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REPORT OF THE OECD WORKSHOP ON INFORMATION AND CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

16-17 January 2001
OECD Headquarters, Paris

For more information, contact Adriana Zacarias Farah; Tel: +33 1 45 24 13 80;
Fax: +33 1 45 24 78 76; Email: Adriana.Farah@OECD.org

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FOREWORD

This is the Report of the OECD Workshop on Information and Consumer Decision-Making for Sustainable Consumption, held on 16-17 January 2001 at OECD Headquarters, Paris. The Workshop was part of the 1999-2000 OECD Environment Directorate's Programme on Sustainable Consumption (see below). Building on earlier work in the OECD on Education and Learning for Sustainable Consumption, the Workshop was convened to:

- take stock of the challenges and opportunities for using information to encourage consumer decision-making for the environment; and
- exchange experiences and identify innovative or good practice strategies for improving the effectiveness of government information-based instruments to promote more sustainable household consumption.

The Workshop brought together OECD government officials working on sustainable consumption or sustainable household programmes with consumer marketing and behaviour analysts, environmental and consumer NGOs, and representatives from business and the academic community. This Report summarises workshop discussions and identifies key issues and strategies for government policy makers using information to guide consumer choices. It was written by Elaine Geyer-Allély and draws from Workshop discussions, background papers, presentations and good practice examples from OECD countries. The OECD Secretariat Background Paper for the Workshop, participant papers, and national country reports are available on the OECD Environment website <http://www.oecd.org/env/consumption>.

The OECD Programme on Sustainable Consumption

The OECD 1999-2000 Work Programme on Sustainable Consumption provided new data and analysis to help OECD member countries reduce the environmental impacts from household consumption patterns. The Programme combined empirical studies of consumption trends in OECD Member countries with conceptual and policy analysis. Programme elements included: development of an economic conceptual framework to set out boundaries of analysis and policy to influence household decisions; sector case studies documenting trends, environmental impacts, and policy options in five key areas of household decision-making; policy case studies to deepen analysis of policy instruments that influence household consumption of final goods and services; and refinement of a body of indicators to assess progress towards more sustainable consumption patterns. The results of these 8 elements of work are published separately and drawn together in a Synthesis Report (see below). For more information contact the OECD Environment Directorate: www.oecd.org/env/consumption.

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OECD Environment Directorate 1999-2001 Programme on Sustainable Consumption

PUBLICATIONS AND UNCLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS

<p>Towards Sustainable Household Consumption? Trends and Policies in OECD Countries</p> <p><i>Synthesis Report of the 1999-2000 Programme on Sustainable Consumption</i></p>	<p>OECD 2002</p> <p>Forthcoming publication</p>
<p>Conceptual Analysis</p> <p><i>Towards Sustainable Consumption: An Economic Conceptual Framework</i></p>	<p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)12/FINAL</p>
<p>Sector Case Studies</p> <p><i>Household Food Consumption: Trends, Environmental Impacts and Policy Responses</i></p> <p><i>Household Tourism Travel: Trends, Environmental Impacts and Policy Responses</i></p> <p><i>Household Energy and Water Consumption and Waste Generation: Trends, Environmental Impacts and Policy Responses</i></p>	<p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)13/FINAL</p> <p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)14/FINAL</p> <p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)15/FINAL</p>
<p>Policy Case Studies</p> <p><i>Information and Consumer Decision-Making for Sustainable Consumption</i></p> <p><i>Participatory Decision Making for Sustainable Consumption</i></p> <p><i>Policies to Promote Sustainable Consumption: An Overview</i></p>	<p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)16/FINAL</p> <p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)17/FINAL</p> <p>ENV/EPOC/WPNEP(2001)18/FINAL</p>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consumers in OECD countries care deeply about environmental problems, motivated in part by a concern that environmental quality has an important impact on human health. They put national governments at the top of the list of responsibility for environmental protection, but they rank individual citizens/consumers a close second.

At the same time, environmental impacts from households have grown over the last thirty years and will continue to intensify over the next two decades. Results at the retail level suggest that environmental considerations influence only a minority of consumer purchases or behaviour. Many more consumers must be engaged in environmentally sustainable consumption in order to slow or redress environmental impact trends.

Information can be a powerful tool for promoting more sustainable household consumption patterns. However, information is often hard to target and its impact is unpredictable and difficult to measure. The OECD Workshop on *Information and Consumer Decision-Making for Sustainable Consumption* (16-17 January 2001, Paris) brought together OECD government officials working in the area of sustainable consumption or sustainable household programmes with consumer marketing and behaviour analysts, environmental and consumer NGOs, and representatives from business and the academic community. Participants took stock of the challenges and opportunities for using information to encourage consumer decision-making for the environment, and identified innovative or good practice strategies for improving the effectiveness of government information-based instruments to promote more sustainable household consumption.

There are a number of barriers to effectively providing information to consumers and linking information to action. These barriers are related to the growing volume and complexity of environmental information today, consumer scepticism vis-à-vis the credibility of most information sources, and "free-rider" decision-making dilemmas. Based on numerous examples of government, private sector and NGO information and awareness campaigns, participants identified a number of strategies for successfully responding to rising consumer scepticism and perceived "information overload" and for choosing and designing information instruments and their delivery. These include:

- Re-capturing consumer interest in the environment by using positive, consumer-friendly language, talking about things that people care about or already know (e.g. health), and providing step-by-step tips on how to change unsustainable behaviour;
- Moving consumers forward on the environmental agenda by educating them on new or confusing issues (e.g. climate change) and setting priorities for consumer action;
- Helping individuals see the social implications of their actions and building social networks to support and reinforce individual action, including by using new technology (e.g. the Internet) to create "virtual communities";
- Reducing consumer skepticism and information overload by enforcing existing legislation on misleading advertising and promoting international standards for environmental claims

(ISO14021), better targeting information to different consumer concerns, and using new tools such as the Internet to let consumers choose how much information they want;

- Supporting information campaigns with education programmes to encourage consumers to be more active citizens and critical consumers; and
- Coordinating information and other policies (e.g. regulatory, economic) and working with other partners to give consumers a consistent message about the sustainability of their consumption decisions.

There is little information available on the cost-effectiveness of information based instruments in helping households to reduce their environmental impacts. However, new tools such as the Internet have certainly lowered the costs of information delivery, although perhaps not to the same extent the cost of information search and assimilation by consumers. Ensuring accurate and reliable information in the market and prioritising public environmental information strategies will be important in reducing the outlay of time and resources required of households to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns.

One of Government's most important roles, however, is to create a policy and regulatory framework that encourages sustainable behaviour and stimulates the provision of sustainable goods and services in the market. In the absence of these stronger signals to consumers, discrete information campaigns will have little effect in promoting more sustainable consumption. Governments have a range of tools they can use to promote more sustainable consumption patterns, including regulatory measures (product and efficiency standards, labelling criteria) and economic instruments (full-cost pricing, removal of perverse subsidies, green tax reform, co-ordinated removal of tax exemptions to industry). Governments can also send a strong signal in the market by improving the environmental performance of their own day-to-day operations. Consumer demand for information on sustainable consumption practices will increase if there is a market and policy environment that makes environmentally friendly action easy and a matter of routine.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Workshop objectives, themes and participants

Households in OECD countries affect the environment through their day-to-day decisions on what goods and services to buy and how they use them, and their decisions on where to live and work, what kind of dwelling to have, and where and how to go on vacation. The combined impact of many households is an important contributor to a number of environmental problems, including air and water pollution, habitat alteration and climate change. In areas such as household energy use, travel, and waste generation, material and energy efficiency gains have been outweighed by the absolute increase in the volume of goods and services consumed and discarded. Environmental impacts from household consumption are set to grow in these areas over the next twenty years (Figure 1).

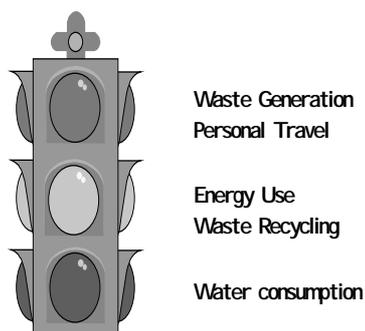
Many studies show that OECD consumers care about the environment. However, results at the retail level reveal that this concern is not often translated into action. Many more consumers must be engaged in environmentally sustainable consumption in order to slow or redress environmental impact trends.

Information can be a powerful tool for promoting more sustainable household consumption patterns. Nearly every government, private sector, or NGO initiative for the environment calls for a better informed and more active public. However, there are a number of barriers to effectively providing information to consumers and linking information to action. These barriers are related to the growing volume and complexity of environmental information, consumer scepticism vis-à-vis the credibility of most information sources, and "free-rider" decision-making dilemmas -- all in the context of a broader information and media environment that generally encourages indiscriminate consumption.

The OECD Workshop on Information and Consumer Decision-Making for Sustainable Consumption (16-17 January 2001, Paris) was convened to explore these issues and their implications for government information-based policies to influence household consumption patterns. Workshop objectives were to:

- take stock of the challenges and opportunities for using information to encourage consumer decision-making for the environment; and
- exchange experiences and identify innovative or good practice strategies for improving the effectiveness of government information-based instruments to promote more sustainable household consumption.

The Workshop brought together OECD government officials working in the area of sustainable consumption or sustainable household programmes with consumer marketing and behaviour analysts, environmental and consumer NGOs, and representatives from business and the academic community. This Report summarises workshop discussions and identifies key issues and strategies for government policy makers using information to guide consumer choices. It draws from Workshop discussions, background papers, presentations and good practice examples from OECD countries. The OECD Secretariat Background Paper for the Workshop, participant papers, and national country reports are available on the OECD Environment website <http://www.oecd.org/env/consumption>.

Figure 1 Household Environmental Impacts to 2020

The OECD's Environmental Outlook 2020 examined past environmental impacts across different sectors in OECD countries and assessed environmental conditions and pressures to 2020 based on expected economic growth. The Outlook used "traffic lights" to signal key findings. A "green light" signals pressures that are decreasing or environment conditions for which the outlook to 2020 is positive. It is also used to signal societal responses that have helped alleviate the problems identified. A "yellow light" signals areas of uncertainty or potential problems while a "red light" signals pressures on the environment or environmental conditions for which recent trends have been negative and are expected to continue to be so to 2020, or for which recent trends have been more stable, but are expected to worsen (OECD, 2001).

Rising personal capita income and pollution and resource-intensive lifestyles in OECD countries will intensify the environmental impacts from households. Household travel and waste generation (red lights) are expected to grow sharply. And though improved products and behaviour changes have led to slower growth of household energy demand and greater diversion of waste from final disposal (yellow lights), these will not be enough to offset the scale impacts of projected consumption trends. Nine OECD countries have made progress in decoupling economic growth from water consumption through technological innovation and conservation practices (green light) but the majority of OECD countries face regional or periodic water scarcities and a growing competition between water users for existing supplies.

