compliance and deters malpractices.

The importance of SOBS's work extends beyond immediate consumer protection. In a country striving to position itself as a reliable trade partner, both regionally and globally, ensuring the quality of exports is paramount. Somali products, particularly livestock, agriculture, and fisheries, have significant potential in international markets. However, to unlock this potential, maintaining rigorous quality standards is crucial. By controlling both imports and exports, SOBS plays a dual role: protecting local consumers from substandard goods and building the international reputation of Somali products.

Despite notable progress, SOBS faces numerous challenges that limit its effectiveness. These include inadequate resources, limited technical capacity, gaps in public awareness, and the sheer complexity of regulating informal markets. These hurdles underscore the urgent need for increased investment in institutional capacity, stronger legal frameworks, and collaboration with national and international stakeholders. Public education campaigns and partnerships with private sector actors are also critical to fostering a culture of quality and compliance in Somali markets.

This article delves into the critical role of the Somali Bureau of Standards in market surveillance, examining its successes, challenges, and the opportunities for enhancing consumer protection in Somalia. It underscores the importance of a coordinated approach involving government agencies, businesses, civil society, and international partners to ensure that Somali consumers and businesses alike benefit from safe, reliable, and high-quality products. By addressing these pressing issues, Somalia can pave the way for a safer and more prosperous market environment, aligned with its broader vision for economic growth and global cooperation.

Section 1: The Importance of Consumer Protection in Somalia

In Somalia, as markets continue to expand and diversify, consumer protection has become increasingly critical. Despite progress, consumers are often exposed to substandard and unsafe products—ranging from counterfeit goods to products that fail to meet basic health and safety standards.

Consumer protection is a fundamental aspect of economic development, ensuring that individuals have access to safe, high-quality products and services. In Somalia, where the market is characterized by a mix of formal and informal sectors, the need for robust consumer protection mechanisms is particularly urgent. The influx of counterfeit, substandard, and expired goods in local markets not only poses significant risks to public health and safety but also undermines trust in the economy. As the country continues to rebuild its institutions and economy after decades of instability, prioritizing consumer protection is essential for fostering sustainable development and improving the quality of life for all citizens.



The informal economy, which constitutes a substantial portion of Somalia's market, often operates outside formal regulatory frameworks, making it a hotspot for unsafe and counterfeit goods. Without adequate oversight, consumers are left vulnerable to deceptive practices, such as altered expiry dates, counterfeit packaging, and mislabeled products. These issues are compounded by low

public awareness about consumer rights and limited access to mechanisms for reporting violations. The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS), as the primary regulatory body, plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Through market surveillance, enforcement of standards, and consumer education, the Bureau seeks to create a safer marketplace and build public trust in Somali goods and services.

Protecting consumers is not only a matter of public health and safety but also an economic imperative. A market flooded with counterfeit goods discourages ethical businesses and stifles

competition, ultimately harming the broader economy. By ensuring compliance with quality standards, consumer protection promotes fair trade practices and enhances Somalia's potential to attract both domestic and international investment. Additionally, it strengthens consumer confidence, empowering individuals to make informed decisions and demand better-quality products. In a country striving for stability and growth, consumer protection is a critical pillar that underpins social welfare, economic resilience, and sustainable development.

The Role of Consumer Protection in National Development

Ensuring consumer protection extends beyond safeguarding individual rights; it also contributes to national development goals. A well-regulated market enhances public health outcomes by reducing exposure to unsafe products, particularly in critical sectors such as food, pharmaceuticals, and household goods. Moreover, consumer protection efforts align with Somalia's ambitions to integrate into regional and global markets by demonstrating a commitment to quality standards. As the Somali government and stakeholders collaborate to strengthen regulatory frameworks, the importance of consumer protection in shaping a healthier, more equitable, and economically vibrant society cannot be overstated.



Current Challenges in Somali Markets

One of the most pressing challenges in Somali markets is the prevalence of substandard and counterfeit goods. These items range from food products that fail to meet safety standards to fake medicines that threaten public health. For example, hardened flour has been

repackaged and sold as fresh flour, and expired sugar has been repackaged into new bags with altered expiration dates, misleading consumers and exposing them to health risks.

The lack of consumer awareness and weak regulatory enforcement exacerbate the problem. Consumers often do not have the knowledge or resources to distinguish between safe and unsafe products. This lack of information makes it difficult for individuals to protect

themselves against fraudulent and harmful goods.

Economic and Social Implications

The risks associated with unsafe products extend beyond individual harm to affect Somalia's broader economy. When consumers lose trust in the safety and quality of products, they may reduce their market participation, which in turn can stifle business growth and discourage foreign investment. Furthermore, the sale of counterfeit products and expired goods tarnishes the reputation of local businesses and Somalia's broader market, making it harder for Somali businesses to engage in international trade.

