

Markos KYPRIANOU

European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection

## **Empowered Consumers and Sustainability**

*Check Against Delivery*  
*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

European Consumer Day

**Brussels, 15 March 2005**

**ECOSOC: EUROPEAN CONSUMER DAY**  
**EMPOWERED CONSUMERS AND SUSTAINABILITY**  
**15 MARCH 2005**

Mrs SIGMUND, (*Anne-Marie Sigmund, President of the European Economic and Social Committee*)

Mr WHITEHEAD,

Mr BERTRAND (*Chair of the Committee on Sustainable Development of the Committee of the Regions*)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be here today with you in my first “Consumer Day” as European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection. And the more so, since this event, initiated by ECOSOC, has been bringing together some of the EU institutions under the same roof.

Consumer Day is marked and celebrated each and every year, all over the world, by those who champion the cause of the consumer which, let us not forget, covers each and every one of us.

Consumer Day is an occasion to remind ourselves of the ultimate goal of our economic and indeed our broader political ambitions and of what we are striving for European society as a whole – to improve progressively the quality of life of each and every individual citizen.

I want to emphasise that I take particular pride in the fact that my portfolio as European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection centres very much on citizen concerns – those issues that have a real and a direct impact on the daily lives of each and every one of us.

The safety of food and other consumer products; the protection of our legal and economic interests; protecting and improving health – these are my concerns; your concerns; everybody's concerns.

If our aim is for citizens to be interested and fully involved in European issues, then Europe has to be more than that just an economic structure. It must engage fully and take an active role in the broader sphere of citizens' hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Health, security, consumer rights, consumer safety – these are amongst the key concerns of citizens. These issues touch the daily lives of everyone. But it is all too easy to pigeonhole these areas into separate categories – to tacitly assume that they exist in isolation, as essentially separate entities.

I intend to take every opportunity to encourage a more inclusive agenda.

For example, when we talk about living a healthy lifestyle in terms of what we eat or drink or how we spend our leisure time, much depends on the choices we make as consumers. Thus the consumer agenda is inextricably linked to the health agenda, and vice versa.

This is why, next month, the Commission plans to propose the creation of a new EU-wide strategy covering both consumer policy and health policy. This way, the synergies between these two policy areas can be exploited to the full – and the EU's influence and activities enhanced and reinforced.

My principal aim with this strategy is to improve service to the citizen. Service to the citizen includes the need to spend community funds in a more prudent and effective manner. One of my key aims with this combined programme is to promote efficiency. Better utilisation of financial resources, a common set of tools and the development of synergies between the health and consumer programmes are the means towards achieving a “sustainable spending” one could call.

Speaking about “sustainable spending”, allow me now to turn more specifically to the theme of today’s conference – **sustainable consumption.**

Few would disagree with the basic premise that what we do on this planet today – including our choices as consumers - should not have a negative effect on the next generation and beyond. However, probably many of us are not willing to change our habits in order to achieve a more sustainable way of consumption.

This is where I believe that public authorities in general and myself, in the quality of Commissioner for Consumer Protection, have a role to play.

Getting citizens willing to consume in a sustainable manner implies that they have access to information on the products and services they are offered, that they are aware of the hazards - present and future - involved in the products of their choice, and that they are aware of the health-related benefits of sustainable consumption and production patterns.

In brief that they are critical consumers who make choices on informed grounds. Active consumers who are confident in their role, who know their rights and recognise their importance contribute to the wellbeing of our economy: they drive competition and thus competitiveness.

They also have the capacity to create pressure for the economy to move in a more sustainable direction.

In order to make this possible, a consumer policy has to cover those concerns, starting by putting in place a legal framework which provides for the protection of the consumer.

That is what the EU is trying to do when it adopts, for instance, the **Directive on General Safety of Products**.

But subsequently, the consumer has to be **informed** about those measures. Hence, the importance of **information and education**. I do not mean, by this, having a paternalistic approach to consumer, but rather to provide the consumers with the means to make informed choices. The better the quality of the information provided to consumers, the more efficient and informed will be their choice.

In this sense, we have launched a first set of initiatives for **training consumer organisations** so that they can be truly effective representatives of consumer interests. And we are organising information campaigns that are targeted specifically at consumers in the new Member States.

But it is not enough to put in place the legal framework for protection of the consumer and to inform him of his rights. There has to be a mechanism allowing for the “*mise en pratique*” of that information. In other words, if a consumer knows that a specific product is not safe, he – or she – has to have the means to enforce his right to a safe product.

It is this need that we are trying to tackle by pursuing the implementation of the **enforcement cooperation regulation**, adopted last year. This is an important development, which will create an environment where Member States can cooperate effectively on the enforcement of consumer rights and where consumers can be sure they have access to adequate redress.

Altogether these and other measures can contribute to having active consumers who are confident in their role, who know their rights and how to enforce them. Such consumers can not only contribute to the wellbeing of our economy, they also have the capacity to create pressure for the economy to move in a more sustainable direction.

The more complete the picture consumers have of the market, of what is available to them, and the implications of their choices, the more they will be able to decide which patterns of behaviour they want to follow.

Confident and empowered consumers will harness their economic clout to help us all to move towards more sustainable consumption and market patterns.

Thank you.

**End**