Source: OECD Environmental Outlook 2020 (OECD, 2001)

The Workshop was part of the OECD Environment Directorate's 1999-2000 Work Programme on Sustainable Consumption. This work programme provided new data and analysis to help OECD member countries reduce the environmental impacts from household consumption patterns. Programme elements included: development of a conceptual framework to set out the boundaries of analysis and policy to influence household decisions; sector case studies documenting trends, environmental impacts, and policy options in five areas of household consumption (food, tourism travel, energy, water and waste generation); policy case studies to deepen analysis of policy instruments that influence household consumption of goods and services; and refinement of a body of indicators to assess progress towards more sustainable consumption patterns. The results of these 8 elements of work are published separately and drawn together in a Synthesis Report (forthcoming 2002). The Workshop built on a 1998 OECD workshop on *Education and Learning for Sustainable Consumption*.¹

¹ For information and reports from the OECD Programme on Sustainable Consumption contact the OECD Environment Directorate envcontact@oecd.org or visit the OECD website: www.oecd.org/env/consumption.

Structure of the Report

This Report contains four sections. The remainder of this section lays out working definitions of “sustainable consumption” and “consumer information and awareness”. It also puts information into a general context of five enabling conditions for promoting sustainable consumption. Section 2 discusses general levels of environmental awareness among OECD consumers and the social conditions that influence consumer decision-making and action. Section 3 outlines a range of practical suggestions and good practice examples for overcoming the barriers to the effective design and delivery of information and for creating a stronger link between information and action. These suggestions are drawn from Workshop presentations, a panel discussion by private sector, NGO, government and academic representatives, and good practice examples from OECD countries. Section 4 provides general conclusions. Workshop papers and participants are listed in Annex 1 and 2.

1.2 Working definitions

What is “sustainable consumption”?

In the OECD the term *sustainable consumption* is defined in parallel to the Brundtland definition for sustainable development as: “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations” (Norwegian Ministry of Environment, 1994). This definition remains open to different interpretations, which is appropriate because assessments of sustainability should be site and problem-specific. In this Report sustainable consumption is generally taken to mean a reduction of environmental impacts – no quantitative targets are identified.

Important aspects of the social dimension of sustainability (*e.g.* equity and distributional considerations) have so far not been addressed in the OECD Environment Directorate work on consumption. Thus, the term “sustainable consumption” in this Report refers to *environmentally sustainable consumption*.

What is “consumer information and awareness”?

Consumer information and awareness can be conceived very narrowly or as encompassing a range of information, education and communication channels in today’s “information society”. Workshop discussions tended to adopt the wider view, which stresses the importance not only of “one-way” information dissemination, but also of communication with, and feedback from, consumers on consumption and environment issues. An attempt was made to distinguish between information as “facts” and information communicated with an attempt to influence behaviour, but in the end it is difficult to draw a clear boundary to describe either.

1.3 Five framework conditions for promoting sustainable consumption

Information is only one factor in a broad range of influences on household consumption patterns. These influences include both “software” -- personal preferences, cultural practices, social norms, regulations and “hardware” -- physical infrastructure, technology, available goods and services that shape household decisions. In her opening remarks, OECD Environment Director Joke Waller-Hunter described five enabling conditions that are necessary if a critical mass of consumers -- more than just the small market segment of highly motivated “green” consumers -- are to make environmentally aware decisions. Those five conditions are:

- *A price structure for consumer goods and services that internalises environmental costs and benefits* -- Wherever the price of energy, road fuels, water or waste does not fully reflect associated environmental costs, households have an incentive to consume more than they would if they faced the full costs of their consumption patterns.
- *A policy and regulatory framework that makes clear the priorities and direction for change* - The *polluter and user pays principles* provide a clear foundation for policies to promote sustainable consumption in OECD countries, but governments need to more clearly define the objectives for household participation in environmental protection, and better communicate these to the public. They must also strengthen the policy and regulatory framework to provide market signals that steer private sector and consumer behaviour in sustainable directions.
- *The availability of a range of environmentally friendly goods and services* -- The shift in OECD economies towards greater reliance on services offers significant opportunity for creating less environmentally intensive consumption options through new consumer goods and services (personal "mobility packages"; leased carpets; re-use water plumbing). Nevertheless, there remains a tremendous potential for increasing the availability of environmentally sound goods and services and for applying principles of design for the environment to satisfy consumer needs at lower environmental costs.
- *Technology and infrastructure that include environmental quality criteria in the design and running of transportation networks, housing, waste management, etc.* – Technology and infrastructure can hinder or create opportunities for sustainable consumption. Addressing the environmental challenges of the next twenty years will require adopting a wider systems perspective of how technology and infrastructure interact and reinforce certain consumption patterns.
- *An educational and learning environment that empowers consumers to use information to its best advantage* -- To be able to make environmentally aware decisions, consumers must have both information and certain practical skills and knowledge. They must also have individual and collective competencies for decision-making to engage in public debate on environmental protection. Closely linked to this is the need to reinforce general environmental awareness and education in OECD countries.

These five conditions formed an important background to discussions on the opportunities and limitations of using information to influence consumer behaviour. There was a strong consensus that information is most effective when combined with other measures, or conditions, that send consumers clear signals about the sustainability of their behaviour and/or environmental protection goals. Section 3 returns to this issue.

2. INFORMATION AND CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Every day consumers are surrounded by a large amount of information that influences their decision-making. Very little of this information directly concerns the environment. Of the environmental information that is available, some is informative, but much seems confusing, misleading, or not immediately relevant to consumer concerns. Understanding this information environment is important for designing strategies to help households reduce the environmental impacts of their consumption patterns.

The Background paper to the Workshop provided an overview of the principal channels of information to consumers.² The discussion covered information conveyed primarily via the market (labels, advertisements, retailers and corporate environmental reports), the mass media (television, radio, newspaper, magazines and the Internet), and social organisations (consumers and environmental organisations). Looking at this broad range of information sources, it is not surprising that many people feel that consumers do not need any more information before taking action to protect the environment. Yet it is clear from empirical experience, and a quick personal experiment in any local grocery store, that the consumer does not always have enough information on environmental impacts, or cannot access and assimilate the information that is out there, to act in support of the environment. If that is true, than it seems inadequate to work from the status quo. This is something the Background Paper called the "information dilemma" and it is a sizeable challenge for governments using information instruments to help consumers reduce the environmental impacts of their consumption patterns.

It is also clear from empirical experience that even well targeted, well communicated information does not always result in a change in consumer behaviour. A number of other factors contribute to determining whether information is translated into action. This section summaries participants' assessments of the general environmental awareness among OECD consumers. It then examines more closely the social context of pro-environmental decision-making and the implications this has for the design and delivery of information and awareness raising initiatives.

2.1 The demand for environmental information

Are consumers interested in environmental information and action? There is conflicting evidence. Although results at the retail level suggest that environmental criteria often are not reflected in actual consumer purchases, several marketing studies suggest that the number of "green consumers" is increasing (Enviro-nics, 2000; OECD, 1997, OECD 1999a). At the Workshop, Doug Miller, President of the global environmental polling firm, Enviro-nics International, presented findings from their 2000 International Environmental Monitor Survey -- an annual survey of trends in consumer attitudes toward the environment. The 2000 Survey was conducted in 34 countries, including 15 OECD countries³. Enviro-nics

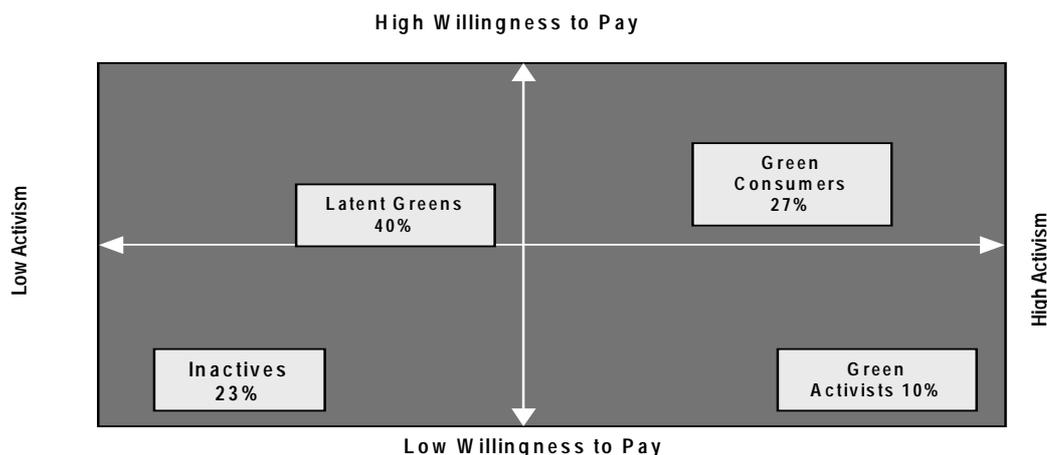
² OECD, 2001a, "Background Paper on Information and Consumer Decision-Making for Sustainable Consumption", Elaine Geyer-Allély and Adriana Zacarias-Farah (OECD Environment Directorate, Paris), www.oecd.org/env/consumption

³ Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the United States.

classifies consumers into four basic groups measured by their self-reported environmental activism and willingness-to-pay (in this case 5% more for a car polluting 20% less) (Figure 2). According to Miller, consumers in OECD countries care deeply about environmental problems, motivated in part by a concern that environmental quality has an important impact on children’s health (range: 75% to 98% of the people interviewed). They feel empowered to address environmental problems and see themselves as a key part of the solution. Although the data are nuanced, more people in OECD countries believe individuals can do something to improve environmental quality than did one year ago. And while they put national governments at the top of the list of responsibility for environmental protection, they rank individual citizens/consumers a close second.

Other results from the Environics Survey suggest that many consumers in OECD countries show a relatively high level of environmental activism but medium to low willingness-to-pay. This is likely linked to consumer fatigue with so-called “green” products brought about by negative experiences with market opportunism (“green washing”) and inferior products that eroded consumer confidence and their willingness to pay premiums for environmental quality. Consumers also report a declining faith in nearly all sources of environmental information (Commission Européenne, 1999, Environics, 2000) and confusion or misinformation about which of their actions count the most or which environmental problem

Figure 2 Consumer Environmental Activism and Willingness to Pay



Environics classified consumers into four basic groups measured by their self-reported environmental activism and willingness-to-pay (in this case 5% more for a car polluting 20% less). Self-reported “green citizen action» included avoiding a product or brand for environmental reasons (35%), gathering environmental information (23%), voting based on environmental policies (14%), supporting environmental NGOs (13%), writing a letter or making a phone call to express environmental concern (11%), and urging policy changes (8%). Based on both self-reported activism and willingness-to-pay roughly 27% of the global sample can be labeled “green consumers” expressing high willingness-to-pay and high environmental activism. Another 10% are considered “green activists” with high environmental activism but lower willingness-to-pay. These are the two groups of consumers who will be the easiest to engage in environmentally conscious decision-making. Another 40% of the market qualify as “latent greens” who have potential, but who will require a stronger enabling environment before they will act. For the final 23% of consumers – the “inactives” – the environment ranks low or not at all.

