

**The New Consumer Future Trends  
40 Year Anniversary of DECO**

**SPEECH**

**by**

**Mr Luca JAHIER  
President of Group III 'Various Interests'  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee**

**OPENING CONFERENCE**

**'The Role of Associations in Consumer Protection Policy'**

**Lisbon**

**10 October 2014**

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*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*

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*Check Against Delivery*

Distinguished guests

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I am with you here in Lisbon today, to commemorate the forty year anniversary of DECO. I am particularly pleased to be speaking alongside Ms Amanda Long of Consumers International and Mr Carlos Coelho of the European Parliament. I hope that among the three of us, we will be able to enlighten you on both the European and international dimensions to the role of associations in consumer protection policy.

I would like to begin by reminding us all of the central role of consumer protection in EU legislation and policies. Firstly, Article 169 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that "...the Union shall contribute to protecting the health, safety and economic interests of consumers, as well as to promoting their right to information, education and to organise themselves in order to safeguard their interests". Not only does this recognise the right of consumers to structure themselves but in addition, what began in 1975 as the first consumer protection programme, has today become a *shared competence* for consumer policy among the EU and Member States. Secondly, consumer policy is regarded as *transversal* whereby according to the Treaty "Consumer protection requirements shall be taken into account in defining and implementing *other* Union policies and activities". Thirdly, consumer protection has a key role to play in the growth promoting strategy of the EU, otherwise known as the Europe 2020 Strategy. For according to this Strategy, one of the aims is to "...place the empowered consumer at the heart of the single market". In effect, this statement describes perfectly the overall objective of consumer policy, which in a nutshell is to increase the well-being of consumers and to ensure that competition is not distorted in the internal market.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Before going further, I would like to briefly present the Various Interests Group that I represent and to outline some of the work of the members of the European Economic and Social Committee. The Various Interests Group includes very diverse EESC members, who represent a myriad of interests including consumers, farmers, the liberal professions, NGOs, environmentalists, the social economy, SMEs, academics, women's groups etc. This diversity is certainly a richness, but it does also sometimes bring disagreement, for example between consumers and environmentalists or SMEs. In general though, I believe that the occasional conflicting views result in acceptable compromises which reflect socio-economic realities and strengthen the work of the Committee.

Of interest is the fact that there are currently only 12 consumer representatives at the EESC, from only 10 Member States. So not only is the sector underrepresented at the Committee, but so are also the national associations. Despite this, these few members are extremely active in promoting and defending the rights of consumers. This is done either through the work of a specific group managed by the Various Interests Group, the Consumer and Environment Category, or through the various reports or Opinions adopted by the EESC. Just to give you an example, last June the Consumer and Environment Category organised a seminar on their concerns relating to the Transatlantic Trade (TTIP) negotiations. Similarly, at the meeting of the same Category only last week, the members

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adopted a Declaration on this DECO conference. Among the recommendations of the Declaration, was for the EU to be at the cutting edge of innovation, something that could be achieved by enshrining sustainable consumption as a consumer right within EU legislation. I hope that during today's discussions you will examine and perhaps even support some of these proposals.

But I would also like to mention that there have been a significant EESC Opinions on topical issues such as the Digital Single Market, Production lifetimes and Consumer information, Consumer Protection, Misleading marketing practices, or indeed Advertising aimed at young people and children, just to name but a few. I am pleased to say that Mr Pegado Liz representing DECO at the EESC, is a particularly prolific author and has been the rapporteur of many EESC Opinions for at least three Sections at the Committee. May you continue your valuable work Jorge!

Having given you an overview of our members and activities, I would now like to turn my attention to the topic at hand, namely: the role of associations in consumer protection policy. The EESC adopted an own-initiative Opinion on exactly this topic in 2012 and the rapporteur was our Spanish member Mr Hernandez Bataller, who is also with us at the conference today.

Central to the recommendations that were made in this Opinion, was the view that it is necessary to take a people-oriented approach to the Single Market and that consumer organisations play an unparalleled role in guaranteeing confidence and the development of the Single Market. As a consequence, the Opinion argues that whilst respecting the principle of subsidiarity, the European Commission should take the initiative to ensure certain common minimum rights, in particular the right to be consulted. Hence, the EC is called upon to encourage Member States to promote the consultation and participation of consumer organisations. There should also be transparency of decision making on services of general economic interest, including financial services.

Secondly, the EESC Opinion argues that consumer associations should act as a counterweight in the market and that they should be in a position to participate on an equal basis with economic players in regulator's discussion forums. This necessitates strong and independent actors and the Opinion recommends that the EC increases significantly their financing of consumer organisations.

Thirdly, the Opinion recommended that in order to put consumption at the heart of the Single Market, it is imperative that there is more cooperation and dialogue between actors, notably between business and consumer organisations.

Fourthly, the Opinion reflects on how support for consumer organisations at the *European* level is no longer an objective and has been replaced by either promoting the consumer movement at the *national* level, or by empowering individual consumers. Indeed, the Opinion finds that the European approach to consumers from a collective point of view is very cautious. Consequently, the EESC calls upon the EC to put forward a concrete proposal on collective action, which is an extremely important instrument for the protection of consumers' interests at both the national and European levels.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will not go further in my presentation in order to leave time for the other interventions and debate. But I would simply like to end by saying that in today's society, notably in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis, the line between consumers and citizens has become even more blurred. There is no doubt that effective consumer policies at the national and European levels are in the interests of all citizens. Our joint aim should be to increase consumers' participation in the definition and implementation of sustainable and responsible economic and social growth policies. Let us join hands together in achieving these objectives!

Thank you for your attention.