EUROPEAN CONSUMER DAY 2021

Digital and green transitions: contradictory or complementary? The consumer viewpoint

European Economic and Social Committee

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#ConsumerDay21
#EESConsumers

Conclusions of the 22ⁿᵈ European Consumer Day

Digital and green transitions: contradictory or complementary?

The consumer viewpoint

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Main findings of the Day

- The digital transition and the green transition are indeed progressing, but sometimes run counter to one another, because consumers do not have the right information to make informed purchases.

- It is therefore important to empower consumers for the green transition: this also means reviewing product labelling, as well as promoting the right to repair.

- Digitalisation should be placed at the service of the green transition: nowadays, in the way it is designed, digitalisation is a burden on the environmental transition. The question is therefore how to turn this burden into a lever to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. If the digital revolution is not green, it will speed up destruction of the environment.

- EU policies on digitalisation and the green transition are not yet sufficiently interconnected and this will be the key challenge for the European institutions. We must not assume that the digital and green transitions will be mutually beneficial. There are considerable challenges to address, including energy consumption. It is therefore extremely important to focus on the interrelationship between the two transitions, as their success cannot be taken for granted.

- Neither of the two transitions will be successful without consumers, who play a major role in this process. Consumption must be able to contribute to the sustainability of both the environment and the internal market.

Introduction

The EESC has been organising its European Consumer Day since 1999. Traditionally, this annual event has taken place in March. Given that the European Commission, in cooperation with the rotating Presidency of the Council, is now also organising a Consumer Summit at that time of year, the EESC has decided to hold its European Consumer Day later in the year. This decision was based on a desire not to have two major events coming one after the other, as well as a wish to feed into the debate ahead of the Consumer Summit.

In order to keep up the momentum between the two events, the theme chosen for the European Consumer Day, namely "The digital and green transitions: Contradictory or complementary? The consumer perspective" was chosen in such a way as to be consistent with the topics of the Consumer Summit scheduled for the first quarter of 2022.

The 2021 European Consumer Day, which – because of the health crisis – could not be organised entirely with in-person participation, was structured around inspiring stories, debates in several workshops, and an institutional response to set out the prospects for the coming year. The aim was to give civil society a voice, strengthen synergies between institutions, raise questions and move forward.

Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

A few figures to describe the European Consumer Day

SPEAKERS
18 speakers, including
1 State Secretary
1 European Commissioner
1 Member of the European Parliament

AUDIENCE
88 participants connected via Interactio

LIVE STREAM
71 visits, 46 visitors, 1681 actions (pages consulted, downloads, diverse researches on the event's webpage).

TWITTER
4310 organic impressions
24 tweets, 35 retweets and 47 like

Martin Salamon, EESC member

Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia, EESC member

Alessandro Mostaccio, EESC member, and Eric Vidalenc, speaker

Thierry Libaert, EESC member

Programme

Master of ceremony for the day: **Ileana Izverniceanu de la Iglesia,** EESC member

10 a.m. Opening session

Welcome by **Alain Coheur**, president, Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption
- **Christa Schweng,** EESC President
- **Simon Zajc**, State Secretary, Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union
- **David Cormand**, member of the European Parliament

10.25 a.m. Video Message by Didier Reynders, European Commissioner for Justice and Consumers

10.30 a.m. Keynote speech

Eric Vidalenc, Deputy Regional Director ADEME Hauts-de-France (Agency for ecological transition), Scientific adviser, Futuribles International, author of "Pour une écologie numérique"

Debate with the participants

11 a.m. Panel 1 – Consumers and digital: opportunities and challenges

Rapporteur: **Wautier Robyns de Schneidauer**, EESC member
- **Cristian Sainz de Marles**, ONCE
- **Marion Graeffly**, Telecoop

Debate with participants

12 midday Panel 2 – Consumers and sustainability: challenges and obstacles

Rapporteur: **Alessandro Mostaccio,** EESC member
- **Jana Žůrková**, RREUSE Belgium
- **Odile Le Bolloch**, EPA Ireland - Stop Food Waste

Debate with participants

1 p.m. Break

2.30 p.m. Panel 3 – Digital transition and Green transition: complementarities and/or contradictions?