Doug Miller, Environics, Workshop presentation

should be given priority.

The empirical evidence, then, suggests that there is a potentially strong level of interest among consumers about the environment and about how they can act in more environmentally sustainable ways. However, it also shows that different segments of the population will require more encouragement and assistance than others, and that there will always be a group of consumers for whom the environment will never be an important consideration. This suggests important lessons about the message, content, targeting and timing of information campaigns. These issues are discussed in depth in Section 3.

2.2 Consumer decision-making and the environment

How is information linked with behaviour and behaviour change? The complexity of consumer decision-making and behaviour is perhaps best reflected in the wealth of disciplines that have something to say about it. Theories of consumer behaviour are offered in marketing studies (psychology of decision-making), microeconomics (individual preferences and maximisation of utility), philosophy (why people consume), anthropology (consumption as a cultural expression and social identity), sociology (life-stage, social status, cultural meaning of consumption; sociology of technology), and ethics (individual values, social and environmental responsibilities in consumption behaviour). Each of these fields explain important motives for consumption.

In their presentations, Johanna Moisander and Liisa Uusitalo from the Helsinki School of Economics argued for a conceptualisation of consumer decision-making as a process affected by different and sometimes competing criteria, including self-interested motives (price, quality, individual taste, life-style) as well as socially-rooted motives (culture, self-identity, social pressure, environmental and social concerns).⁴ From this perspective, Moisander stressed, “green consumerism” is not a continuum from “less green to more green”, nor is it uniquely individualistic. Instead, consumers have divergent views on what is pro-environmental behaviour, and thus different ways for acting “green”. Divergence can be due to disagreements or confusion about the basic objectives and strategies of ecologically responsible consumption, the criteria for what constitutes an ecologically sound or safe product or service, and the relevant areas of environmental concern. This divergence highlights the importance of clear and accessible information on the link between household consumption and the environment. It also means that one information or education campaign (or any other consumer policy measure) will not affect all consumers in the same way.

In her presentation, Uusitalo stressed the “social contingency” of consumer behaviour, which emerges from the environment’s status as a public or collective good. Unlike preferences for marketed goods and services, people’s preferences for environmental quality cannot often be revealed by looking at their purchasing behaviour. Moreover, environmental quality can be produced only through co-operation among actors in society. This leaves open the possibility that some actors become *free-riders*, benefiting from changes made by others without making those changes themselves (Table 1). As a result, Uusitalo advocated a conceptualisation of consumer decision-making that accounts for the social embeddedness of

“Many see consumers as goal-conscious decision-makers and expect “rational” household management.

Consumers are expected to:

- ***choose the best products***
- ***know their options***
- ***engage in reusing, reducing and recycling,***
- ***influence others***
- ***demand that governments and firms take responsibility, and***
- ***be active in civic organisations.***

Is this too much to ask?”

***Johanna Moisander,
Helsinki School of
Economics, presentation***

⁴ Moisander, J. and Uusitalo, L., Helsinki School of Economics, *Motivation and Social Contingency of Environmental Consumer Choices* (see www.oecd.org/env/consumption)

consumer decision-making. In this view, decision-making includes a strategic dimension as consumers decide whether to contribute in favour of the common good or to act as free riders. Uusitalo argued that the weighing of private against collective utility takes place constantly in the minds of consumers in a form of “fair share” argument. This has concrete implications for the kind of information consumers will need to make pro-environmental decisions. These are discussed in the following section.

3. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Building on the discussions of the demand for environmental information and different conceptions of consumer decision-making, a panel of government, private sector, NGO and academic practitioners (Box 1) discussed key problems they have encountered in using information to promote sustainable household consumption and identified several practical solutions. This discussion was followed by a series of presentations on public information initiatives by Dag Endal of the Norwegian Environmental Home Guard, Andreas Kleinstuber of the *Solar—Na Klar!* Campaign in Germany, Mirjam de Jong of the Dutch Ministry of Spatial Planning, Housing and the Environment's *Sustainable Do-It-Yourself* initiative, and Manus van Brakel, Friends of the Earth Netherlands, on wider strategies to promote sustainable consumption patterns. Drawing upon these presentations and additional experiences around the table, participants identified a wide set of good practice examples for using information to promote sustainable consumption.

Box 1 Panel Discussion on Information Provision for Stimulating Consumer Action

Ms. Anna Fielder, Regional Director for Developed Countries and Eastern Europe, Consumers International
Dr. Peter White, Associate Director, Corporate Sustainable Development Department, Procter & Gamble, and Working group co-chair: Sustainability Through the Market, World Business Council for Sustainable Development
Ms. Betsy Taylor, Executive Director, Center for a New American Dream
Dr. Laurie Michaelis, Research Director, Commission for Sustainable Consumption, Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and Society
Ms. Mieke de Swert, Directorate General, Health and Consumer Protection, European Commission
Mr. Hamish Will, Unilever Home and Personal Care, Europe

3.1 Re-capturing consumer interest

Practitioners at the Workshop spoke strongly of the need to “meet people where they are.” In practice this means two things: using consumer-friendly language and terminology, and engaging consumers on issues that they know and/or care about.

The first criterion for rebuilding a stronger basis of communication with consumers is using a language that makes sense at the household level and key messages that are personal, real, and vivid. Participants were nearly unanimous in judging “Sustainable Consumption” to be a poor rallying cry. In fact, very few of the government, NGO or private sector information initiatives discussed at the Workshop use this term, even if the actions and behaviours they seek to promote fall fully into what qualifies as sustainable consumption. Many did not even refer to the environment, but used terms related to quality of life or public health and safety – both more relevant to immediate consumer concerns.

No one message is the best or only way to communicate with consumers. Messages differ in tone, directness, and appeal to individual or social roles in achieving sustainable consumption (Box 2). Many participants stressed the importance of finding a motivating and light message to convey the objectives of

Re-capturing consumer interest:

- ✓ **Use positive, consumer-friendly language**
- ✓ **Talk about things that people care about or already know (health)**
- ✓ **Use a change in routine to capture attention**
- ✓ **Provide step-by-step guidance**

sustainable consumption rather than using doomsday threats or “promoting the ‘aesthetics of ugliness’”, and of telling stories or creating a vision of what sustainable consumption means in practice. Most agreed that bringing any new message to consumers was a long-term effort and recommended that governments and NGOs should develop some of the techniques used in advertising and social marketing to make their information campaigns more effective. Part of UNEP’s work on Sustainable Consumption, for example, includes an initiative with the advertising sector to see how ad agencies can contribute to developing a communication strategy on sustainable consumption.⁵

Box 2 Sustainable Consumption: Multiple messages

More fun, less stuff

Center for a New American Dream

are you doing your bit?

UK DETR

No Coal, No Nukes, No Kidding. It’s a small planet. Choose wisely.
Green Mountain Energy

From words to action

Is the Future Yours?

Norwegian Environmental Home Guard

UNEP Sustainable Consumption Youth Campaign

Environmentally friendly DIY-ing is doing a good job

(Wie milieubewust klust is zeker goed bezig)

Dutch Min. of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment

Going for Green: Making a world of difference --together

UK’s biggest public environmental awareness campaign

Washright

The Washright campaign

The second criterion is to engage consumers on issues that they know and/or care about. This takes advantage of “top-of-mind” thinking -- when consumers are likely to be more receptive to new information or more willing to act. Many of the consumer awareness programmes discussed appealed to general household concerns about the environment, local environmental pressures, or public health issues. Many programmes also reinforced positive actions already taken by consumers, even if these are not priority concerns from an environmental perspective. “Win-win” situations (“Save energy, Save money, Save the environment”), or environmental problems carrying a sense of urgency, also elicit more interest than environmental issues with less immediate relevance to consumer concerns. The Toxics Use Reduction Networking (TURN) Grants Program, run by the Massachusetts Toxics Use Reduction Institute in the United States, for instance, has found that public health is an effective “hook” for capturing consumer attention (Anne Berlin Blackman, Massachusetts Toxics Use Reduction Institute, written contribution). TURN Program projects with a household consumption dimension appear to have been directly motivated by residents’ concerns about the links between the use and consumption of toxic products and their potential health effects. This suggests that a community will be particularly receptive to learning about

⁵ UNEP, June 2000. *Advertising for a Better World: Towards a Communication Strategy on Sustainable Consumption* (UNEP DTIE, Paris). See www.uneptie.org

sustainable consumption if it is already concerned about the impact of the environment on public health and if the sustainable consumption message is couched in public health terms.

A growing body of empirical experience and analysis has shown the importance of *habit and routine* in consumer decision making, and the potential for using a change in routine to capture consumer attention. The Norwegian Environmental Home Guard (Box 3), for example, has shown that behaviour change is facilitated when some part of the consumer's regular routine is altered (*e.g.* a move to a new town or new home, changing family organisation, the birth of a child, entering retirement etc.). Swiss experience and analysis of car-sharing initiatives has shown that while some participants in car-sharing initiatives were swayed by the virtues of the service offered, many had experienced some kind of change in their life circumstances that led them to break their car habits, and which put them in the mood to look for alternatives (Bernhard Truffer, Swiss Federal Institute for Environmental Science and Technology, intervention). In the United States, Green Mountain Energy, an energy broker in the United States that recently left the market after the 2001 California blackout, learned the importance of taking advantage of

Box 3 The Norwegian Environmental Home Guard: from words to action
Excerpt from the paper and presentation by Dag Endal, Environmental Home Guard

The role of The Environmental Home Guard (EHG) is to provide households and individuals with the knowledge, competence and inspiration they need to adopt more sustainable consumption habits. The programme targets "early majority" as well as "early adopters" within the adult population and works on several fields of action, including among others: *resource saving, waste management, energy saving, transportation habits, household chemicals, shopping habits, and food habits*. Initially funded 100% by the Norwegian government, it still receives 50-55 % of its budget from the Norwegian Ministry of Environment.

The Environmental Home Guard is based on many of the same principles as those found in "green-consumer" movements in a number of Western countries, but the organisational set-up has been adapted to the Norwegian context, which is characterised by a strong involvement in voluntary organisations (on average, each Norwegian is a member of 4 to 5 organisations), a tradition of cooperation between organisations on issues of mutual interest and relatively high environmental awareness amongst the population, but also a consumption-intensive lifestyle that dominates public discussion and the political agenda in Norway: "We have everything and that's all we have... And in 2030 we plan to have double."

