



**IFHE Symposium "Sustainable Development and Quality of Life
- A Challenge for Consumer Education"**

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in Bonn

Opening statement

by

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you here to Bonn as representative of the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture and to give the best wishes of our Federal Minister Künast to you. Due to other long-term engagements, she is unfortunately not able to participate in this event.

In the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, your conference addresses a topic that has been on the political agenda since the 1960s but has lost nothing of its topicality and urgency. Quite a lot has been achieved but we are still far from having made great progress in the direction of sustainable development.

Since the Conference of the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the term 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development' has been firmly established as a key concept in many policy areas. Through the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 in Johannesburg, the topic has also received new attention from the aspect of sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The German Federal Government also committed itself to observe the key concept of sustainable development and to incorporate it into its policies. Sustainability is not limited to environmental protection. In fact, the basic idea of sustainability applies to all policy areas, like to the reform of social security systems, food and nutrition as well as

the transport sector – just to mention a few examples. The Federal Government outlined its objectives and measures in its first National Sustainability Strategy adopted in 2002 and its Progress Report published in 2004. The drafting of both reports was accompanied by an extensive social dialogue. On the international stage, for example at the Johannesburg World Summit, the Federal Government has also taken up that position.

Since Johannesburg, the focus has increasingly been on the importance of consumer behaviour to sustainable development. In the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, an entire chapter was dedicated to the transition to sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The Federal Government welcomes this approach. Consumption and production are two sides of the same coin. Suppliers and consumers must be equally motivated towards sustainable development. And consumer policy plays an essential role in this respect. In order to enable consumers to base their consumption decisions on ecological, social and ethical aspects the following two preconditions must be met:

First: The goods and services on offer must comply with the criteria for sustainable management.

Second: Consumers must be able to identify those goods and services that were produced according to these criteria.

In addition to promoting sustainable production patterns, the Federal Government has taken a wide variety of measures to provide consumers with information and to facilitate the access to this information. Particularly with the help of recognised labels or approval marks, consumers can quickly find their products of choice. I would like to mention the example of the so-called Eco-label, a uniform label for organically farmed products. The successful distribution of the label has generated better market transparency. Since it was announced in September 2001, almost 24,000 products of more than 1,200 manufacturers carry the Eco-label.

Another example is the TransFair trademark which assures consumers that social standards are met when these products are manufactured and placed on the market. And at the same time, through the purchase of fair trade products, consumers help to

create fair trade relations and better working and living conditions for people in developing countries.

Whether in the field of food labelling, agrobiotechnology or electricity labelling, we always aim at establishing clarity, transparency and traceability. Consumers must be able to make self-determined and informed decisions. The parliamentary groups of the coalition therefore decided to adopt specific regulations in order to provide consumers with a right of access to government information on foodstuffs, commodities (like cosmetics, for example) and feedstuffs. In addition, national rules are to be established providing that government authorities must actively inform the public under certain circumstances, for example when precautionary measures have to be taken. The bill is currently negotiated in the mediation committee, made up of members from the Bundesrat (*council of our federal states*) and the Bundestag (*federal parliament*).

So far, I have underlined the importance of information in consumer policy. But 'education' also includes school education. Let me illustrate that with the example of "food and nutrition". Good basic schooling is necessary to enable consumers to make informed and self-determined consumption decisions later on in their life. The current discussion about education, triggered by the so-called Pisa Study (*OECD Programme for International Student Assessment*), also requires a thorough review of educational priorities, curricula, educational material and further education programmes in the field of nutritional and consumer education.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the federal states, the so-called "bundesländer", are responsible for school education. In other words: The federal government is not in a position to dictate to the federal states what courses or curricula are mandatory. In order to improve consumer and nutritional education across all federal states, the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture has initiated a pilot project. This project is aimed at developing up-to-date educational priorities and standards as well as core curricula concerning both nutrition and general economics for all school levels which can be used in various courses and contexts and are internationally comparable.

But measures aimed at improving dietary habits must go beyond school education and start at various levels. A major problem lies in the fight against overweight. And it is particularly alarming that an increasing number of children and young people are concerned by this problem. Preventing excess body weight in children and young

people therefore represents a key objective in consumer and food policy. It lays the foundation for a healthy lifestyle.

As an example, I would like to mention the campaign of our ministry "SLIM KIDS.BETTER DIET:MORE EXCERSISE:". This initiative is aimed at developing prevention and information measures with regard to diet and physical activity. With the healthy diet campaign "FIT KID", we established an advisory service for day-care facilities for children, aimed at providing nutritional information and improving the food served there. Comprehensive further education programmes for teachers and multipliers are offered with a view to improving the food served to children in all-day schools.