Rapporteur: **Christophe Lefèvre**, EESC member
- **Ursula Pachl**, BEUC
- **Claire-Anne Coriat**, Le Kaba

Debate with participants

3.30 p.m. Wrap up and conclusions

- Presentation of panel 1 conclusions by **Wautier Robyns de Schneidauer,** rapporteur
- Presentation of panel 2 conclusions by **Alessandro Mostaccio,** rapporteur
- Presentation of panel 3 conclusions by **Christophe Lefèvre,** rapporteur

3.45 – 4 p.m. Institutional response

- **Guillaume Daïeff,** Deputy Director in charge of competition law, consumer law and legal affairs (DFCCRF), French Ministry of Economy and Finance
- **Nils Behrndt,** Director, DG JUST, European Commission
- **Alain Coheur,** INT Section President

The contribution of the different speakers

Our two moderators

In his capacity as INT section president, **Alain Coheur** welcomed the participants and expressed how pleased he was about the EESC's sustained commitment to consumer protection. The European Consumer

Day was a unique opportunity for all consumers to exchange and put forward ideas. Alain Coheur and **Ileana Izveniceanu**, EESC member and master of ceremonies for the day, took turns at moderating the different sessions, one in face-to-face mode and the other in remote mode: the outcome was both smooth and dynamic. The theme

chosen for the 2021 European Consumer Day was of major importance; it raised number of crucial challenges that we would have to face in order to create a modern, responsible consumer policy.

Opening session

Christa Schweng, EESC president

Since 1987, the EU has had the strictest consumer protection rules in the world. Consumer expenditure accounts for 56 % of EU GDP. As the voice of civil society in Europe, the EESC has always been very

active in consumer matters. In this area, we cooperate closely with the European Commission (EC). Last year, the EC adopted the New Consumer Agenda, which sets out the priorities and main measures to be implemented over the following five years. One of the objectives of the New Consumer Agenda is to give European consumers an active role in the green and digital transitions. Here, one of the key challenges will be to work out how to ensure that the digital and green transitions are complementary and not contradictory. How can we make sure that the EU's digital and environmental policies are mutually reinforcing? One solution would be to ensure that consumers have access to relevant information that enables them to make informed choices. This raises the question of what elements should be displayed on product labels. Our common goal is to turn the dual transition into an opportunity for both consumers and businesses.

Simon Zajc, State Secretary, Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Digitalisation and new technologies entail new risks for consumers. During the health crisis, online sales increased and consumer habits changed: it is now possible to obtain consumer credit on the internet with just a few clicks, which brings with it the risk of over-indebtedness. It is therefore important to raise awareness and provide consumers with enough information. Our common objective must be to establish a properly functioning single market, whilst ensuring the highest possible level of consumer protection. Consumers have legitimate expectations about the safety of products, whether they are bought in shops or online. While the General Product Safety Directive has proved effective, there are still too many dangerous products on the market. It is therefore important to harmonise product safety rules, strengthen market surveillance and create fair competition between all the companies offering products to consumers. Finally, there should be no doubt about the fact that consumers must be able to buy safe and sustainable products on sustainable financial terms. Consumption should be able to contribute to the sustainability of both the environment and the internal market.

David Cormand, Member of the European Parliament

The theme of the 2021 European Consumer Day is crucial because there is a preconceived idea that the digital transition will go hand in hand with the green transition – in other words, that the digital transition will enable the green transition to take place. This is not the case. The European Parliament is proposing that people be made aware of this. They should bear in mind that digital technology, as it stands today, continues to have a strong environmental impact and promote overconsumption. By way of example, 5G further promotes the use of connected objects and data pathways. There are solutions that could be envisaged: for example the introduction of standards to reduce the number of connected objects, so that they are designed to last longer. Some consumer incentives based on digital and personal data, such as targeted advertising and online advertising, could be dropped. There could be regulation of trading platforms that, due to their monopoly, have an excessive influence on consumers and what they consume. One thing is certain: If the digital revolution is not green, if it is not regulated by green standards, it will speed up destruction of the environment.