Prior to launching a new phase of work next year, the EHG has had "to learn to know our audience". This has included gauging general environmental awareness and segmenting the consumer population by their receptivity to new ideas. In addition, the EHG is taking into account other general social trends, including time pressures at the household level, changes in the culture of voluntary organisations, and shifts in values and attitudes towards "post-material values". These include shifts from collective thinking to individualism; from a search for safety and stability to sensation seeking; the substitution of a traditional culture of moderation and scarcity by a very dominant consumer culture; the development of a multiplicity of attitudes and cultural expressions rather than one dominating set of values; reduced confidence in traditional formal and informal authorities; and *ad hoc* involvement replacing long-term commitments). The EHG draws on marketing strategies for the 21st Century (*The Dream Society*) to design and deliver its messages and uses, through co-operation with the Global Action Plan International, empowerment techniques to support household action.

In its new programme, the EHG aims to use different support aides to let the target population choose their areas of participation, level of ambition and commitment, and the kind of information and support they need. Several aides will be available: *The Eco Pledge* - whereby households "sign up" for a few actions and are supported by mail, e-mail and personal contact to develop their knowledge, actions and identity as green consumers; *The Eco Step* -- a six-step programme giving individual households monthly activities to perform; *The Eco Team* -- grouping 5-8 households to help and encourage each other through information exchange to develop more sustainable habits; an Internet *Eco Guide* to answer What? Why? How? questions (*e.g.* Test your green score, Hitchhikers meeting point, news bulletin on GMO food, list of green alternatives in individual municipalities etc.); an *Eco Phone*; *Eco Manuals* on how to improve the environment profile of different institutions and target groups ("The Green Office", "The Green School", "Green housing co-operatives", and household manuals on home composting, gardening without chemicals, etc.); and *Eco Counsellors*, located in thirteen regional service centres, giving eco-counselling services to households, voluntary organisations, schools, local authorities etc. These offices are involved in Local Agenda 21 activities towards the same target groups.

systems changes, like the deregulation of utilities, and heightened consumer attention and interest as a moment of opportunity for providing information and education (Dianne Dillon-Ridgely, Green Mountain Energy, intervention). OECD work on individual travel behaviour has suggested that longer-term consumer changes in attitudes and values about sustainable consumption can be facilitated by “trying out” a new pattern and seeing that it can fit with lifestyle objectives.⁶ The “step-by-step” approaches used by the Environmental Home Guard, the Global Action Plan, the Center for a New American dream and others, are appealing for the practical, gradual support they provide to individual consumers trying to make adjustments to their routines in order to reduce their environmental impacts.

3.2 Moving consumers forward on the environmental agenda

While “meeting people where they are” has tremendous practical appeal, there are some limitations to this approach. First, not all significant environmental impacts can be tangibly linked to personal behaviour or immediate local or personal concerns (*e.g.* emissions from long-haul air travel, climate change, watershed pollution). Moreover, not all pro-environmental actions are clear personal “win-win” situations: environmental problems such as climate change and declining biodiversity require a broader motivation to act in the interest of society or future generations. A third limitation arises where there is consumer confusion or misinformation and/or where consumer priorities diverge from ecological priorities. While information gaps contribute to these problems, so do personal perceptions of acceptable levels of individual and social risk: consumer concerns are not necessarily consistent with science. For example, although household recycling rates are now higher than ever in OECD countries, total household waste generation is still rising, suggesting that consumers have not understood the need to reduce the amount of waste they generate in the first place. In the long-term, a risk of focusing only on those actions with which the consumer is most comfortable or familiar is potential consumer frustration and disenchantment that the actions they take are insignificant or potentially irrelevant (the plastic versus paper products “dilemma”, searching for “ozone friendly” products) (See below).

Moving consumers forward on the environmental agenda:

- ✓ **Start with familiar issues (green products, recycling)**
- ✓ **Educate on new or confusing issues (climate change)**
- ✓ **Set priorities**

As a result, a second key message was the importance of bringing consumers “up to date” on environmental protection priorities. Across OECD countries, consumers seem either to be stuck on past environmental problems (*e.g.* aerosols) or confused about which problems, and which of their own actions, are the most important. Some participants expressed impatience with this view, because the environmental agenda is not new, even if it captures consumer attention only in waves. Some consumer “ignorance” seems self-imposed. However, it was clear in suggestions to “start with the old agenda” (*e.g.* judging green products, energy conservation, waste priorities) while educating on issues where consumers are confused or poorly informed (*e.g.* climate change), that regaining “top-of-mind” consciousness for environmental issues will require a balanced approach between supporting existing consumer initiatives and identifying new environmental priorities for them. The experience with TURN projects, for example, also suggested that while it is important to allow local groups to define their environmental priorities, most communities lack basic knowledge about the toxic constituents and products in their homes (Anne Berlin Blackman, written contribution). This points to a need for governments to provide such information even if – or perhaps especially if – the communities are not aware that a problem exists.

⁶ See the OECD Sustainable Consumption website links on Individual Travel Behaviour [<http://www.oecd.env/consumption>]

Although the role of education and learning were not formally part of the discussion, Workshop participants emphasised that many of these issues can only be addressed alongside longer-term consumer and environmental education. OECD work in this area has identified the importance of nurturing active learning and responsible citizenship at all levels of formal schooling and in professional training and community education in order to promote sustainable consumption. Training students and adults in critical decision-making skills and fostering active citizenship are all part of achieving higher levels of pro-environmental awareness and action (OECD, 1999).

3.3 Putting individual action into a wider context

A consumer who feels that she has already contributed more than other actors to the collective good is likely to give personal preferences more weight, while in the opposite case social preferences will dominate. In her presentation, Liisa Uusitalo argued that this “fair share” argument, while utilitarian and not by itself a satisfactory explanation for socially committed behaviour, emphasises the need to consider environmentally sound consumption not one activity at a time, but as *a pattern of behaviours* that involves trade-offs between various kinds of activities. This means that consumers need not only information relevant to their own self-interest or personal morals, but also a new type of “strategic” information about the impact they have on the common good and about how other consumers will contribute (Table 2). This includes not only direct feedback about how others behave but also knowledge of shared social norms, traditions and values. In the field of environmental behaviour, the problem is often the lack of relevant social information.

NGO, government, and private sector practitioners described different approaches they are taking to information and awareness raising to promote sustainable household behaviour. Private sector programmes, working essentially to improve consumer choice and use of marketed

Putting individual action into a wider context:

- ✓ **Explain the importance of individual action and the contributions others will make towards environmental goals**
- ✓ **Build social networks to support and reinforce individual action**
- ✓ **Use “informal communication” to put consumers in contact with other consumers**
- ✓ **Create “virtual communities” via the Internet**

Table 2 Promoting environmentally friendly behaviour and co-operation: appealing to self-interest, personal morals and social contingency	
Appealing to ‘economic man’ (self-interest) and ‘moral man’ (personal morals)	Appealing to ‘social man’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the consequences of individual choices • Information of private side benefits (economic or social) from co-operative behaviour • Increase individual reflection on own choices and their consistency with preferences • Help to construct ‘green identity’ • Appeal to aesthetic preferences • Increase motivation, ability and opportunity to make green choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about why commitment to social norms is needed • Information on the collective benefits from co-operative behaviour • Information about how others behave • Reduce feelings of insignificance • Create communities or imaginary communities with social norms • Use fair share, reciprocity arguments • Appeal to feelings and sympathy for others • Increase public reflective discourse on preferences and goals
Source: Liisa Uusitalo, Presentation on the “Motivation and Social Contingency of Environmental Consumer Choices”	

goods, primarily appealed to individual interests and benefits and general environmental or quality of life issues (e.g. Proctor & Gamble labelling on detergents).

Some of the NGO and government initiatives presented, on the other hand, targeted a wider set of behaviours and attempted to set individual actions in a broader social setting. These initiatives give consumers information on the relative impact of individual actions and overtly appeal to consumers to act on behalf of society.

In the UK, for instance, the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions' (DETR) *'Are You Doing Your Bit?'* campaign promotes awareness of the links between people's actions and their collective impact, focusing on individuals in their everyday actions as shoppers and travellers. The Campaign reinforces existing promotional activity on climate change and transport in the UK. Extensive market research to prepare the campaign identified a number of substantial barriers to individual action including: *distancing* ("Environmental action was regarded as something freaky/hairshirt and for extremists/Eco-warriors"); *confusion* (Climate change was mumbo jumbo/media hype on which "even the scientists can't agree"); *helplessness* ("I can't make a difference, its up to government and business to put right."); and *apathy* ("I can't be bothered and anyway what's in it for me?"). The challenge in developing *'Are You Doing Your Bit?'* was to overcome those barriers. The DETR felt the solution lay in re-launching, revitalising and normalising environmental behaviour. In particular, the campaign aims to accentuate the positive and empower consumers by getting people involved and demonstrating that their support is appreciated and making a tangible difference however small. Campaign messages are simple and make action look easy while demonstrating an inextricable link between consumer action and environmental impact. Research on the impacts of the campaign showed that people particularly liked its non-moralistic approach and use of "reminders" that make environmental actions seem routine and help build positive attitudes to change. The public highly valued the campaign's clear communication of the personal and collective benefits of action (Mr. David Murphy, UK Directorate of Communications, intervention and written contribution).

Informal communication among consumers, via Ecoteam approaches or "virtual communities", can also be a powerful tool for placing individual action in a wider social context. Several government and NGO initiatives, such as the UK *Going for Green* campaign, the Norwegian *Environmental Home Guard*, the Global Action Plan, and the Center for a New American Dream's *Turn the Tide* website (Box 4), put consumers in contact with other consumers to share experiences and compare their progress on reducing their environmental impacts. Besides helping to keep information flows at a level and in a language most appropriate for average households, it lets consumers know that they are not working alone. On the *Turn the Tide* website, for example, participants can set up their own personal workspace, and watch as the online calculator both tallies the environmental impact of their reported actions and keeps a running total of the combined results of all *Turn the Tide* participants (Betsy Taylor, Center for a New American Dream, written contribution). Ecoteam-type or Internet-based approaches have some limitations. The group meeting format, for example, does not hold much appeal for most consumers: in the US and Norway for instance, only a small segment of the population participates. Similarly, Internet-based actions also primarily reach those consumers that are already active information seekers. Despite these limitations, both appear to be effective strategies for reaching environmentally "engaged" households.