The Role of Consumer Protection

Consumer protection is essential for fostering a thriving and sustainable market economy. When consumers feel confident in the safety and quality of the products they purchase, they are more likely to engage in market transactions, which supports business growth and economic development. Strong consumer protection laws, market surveillance, and product standards are crucial for creating a transparent and accountable marketplace. The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) plays a pivotal role in safeguarding consumers by ensuring products meet the necessary quality and safety standards, thus promoting trust and transparency in the market.

Section 2: The Role of the Somali Bureau of Standards in Market Surveillance

The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) is tasked with setting national standards and regulating the quality of products available in Somali markets. One of the Bureau's core responsibilities is conducting market surveillance to ensure that products sold to consumers meet established safety and quality standards. Market Surveillance as a Tool for Safety SOBS's market surveillance efforts have been instrumental in identifying and addressing the

goods
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safety



challenges posed by substandard and counterfeit products in Somali markets. By conducting regular inspections and random sampling of in markets, supermarkets, and shops across Mogadishu and other regions, SOBS has been intercept products that do not meet national standards.

For instance, during a routine inspection, SOBS discovered hardened flour being repackaged and sold as fresh flour. The Bureau took swift action, closing down the premises where this flour was being processed and burning the substandard flour to prevent it from entering the market. Similarly, during a visit to various supermarkets, SOBS inspectors uncovered counterfeit goods, expired products, and unsafe food items, which were promptly removed from shelves.

Case Study 1: Hardened Flour Sold as Fresh in Mogadishu

In Mogadishu, a critical issue was uncovered involving the sale of **hardened, broken flour** being repackaged and sold as fresh flour. The flour, which had been improperly stored and had deteriorated due to exposure to moisture, was often found in unsanitary conditions at various premises in the city.



The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) took immediate action, closing down several premises where this practice was rampant. In one case, SOBS inspectors discovered that large quantities of hardened flour were being repackaged in new bags and labeled as fresh flour, a clear violation of food safety standards. As part of their response, SOBS also confiscated and burned the substandard flour to prevent it from reaching the market and to eliminate any

potential health risks. This proactive intervention helped protect consumers and send a strong message about the importance of enforcing market regulations.

This case highlights the necessity of SOBS's market surveillance efforts and the dangers of substandard food products being sold as new. It also underscores the ongoing challenges SOBS faces in ensuring compliance, as unscrupulous practices continue to jeopardize consumer safety.

Case Study 2: Counterfeit and Expired Products Found in Supermarkets

Market surveillance efforts by SOBS have also revealed a worrying trend in supermarkets across Mogadishu, where counterfeit goods, substandard products, and expired food items were being sold to consumers. During a series of surprise visits, SOBS inspectors identified products such as food items, medicines, and other consumer goods that were either counterfeit, below the prescribed quality standards, or far past their expiry date.

In response, SOBS took swift action by conducting inspections, removing the counterfeit and expired products from shelves, and imposing penalties on the responsible businesses. This not only prevented these unsafe products from reaching consumers but also highlighted the need for more robust oversight in commercial establishments. Through these inspections, SOBS continues to work toward fostering a safer market environment where consumers can trust the products they purchase.

Case Study 3: Products Without Expiry Dates or Altered Expiry Dates

One of the most alarming challenges encountered during market surveillance by the Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) is the presence of products either without expiry dates or with



tampered expiry dates. This issue is particularly prevalent in food items, pharmaceuticals, and personal care products, where the absence or alteration of expiry information poses significant risks to public health. Products without expiry dates prevent consumers from making informed decisions, while those with

altered dates deceive consumers into believing the products are safe to use long after their actual expiration.

During recent inspections conducted in Mogadishu, SOBS officials identified multiple cases of such violations. In one instance, expired flour was being re-bagged in new packaging with no expiry date, misleading consumers into purchasing and consuming potentially unsafe products. In another case, large quantities of sugar were found with altered packaging, where the original expiry dates had been deleted and replaced with fraudulent dates, making the products appear freshly packed. These practices not only endanger the health of consumers but also violate ethical trade practices and undermine trust in the market.

To address these issues, the SOBS has intensified its market surveillance activities. Premises found engaging in such fraudulent practices have been shut down, and in some cases, the confiscated products have been destroyed to prevent them from re-entering the market. These actions are complemented by public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about the importance of checking for expiry dates and reporting suspicious products. However, the persistence of these practices highlights the need for stricter penalties, enhanced regulatory oversight, and collaboration with manufacturers and distributors to ensure proper labeling and packaging of goods.

This case study underscores the critical role of the SOBS in protecting Somali consumers from health risks associated with expired and counterfeit products. It also highlights the importance of empowering consumers with the knowledge and tools to identify and avoid unsafe goods, thereby contributing to a safer and more reliable marketplace.