Video message from Didier Reynders, European Commissioner

In 1999, when the EESC organised its first European Consumer Day, fewer than 10 % of consumers bought online. Last year, more than 70 % of consumers in the EU bought online. The EC is currently examining the digital transformation to ensure that consumer protection legislation is ready for the digital age. At the same time, the EU is committed to being the first continent to cut emissions by 2050. This objective will not be achievable if we fail to ensure that consumers consume in a more sustainable manner. Most consumers want to contribute to the green transition, but there are still many barriers linked to

digitalisation, which is not environmentally neutral. Indeed, there is a hidden environmental cost associated with using our screens: a message posted on Tik Tok emits approximately 5 grams of CO_2, a Pinterest message emits 3.6 grams, and a message on Snapchat 2.1 grams. Speaking for one minute on a mobile phone represents emissions of about 57 grams of CO_2. It is up to policy-makers to guide consumers in their choices. This is why the EC will be presenting a proposal in 2022 to empower consumers for the green transition. This means giving consumers the information they need (e.g. on the reparability of products) and getting rid of misleading environmental claims as well as environmental labels that make claims that are not credible. The digital transition should serve the green transition.

Keynote speech

Eric Vidalenc, Deputy Regional Director ADEME Hauts-de-France (Agency for ecological transition), scientific adviser Futuribles International, author of "Pour une écologie numérique"

Matters digital have played an important role in our daily lives. The environmental weight of digital technology is far from negligible: it accounts for around 10 % of electricity consumption and 3 to 4 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. As it is designed today, digitalisation is a burden on the environmental transition. The question is, therefore, how to leverage this burden. While the environmental transition is an obligation, there is nothing that requires us to digitalise our production systems, consumption or lifestyles. The two transitions are therefore not on an equal footing: the digital sphere must be placed at the service of the green transition. Possible avenues to be discussed include:

− how to make the invisible visible: nowadays, consumers are not given the full information about what they consume;
− digital sobriety, which means removing digital systems wherever there is nothing for them to do: the digital sphere is exacerbating environmental problems;
− the digital transformation, which implies a much longer digital life, aligning software programming as closely as possible with needs, and also downloading rather than streaming; and
− structural change in our consumption and production patterns, for example through pooling (car-sharing, carpooling, functional economy, collective organisation, etc).

Panel 1 - Consumers and digital: opportunities and challenges

Cristian Sainz de Marles, ONCE

People with disabilities are also consumers. They are a vulnerable consumer group and can benefit from technology. For blind people, the greatest difficulty has long been reading. In 1993, much progress was made with the emergence of Windows, which made it easier for people with disabilities to access many activities. Videoconferences that appeared later have also represented a significant step forward, as they have reduced travel. However, the revolution that greatly helped vulnerable consumers was triggered some ten years ago: computers became lighter and therefore easier to transport. It is now possible for unsighted people to travel into

town with their devices, go places where they were not able to go previously, check their budget, detect whether a light is on or not at home, find the exit at a shopping centre, read content on the internet, make payments, and withdraw money from a cash machine, amongst other things. In general, technology should be adapted to users, not the other way around. However, the question of data consumption and CO_2 emissions then arises, since sending a simple Whatsapp message alone represents an emission of up to 2 grams of CO_2. Solutions will have to be found to preserve the planet.