What are the implications for governments if consumer information is to be considered in a wider social setting? Should governments strengthen the social components of information and communication strategies, or use information to encourage consumers to "internalise" environmental protection objectives in their decision-making. Participants clearly avoided calling for governments to dictate consumer preferences or to define a unique form of "sustainable consumption" to be achieved by all consumers. Instead, they identified specific steps government could take to strengthen consumer awareness of the link between their actions and environmental quality. These included using economic instruments to influence

Box 4 Creating a “Virtual Community” :**Excerpt from the Center for a New American Dream’s *Turn the Tide* Website**

“We know we can have a significant impact on the environment if we can encourage many people to take small steps together... We’ve compiled an impressive list of powerful actions that most people can take without significant inconvenience. That’s not to say that they’re all a cakewalk. But they are all achievable by most Americans who want to become more responsible consumers. And, when these nine little actions are taken together by thousands of us, it will have a significant impact on the environment. Together, we can do more than dream. We can make a difference right here and now.

Skip a car trip.

–Since 1960, the American population has increased by 50 percent but the miles we travel each year has more than tripled. And 90 percent of our trips are in an automobile or light truck. Americans consumer 40 percent of the world’s gasoline and emit more climate changing gases than China, Japan, and India combined! Transportation, overwhelmingly in automobiles, is responsible for a third of American greenhouse gas emissions. The car culture is also a main driver of sprawl and the ensuing habitat loss. We can do better.

–Choose one trip you make on a weekly basis. Then decide how to get that task done without your car – whether it be by biking, taking public transportation, hitching a ride with a friend, telecommuting, or simply eliminating an expendable trip. Skipping a weekly 20-mile trip represents less than a 10 percent decrease in the average American’s driving and can reduce your weekly carbon dioxide emissions by more than 18 pounds. If only 1,000 of us take this action, we will prevent nearly a million pounds of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere each year! Together we will give the climate a break and improve air quality while avoiding traffic congestion, sprawl and habitat loss.”

Editor’s note: See the *Turn the Tide* website [www.newdream.org] to see the other eight actions recommended.

individual pay-offs in environmental choice situations, filling information gaps, including on the social context of environmental decision making, and promoting and supporting social dialogue on desired environmental quality objectives and means for achieving them.

3.4 Reducing consumer scepticism and “information overload”

Many participants recognised the difficulties consumers face in sifting through all the information to which they are exposed every day. The stagnating performance of many existing eco-labels and rising consumer scepticism, for example, were seen to stem in large part from the lack of transparency behind eco-labels and general environmental claims. Research has shown, for example, that consumers often do not distinguish between Type I (based on criteria set by a third party) and Type II claims (based on self-declaration by manufacturers or retailers).⁷ They often assume that all environmental claims have some kind of official backing (Leubuscher, 1998).

An obvious first step to improving the information environment, then, is to ensure that environmental information in the marketplace is accurate and backed by credible resources. Governments can already take concrete measures in this regard, including enforcing legislation on misleading advertising and providing practical guidance and monitoring on ISO14021, the international standard on self-declared

⁷ See the Background Paper to the Workshop for a brief overview of the different types of environmental claims. See also ERM (2000), Study of Different Types of Environmental Labelling, http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/surveys/sur08_en.html

environmental claims. The European Commission is also working on problems related to the proliferation of environmental (“green”) claims (e.g. green-coloured packaging, phrases such as “respects the environment”). Building on preparatory work⁸ the EC is moving forward on proposals⁹ to revise the existing EC Directive on misleading advertising, to bring the European initiative into parallel with ISO 14021, and to provide practical guidance and monitoring to facilitate the use of environmental claims (Mieke de Swert, European Commission, presentation).

Even with accurate information, however, the sheer volume of information in today’s “information society” poses a real problem for targeting environmental messages to consumers. To overcome information overload, panellists returned to the idea of “meeting consumers where they are”. Most of the campaigns discussed at the Workshop were prepared after polling consumers and organising focus group discussions to discern what consumers knew and cared about. The Center for a New American Dream focuses on consumer actions that can be supported by credible science and backed by clear references in order to bolster consumer confidence in the rationale for pro-environmental action.

Other actors have made a conscious decision to focus their information efforts on specific target groups likely to be looking for environmental information. In his presentation, Peter White (Proctor and Gamble) for example, stressed that as a consumer goods company “we have lots of information to get across; and the environment is only one piece. Use instructions are crucial. 25% to 30% percent of consumers state that the environment is a key element for them, but “green products” are still only a niche market. The environment doesn’t rank high in the consumer hierarchy.” As a result, Proctor and Gamble’s environmental information strategy is to focus on the ‘dedicated information seekers’ (about 14% of their consumer base). The Internet has become a very powerful tool in this respect. It allows information providers to cost-effectively provide different layers of information of varying complexity and comprehensiveness. The consumer then decides how far s/he wants to go. Proctor and Gamble and others are taking increasing advantage of the interactive nature of websites to satisfy consumer information requests.

It was more difficult to see a way through the bigger challenges posed by wider information flows in society (cultural, scientific, institutional, informal person-to-person), and the way these flows generally influence consumer behaviour and opinions and awareness of environmental issues. Although not discussed at length, informal channels of information – what parents tell children (and what children tell their parents), what neighbours relate to each other, what the storekeeper down the block recommends – have often important influences on consumption decisions. Some informal communication can pose obstacles to behaviour change. In his presentation on Unilever’s participation in the *Washright* campaign, for instance, Hamish Will noted the frequent difficulty of getting male consumers to reduce washing temperatures (the most important environmental impact when it comes to clothes washing) because “their mothers told them how to do the wash”.

Reducing consumer skepticism and information overload:

- ✓ **Enforce existing legislation on misleading advertising and promote ISO14021**
- ✓ **Use focus groups, polls, etc. to target information to consumer concerns**
- ✓ **Choose consumer actions backed by credible science and clear references**
- ✓ **Use new tools such as the Internet to let consumers choose how much information they want**
- ✓ **Foster informal information exchange between consumers**
- ✓ **Use the media to amplify communication.**

⁸ See http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/surveys/sur08_en.html

⁹ See http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/policy/developments/envi_clai/envi_clai01_en.html

Workshop discussions also touched briefly on the central role of the media as a conduit of information and images that influence consumption. Laurie Michaelis (Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and Society – OCEES) discussed the findings of an OCEES workshop on media and consumption and media's role in social dialogue about lifestyles. That Workshop highlighted the potential limitations of the media, which tend to focus on “big news” or to highlight controversy, for dealing with long-term issues of environmental protection, collaboration and co-operation. Is it realistic to look to the media to autonomously promote sustainable consumption lifestyles? It is a question still open to debate: “Mass media helped get us into this, but it may not be the way out.”¹⁰ The media's power to capture public attention and to reach a large audience, however, is a potentially strategic tool for information and awareness initiatives on sustainable consumption. Several of the public, private sector and NGO information initiatives reviewed at the workshop are beginning to use the media to amplify their outreach efforts and to stretch often limited communications budgets.

The outstanding challenge for all the practitioners at the Workshop remained how to reach uninterested consumers. Whether these are the “Basic Browns” or Miller's “Inactives” they represent approximately 25 percent of the market. Along with the “Latent Greens” – consumers who are potentially interested in acting for the environment, but need convincing -- these groups represent nearly 60 percent of all consumers. Not all information campaigns need to reach such a broad audience to achieve successful results. Similarly, product marketers will often consider it sufficient to capture the 10 to 15 percent of consumers interested in pro-environmental behaviour. However, a larger critical mass of environmentally active consumers will be required to make progress on reducing scale impacts from many environmental problems, particularly in the areas of transport, waste and energy.

Some campaigns have taken up this challenge. In the UK, the “*Are you doing your bit?*” campaign focuses on the 87% of the population classed as “concerned” and particularly the 51% who were “persuadable” – doing a little, but capable of much more. A strong message to come from this discussion was that providing information to “inactive” or “latent” consumers will achieve little without a stronger enabling environment that makes environmental protection an explicit component of decision-making (environmentally sound products in the market, product prices that reflect environmental costs, etc.).

3.5 Communicating effectively

The kinds of information most likely to be effective in reaching the consumer and stimulating pro-environmental behaviour will depend on the nature of the environmental problem addressed and the kind of action consumers are expected to take. But in general, cutting through the information barrier requires careful targeting of both the content and format of the information provided and an effective delivery mechanism. New products or ideas may require different types of communication (factual, promotional, etc) targeted to different groups of consumers at various points along the “diffusion curve”. In the *Are you doing your bit?* campaign, for instance, the DETR decided to give more weight to promotional activity aimed at women, building on their more sympathetic reaction to environmental concerns and, often, their role as the main instigators of change in the home.

Communicating effectively:

- ✓ **Target information**
- ✓ **Provide clear and practical guidance**
- ✓ **Support information with education programmes**

¹⁰ See the Report of the Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and Society Workshop on « The Media: A Resource for Sustainable Consumption », (OCEES, 2001). See www.mansfield.ox.ac.uk/ocees

Practical experience appears to suggest some common criteria when designing information campaigns. In her presentation, Anna Fielder (Consumers International) stressed the importance of using established marketing principles to design information campaigns. This includes beginning by establishing the need for, and purpose of, consumer action: what local, national, or international goals are consumers expected to deliver? How will successful action be measured? Who is the target audience?

In addition to providing clear and simple guidance on the actions consumers can take, Fielder argued that “green campaigns” should serve in a broader sense to generate awareness, stimulate debate and build public support for environmental protection. However, long-term commitment will also require enabling consumers to make environmentally sustainable decisions, and this requires properly co-ordinated long-term campaigns and partnerships between different players that provide simple, consistent messages.

Many of the initiatives discussed at the Workshop departed from the assumption that while consumers may have a general understanding that their consumption patterns have a link to the environment, many do not know what to do when making purchasing decisions or how to prioritise different actions. These initiatives shared a common “step-by-step” approach of providing the consumer with practical background information, motivation, and specific action recommendations. At the same time, most stopped shy of “explaining the science”. Workshop discussions did not entirely tackle the question of how better to communicate with consumers on complex environmental problems, for instance where information is incomplete or expert opinions diverge. Participants underlined the need for information initiatives to work on parallel tracks with consumer, environmental, and sustainability education as part of longer-term efforts to raise environmental awareness and improve decision-making skills.

An information checklist:

“Information is a communication tool, not an end in itself. It should be:

- ✓ Targeted
- ✓ Actionable
- ✓ Relevant
- ✓ Clear and easy to understand
- ✓ Consistent
- ✓ Properly resourced
- ✓ Linked to an enabling context.”

Anna Fielder, Consumers International, presentation

3.6 Using information as a push or pull for technology or policy

The purpose information is intended to play – whether to give consumers information they already request, to raise awareness and create a fertile ground for forthcoming policy or technological advances, or to create consumer demand for new policy or technology – will have consequences on the content, method of delivery and timing of an information campaign.

