



BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR SOZIALE SICHERHEIT  
GENERATIONEN UND KONSUMENTENSCHUTZ



European Economic and Social Committee

## EUROPEAN CONSUMER DAY

"Consumer Education"

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Vienna, 15 March 2006

### STATEMENT

by

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President of the European Economic and Social Committee

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Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to join the federal minister, Ms Haubner, in saying that it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this year's European Consumer Day and to address you at its opening. This is the eighth European Consumer Day. The European Economic and Social Committee launched the initiative in 1999 in order to raise public awareness of EU consumer policy. Over the years, the event has continued to grow and attract attention. On this occasion, we turned to the Austrian Presidency to organise the event.

The European Economic and Social Committee was set up as an advisory body under the 1957 Rome treaties and acts as a bridge between the European institutions and organised civil society.

Our 317 members are organised into three groups: employers, employees and various interests. Membership of the last of these groups extends beyond the traditional social partners and includes representatives of family associations, the professions, cooperatives, environmentalists, farmers and the other leading protagonists of organised civil society, including of course consumers.

The EESC therefore systematically takes up subjects that are of relevance to consumers and their day-to-day problems, such as unfair commercial practices and consumer credit. We realise that often the underlying cause of these problems is the consumer's ignorance of his or her own rights and the means of enforcing them.

This is why we have chosen consumer education as the main theme of this year's event. This principle is clearly established under Article 153 of the EC Treaty, which promotes the consumer's right to information and education.

The common goal is to have informed consumers who know how to take full advantage of the benefits of the internal market. This is not only a key benefit for consumers themselves, but society also benefits through the positive impact of sustainable consumption, the theme of last year's European Consumer Day.

The EESC – the institution that represents civil society at EU level – is therefore resolved to generate a public debate that will give new impetus to consumer education. Today, during our discussions, we will trace developments in this field, which over recent years have culminated in ongoing national, EU and NGO initiatives. In this way we can lay the groundwork for identifying and sharing best practice.

To guide us, we need to ask three general questions:

First - "Who should be responsible for passing on the relevant knowledge?"

Second - "What are the preconditions that enable someone to absorb this knowledge?"

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Third - "Which methods are most effective?"

I am certain that the morning's discussions will raise enough questions and issues to enable us to hold an in-depth debate on future strategies for consumer education.

With a view to the forthcoming spring summit of heads of state or government, I would remind you that informed consumers are a core element in the European economic and social model. The principle of consumer education is a very tangible aspect of a knowledge-based society and sustainability, two central planks of the Lisbon strategy.

We therefore owe it to ourselves to reflect on how to ensure equal access to education for consumers throughout the European Union and in all its regions, in accordance with the principle of cohesion. To this end, a sufficient exchange of best practice between the leading countries in this field and those that are just starting out is in the interests of the whole of Europe.

Furthermore, educating consumers is an objective in its own right at international level. It has UN endorsement, notably with regard to the socioeconomic and environmental impact of consumer choices.

Therefore I hope that European Consumer Day will provide concrete answers to the questions raised above and serve as a launch pad for advances in this field. The Committee will take on board and follow up the conclusions of this conference as part of its consultative work and its permanent dialogue with the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament.

I would like to thank federal minister Haubner for organising this year's European Consumer Day as part of the presidency programme and wish the event the success it deserves.

I thank you for your interest.

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