

REACHforLIFE Roundtable

Summary of Roundtable discussion –19th March



What do consumers have to gain from science-based policy-making?

REACHforLIFE Roundtable, 19 March 2009, Brussels

Introduction

In recent years consumer protection has taken an increasingly important place on the EU's policy agenda. On 19th March 2009, only a few days after European Consumer Day, the second in a series of REACHforLIFE Roundtable discussion took consumer policy as its topic. The discussion, which brought together a variety of engaged stakeholders, centred on the question of "What do consumers have to gain from science-based policy-making?"

This document serves as a summary of the points discussed at the event and has been agreed upon by all of the participants of the Roundtable. Moreover, we would like to thank the following individuals for their participation in the discussions:

- Jarka Chloupková Scientific Technology Options Assessment (STOA) European Parliament
- Marie-Hélène Fandel European Policy Centre (EPC)
- Rodrigo Gouveia Eurocoop
- Hubert Van Der Snickt European Burns Casualties Association (EBCA)

REACHforLIFE was represented at the event by the spokespersons Willem Hofland and Guillaume Artois and the Campaign Director Jessica Adkins. Chris White of the EU Reporter, Jennifer Rankin of the European Voice and Theodoros Karapiperis of the Scientific Technology Options Assessment (STOA) panel of the European Parliament sent their apologies for being unavailable to attend.

Please find below a brief summary of each participant's contribution to the debate.

Summary

Guillaume Artois, REACHforLIFE spokesperson, delivered the opening statements which briefly introduced the campaign. He commented that REACHforLIFE was born out of moves to ban a specific substance that had been proven safe in consumer products. Mr Artois highlighted the fact that while safety in consumer products has to be given top priority; issues relating to consumer protection need to be looked at in a broad context.

Throughout the Roundtable, Mr Artois drew attention to the importance of independent science, stressing that risk assessments, such as those required under the REACH Regulation, should be considered impartial and that their conclusions must be accepted by other regulatory and legislative bodies, as well as other stakeholders. In fact, Mr Artois lamented the fact that politicians do not seem to consider science as an important criteria when formulating policy.

Mr Artois cited REACH as a good example of the formulation of legislation in a democratic manner, since it involved the consultation of many stakeholders. This process was conducted with the notion of Better Regulation in mind and ensuring a safe environment for consumers.

Rodrigo Gouveia, Eurocoop, stated that as an organization that represents consumer run co-operatives, Eurocoop is in a unique position to see both consumer and industry perspectives. He argued that consumers do not always trust science, since it is often not independent or transparent. Mr Gouveia also stated that decision-makers should see science as one among many factors, i.e. social, moral, and ethical criteria that must be taken into account during policy-making.

Mr Gouveia insisted that communication regarding scientific information has to be improved and that consumers must receive, understand and trust the information that they receive from scientists. Despite this, Mr Gouveia insisted that industry has to recognize and accept that consumer concerns are based on social and ethical principles as well as scientific criteria.

Willem Hofland, REACHforLIFE spokesperson, hailed REACH as an independent and objective EU criterion and, as a consequence, stated that the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) must base its recommendations on science and that this same science should carry more weight in the decision-making process. Mr Hofland pointed out that MEPs admit they do not have all of the available information and, as such, they rely upon ECHA. He admitted that Mr Gouveia was correct in that, other than science, there are other aspects that carry weight in the legislative process, but REACHforLIFE feel that there is too much emphasis on the political perspective and too little on science. Furthermore Mr Hofland commented that fire safety as part of the ethical and social aspects of the policy-making process is being ignored.

He stressed the point that often REACHforLIFE feels that the respective doors of decision-makers are opened wider to (E)NGOs than to industry. Mr Hofland concluded on the remark that the three founding members of REACHforLIFE have a high ethical profile and thus, contrary to the claims of some (E)NGOs, have no interest in putting questionable products to the market.

Hubert Van Der Snickt, European Burns Casualties Association (EBCA) represented the interests of burn victims at the Roundtable and stated that the removal of products not based on scientific principles can present challenges. Taking the case of fire safety, Mr Van Der Snickt questioned the actions of ENGOS. He said that they may have lobbied for different legislation on fire safety for social reasons as Mr Gouveia mentioned, but that it appears that these same ENGOS do not consider the social consequences of fires, including disfiguration and even fatality. Mr Van Der Snickt stated that his organization urges decision-makers to take into account fire safety and that if social concerns are to be allowed to take precedence over scientific evidence, then preventing the loss of human life should be a priority.

Marie-Helene Fandel, European Policy Centre (EPC), pointed out that many consumers still have a profound distrust of science and they often question science's impartiality. She invited participants to think about the reasons behind this and wondered whether this may be linked to precedents (including for instance precedents in the tobacco industry).

She also questioned whether this distrust was specific to European consumers and how this compares to the rest of the world. One of her examples was GM crops which have been approved by scientific risk assessments and which are a reality in many parts of the world. Ms Fandel stressed that the principles of science as well as scientific evidence regarding specific products and technologies need to be better communicated to consumers.

Jarka Chloupková, Science and Technology Options Assessment (STOA), commented that she agrees with the message that science is not being heard enough. She discussed the fact that the STOA in the European Parliament is designed to look at science and technology long-term and interdisciplinary issues. Due to the constraints related to MEPs constantly overbooked agenda, it seems like STOA activities does figure on the priority list, despite its potential of bringing an added value in decisions making. She wishes this could change.
