



## **Consumers International**

### **Policy position on consumer voluntary action on climate change**

#### **1. Background**

Consumers have enormous potential to contribute to the fight against climate change through voluntary action (VA). Many consumers are concerned about climate change and about their own impact on the environment, but need support from government and business in order to realise their potential. Individual consumer choices are limited by infrastructure, the availability and accessibility of sustainable options, and the amount and credibility of information available to them about the impact of the choices they make.<sup>1</sup>

VA refers to any action by consumers that contributes to reducing harmful environmental impacts, such as green house gas (GHG) emissions, which is not a mandatory requirement under government regulation. VA includes actions affecting, not only the consumption phase, but all phases of a product or service's life cycle, including extraction, production, distribution and disposal, as well as actions to protect against the impacts of climate change. VA can also include demanding action from industry and governments, as well as acting to improve one's own environmental impact.

Although consumer voluntary action has great potential, and consumers have the right to realise this potential, VA should always be seen in the context of action from government and industry. Responsibility to solve the crisis lies primarily with them rather than with individual consumers, and VA alone cannot have a significant impact in the absence of action from other stakeholders. In order to make voluntary action by consumers count to improve environmental impact and reduce GHG emissions on a large scale, the consumer movement has to act as a whole, in addition to action by government and industry.

However, there is no 'one size fits all' solution and a variety of approaches to encourage, enable and inspire consumers to take voluntary action are needed to address different groups of consumers both within and between countries. The actions available to consumers differ between consumers of different means and between consumers in developing and developed countries. These cannot be viewed as simple distinctions, particularly for example in light of the growing number of middle class consumers in many developing countries, and the different levels of motivation within consumer groups.

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<sup>1</sup>International Institute for Environment and Development, *Shifting the balance: equity and sustainable consumption*, 2009, p.1

Much research has been undertaken into the level of consumer willingness to make changes to improve their environmental impact, and results have sometimes been conflicting. Those studies concluding lower levels of consumer willingness to change sometimes do not fully take account of the role of external obstacles. Although many consumers are already willing to or aware of the need to change, many obstacles such as the poor availability of sustainable products on the market prevent them from acting. Consumers need to be encouraged, enabled and inspired to take VA.

Where research indicates that consumer stated willingness or desire to take VAs is not translating into action in practice, it may be that feelings of disempowerment faced with real world barriers are to blame, rather than a lack of commitment to the cause. One study looking at what motivates consumer VA found that, in terms of predicting consumer actions, belief that one's actions could have an impact was almost six times more reliable an indicator than the consumer's level of concern for the environment.<sup>2</sup> For VAs to be enabled, consumer action must be made to count, and the impact and number of actions by all actors must be visible to assure consumers that they are not acting alone.

Many studies have found that significant numbers of consumers are willing to act on climate change and change their behaviour in order to improve their impact on the environment.<sup>3</sup> In fact it seems that the proportion of consumers who are unwilling to act is very small.<sup>4</sup> It seems that where consumers are adequately informed, they will generally make the easy, close to home changes readily.<sup>5</sup> And yet information alone is not necessarily sufficient to produce a shift towards more sustainable consumption patterns.<sup>6</sup> Much potential consumer VA is prevented due to feelings of disempowerment and demotivation.<sup>7</sup> According to an international

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts, 1996 in Network for Business Sustainability, *Socially conscious consumerism: a systematic review of the body of knowledge*, Network for Business Sustainability, 2009, p.7

<sup>3</sup> See for example, AccountAbility and Consumers International, *What assures consumers on climate change?*, AccountAbility, 2007; and Study by Havas Media based on interviews with more than 11,000 respondents in Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Mexico, Spain, UK and US, cited in: <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS52654+11-May-2008+PRN20080511>

<sup>4</sup> The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute, *Consumers, business and climate change*, The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute, 2009; and similarly, AccountAbility and Consumers International, *What assures consumers on climate change?*, AccountAbility and Consumers International, 2007, p.9

