

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSUMER PARTICIPATION IN STANDARDISATION

Mr Robert Madelin,
Director General for Health and Consumer Protection,
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at the 15TH ANEC¹ General Assembly in Brussels on 3 June 2004

It is a great pleasure to be here for the ANEC General Assembly and to meet for the first time one of the most important partners of my Directorate General.

I know that ANEC has now reached a certain maturity and will next year celebrate its tenth anniversary. I also know the journey has not always been easy but that the link with DG SANCO, and its predecessors, has always been strong.

Standardisation is of course an activity that came into being long before the inception of ANEC. In some Member States consumers were involved as far back as 40 years ago. It was, however, the programmes for harmonisation of the internal market and the “New Approach to technical harmonisation” that raised the profile of standards in the context of the policies of the European Union. With only general objectives set out in the legislation, and standards used for achieving these objectives, standardisation was given a prominent role in the legislative system.

The importance of standards within these systems has been further accentuated with the revised Directive on General Product Safety which came into force on 15 January of this year.

This Directive is in many respects very similar to the “New Approach” as products complying with European standards for which a reference has been published by the Commission are considered to satisfy the safety requirements of the Directive.

This evolution of the importance of standards has been matched by the increasing importance of the participation of consumer representatives in the process of standard setting at European level – not only for guaranteeing that standards will be developed and maintained at the appropriately high level our citizens expect, but also for the legitimacy of the use of standardisation in the framework of legislation.

The creation of ANEC responded to the need to ensure an effective means for co-ordinating consumer participation in the standardisation process. The results of ANEC’s activities through these years are significant. ANEC has clearly established itself on the map; it is an organisation that in its own right has a recognised role within the mechanisms of the European standardisation system.

ANEC representatives have had a strong impact on the content of many standards and ANEC lobbying has meant that standard proposals that have not provided a satisfactory level of protection have not been adopted.

ANEC has in many cases set the agenda by proposing mandates for new standards which have subsequently been proposed by the Commission and accepted by Member States and the standardisation organisations. A lot has thus been achieved. And I should also mention the important role of ANEC in raising awareness of standardisation within the consumer associations and for the training of consumer representatives.

¹ European Association for the Co-ordination of Consumer Representation in

ANEC very much relies on voluntary work from consumer representatives and contributions from consumer associations. But ANEC is also, to a great extent, dependent on financial support from the Commission and EFTA. We are therefore very pleased that we have recently been able to secure more long-term and stable financing arrangements for ANEC activities.

It is clear however that the Commission, ANEC and indeed Europe are not the same as they were ten years ago. Such evolution results in new challenges not only for ANEC but also for national consumer representatives and associations, for standardisation organisations, for Member States and for us in the Commission. I would like to highlight some of these.

I will start with the main theme of this General Assembly – enlargement. Naturally this poses the challenge of integrating our new members into our ongoing activities. Although there is a tradition of consumer representation in standardisation in many of the new Member States, we need to ensure that consumer associations give standardisation the priority they require. I am pleased to see that you will later this morning be discussing how representatives from the new Member States can be smoothly and rapidly integrated in the European standardisation process and ANEC.

The establishment of ANEC was of course a major step forward as far as EU level standard setting is concerned. Nevertheless, European standards are approved by the national standardisation organisations. It is, therefore, equally important to ensure that consumer representatives can be heard at national level if they are to have a proper input into the process. There is still room for substantially improving the level of awareness of this point, within many consumer associations and national standardisation organisations. We need to motivate consumer and national standardisation organisations to engage more fully in this and to encourage their governments to support them in this regard.

With the ever growing importance of international trade and of globalisation, international standardisation is as a consequence becoming increasingly important. The use of international standards is hampered when these do not take sufficiently into account legitimate safety concerns. Although the consumer voice should be represented in the positions taken by national delegations represented in this system, mechanisms for direct stakeholder influence are still largely missing.

We have also noted a general problem in co-ordinating the views of consumers from different parts of the world. To raise stakeholder participation at international level is therefore a challenge not only for the international standardisation organisations but also for the international consumer movement. From our side we will monitor and contribute to these developments in order to make the WTO TBT agreement's far-reaching ambitions on the use of international standards work in practice.

Standardisation work is increasingly taking place in new environments, such as in consortia in areas of rapid technological development – the Information Technology field, for example. Consumers must be adequately represented in such developments. We recognise that ANEC is paying more and more attention to this, but take the view that more could be done.

Standardisation is, in fact, a moving target not only in relation to structures but also with regard to subjects. It is progressively expanding into the area of “softer” standards such as quality standards – particularly in the area of services. As you know, the strengthening of the internal market for services is a general priority and in DG SANCO we are, together with Member States and stakeholders, examining the issue of safety risks related to services. Standardisation can play an essential role in initiatives, centred on the development and encouragement of best practices.

The liberalisation of public utilities and services of general interest such as telecommunications and transport services have also given rise to new standardisation issues and needs. We are pleased to see the very positive results of ANEC activities in the area of postal services.

All these challenges have been recognised in the current Consumer Policy Strategy in which better involvement of consumer organisations in EU policy making is one of three main objectives. We have under this objective undertaken to examine how the Commission can ensure better consumer participation in the work of standards-setting bodies.

To gain a better picture of the situation we have carried out a survey among consumer associations. Many of you will have contributed to the very good response we had to this exercise.

The results from the survey very much confirm the challenges I have mentioned, but also indicate that many consumer associations and several national standardisation organisations pay a great attention to – and attribute considerable resources to – consumer participation in standardisation.

We will soon publish the report of this survey on our website. It will contribute to the discussion on how to improve the situation. We will discuss further with ANEC and other relevant stakeholders the development of actions to be taken.

I also believe that the knowledge and expertise in product safety that ANEC members possess is important in relation to another of the priorities of the Consumer Policy Strategy, namely the “effective enforcement of consumer protection rules”.

The new Product Safety Directive places a heavy emphasis on this and contains numerous provisions on enforcement and networking. The revised Directive will also contribute to raising the level of awareness among consumers as it provides for improved access by the general public to information on dangerous products. We have now, for instance, been able to start publishing notifications of dangerous products under the RAPEX-system on the DG SANCO web site.

The role of consumer associations in developing safety is many-faceted. Your voice must be heard in the development of new policy initiatives and standardisation. You can make consumers aware of safety risks and can also be a watchdog – checking, following up and informing consumers, authorities and business about safety problems and keeping a watchful eye on the authorities to ensure that they meet their enforcement obligations.

The challenges I have mentioned illustrate the central importance of ANEC and its activities to policy development. I have also highlighted the need for constant adaptation in an ever-changing world. I would finally like to re-assure you of continuing support from our side – but you can also count on us to encourage you to be even more pro-active in adapting to new developments and setting new priorities for the future. We, on the other hand, will be counting on you to monitor that we fulfil our role as regards safeguarding the safety of European citizens.

Thank you for your attention.