

# CONSUMERS WELCOME THE LAUNCH OF THE RETAIL FORUM

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## Summary

Address by Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC,  
at the launch of the **Retail Forum** that took place at the  
Committee of the Regions on  
3 March 2009.

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## *They call for ambitious objectives within short deadlines<sup>1</sup>*

The launch of the Retail Forum is the end of a long and sometimes burdensome process. It is, more importantly, the beginning of a challenging new approach towards greening the retail sector.

### **Consumer difficulties when wishing to buy green**

From the consumer perspective, this initiative is to be welcomed. Since many years consumers are ready and willing to try to be more sustainable and to buy greener, more sustainable products, even if they are a little bit more expensive. However, such more sustainable consumer behaviour faces a lot of difficulties, among which the followings:

- there are little or no sustainable choices in stores
- more sustainable products are not easy to find
- more globally, consumers are confused : objective, reliable information on the environmental impacts of products is barely available, there is a lot of greenwash<sup>2</sup> advertising that is on the edge of being unfair or misleading. In addition, behavioural science indicates that where consumers are confronted to such confusing messages, they lose confidence in all of them, even those which are accurate.

### **The need for cooperation between all stakeholders**

Consumer organisations therefore welcome a more sustainable retail policy. In this context, it is important to note that the goal of making our lives and our consumption patterns more sustainable can only be achieved if efforts by all stakeholders are put together towards the same goal. Efforts have been made (and are still being made) on the production side, with integrated product policies such as eco-design of products; efforts have been made on the consumer information side, with the EU Ecolabel scheme as well as the EU energy label with its A to G rating system, which is very well understood by consumers.

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<sup>1</sup> With all my thanks to Ms. Laura Degallaix, Head of Safety and Environment Department at BEUC, who helped me prepare my intervention.

<sup>2</sup> A personal experience refers to the fact that a retailer's catalogue mentions that a given brand of TV-sets « functions with green energy »: this is of course misleading for consumers, considering that every electrical appliances can function with green energy.

Therefore it is now timely to turn towards a more ambitious global retail strategy, even if it is true that individual retailers have engaged into proactive green policies. Retailers are the link between consumers and producers and can not only propose to consumers more sustainable offers from producers, but can also convey to producers consumer expectations in this area.

## **Consumer expectations from a green retail sector**

In this area, from the consumer point of view:

- we expect more sustainable products on the shelves, and even on those prominent shelves which are considered more attractive for consumers;
- we expect shops to use their bargaining power towards producers to stop the production of the less sustainable products;
- in general, we expect retailers to actually engage into 'choice editing' in order to make the more sustainable choice the easiest choice for consumers. Some of you have told me that you have philosophical problems with such an approach and consider it as a limitation of consumer choice, I would not fear this : retailers have been engaged into choice editing since decades now, for marketing purposes, so why not using this technique for the sake of sustainability. This technique has never led to limitation of choice; instead it shifts the range of choice upwards: consumers would be provided with a similar range of choice i.e. as wide as before but made of products that are more and more sustainable<sup>3</sup>.
- The green policy should of course extend from products to more global retailer policies: transport, storage, energy supply, packaging, paper-less administration, etc.

## **The role of the Retail Forum**

Consumer organisations expect from the forum to set clear and ambitious objectives, covering a broad range of areas and sectors. It should also define clear and short deadlines in order to live up to the challenge. We also expect the forum to have transparent working methods.

## **The need for independent monitoring and Commission follow-up**

The Retail Forum has our warm support even though it is a voluntary instrument. Our experience for decades now gives us good reasons to be sceptical about voluntary instruments. We therefore remain to be convinced but we do not ask better than to be convinced.

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<sup>3</sup> This is what happened with domestic appliances since the introduction of the A-G energy labelling scheme— there are no G or F products any more in Belgium for instance.

There is of course a need for independent monitoring of the implementation of the work programme and the progress achieved with regard to the deadlines set. Several consumer organisations member of BEUC have expressed their will to proceed to such monitoring and evaluate the practical effects of the work of retailers on real consumer life. Also, in case the expected results would not materialise, the Commission should prepare a fallback action in order to set up a regulatory framework.

This being said, I do not wish to spoil this launch; I am convinced that the members of the Retail Forum are full of creative ideas and commitment to provide a substantive contribution to make our lives more sustainable. BEUC is happy to have been associated to the works of the forum as from the beginning. I wish the forum a lot of success.