



Consumers International Recommendations towards Rio+20

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Consumers International (CI) is the world federation of consumer groups that, working together with its members, serves as the only independent and authoritative global voice for consumers. With over 220 member organisations in 115 countries, we are building a powerful international movement to help protect and empower consumers everywhere.

Introduction

“Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly separated within nations, within sectors (such as energy, agriculture, trade, etc.), and within broad areas of concern (such as environment, economic, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies in particular to various global “crisis” that have seized public concern, particularly over the last decade. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one”.

With these words, in 1987, the Brundtland Commission Report *Our Common Future* expressed the interrelations of human activities, their impact on the planet and the increasing relevance of the environmental crisis. Everything raised by Brundtland in the above statement applies today, with an even greater sense of urgency.

Since the publication of *Our common future*, consensus around these issues has grown, and new instruments, strategies and methodologies have been developed to confront them. So the obvious question is, why is it taking us so long to come out of the social, economic and environmental crisis highlighted by the Brundtland Report nearly 25 years ago?

Consumers International believes the rights and responsibilities of consumers can and must play a pivotal role in making this great leap to a sustainable future. What and how we consume must be a cornerstone of the transition to a green economy that puts human wellbeing and social equity at its heart, while progressively reducing our individual and collective impact on the environment. As stated by Chapter 4 of Agenda 21: "We must consider the need for new concepts of wealth and prosperity, which allow higher standards of living through changed lifestyles, and are less dependent on the Earth's finite resources and more in harmony with the Earth's carrying capacity."

Consumer rights and sustainable consumption

Today there is widespread consensus that changes in consumption and production patterns are urgently needed. Achieving sustainable development will require significant changes in our economies and a profound transformation of our current lifestyles. Alongside government and industry, consumers will obviously be a fundamental force in this change.

Initiatives to mobilise consumers behind sustainable consumption have multiplied over the past few years. Businesses, governments, civil society organisations are all involved in the development of consumer education campaigns, new products, labelling and certification initiatives.

In response to these programmes, there has certainly been a shift in consumer understanding and awareness of the environmental and social impact of different consumption choices.

However, effective consumer action is still limited by sparse or misleading product and service information, a lack of effective and clear regulation and a lack of meaningful choice. Too often, consumers who seek to promote sustainable consumption find themselves lost and confused in the face of underdeveloped, scarce and inconsistent standards. Many consumers feel that the actions available to them are also insignificant in the context of government inaction.

Consumers cannot be left alone in this process. Individual efforts are not enough to generate the required social changes. Consumers have to be supported by an enabling framework of policies, regulations and measures that are capable of ensuring a real transition to a green economy that can effectively meet the needs of people and the planet.

CI believes it is essential that governments and the business sector everywhere commit to implementing policies that guide us onto a sustainable course. It is equally essential that consumers are empowered to support sustainable consumption, and can assume their rights and responsibilities in this respect.

The UNCSD process and the Rio+20 summit

The UNCSD process began at the Rio Summit in 1992, continued through the Johannesburg Summit in 2002, and incorporated the Marrakech process that sought to develop a 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production.

The upcoming 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development offers a new opportunity to generate the change that we are all hoping for. The critical issue now is whether Rio+20 will be able to set governments on a course towards establishing binding multilateral commitments.

In accordance with the UN General Assembly resolution 64/236, the objective of Rio+20 is to secure a renewed political commitment to sustainable development, assessing the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development, and addressing the new emerging challenges. In this context, the member states have agreed to focus on two themes for the Conference:

- (a) A green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication

- (b) The institutional framework for sustainable development.

CI wishes to see the Rio Conference commit to the policies and targets that help build an economy which provides a better quality of life for all within the ecological limits of the planet.

Rio+20 commitments

CI calls on governments meeting at the UNCSD summit in Rio, in June 2012, to commit to the following actions:

An explicit commitment to measures that will support sustainable consumption including the full implementation of section G of the UN guidelines for consumer protection.

Support and endorse an ambitious 10-Year Framework of Programmes (10YFP) on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP).