Marion Graeffly, Telecoop

Telecoop is a cooperative Telecom operator that was developed because the digital sector was leaving some people behind. It is clear that digitalisation has an impact on the environment: At global level,

several studies have shown that digitalisation accounts for 4 % of greenhouse gases and this percentage could rise to 8 % by 2025. Digitalisation, which could be a great tool for the environmental transition, is not playing its part in this and is not replacing practices that are highly polluting and still worsening (transport, manufacture of electronic equipment, etc.). Many people are also being left behind: in France, almost one in five people are affected by the digital divide, either because they do not have the means to pay for the tools needed to use digital systems, or because they do not

have the necessary skills. Digital systems constitute a resource that needs to be shared fairly. Telecoop's raison d'être is to see how digital systems can continue to be used for about twenty years without overly increasing pressure on raw materials, rare earths, etc. The concept of limited profit is important for Telecoop: the aim is to find solutions for a long-term environmental and social transition in digital technology. Telecoop, together with a number of groups in other sectors, co-founded the Les Licoornes collective, along the lines of what is being done with start-ups (unicorns). This thinking makes it possible to create partnerships with groups specialising in other parts of a value chain.

Panel 2 - Consumers and sustainability: challenges and obstacles

Jana Žůrková, RREUSE Belgium

Social economy enterprises active in the circular economy offer an alternative to overconsumption. RREUSE is an international network of social economy enterprises specialised in recycling and second-

hand goods. The network has 31 members located in 29 countries. RREUSE members collect objects (textiles, furniture, books, etc.), clean them, repair them and sell them on second-hand. The idea behind this approach is to reduce waste and create jobs for disadvantaged people. RREUSE therefore achieves environmental and social objectives. In terms of impact, REUSE members collected 1 100 000 tonnes of waste in 2020: 270 000 tonnes of these were re-used. In terms of social impact, 102 000 people were engaged in jobs, volunteering or traineeships. Recent good practices in

RREUSE include the Communication on the RREUSE philosophy. Some examples: at the end of each summer, campaigns are held to redistribute school material to children in need, ahead of the start of the school year. REUSE activities around 'Black Friday' provide another example: in France and the

Netherlands, there are many 'Green Friday' campaigns to compete with 'Black Friday'. These campaigns show consumers that they have a choice and that there are alternatives to consumerism.

Odile Le Bolloch, EPA Ireland - Stop-Food-Waste

In Ireland, the food waste prevention programme is carried out by the National Waste Prevention Programme. The two components of the [Stop-Food-Waste programme](#), launched in 2010, concern

awareness of food waste and changes in consumer behaviour (purchase planning, purchases, storage, consumption and use of left-overs). Over 3 years, the Stop-Food-Waste programme has reduced food waste by 20 % and increased the number of people involved in combating food waste. A behavioural study was carried out in September 2020 involving more than 1000 people over 16 years of age. The results of this study showed that:

−   Food waste is a matter of concern to the Irish people and they want to take action;
−   The main reasons for food waste are expiry dates and forgotten left-overs in the refrigerator;
−   After bread, vegetables, fruit and salads are the foodstuffs that are wasted the most;
−   During the first lockdown, 29 % of respondents said they had wasted less.

Efforts to combat waste present a range of challenges: it is important to raise awareness of the problem, disseminate reliable information by combating greenwashing, combat consumerism and brand advertising, ensure that awareness develops into behavioural change, and monitor and evaluate trends.

Panel 3 - Digital transition and Green transition: complementarities and/or contradictions?

Ursula Pachl, BEUC

Consumers depend on e-commerce, but this trend has a negative impact on the environment. To make e-commerce greener, it is important to reduce returns of goods. In the future, digitalisation can help

consumers to see virtually how a piece of furniture would fit into their lounge, for example. The question of free return of goods should be raised: some companies vigorously promote the possibility of returning their goods free of charge, but this approach tends to increase the number of returns. We need to encourage consumers to buy more sustainable products, and this requires better information. The EC is preparing a legislative proposal on pre-contractual obligations that should provide information on the reparability of products.

[BEUC](#) would ask that this go further and that product labels indicate estimated lifespans of products, as well as a reparability index. Efforts also need to be made in the area of environmental claims. According to a study carried out by the EC, and also by national authorities responsible for consumer protection, 42 % of environmental claims found on the internet are exaggerated or even misleading. The connected objects sector has a considerable impact on the environment: premature obsolescence

of products increases electronic waste and costs for consumers. On the other hand, artificial intelligence can contribute to the environmental transition through progress in managing city lighting and public transport, but with a downside, as it increases energy consumption and carbon emissions.