In some of the public information campaigns discussed at the workshop, information played a definite role in pulling public demand for new technology or policy. In Germany, the *Solar Na – Klar!* programme (Box 5), for instance, is explicitly designed to accelerate the diffusion of solar thermal technology. A single-issue campaign, solar thermal energy was chosen because of the major efficiency gains that could be made through wider diffusion of solar technology among German consumers. Although solar thermal energy is close to achieving competitiveness in the energy market, information and awareness raising at this stage of the product’s development is intended to help speed the diffusion of solar thermal systems among innovative and “early majority” consumers. The consumers that have most often invested in solar thermal systems tend to be environmentally aware and “technologically modern” – in other words keen to invest and show their interest in new technology. For these customers, the campaign can work from the perspective of the “prestige benefits” offered by the technology, without emphasising price (like selling a luxury car). These

Using information as a push or pull for technology or policy

- ✓ **Prepare the introduction of new policy**
- ✓ **Create new consumer markets**

factors, however, are not likely to be motivators for the mass market. A different approach will be needed to reach a wider audience (Andreas Kleinstuber, *Solar-Na Klar!*, presentation).

Some participants also noted the potential for campaigns like *Solar-Na Klar!* to increase

Box 5 The *Solar -- Na Klar!* Campaign, Germany
Excerpt from the presentation by Andreas Kleinstuber, *Solar -- Na Klar!*, Germany

The *Solar -- Na Klar!* Campaign (*Solar -- It's Clear! So laire -- C'est Claire!*) is a publicly funded information and awareness campaign intended to raise awareness and provide information to the German public about the use of solar thermal home systems, and to transform the general public's highly positive image of solar energy into real buying decisions. The Campaign has specific objectives to raise the number of solar thermal home systems installed every year in Germany to 400,000 per year by 2003. The Campaign also seeks to contribute to the creation of long-term employment and to protection of the climate.

The *Solar -- Na Klar!* strategy is to work in co-operation with thermal system installers to encourage them to become knowledgeable and active advocates of solar systems, while providing consumers with information and incentives to stimulate their demand for solar thermal units. The Campaign receives financial support from national and all 16 state governments, the Installer Association and the German solar industry. Government funding will run out in 2002. The Campaign is also looking to expand partnerships with similar initiatives in order to move out of a niche market into the mass consumer market.

The *Solar -- Na Klar!* Campaign uses a wide public relations and media strategy, including daily, weekly, and monthly coverage in the trade and general press, television and radio spots, prominent testimonials for "*Solar -- Na Klar!*", advertising and Internet based information, public relations events, trade and consumer fairs and competitions ("*Solarschools 2000*"). The Campaign provides a number of different supports for market partners, including a sales folder for installers, an advertising leaflet, a Hotline for installers, and a "Service Box" including an electronic "toolbox" for local and regional public relations work and advertising activities, campaign materials and 'give-aways', technological information and sales advice. For consumers, the Campaign has developed an information brochure including a list of recommended local registered installation companies and a consumer hotline and website.

Solar--Na Klar! has faced challenges in getting support from associated craftsmen and professionals. Labelling problems, small company competition instead of collaboration, lukewarm reception by architects vis-à-vis the "aesthetics of sustainable consumption» have meant that some key actors in the housing and installation sectors are not yet active advocates of solar energy. The Campaign also sees a growing need to connect with the larger modernising heating market and to get related industry associations and contractors to use their promotional material.

consumer pressure on utilities to move away from energy supply to selling energy services, which can bring stronger incentives for increasing energy efficiency and conservation. *Solar--Na Klar!* is trying to encourage utilities to become regional partners in the Campaign, and to provide consumers with incentives to purchase solar thermal systems. Green Mountain Energy incorporated information on the power of customer choice in its promotional material as a way of encouraging consumers to push for market developments to favour sustainable energy alternatives.

In Canada, practitioners developing the Canadian public education and outreach strategy on climate change had to carefully consider whether it would be better to tie a major awareness and understanding campaign to a policy push, or to precede such a push. Ultimately they made a deliberate decision to keep public education and outreach activities low key in the first three years, while policy was being developed. This permitted them to fund a wide variety of approaches, tools, and projects, as well as limited awareness activities. With the lessons learned from these early initiatives, the strategy is now better

positioned to invest public education and outreach funds to meet specific objectives of Canadian Climate Change policy with tools and approaches that have been shown to be effective (Nicole Martel, Environment Canada, written contribution).

It is often not possible, however, to ensure the impact of information on stimulating technology or policy innovation. In Finland, the Eko-ostaja (Eco-Buyer) Guide is a practical tool intended to give environmentally-conscious consumers information about both the environmental impacts of their purchasing decisions and concrete product alternatives. The Guide is targeted to consumers in general, but in particular for those consumers who have already decided to consider environmental aspects in their consumption decisions. Originally published in book form, the Guide is now also part of the Finnish Consumer Agency's website. The web format allows information to be more easily updated, and provides interested consumers with additional links to original product information. The Guide is probably the most comprehensive, if not the most detailed, data base on "green products" in the Finnish market. Co-operation with manufacturers and traders has run smoothly. However, one objective expressed in the first version of the Guide – to give manufacturers an incentive to compete on the basis of the ecological quality of their products – has not been achieved as was expected (Ilkka Cantell, Finnish Ministry of Trade and Industry, written contribution).

3.7 Co-ordinating information and other policies to influence consumption

Workshop participants touched repeatedly on the importance of governments setting the framework conditions for environmentally aware decision-making. This included not only macroeconomic policies but also long-term and cross-government co-ordination of policies that influence household consumption patterns.¹¹ This includes setting clear goals for sustainable consumption, perhaps as suggested by Manus van Brakel, by starting from quality of life considerations, and "working backwards from a desired solution to find the right strategies, and the right language, to reshape current patterns of consumption." (Manus van Brakel, Friends of the Earth Netherlands, presentation). Van Brakel also highlighted the importance of using different policy tools in order to compensate for weaknesses in any one type of policy instruments (*e.g.* combining information and economic instruments to bolster consumer action where price is not a principal influence in consumption decisions).

Coordinating information and other policies to influence consumption:

- ✓ **Set clear goals for households**
- ✓ **Tie information to other measures**
- ✓ **Promote market innovation**
- ✓ **Provide consistent messages**

The general framework conditions that influence consumption can have specific impacts on the success of information campaigns to achieve their objectives. In Germany, for example, the *Solar—Na Klar!* Campaign faces stiff market conditions because under current energy prices solar thermal systems do not yet pay off. In this context, information alone is not enough to stimulate demand in the general public. As a result, part of the Campaign includes lobbying the government on the issue of general energy pricing. In other countries, such as Greece, a high penetration of solar hot water heaters across market segments is largely due to a programme of government incentives. Government support also provides a signal "that this is something that society wants" (Yorgos Klidonas, Permanent Delegation of Greece to the OECD, intervention).

¹¹ See the Synthesis Report of the 1999-2000 Programme on Sustainable Consumption, *Promoting Sustainable Consumption in OECD Countries* [OECD/ENV/WPNEP(2001)18] which discusses these issues in depth.

The Dutch government's *Sustainable Do-It-Yourself* (DYI) initiative was a strong example of a public information campaign that explicitly aimed to bring as many facilitating conditions together as possible to encourage consumer behaviour change (Box 6). The project incorporates many of the strategies good practice suggests is needed to turn information into action on the part of consumers, including harmonised information communicated through multiple channels (print and broadcast media, in the shop, and reflected in the price of goods); trained retail staff; an expanded product range in stores; incentives to stimulate sales; and distribution of consumer information. Additional impetus is given by a government energy refund tied to the purchase of energy efficient household appliances or installation of energy saving devices or materials in homes. Post-campaign measures showed that DIY consumers felt they knew significantly more about sustainable DIY than before. This was true especially for women. Importantly, most DIY consumers thought it appropriate that the government was involved in the issue of sustainable DIY.

Box 6 Sustainable do-it-your-self (Sustainable DIY) in the Netherlands

Excerpt from the paper and presentation by Miriam de Jong, Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment

The Dutch *Sustainable Do-It-Yourself* (DIY) project was started in October 1998 after it became clear that the environmental gains won through the Sustainable Building initiative could be lost by environmentally unfriendly consumer behaviour. The average household spends 15.4% of a month's budget on renovation and gardening (i.e. approximately 500 Euro per household per year).

The project works through the market by combining a pull mechanism to enhance consumer demand, and a push mechanism to increase the supply and purchase of environmentally friendly products. The project has a strong focus on information transfer at the point of sale. Most DIY consumers get information in advance from shops (e.g. from staff, brochures, product labels, publicity material), DIY magazines and friends and acquaintances. Consumer attitudes towards the environment are positive, but neither consumers nor staff know much about environmentally friendly DIY products and DIY consumers question their effectiveness. As a result, the campaign targets both consumers and store management and personnel.

Lessons learned in the project and media campaign.

All the project partners clearly see the added value of approaching consumers through market actors. The project has also put Sustainable DIY "on the agenda" of stores, which now have uniform information at their disposal. Environmental issues are part of personnel training, more attention is being given to sustainable products in store choice, and every retail chain has a contact person for environmental issues.

There are areas for improvement. The project has been too focused on content, and too little time has been spent on broadening support within the participating parties. In particular, store managers and staff are often ambivalent: they agree that the environment is important, but feel that too much responsibility has been put on retailers' and not enough on manufacturers, consumers, and governments. They feel that the environment is unmarketable. The absence of consumer demand for specific products reinforces this problem.

The project encountered certain practical problems that frustrated efforts to coordinate mass media campaigns on commercial broadcast time and to ensure the supply of improved goods. Changing the supply of garden wood products, for instance, required a two-year lead period. More difficulties arose when regulatory shop closing times changed from 18:00 to 20:00 in the evening. This resulted in a large turnover of personnel and reduced contact between managers and staff with a corresponding negative effect on shop workers' knowledge. Another difficulty stemmed from the franchise structure of the enterprises; the extra work for the franchise dealers on behalf of the project was not sufficiently taken into account in the project design. In the future, private sector involvement will be expanded to include not just retailers but other actors along the production-retail chain. The intention is to deal better with a smaller number of DIY tasks.

3.8 Working with NGO, market and municipal partners

Many of the information initiatives discussed at the Workshop shared a common approach of partnering government information campaigns with other actors, including non-governmental consumer, environmental or other civic organisations or private sector initiatives. The Norwegian Environmental Home Guard, for example, has long been supported by the Norwegian government because: “The government wants people to do something. The Environmental Home Guard has a good reputation. They have managed to get to people better than government has...” (Jacob Bomann-Larson, Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, intervention). The TURN Program provides seed money to community groups and municipalities to launch projects that educate communities about toxics use reduction (TUR) through the development of strategic partnerships. The program’s emphasis on collaboration and networking among citizens groups, government agencies and businesses has generated some outstanding models for how TUR projects can become truly community-wide efforts. The increase over time in TURN projects aimed at reducing residential toxics use indicates two trends. First, that information about the effects of household toxics use is beginning to percolate through communities. Second, that community coalitions perceive household toxics use to be an important issue once they have learned about it (Anne Berlin Blackman, Massachusetts Toxics Use Reduction Institute, written contribution).