<sup>5</sup> AccountAbility and Consumers International, *What assures consumers on climate change?*, AccountAbility and Consumers International, 2007, p.9

<sup>6</sup> National Consumer Council (England), *Desperately seeking sustainability*, National Consumer Council, 2005

<sup>7</sup> The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute, *Consumers, business and climate change*, The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute, 2009; and AccountAbility and Consumers International, *What assures consumers on climate change?*, AccountAbility and Consumers International, 2007, p.9

survey, the three main barriers that prevent VA are a lack of information on products with a low GHG impact, a lack of availability of “eco-friendly products” and cost.<sup>8</sup> Globally, it seems that as much as 80% of consumers may buy more sustainable products if more were on offer, highlighting the importance for companies not to make the mistake of confusing lack of consumer choice with consumer loyalty.<sup>9</sup>

Central to enabling and inspiring consumer VA is consumer faith in green claims. The increasing number of products and services containing information about their environmental impacts is to be welcomed. However, consumers are often wary of green claims by industry, particularly in the light of misleading claims and confusion resulting from the number of and lack of consistency in claims made.<sup>10</sup>

For poor consumers, cost and access are often overriding issues. In many cases however, shifting to products and services with lower associated emissions can save money for consumers, as is the case with many energy efficient products and services or products with longer lifecycles. Better consumer information and education is needed to highlight these win-win scenarios and clarify the impact consumer choices have on climate change.

## **2. Recommendations**

### ***Consumer organisations should***

- Provide consumer information identifying which actions can have the biggest impact and provide regionally appropriate guidance on everyday choices.
- Provide inspiration and encouragement by running information campaigns showing the impact VA can have.
- Provide consumers with information on win-win scenarios where they can save money and reduce emissions simultaneously.
- Campaign for regulation and standards to ensure businesses provide accurate, clear and standardised information on the environmental impact of products and services.
- Incorporate environmental performance indicators in product testing.
- Act as a watchdog for misleading claims by businesses.
- Engage in dialogue with business and government on how consumer VA can be enabled.

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<sup>8</sup> The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute, *Consumers, business and climate change*, The University of Manchester Sustainable Consumption Institute, 2009, p. 19

<sup>9</sup> Study by Havas Media based on interviews with more than 11,000 respondents in Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Mexico, Spain, UK and US, cited in:  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS52654+11-May-2008+PRN20080511>

<sup>10</sup> See for example, AccountAbility and Consumers International, *What assures consumers on climate change?*, AccountAbility and Consumers International, 2007

### ***Businesses should***

- Ensure availability and accessibility of a range of sustainable and affordable products and services that meet performance requirements.
- Ensure green claims are clear, credible and comparable.
- Promote and support eco and energy labels and standards.
- Provide clear guidance on improving environmental impact during the use and disposal phases of their products and services.
- Provide complete transparency about their environmental impact, as well as their plans for improving this impact.
- Engage in partnerships with governments and consumer groups to promote sustainable lifestyles and to develop consistent and consumer friendly ways of communicating technical green claims.

### ***Governments should***

- Provide clear, concise and action-oriented information on consumer VA.
- Include sustainable consumption as part of national curricula and other education programmes.
- Put in place and enforce effective legal frameworks with corresponding implementation mechanisms to ensure availability of sustainable products and services.
- Commit to technology transfers of low-emission technologies to enable VA in different countries.
- Inspire consumer action by creating a vision of a sustainable future with a clear role for consumers.
- Support consumers in switching to more energy-efficient products through procurement policies, subsidies, taxes and incentives as well as through choice editing.
- Better regulate industry claims, and marketing and advertising behaviour.
- Enter into partnerships with Consumer and environmental NGOs to ensure credibility.
- Inspire consumers by incorporating environmental considerations into all activities and national and regional plans, and publicising results.
- Contribute to the development of sustainable products through funding of innovation and research.