

Consumer protection

Securing the basic necessities of life: Consumer protection - a question of international justice

The international flow of goods, the international division of labour and the emergence of transnational companies as global players are turning consumer protection into a global task. This trend, as a result of which 52 of the 100 largest economic entities are commercial enterprises, is throwing up new questions. We want to achieve better control through greater transparency in order to provide greater security for consumers. For the first time consumers have the possibility of making a decision, through what they choose to buy, in favour of fair production conditions.

It is particularly essential to guarantee security for all people with regard to the key necessity for every human life, namely food. Food security is indivisible!

A key element in food policy is the maintenance of local diversity of food and cuisine. The development of ecolabels and regional labels may not be overruled by food safety standards of the industrial food processors.

But what also concerns many people is securing the basic conditions for the provision of nutrition. Every person has a right of access to adequate food. The forthcoming World Food Summit must make an issue of the Code of Conduct. This right must become a key criterion for good governance!

We are particularly concerned in this context about the development of green genetic engineering. This technology is aimed above all at rationalizing jobs, while its long-term effects on nature - on biodiversity, for example - are impossible to predict. It is the big companies that will be the main beneficiaries, not the people in the places of production, nor consumers.

Every year large areas of virgin forest are cleared to allow major companies to plant forage plants such as genetically modified soya for the intensive livestock farming industry in Europe. In place of this, we want to promote socially, ecologically and economically sustainable cultivation methods which guarantee the livelihood of rural populations, strengthen the internal market and ensure that what is produced for export is what consumers want.

Consequences of the opposition to globalization

To this end we need a new agricultural policy. A change of direction in agricultural policy requires support in the form of global government action. We are critical of the WTO and advocate that it should be anchored in UN structures. The ongoing resistance demonstrated by civil society shows that the WTO must be reformed, that it is a matter of urgency to make the WTO and also the UN more democratic. One of the tasks of the WTO must be to ensure fairness in world trade and, through an international trade regime, to prevent the EU and the USA from pursuing a policy of economic protectionism. We are particularly critical of the current protectionist trends in the USA in the steel trade and the farm bill discussion.

We are also concerned about Johannesburg summit preparations (cfr next Bali session) where it seems that EU will stress that multilateral agreements on environment must take into account WTO rules without changing them, which means they are subject to these WTO rules". Protection of rural areas, social standards and environmental and consumer protection must be firmly established as criteria having priority on world trade rules
Securing freedom of choice

The prerequisites of freedom of choice are information and transparency. Consumers have the right to decide whether or not they wish to consume genetically modified products. There is consequently a compelling need for labelling obligations and traceability. It is essential to ensure that it is possible to grow GMO-free produce! This is particularly crucial in relation to organic farming.

We support the activities of all those who wish to secure freedom of choice:
the farmers who want to know and decide for themselves what they produce,
the farmers with processing businesses who want to know and decide for themselves what they feed their animals on,
the consumers who want to know and decide for themselves what they eat.

We want the EU to promote its consumer protection policy more forcefully in the international arena. Our aim is to establish the prospect of GMO-free production for the approximately 550 million consumers in the enlarged EU, as well as for the producers of agricultural goods in the main grower countries and hence particularly in the developing countries.

Consumers must take responsibility

We also want consumers to take more responsibility for production conditions.

They must know

whether the cocoa or chocolate they buy is the product of child labour,
whether the clothing they buy is produced by companies who engage in social or ecological dumping practices,
or, alternatively, whether they buy products from companies that have undertaken to adhere to the international regimes which represent the first small step in the global compact.

But for this to happen it is necessary for the interests of consumers to be heard:

It is necessary to establish a procedure for establishing international regimes that is transparent for consumers.

Consumer representatives must be admitted as observers in the relevant processes (as members of national delegations, for example).

There is a need for participatory instruments, which provide consumers with a means of making their voices heard.

There is also a need to regulate which means that self-regulation (by companies themselves) is not sufficient and cannot become the standard (cfr. Green Book on consumer protection recently published by EC). In any matter of interest for consumer rights, the EU must ensure that the best level of protection will be considered as a standard to be translated into national, European and global government action, in order to improve consumer protection and avoid dumping of it in some national measures.

The establishment of a European Food Agency and national food agencies as well, the Green Paper on Consumer Protection, and the implementation of product safety directives are the first steps in the process. But economic consumer protection and protection against deception must not stop at national borders, because goods and services do not do so. We want a EU which uses its power to champion consumer protection internationally. We regard the last WTO round in Doha and the commitment of the EU to accept non trade-related criteria as a first step in the right direction. Ensuring the international implementation of consumer rights is a fundamental prerequisite for more equitable globalisation.

Foodprocessors, supermarkets and all the other players in the foodchain have to publish every year in their annual report their efforts on social and ecological improvements. In the governing bodies of the foodcompanies, in comparison with the workersdirector, should the green movement go for a specific " green director".