The Dutch Sustainable DIY project also works through a collaborative group of government agencies and business and consumer groups, including a number of local and regional organisations (e.g. municipalities, nature and environmental groups) that are seen as being ‘closer’ to consumers and thus more able to engage consumer attention. A key element of the Dutch Sustainable Do-It-Yourself initiative was the focus on consumer decision-making at the point-of-purchase and information dissemination at the retail level. The climate for motivating retailer involvement (80% of the market participated) was particularly favourable in the Netherlands as local organisations were already pushing retailers for a higher level of engagement on environmental issues. Similarly, many municipalities were looking for tools they could use to communicate with consumers, so the tool kit and guideline developed by the project were welcome supports (Mirjam de Jong, Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, presentation).

Other initiatives have used partnering to expand limited budgets. Funding for the *Solar—Na Klar!* Campaign, for example, is 8-10 million DM over 3 years (compared to a 100 million DM public relations budget for conventional energy). As a result, the campaign also focuses on activating market partners. These include installation companies, trade guilds and associations, architects, planners, regional board member -- and actors working at the regional level, such as solar, Agenda-21, and other environmental initiatives, municipalities and utilities, savings banks and companies, and local associations (Andreas Kleinstuber, *Solar—Na Klar!*, presentation). Similarly, the Canadian Public Education and Outreach strategy on Climate Change decided that the best use of their limited budget (\$30 million Canadian dollars over three years) was to fund groups throughout Canada, in order to build capacity in public education and outreach, and also to leverage funding. An investment of \$18 million in project funded leveraged an additional \$33 million in funding from partners (Nicole Martel, Environment Canada, written contribution).

Finally, some government information initiatives have been co-ordinated with school curricula. In 1998 in Sweden, for example, a new law went into effect to make it easier for consumers to dispose of

Working with other partners:

- ✓ **Using local and/or consumer based organizations that are closer to consumers**
- ✓ **Ensuring consistent messages from different “partners”, particularly at retail level**
- ✓ **Amplifying limited funding**
- ✓ **Reinforcing information and education initiatives through schools**

used household batteries. Previously, batteries were collected by different actors depending upon their metal content. Now municipalities are responsible for retrieving all types of smaller batteries, while industry is responsible for collecting lead batteries weighing over three kilograms, such as those used in cars. Consumers can dispose of small batteries in local shops. An information campaign, "Back to the bin" (*Hem till holken* in Swedish), was launched in 1999 to raise awareness and stimulate battery recycling among consumers. The focus was placed on schoolchildren, in order to gain access to families and to promote both a short-term goal of influencing children's surroundings and a long-term goal of educating them for the future. Schools were provided teaching materials and supports. It was hoped that there would be a ripple effect by which the 125,000 children involved would inform their immediate families, relatives, friends and merchants about how to dispose of batteries. They were supported through television and radio messages aimed at youth (e.g. satellite TV, music channels). Was there a ripple effect? From articles in local newspapers, it was found that the children had informed their parents and that there had been some corresponding changes in family behaviour. The affected parents had greater knowledge (10%) and awareness (Ms. Cathrine Winblad, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, written contribution).

The Polish awareness project *Washing can be cheap* worked with specially trained secondary school students who personally distributed information on ecological washing practices and the hardness of local water supplies. The campaign provided consumers with operational instructions for washing machines with information on water hardness and maps indicating water hardness. Regional centres of environmental education have continued to pursue the campaign objectives now that the formal campaign has ended. Several manufacturers of washing agents have also begun to place maps of water hardness on washing powder packages and to distribute individual water hardness testers (Ms. Anna Starzewska-Sikorska, Polish Institute for Ecology of Industrial Areas, written contribution).

4. CONCLUSIONS

To be able to make environmentally aware decisions, consumers must have both information and certain practical skills and knowledge (*e.g.* to be able to identify eco-labels, to sort waste, to consider the environmental characteristic of a product or service). They must also have individual and collective competencies for decision-making to engage in public debate on environmental protection. Currently, OECD countries suffer somewhat of an “information dilemma”, which can be defined as consumer access to an abundance of information, but which often is not very useful to them for identifying environmentally sustainable actions. Governments and other stakeholders must make progress in better targeting environment and consumption information and communicating it more effectively.

Given both the challenges and opportunities consumers face in finding and using information to reduce their environmental impacts, it is important to improve the effectiveness of measures and policies to stimulate action from individuals and communities. This raises a number of challenges for all actors that dialogue with consumers. *Information* is clearly one of the most important tools governments have to stimulate consumers to make environmentally sustainable consumption decisions. It is also the least intrusive. However, information is often hard to target and its impacts are unpredictable and difficult to measure. The discussion above suggests a number of strategies for successfully responding to rising consumer scepticism and perceived “information overload” and for choosing and designing information instruments and their delivery.

Earlier OECD work on the role of *education* for sustainable consumption has shown that consumers are most receptive to, and most apt to act on, environmental information where there is a general level of environmental awareness. As a result, while the Workshop did not reopen this issue, it is important to reinforce the link between individual information campaigns on specific environmental issues (*e.g.* energy and climate change) and longer-term initiatives to improve environmental education and public awareness and decision-making skills. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of education for attaining environmental sustainability in OECD countries, a major effort is still needed to integrate environmental and sustainability education into school curricula, continuing education, and professional and workplace training. An important part of information and education strategies should be to bring consumers “up to date” on current environmental priorities, particularly climate change.

There is little information available on the cost-effectiveness of information based instruments in helping households to reduce their environmental impacts. However, new tools such as the Internet have certainly lowered the costs of information delivery, although perhaps not to the same extent the cost of information search and assimilation by consumers. Ensuring accurate and reliable information in the market and prioritising public environmental information strategies will be important in reducing the outlay of time and resources required of households to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns.

One of Government’s most important roles, however, is to create a policy and regulatory framework that encourages sustainable behaviour and stimulates the provision of sustainable goods and services in the market. In the absence of these stronger signals to consumers, discrete information campaigns will have little effect in promoting more sustainable consumption. Governments have a range of tools they can use to promote more sustainable consumption patterns, including regulatory measures

(product and efficiency standards, labelling criteria) and economic instruments (full-cost pricing, removal of perverse subsidies, green tax reform, co-ordinated removal of tax exemptions to industry).¹² Governments can also send a strong signal in the market by improving the environmental performance of their own day-to-day operations. Consumer demand for information on sustainable consumption practices will increase if we are able to convey a positive message and vision of sustainability that inspires environmentally friendly behaviour, and at the same time if there is a market and policy environment that makes environmentally friendly action easy and a matter of routine.

¹²

For a broader discussion of policy options for promoting sustainable household consumption, see the following other reports in the 1999-2001 Work Programme: *Promoting Sustainable Household Consumption in OECD Countries: Trends and Policies* (forthcoming, 2002); *Participatory Decision Making for Sustainable Consumption*; *Policies to Promote Sustainable Consumption: An Overview*; *Household Food Consumption*; *Household Tourism Travel*; *Household Energy and Water Consumption and Waste Generation*. See www.oecd.org/env/consumption

ANNEX I – LIST OF PARTICIPANT PAPERS AND WEBSITE REFERENCES
(most of these papers are available on the OECD website www.oecd.org/env/consumption)

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ANNEX II – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Mr. Ümit AKSOY
 Ministry of Finance/General Directorate of
 Revenues
 Maliye Bakanligi
 Gelirler Genel Müdürlüğü
 06100-Ulus/Ankara TÜRKİY
 Tel: 90 312 310 4135
 Fax: 90 312 311 4510
 Email: uaksoy@gelirler.gov.tr

Mr. Jacob BOMANN-LARSEN
 Consumer Department
 Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs
 P.O. Box 8036
 0030 Oslo NORWAY
 Tel: 47 22 24 24 85
 Fax: 47 22 24 27 17
 Email: jacob.bomann-larsen@bfd.dep.no

Mr. Witoslaw ANTCZAK
 Permanent Delegation of Poland to the OECD
 86, rue de la Faisanderie
 F-75116 Paris FRANCE
 Tel: 33 1 4504 1020
 Fax: 33 1 4504 35 89

Mr. Thomas BECKER
 Environmental Policy
 Federation of German Industries (BDI)
 Breite Strasse 29
 10178 Berlin GERMANY

Ms. Anne Berlin BLACKMAN
 Massachusetts Toxics Use Reduction Institute
 University of Massachusetts Lowell
 One University Avenue
 Lowell, MA 01854 USA
 Tel: (978) 934-3124
 Fax: (978) 934-3050
 Email: blackman@turi.org

Ms. Jeanne BLOCH
 Sept ou 8
 3, rue Chanzy
 75011 Paris FRANCE
 Tel: 33 01 55 25 80 30
 Fax: 33 01 55 25 80 31
 Email: jeanne@septou8.com

Ms. Katharine BRADDICK
 Department of the Environment, Transport and the
 Regions, UK
 6/H11
 Ashdown House
 123 Victoria Street
 London SW1E 6DE UNITED KINGDOM
 Tel: 44 020 7944 6677
 Fax: 44 020 7944 6559
 Email: katharine_braddick@detr.gsi.gov.uk

Mr. Ilkka CANTELL
 Commercial Counsellor
 Ministry of Trade and Industry
 P.O. Box 32
 00023 Helsinki FINLAND
 Tel: 358 9 160 3531
 Fax: 358 9 160 2670
 Email: ilkka.cantell@ktm.vn.fi

Mr. Tim COOPER
 Centre for Sustainable Consumption
 Sheffield Hallam University
 Howard Street
 Sheffield S1 1WB UNITED KINGDOM
 Tel: 44 (0) 114 225 4838
 Fax: 44 (0) 114 225 3343
 Email: t.h.cooper@shu.ac.uk

Ms. Lindsay COOMBS
 Department of the Environment, Transport and the
 Regions, UK
 Zone 6/D12 Ashdown House
 London, SW1E 6DE UNITED KINGDOM
 Tel: 44 020 7944 6583
 Fax: 44 020 7944 6559
 Email: lindsay_coombs@detr.gsi.gov.uk

Mr. András R. CSANADY
Policy Planner
Department of Strategic Planning and Co-operation
Ministry for Environment
1011 Budapest 1., Fo u. 44-50
1394 Budapest Pf. 351 HUNGARY
Tel: 36 1 201 3973/ 457 3387
Fax: 36 1 201 2091
Email: csanady@mail.ktm.hu

Ms. Dianne DILLON-RIDGLEY
Interface
2204 Mac Bride Drive
Iowa City, Iowa 52246 USA
Voicemail: 1800 336 0225 ext. 0637
Fax: 1319 338 2090
Email: ddrwater27@aol.com