Claire-Anne Coriat, Le Kaba

Le Kaba is a responsible consumer guide that offers greener purchasing selections than average. The green transition is a common goal, while digitalisation is only one of the levers. The concept of

environmental transition remains very unclear for consumers. Digitalisation has its role to play in replacing certain high-carbon-impact services: teleworking has made it possible to reduce work-related journeys; and applications such as Too Good To Go offering food close to expiry date help reduce food waste based on technology and a high-quality digital experience. Nevertheless digital technology's share in the carbon footprint is growing rapidly. Consumers who decide to have their say in the green transition are somewhat lost for the time being. On the one hand, they might change their habits by eating less meat and sorting their waste better, but on the other hand they might consider it difficult to adopt responsible consumption because a lack of information constitutes a major obstacle to doing so. Digital pollution is not yet tangible for consumers. They neither know that 65 emails sent are equivalent to one km by car, nor that an episode on Netflix corresponds to a 7 km car journey, nor that a Google query represents 7 grams of CO_2. Le Kaba's mission is to support the transition amongst the French population and to ensure that they adopt eco-responsible consumption habits in a sustainable manner. In conclusion, the digital transition must continue to facilitate access to information for consumers. The introduction of environmental labelling and the traceability of products allow consumers to make informed choices. Digital systems also make second-hand markets more efficient by bringing supply and demand closer together at local level.

Wrap up and conclusions

Conclusions of panel 1 - Wautier Robyns de Schneidauer, rapporteur

President John F. Kennedy defined the principles of consumer recognition as the right to safety, protection, choice and the opportunity to be heard. These four principles were discussed in the first

panel, which showed how someone with disabilities could benefit from technologies in order to move towards greater inclusion in society. The first panel also examined an egalitarian social model – which could be described as militant – guided by a concern for fairness. We were able to identify a number of challenges and opportunities: firstly, the aim was to reduce the digital divide, raise environmental awareness, encourage environmental sobriety and make more progress in terms of equipment. We heard about opportunities to work at local level, reallocate sectors, influence legislators and develop ecosystems. There were also challenges as regards the environmental impact, as well as the different types of digital divides affecting vulnerable groups. We likewise discussed the runaway effect of market applications, the management of consumers' personal data and the restrictive use of algorithms, which may not always constitute a

step forward for humanity, as might have been promised by the idealists who first thought up the internet.

Conclusions of panel 2 - Alessandro Mostaccio, rapporteur

The first speaker placed an initial focus on synergies between the social and the circular economies, the aim being to link these two economic models through the Social Economy Action Plan and the Circular Economy Action Plan. Another focus was on synergies between the social economy and institutions, as shown by the many examples cited, such as Green Friday. A third emphasis was placed on the need to create synergies between digital opportunities and sustainability. Internet platforms were another way of developing the economy, for example the donation economy. The second speaker found that awareness-raising and an educational approach were paying off. All these findings brought hope, because they gave us a sense of belonging to a community. People had found that they could reduce food waste during the lockdown: this showed that our pre-pandemic lifestyle had been marked by waste and consumerism. In conclusion, we could say that we had managed to progress half-way along the path to our goals so far. We still had a long way to go, but there were crucial milestones along that path, such as the digital transition. If we managed to make this transition work for sustainability, then it could become a catalyst, accelerating the environmental transition that we all needed to achieve.