Case Study 4: Repackaging of food products and Changing Labels

A concerning trend was uncovered involving the repackaging of food products and alteration of expiry labels, deceiving consumers into believing the items were fresh and safe. In several instances, shops in Mogadishu were found repackaging expired food items such as rice, flour, and cooking oil into new containers with falsified expiry dates. These products, often stored improperly, posed significant risks to public health due to potential contamination and degradation in quality.

The Somali
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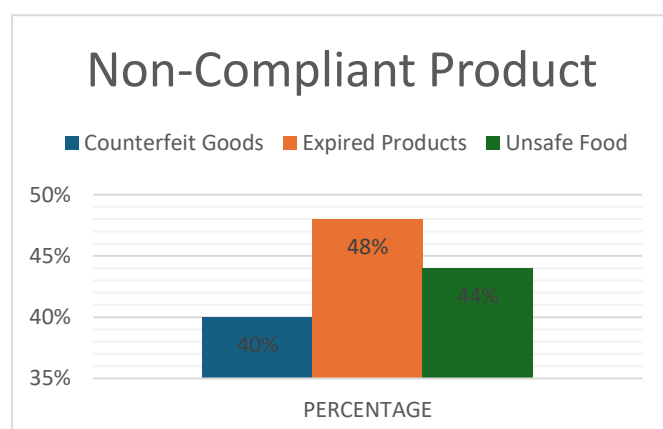
businesses involved. Heavy fines were imposed, and the importance of compliance with consumer protection laws was reinforced to deter future violations. These actions underscored SOBS's commitment to safeguarding consumer health and ensuring market integrity.

Bureau of Standards (SOBS), through its market surveillance efforts, conducted inspections that led to the identification and confiscation of large quantities of these and mislabeled food items. In response, SOBS not only removed the unsafe products from the market but also took legal action against the

businesses involved. Heavy fines were imposed, and the importance of compliance with consumer protection laws was reinforced to deter future violations. These actions underscored SOBS's commitment to safeguarding consumer health and ensuring market integrity.

Section 3: The Impact of Market Surveillance on Consumer Protection

The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) has been instrumental in protecting consumers by implementing effective market surveillance measures. These efforts go beyond merely identifying and removing unsafe products; they contribute significantly to public health, consumer confidence, market integrity, and economic growth.



1. Improving Public Health and Safety

Through diligent monitoring, SOBS prevents substandard and counterfeit products from endangering public health. For example, the confiscation of expired sugar and hardened flour has reduced the risk of foodborne illnesses, while the removal of counterfeit medicines protects against severe health consequences. These actions not only safeguard individuals but also alleviate pressure on Somalia's healthcare system, allowing resources to be directed toward other pressing needs.

2. Enhancing Consumer Trust

A visible and proactive approach to market surveillance bolsters public trust. Consumers who witness SOBS closing non-compliant premises and conducting surprise inspections feel reassured about the quality of the goods they purchase. This confidence encourages more consistent consumption and fosters loyalty to businesses adhering to regulations. Over time, this trust can transform consumer habits, reducing reliance on informal and unregulated market spaces.

3. Strengthening Market Integrity

SOBS's enforcement of standards ensures that ethical businesses are protected from unfair competition posed by counterfeit and substandard products. This creates a level playing field where legitimate businesses can thrive. The removal of harmful goods and the consistent application of market regulations highlight SOBS's commitment to fostering a competitive yet fair market, benefiting both consumers and reputable businesses.

4. Fostering Economic Growth

A reliable market surveillance system attracts investments by ensuring the market adheres to international standards. Foreign investors often assess a country's regulatory landscape before committing resources. SOBS's efforts to regulate and monitor markets send a strong signal that Somalia is prioritizing product quality and consumer safety, creating an environment conducive to business expansion and international trade.

Through these multifaceted impacts, SOBS's market surveillance initiatives not only protect consumers but also pave the way for a healthier, more stable economy.

Section 4: Challenges in Consumer Protection and Market Surveillance

While the Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) has made commendable progress in enhancing consumer protection, significant challenges remain. These hurdles, ranging from limited resources to gaps in public awareness, hinder the full effectiveness of market surveillance and call for targeted interventions.

1. Limited Resources for Market Surveillance

SOBS operates under resource constraints that limit its ability to conduct comprehensive market inspections across Somalia. Budgetary limitations restrict the Bureau's ability to hire sufficient personnel, procure necessary equipment, and carry out inspections in remote or densely populated areas. As a result, many markets, particularly in rural and informal sectors, may not receive adequate oversight, allowing substandard and counterfeit goods to circulate unchecked. Expanding SOBS's capacity is essential to achieving comprehensive coverage.