In this context, I would particularly like to stress the foundation of the "Platform for Action on Nutrition and Physical Activity". With this platform, we want to give children, young people and their families concrete assistance to help them decide for a health-promoting lifestyle, a long-term suitable diet and physical activity habits.

The special thing about the "Platform for Action on Nutrition and Physical Activity" is that it unites the forces of all actors of society. This ensures that through a wide range of concerted actions, large sections of the population can be reached with co-ordinated messages. Apart from the Federal Republic of Germany, the founding members of the platform include, among others, the food industry, the German Sports Association, the German Society of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, central associations of health insurance companies and the German Agricultural Marketing Board.

But the Federal Government's activities to promote sustainable consumption patterns are not limited to food and nutrition but cover all aspects of consumption. I have already mentioned the Eco-label and the Transfair trademark and would now like to explain our activities with the help of two other examples:

In December last year, we launched the consumer information campaign "TRULY FAIR – Buying smart". This campaign is aimed at providing consumers with concrete and practical alternative approaches to environmentally and socially compatible consumption patterns and at initiating a social discourse. In this context, information is provided on trustworthy product labels in the fields of "food and nutrition", "construction, living, household and energy", "textiles, clothes and toys" as well as "travels, mobility

and investments". In addition to that, specific possible behaviour patterns are identified. Local, regional and supra-regional actors are to be networked under the roof of this campaign. The integration of the various groups of actors guarantees that wide sections of the population can be reached in their respective living environments. Fair trade is also a topic of this campaign.

Another example is our so-called "EcoTopTen Initiative" – a consumer information campaign. This initiative addresses both sides of production and consumption. On the one hand, innovative and sustainable products are developed for the market which are very sophisticated, ecologically compatible and with a good price-performance ratio. On the other hand, consumers can quickly and reliably get a market overview of sustainable and conventional products and find information on possible sustainable uses. Federal Minister Künast has assumed the patronage of this campaign and will launch it officially on 9th March this year.

[Ladies and Gentlemen,]

The title of your symposium clearly illustrates that achieving sustainability represents a challenge for consumer education and information. Neither is there a clear answer to the question what it means to consume or behave in a sustainable manner every single day nor does the one consumer exist. There is no prescribed, universally applicable or even obligatory path to sustainability, everyone must ask him- or herself these questions every day and for all kinds of consumption areas.

What makes things even more complicated is the fact that "sustainability" is a rather clumsy word and, unfortunately, is often used in the wrong context. We are working hard on improving this.

But at the same time, more and more consumers realise that their purchasing decisions and daily habits have consequences for our environment and our society – and consequences for future generations. This is supported by empirical studies. It has, for example, been shown in a representative study carried out in 2003 in Germany (Institute for Market – Environment – Society, Hannover 2003) that two thirds of the people questioned were interested in information on the social and ecological effects of business activities. And more than half of all Germans indicated that they prefer

products coming from companies that are acting responsibly – but only if price and quality are the same.

In this context, it is of particular importance to consumers that companies do without child labour. And it is also crucial whether companies make economical use of resources, create jobs or are not involved in animal testing.

But in spite of all those difficulties and different ideas, one thing is for sure: There is broad social consensus on the objective of a socially fair, ecologically compatible and economically sustainable development.

A policy that follows the principles of sustainability makes decisions which ensure that future generations have at least the same opportunities as we have today. But such a policy must also extend across national borders: As our world has become a global village, sustainable development can only be achieved if we think and act globally.

The economic and social development of all countries must observe the earth's resilience. The developed countries bear particular responsibility to ensure that the limits of tolerance are not exceeded any more. Because the consequences of unsustainable resource consumption in the industrial states don't stop at national borders.

Every country must develop its very own concepts for the promotion of sustainable consumption and production patterns and thus meet the commitments made in Johannesburg to implement the 10-year framework programme. In your capacity as scientists or managers in the important economic sector of home management – and this is where consumption actually takes place – you are playing an essential role in developing these concepts.

Yet one thing must not be forgotten: Sustainable development cannot be dictated by the state. Only if economic and social actors, if citizens, if consumers make sustainability to their own cause we will be successful. That's why our society needs a wide-ranging public debate about the objectives and approaches to sustainable development. Government measures alone – as important as they may be – will not succeed. What really matters is the commitment of the people.

Therefore I hope that this symposium will be an opportunity for fruitful discussions and that it will generate ideas for new concepts. I thank you for your attention.