Conclusions of panel 3 - Christophe Lefèvre, rapporteur

One speaker pointed out that the mix between the digital transition and the environmental transition provided an opportunity, because there was a multiplier effect. There was a collateral effect of the digital transition, i.e. excessive consumption of everything that could be a digital tool. The responsibility of service providers in this transition could not be avoided. It was extremely important that consumers knew how to go about buying. This was difficult nowadays because consumers did not have the information that allowed them to make informed choices. There were no standards at European level on what should appear on labels. Consumers also lacked knowledge of internet tools: older people did not have the right training or had no access to information. There was also a lack of consumer protection in absolute terms. Despite the REFIT initiative and the recast of EU directives, much remained to be done. Finally, there was an extremely important issue, namely energy prices, which – if not brought under control – would turn into a social catastrophe for consumers, given that energy was involved in the manufacture of goods and the provision of services.

The institutional response

Guillaume Daïeff, Deputy Director in charge of competition law, consumer law and legal affairs (DFCCRF), French Ministry of Economy and Finance

France's digital transition priorities will be economic regulation and empowerment of digital platforms, with 2 legislative initiatives: DSA and DMA. Consumers must be able to make purchases on the internet with confidence, and that is why regulation is needed. Economic operators are also called upon to make commitments, provided that these go further than just regulation. Consumers can act and public authorities need to facilitate their actions. State action is not limited to ensuring that the consumer can benefit from the digital transition. The environmental transition is also a major issue and consumers must be players in this. Since the health crisis, some consumers have become aware of the importance of their choices in this area. In order for consumers to play their full role, they must have proper information at their disposal, and this is an essential task for public authorities. France has been playing a full part in this environmental transition: it adopted the Anti-Waste and Circular Economy Law in 2020 and organised the Citizens' Convention for the Climate at the end of 2019. The aim of this convention was to give the public a chance to air their views, and their recommendations resulted in the Climate Law of August 2021, which made environmental labelling mandatory according to product category, after a maximum of 5 years' trial. The question is whether there is a risk that consumers will be overloaded with information. This is where the two transitions can complement one other to the benefit of consumers.

Nils Behrndt, Director, DG JUST, European Commission

The policy framework that the EC has presented at EU and national level is reflected in the 2020 New Consumer Agenda. The environmental transition is fundamental for addressing the climate and environmental challenges we are facing. The digital transformation is changing our societies, as well as our experience as consumers. What is important is how these two transitions can move forward hand in hand. The digital transition allows us to be better informed, not only about the environmental aspects of our purchases, but also about our personal carbon footprint. The digital transformation allows businesses to use the full potential of the Single Market. It is taking us towards a more shared economy (such as car-sharing). We must not assume that digitalisation and the green transition will reinforce one other. There are considerable challenges, including energy consumption. It is therefore extremely important to focus on the interrelationships between the two transitions, as their success cannot be taken for granted. While the legislative framework can stimulate synergies between the transitions, it is important for there to be voluntary action by the different players involved. There are many businesses that go beyond this and want not only to put green products on the market, but also to target consumers in this greening effort. In this respect, the EC has launched voluntary cooperation with industry as part of pledges to promote environmentally-friendly consumption. The pilot phase for this type of cooperation is under way and the results will be announced at the Summit on 10 February 2022.

Alain Coheur, EESC member, INT Section President

It appears from the discussions that these two transitions are indeed well under way. There is a 'forced march' on the one hand and more of a 'voluntary march' on the other. We do need to complete these transitions, but we need to do so in such a way that one does not hinder the other. Therefore policies on the green and digital transitions will need to provide support for one another and they will need to make progress in parallel. In order to do so, consumers must become active players. They must act and make informed choices. In order to do so, consumers must have sufficient and relevant information. This means reviewing product labelling: for example, making it accessible and legible. In this context, the idea of an Ecoscore, reflecting the environmental impact of products sold in the European Union, makes sense, since the Ecoscore is a decision-making tool to guide choices towards a more sustainable consumption pattern. Sustainable consumption must be one of our priorities: why replace an entire camera when only one of the components is faulty? It is important to promote the right to repair. Repairing an appliance should not cost more than buying a new one, but unfortunately this is all too often still the case. We need to move forward together and strengthen synergies between all stakeholders in the consumer sector, both at institutional level and civil society level, in order to develop a modern consumer policy adapted to the new challenges that we face.