

Global survey shows slow progress on UN Sustainable Consumption Guidelines (3/6/2002)

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London/Nairobi/Bali - Three years after UN General Assembly ratification, a global survey has found slow progress from governments on implementing the Sustainable Consumption Guidelines in the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection.

In a joint assessment by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Consumers International (CI), the survey found that over 38% of the governments responding were not even aware of the Guidelines' existence.

According to the Survey, "Tracking Progress: Implementing Sustainable Consumption Policies," of the 52 governments that responded (150 governments approved the Guidelines in 1999), only 56% promote research on sustainable consumption with the same percentage using relevant economic instruments such as 'green taxes.'" It also notes only 54% measure the progress of their nations toward more sustainable consumption patterns.

"When it comes to policy guidelines, governments have made a start but clearly much more still needs to be done," said Klaus Toepfer, UNEP Executive Director. "Future population growth will be accompanied by an extraordinary growth in consumption. Meeting the growing consumption demands of all people while at the same time preserving Earth's natural resources requires actions by individuals, business and, of course, governments" he said.

"Progress towards more ecologically sustainable economies is a high-level concern of consumers - governments clearly need to lift their game," said Louise Sylvan, President of Consumers International (and Chief Executive of the Australian Consumers' Association).

"Disappointingly, some of the biggest resource-consuming countries did not respond to the survey" said Louise Sylvan "and have not yet used the Guidelines to provide frameworks for achieving improvements. Strongly growing economies are important in helping to fulfil the first consumer right - satisfaction of basic needs - but achieving these goals now needs to be carried out in a responsible and sustainable way," she said.

More encouragingly, the survey found that 80% of the governments that responded believe the guidelines are useful for policy making and the same number have initiated information campaigns on sustainable consumption in their countries.

In analysing the survey, each responding country was given a score based on progress with implementing the guidelines, from 0 (no implementation) to 10 (implementation of all parts of the guidelines has started).

The scores are as follows:

- 10 Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and Sweden
- 9 People's Republic of China, Germany, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Vanuatu
- 8 Canada, Hong Kong (China SAR), Kuwait, Seychelles and Slovak Republic
- 7 Argentina, Chad, El Salvador, Fiji, Israel, Japan and Zimbabwe
- 6 Kiribati, Mauritius, New Zealand, Senegal and Switzerland
- 5 Austria, Chile, Croatia, Indonesia, Italy and Uruguay
- 4 Bulgaria and Côte d'Ivoire
- 3 Costa Rica and Haiti
- 1 Burundi, Ecuador and Kenya
- 0 Cyprus and Zambia

The survey found that two-thirds of countries promote environmental product testing and eco-labelling of products. Other examples of successful projects to encourage sustainable consumption included:

Australia's "Green Games 2000 Initiative", recycling programmes on aluminium cans, mobile phones, batteries, newsprint and waste oil, Environment Industries Action Agenda and a tax on Sydney car park spaces;

Brazil's green labelling programmes, product testing and consumer surveys;

Chile's campaigns to promote sustainable consumption in water, waste and electricity services and the start of a cleaner production programme;

China's Law on Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests, publicity and education programmes, environmental labelling, energy-saving campaigns for household electrical appliances, certification of environmentally sound products and 30% sales tax reduction for light vehicles;

Germany's "Green Dot" recycling scheme, "Blue Angel" ecolabelling, eco-tax on mineral oil and green public procurement website;

Japan's Laws on green procurement, recycling and waste management and financial incentives for buying electric, natural gas, methanol and hybrid vehicles;

Mauritius' awareness raising campaigns on use of solar systems, reuse of paper and prudent use of plastic products, "Children as consumers" campaign and the 'e-government' campaign, aimed at a decrease of use of paper in government's offices;

Senegal's information campaigns on saving energy, transportation in Dakar, and a women's group action to recycle plastic rubbish.

As a result of the findings of this survey, UNEP and Consumers International are calling for a time-bound programme of implementation (by 2004). Such a programme, involving governments and other stakeholders (such as National Cleaner Production Centres), will include awareness raising, further clarification of the Guidelines, upgrading of monitoring efforts, expansion of sustainable consumption campaigns and support to developing countries.

This mirrors recommendations from UNEP's 7th High-Level Seminar on Cleaner Production, held in Prague, Czech Republic from April 29-30, which highlighted the importance of the life-cycle approach in sustainable consumption and production policies.

"This pioneering survey shows that Governments, in developed, developing and transition economies, are interested and willing to implement policies outlined in the UN Guidelines," said Klaus Toepfer. "A long-term capacity building programme for sustainable consumption and production patterns, involving governments, industry and consumers, would now be very timely"

Notes:

The UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1985, and expanded in 1999 to include Section G, Promotion of Sustainable Consumption (UN Assembly Decision 54/449).

The Sustainable Consumption Section of the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection gives a framework for governments to use in formulating and strengthening policies and legislation for more responsible consumption and production patterns, resulting in diminishing environmental

impacts, and a more equitable distribution of resources among the rich and poor. Separate chapters deal with research into consumer behaviour, 'green' design of products and services, environmental testing, green procurement, as well as development of indicators and tools for measuring progress.

The United Nations Environment Programme's Division of Technology, Industry and Economics (UNEP- DTIE) and Consumers International (CI) joined in partnership in 2001 to conduct a global status survey focusing on the extent to which governments were aware of the Sustainable Consumption section of the UN Consumer Guidelines, and what they had done to date to implement these elements into their national policy frameworks. UNEP and CI surveyed 150 UN member governments, all of which approved the Guidelines in 1999. 52 questionnaires were received back from governments and 8 detailed case studies were undertaken. The two organizations have successfully utilised their regional networks to communicate with governments. CI's presence in 127 countries was directly responsible for the receipt of 52 government surveys and 8 national case studies.

Estonia and Finland surveys were returned after the deadline and therefore are not included in the analysis.

For further information:

The report, Tracking Progress: Implementing Sustainable Consumption Policies is available at: www.uneptie.org/pc/sustain/guidelines/guidelines.htm. Please contact sc@unep.fr for more information.

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