



Concluding remarks on the ANEC/ASI-CC/BEUC conference “How to eliminate hazardous chemicals from consumer products”

by Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC

The objective of the ANEC/ASI-CC/BEUC conference was to raise awareness on a critical topic that concerns us all: the exposure of consumers to dangerous chemicals in consumer products and especially to the cocktail effect of combined exposure to different chemicals.

The first part of the day was devoted to analyzing the legislation related to chemicals in products and to discussing whether this legislation ensures a high level of protection of consumer health and safety.

The second part of the day was dedicated more specifically to identifying the gaps in the legislative landscape applicable to chemicals and considering additional, complementary - maybe more ambitious - measures to fill these gaps in order to improve consumer safety.

Our intention was to raise awareness, but beyond that it was to start the debate, and I believe that we succeeded, thanks to the speakers and panellists who provided us with committed presentations and opinions, and thanks to the audience, who participated in lively discussions. Therefore I would on behalf of the three organisers, thank you all for having attended and participated so actively in this conference.

We also consider the important number of participants to be a signal that should be transmitted to policy makers: the debate around chemical consumer safety is of huge interest to many stakeholders be they consumers, parents, the chemical industry traders and retailers, environmentalists or policy makers.

The debates of the day were very inspiring. The cross-cutting elements that could be identified were the following:

- the current approach for a regulatory framework concerning chemicals in consumer products is piecemeal. Vertical, sector specific legislation leads to lack of consistency and to confusion. When combined with an even more fragmented enforcement by national authorities, it leads to a complex “ecosystem” that makes it difficult for all stakeholders to identify the applicable rules;
- today, consumers face increased exposure to chemicals, whose effects have not been - if at all - duly assessed. Meanwhile, it is the perception - as well as the legitimate expectation of consumers - to believe that products and substances on the market are safe;
- the vertical legislative framework is very slow to adapt to technological and scientific developments and therefore the gap between the marketing of substances and the regulation of their assessment is ever widening;



- global wordings such as “products must be safe” do not constitute proper guidance for manufacturing industry, the retail trade, market surveillance authorities or consumers, and it is essential to develop clearer guidelines on the criteria with which substances/products must comply in order to be considered safe;
- the quantitative risk assessment approach leads to endless discussions about levels of tolerance etc. It is crucial to take another approach, based on qualitative risk assessment methods. This will also then put into perspective the dependence of policy makers on the scientific and technical expertise mainly hosted by the industrial sector, so making the regulatory framework dependent on the goodwill of one of the stakeholders;
- where it is important to set rules, the voluntary approach by individual companies that are forerunners in investing into safer alternatives is key to a quick development towards an environment that is free of hazardous substances.

So it is important to take our heads from the sand: we cannot pretend there is no problem with chemicals in consumer products. There is a problem that has to be addressed and the sooner the better. This is key if the confidence of consumers in the products they buy is to be boosted.

It is also key, more indirectly perhaps in the debate around innovation, growth and competitiveness: I am convinced that we, as Europeans, have a leading role to play in demonstrating to the world that innovating into safer chemicals and phasing out the more dangerous ones can be a factor of growth and of competitiveness.

There are many pieces of consumer legislation that are or will soon be under review and the question has to be asked on how to integrate the issue of safe chemicals into that review. I do not talk about REACH, which is not intended to regulate those chemicals that are contained in consumer products. I refer to the Ecodesign legislation or the General Product Safety Directive. However, it is crucial to be ambitious, and therefore we need to tackle chemicals within a (enhanced) horizontal framework legislation at EU level. There is a need for a fresh approach, for political courage, for incentives to innovate safer alternatives.

We must do it and we must do it now.

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