In particular, CI calls on governments to commit to the following:

(a) A green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication:

Full implementation of section G, number 44, of the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection that states:

“Governments, in partnership with business and relevant organizations of civil society, should develop and implement strategies that promote sustainable consumption through a mix of policies that could include regulations; economic and social instruments; sectorial policies in such areas as land use, transport, energy, and housing; information programmes to raise awareness of the impact of consumption patterns; removal of subsidies that promote unsustainable patterns of consumption and production; and promotion of sector-specific environmental management best practices”.

Meet consumers’ basic needs

- Governments should commit to facilitate technology, expertise and funds transfers to those countries that require these resources to tackle poverty and secure the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Governments should also commit to address the needs of those consumers within their own country that do not have access to basic needs.
- Initiate mechanisms to reach the goal of universal access to energy services, following the principles of affordability, fairness and sustainability.

Act as role models in their own consumption choices

- Local and national governments should adopt policies that support sustainability so that consumers can see their actions in the context of a wider movement towards sustainability.
- Similarly, governments should avoid contradictory or damaging policies that negate action taken by the consumers.

Act as facilitators

By ensuring regulation and fiscal incentives support sustainable consumption

- Support sustainable lifestyles through their own national strategies, procurement, planning and operating practices.

- Ensure financial incentives support sustainable outcomes (eg taxes and subsidies should support environmental and social goals).
- Apply appropriate market interventions to ensure fair and transparent markets working for sustainable consumption and production.
- Develop choice reduction policies and legislation that removes from the market the worst performing products or services according to economic, social or environmental impact.

By informing consumers

- Governments should fund research and produce information to inform consumers about how to consume more sustainably, and assist them in identifying the material changes they could make.
- Run targeted information campaigns to raise consumer awareness and empower consumers in relation to the environmental and social impact of consumption patterns, particularly in the areas of food, housing and transport. Information should use tools and insights from branding, psychology, communications and social marketing to engage with consumers effectively.
- Adopt ambitious Minimum Energy Efficiency Performance Standards (MEPS) and labelling schemes.
- Include education for sustainable consumption in their national curricula as well as promote consumer education more generally.

Hold businesses to account

- Governments should develop rigorous and transparent standards through accountable processes of multi-sector engagement, and on the basis of scientific consensus, which offer consumers a trusted basis on which to make product and lifestyle choices.
- Governments should ensure that consumers have *independent assurance* of product information so that they have confidence that product information is correct and is not misleading.
- Governments should enact right-to-know legislation, and ensure that companies report on their environmental and social impacts using internationally agreed standards such as ISO 26000.

Inclusive policymaking

- Consumer voices must be heard and listened to in relation to sustainability. At a governmental level, this means government engagement with consumers in policymaking and full recognition of consumers' rights and interests.
- Consumers should be recruited as active supporters in valid and transparent whole economy approaches, driving innovation, and supporting calls for progressive and smart regulation.

(b) Institutional framework for sustainable development:

Support and endorse an ambitious, 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production

- This 10YFP on SCP should be a coordinated global framework of programmes that in a systematic and integrated manner provides countries with the real opportunity of decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and increasing the wellbeing of all.
- If the Rio+20 summit is capable of delivering and ensuring the structural changes needed for a global transition to a green economy, it is clear that all countries will need to take coordinated international action; isolated initiatives will not be able to

achieve the required changes. The 10YFP on SCP offers a concrete pathway for this coordinated action.

Deliver, promote and facilitate an institutional change in the current structures of governance that will ensure a framework for a real transition to sustainability at all levels: international, regional, national and local

- Rio+20 must result in sustained, collaborative action that will change the course of unsustainable growth, generate the required bases for a transition to a green economy and improve the wellbeing of millions of poor and vulnerable communities.
- While the Rio+20 outcomes must allow for a diversity of institutional approaches and commitments, particularly at the national and local levels, it is critical that all are integrated in a systemic framework flexible enough to accommodate different types of commitments, and reciprocal enough to achieve a strong sustained level of effort. By linking actions and negotiating them as a package, nations are likely to undertake a higher level of effort than they would if acting on their own.