2. Challenges Posed by the Informal Market Structure

Somalia's economy is heavily reliant on informal markets, which operate outside formal regulatory frameworks. Vendors in these markets often lack documentation, making it challenging for SOBS to trace products back to their sources or enforce compliance. Informal markets are also resistant to regulation, as many participants may not fully understand the benefits of adhering to national standards. Addressing this issue requires innovative approaches, including community engagement and partnerships with local authorities.

3. Insufficient Public Awareness and Consumer Education

A significant proportion of Somali consumers remain unaware of the risks posed by counterfeit and substandard goods. For example, many consumers may not know how to identify fake medicines or understand the importance of checking expiration dates on food products. Without public awareness campaigns, consumers inadvertently support the sale of unsafe products, undermining SOBS's efforts. Education initiatives can empower consumers to make informed choices, creating a ripple effect that improves market standards overall.

4. Weak Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Although SOBS has the authority to enforce standards, Somalia's legal framework often falls short in deterring market violations. Penalties for selling counterfeit or unsafe products may be insufficient to dissuade repeat offenders. Moreover, inconsistent enforcement can create loopholes, allowing unscrupulous businesses to evade consequences. Strengthening legal structures and ensuring that regulations are consistently applied is critical for long-term success in consumer protection.

These challenges underscore the need for coordinated efforts to enhance SOBS's effectiveness and ensure that Somalia's markets are safe, fair, and reliable for consumers.

Section 5: Recommendations for Strengthening Consumer Protection in Somalia

To overcome the challenges in market surveillance and consumer protection, a comprehensive and collaborative approach is needed. SOBS, in partnership with the government, private sector, and public, can implement the following strategies to ensure better outcomes:

1. Increase Funding and Resources for SOBS

The Somali government should prioritize allocating more funds to SOBS to expand its capacity for market surveillance. Additional resources could support the recruitment of more inspectors, acquisition of modern inspection tools, and deployment of mobile teams for remote areas. Investing in technology, such as digital tracking systems, can also enhance the efficiency of monitoring and identifying substandard products.

2. Strengthen Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

SOBS should work closely with lawmakers to revise and strengthen existing consumer protection laws. Penalties for violations must be substantial enough to deter illegal practices, and the legal process for addressing complaints should be streamlined. Regular updates to the regulatory framework will ensure that emerging issues, such as counterfeit electronics or e-commerce fraud, are adequately addressed.

3. Expand Public Awareness and Consumer Education Programs

Educating the public is key to empowering consumers to protect themselves. SOBS should launch nationwide campaigns in multiple languages to inform citizens about the dangers of counterfeit goods, the importance of checking safety certifications, and how to report violations. Collaborating with schools, community organizations, and the media can amplify these messages and ensure that they reach diverse demographics.

4. Foster Private Sector Collaboration

The private sector can play a significant role in improving market standards. SOBS should engage businesses in voluntary certification programs, encourage regular product testing, and promote compliance with national standards. Transparent partnerships between SOBS and private enterprises can also help identify market risks and develop solutions collaboratively.

5. Develop Innovative Solutions for the Informal Market

Given the prevalence of informal markets, SOBS must adopt creative approaches to ensure compliance. This could include mobile inspection units, partnerships with local community leaders, and leveraging technology for anonymous reporting. Raising awareness within informal markets about the benefits of adhering to standards can gradually shift attitudes and behaviors.

By implementing these recommendations, Somalia can build a robust system of consumer protection that not only safeguards public health but also supports economic growth and enhances trust in the market.

Conclusion

As Somalia rebuilds and modernizes its economy, consumer protection emerges as a critical pillar for sustainable development. The Somali Bureau of Standards (SOBS) has already made meaningful contributions to safeguarding consumers through its market surveillance efforts, ensuring that substandard and counterfeit products are removed from circulation. However, the challenges of limited resources, informal market structures, insufficient public awareness, and a developing legal framework highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to consumer protection.

Strengthening SOBS's capacity and expanding its reach across Somalia's markets will require greater investment, innovative strategies, and collaboration with stakeholders. Empowering consumers through education will not only reduce reliance on unsafe products but also foster demand for higher standards in the marketplace. At the same time, enhancing the legal

framework and enforcement mechanisms will create a deterrent effect, ensuring compliance among businesses and promoting ethical practices.

By addressing these gaps, Somalia has the opportunity to build a safer, more transparent market environment that fosters consumer trust and attracts both local and international investment. A robust consumer protection framework will not only safeguard public health but also lay the foundation for economic growth, enabling Somali businesses to thrive locally and compete globally. With a united effort from SOBS, the government, and society at large, Somalia can achieve a future where consumer protection is not just a goal but a reality that drives national progress.

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