Ms. Carla DI PAOLA
Italian Permanent Delegation to the OECD
50, avenue de Varenne
Paris FRANCE
Tel: 01 44 39 21 61
Fax: 01 42 84 08 59
Email: carla.dipaola@rappocse.org

Ms. Mirjam T.V. DE JONG
Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the
Environment
P.O. Box 30945
2500 GX The Hague THE NETHERLANDS
Tel: 31 70 339 4657
Fax: 31 70 339 1293
Email: mirjam.de.jong@minvrom.nl

Ms. Mieke DE SWERT
European Commission
Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-
General
Wetstraat 200 rue de la Loi
(B-232 6/6)
1049 Brussels BELGIUM
Tel: 32 2 296 5022
Fax: 32 2 299 1858
Email: mieke.de_swert@cec.eu.int

Mr. Dag ENDAL
The Environment Home Guard
P.O. Box 2113 Grûnerløkka
0505 Oslo NORWAY
Tel: 47 22 04 46 80
47 91 18 43 88
Fax: 47 22 71 77 85
Email: dag.endal@miljohv.no

Ms. Anna FIELDER
Director, Office for Developed and Transition
Economies
24 Highburry Crescent
London N51FX UNITED KINGDOM
Tel: 44 207 226 6663
Fax:
Email: afielder@consint.org

Mr. Klaus-Jochen GÜHLCKE
Counsellor
Permanent Delegation of Germany to the OECD
9, rue Maspéro
75116 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 01 55 74 57 07
Fax: 01 55 74 57 40
E-mail: klaus.guhlcke@germany.oecd.org

Mr. Robert GOODCHILD
European Commission
DG ENV
200, rue de la Loi
(BU5 – 6/140)
1049 Brussels BELGIUM
Tel: 32 2 299 01 37
Fax: 32 2 296 39 80
Email: Robert.Goodchild@cec.eu.int

Ms. Michelle GRAVES
Sept ou 8
3, rue Chanzy
75011 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 33 01 55 25 80 30
Fax: 33 01 55 25 80 31
Email: michelle@septou8.com

Ms. Julia HAAKE
C3ED Université de Versailles - St. Quentin en
Yvelines
47 boulevard Vauban,
78047 Guyancourt FRANCE
Tel: 33 139 25 53 75
Fax: 33 139 25 53 00
Email: julia.hakke@c3ed.uvsq.fr

Mrs. Julia HEISS
UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy
75015 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 33 1 45 68 10 36
Fax: 33 1 45 68 56 37
Email: j.heiss@unesco.org

Ms. Riitta JALKANEN
Finnish Consumer Agency
P.O. Box 5
00531 Helsinki FINLAND
Tel: 358 9 7726 7546
Fax: 358 9 7726 7557
Email: riitta.jalkanen@kuluttajavirasto.fi

Mr. Andreas KLEINSTEUBER
German Campaign for Solar Thermal Home
Systems
BAUM EPAG
Osterstr. 58
20259 Hamburg GERMANY
Tel: 49 40 4907 1494
Fax: 49 40 4907 1499
Email: Andreas.Kleinsteuber@BAUMeV.de

Mr. Yorgos KLIDONAS
Permanent Delegation of Greece to the OECD
15, villa Said
75116 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 33 01 45 02 24 10
Fax: 33 01 45 02 71 55

Ms Ulrika LINDSTEDT
Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
10648 Stockholm SWEDEN
Tel: 46 8 698 1254
Fax: 46 8 698 1433
Email: ulrika.lindstedt@environ.se

Mr. Karol LITYNSKI
Chief Expert
Department for Economic Strategy
Ministry for Economy
PL. 3 Krzyzy 5
00-507 Warsaw POLAND
Tel. 48 22 693 59 31
Fax. 48 22 693 52 68
e-mail lityn@mg.gov.pl

Ms. Sylvia LOREK
Forum Environment and Development Germany/
Sustainable Europe Research Institute
Glatzer Str. 1
51491 Overath GERMANY
Tel: 49 0 2206 84848
Fax: 49 0 2206 84848
Email: sylvia.lorek@t-online.de

Ms. Isabella MARRAS
UNEP DTIE
39/43 Quai André Citroën
75739 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 33 1 44 37 14 21
Fax: 33 1 44 37 14 74
Email: isabella.marras@unep.fr

Ms. Nicole MARTEL
Environment Canada
Climate Change Bureau
Terrasses de la Chaudière
10 Wellington Street
Hull, Québec K1A 0H3 CANADA
Tel: 1 819 997 6970
Fax: 1 819 953 3241
Email: nicole.martel@ec.gc.ca

Ms. Paola MAZZUCHELLI
Trainee adviser –environmental affairs
UNICE
Rue Joseph II, 40 - B - 1000
Brussels BELGIUM
Tel: 32 2 237 65 45
Fax: 32 2 231 14 45
Email: mazzucchelli@unice.be

Mr. Peter MEYER-RUTZ
Head of Section
Product-Related Environmental Protection
Federal Ministry for the Environment
Alexanderplatz 6
10178 Berlin GERMANY
Tel: 49 1888 305 2260
Fax: 49 1888 305 3339
Email: meyer-rutz.eckart@bmu.de

Mr. Laurie MICHAELIS
Commission on Sustainable Consumption
Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and
Society
Mansfield College
Oxford OX1 3TF UNITED KINGDOM
Tel: 44 1865 282 903
Fax: 44 1865 270 886
Email: laurie.michaelis@mansf.ox.ac.uk

Mr. Doug MILLER
Environics International
33 Bloor Street E., Suite 900
Toronto, ON CANADA M4W 3H1
Tel: 1 416 920 9010 X299 or 203
Fax: 1 416 920-3510
Email: doug.miller@environicsinternational.com

Ms. Johanna MOISANDER
Helsinki School of Economics and Business
Administration
Department of Marketing
P.O. Box 1210
Fin-00100 Helsinki FINLAND
Tel. 358 (0)9 43131 (office)
358 (0)50 555 9935 (mobile)
Fax 358 (0)9 43138660
E-mail: moisande@hkkk.fi

Mr. David MURPHY
Assistant Director of Publicity
Directorate of Communications
Eland House, Zone 4/J6
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5D4 UNITED KINGDOM
Tel: 020 7944 4623
Fax: 020 7944 4619
Email: david.murphy@detr.gsi.gov.uk

Ms. Liselotte Brostrøm NIELSEN
Danish Environmental Protection Agency
Strandgade 29
1401 Copenhagen DENMARK
Tel: 45 32 66 05 50
Fax: 45 32 66 03 74
Email: lbn@mst.dk

Mr. Enrico OTTOLINI
ANPA National Agency for the Protection of the
Environment
Via Vitaliano Brancati, 48
00144 Roma ITALY
Tel: 39 06 50072183
Fax: 39 06 5007 2048
Email: ottolini@anpa.it

Mr. Yeon-Soo PARK
First Secretary, Environment
Permanent Delegation of Korea to the OECD
Tel: 01.44.05.20.59
Fax:
Email: yspark-me@mofat.go.kr

Mrs. Kvetoslava REMTOVA
Associated professor at
the University of Economics
Faculty of Macroeconomy
Department of Environmental Economics
nám. W. Churchilla 4
130 67 Prague 3 CZECH REPUBLIC
Tel: 422.240.95.551
Fax 422.24095.529
E-mail: remtova@vse.cz

Hanni ROSENBAUM
Policy Manager
BIAC
13-15, Chaussée de la Muette
75016 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 33 1 42 30 09 60
Fax: 33 1 42 88 78 38
Email: rosenbaum@biac.org

Mr. Johannes SCHMITT
Attaché
Permanent Delegation of Germany to the OECD
9, rue Maspéro
75116 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 01 55 74 57 24
Fax: 01 55 74 57 40
E-mail: delegation@germany-oecd.org

Mr. Jan Willem SCHOUW
Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the
Environment
Communications Directorate,
Policy Communication Division
IPC 120
P.O. Box. 20951
2500 EZ The Hague THE NETHERLANDS
Tel: 31 70 339 3740
Fax: 31 70 339 1144
Email: janwillem.schouw@cdc.cs.minvrom.nl

Marielle SMEETS
Ministère des Affaires Sociales, de la Santé
publique et de l'Environnement
Cité Administrative de l'Etat - Esplanade 621A
Bld. Pachéco 19 - boîte 5
B-1000 Bruxelles BELGIUM
Tel: 32 2 210 64 24
Fax: 32 2 210 64 16
Email:

Ms. Anne SOLGAARD
UNEP DTIE
39/43 Quai André Citroën
75739 Paris FRANCE
Tel: 33 1 44 37 14 66
Fax: 33 1 44 37 14 74
Email: anne.solgaard@unep.fr

Ms. Anna STARZEWSKA-SIKORSKA
Expert
Institute for Ecology of Industrial Areas
Ul. Kossutha 6
40-832 Katowice POLAND
Tel: 4832 25 46 031 Ext. 275
Fax: 4832 254 1717
Email: race@ietu.katowice.pl

Ms. Lisbeth STRANDMARK
Danish Environmental Protection Agency
Strandgade 29
1401 Copenhagen K DENMARK
Tel: 45 32 66 04 84
Fax: 45 32 66 03 74
Email: lis@mst.dk

Mrs. Dagmar SUCHAROVOVA
Ministry of Environment
Vrsoviccka 65
100 10 Prague CZECH REPUBLIC
Tel: 422 6712 27 84
Fax: 422 6731 03 40
Email: sucharovova_dagmar@env.cz

Ms. Betsy TAYLOR
The Center for the New American Dream
6930 Carroll Avenue Suite 900
Takoma Park, MD 20912 USA
Tel: 301 891 3683
Fax: 301 891 3684
Email: betsy@newdream.org

Mr. Werner Thomas THALHAMMER
Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry,
Environment and Water Management
Stubenbastei 5
1010 Vienna AUSTRIA
Tel: 431 515 22 1323
Fax: 431 515 22 7325
Email: werner.thalhammer@bmu.gv.at

Mr. Bernhard TRUFFER
Swiss Federal Institute for Environmental Science
and Technology
Seestrasse 79
6047 Kastanienbaum SWITZERLAND
Tel: 41 41 349 2115
Fax: 41 41 349 2162
Email: truffer@eawag.ch

Mr. Peter WHITE
Procter & Gamble
Newcastle Technical Center
Whitley Road
Longbenton
Newcastle, NE12 9TS UNITED KINGDOM
Tel: 44 191 279 1508
Fax: 44 191 279 2871
Email: white.pr@pg.com

Ms. Liisa UUSITALO
Helsinki School of Economics
Department of Marketing
P.O. Box 1210
Fin-00101 Helsinki FINLAND
Tel: 358 9 43138544
Fax: 358 9 43138660
Email: luusital@hkkk.fi

Dr. J.P (Hamish) WILL
Unilever Home & Personal Care, Europe
Wood Street
Port Sunlight, Wirral
Merseyside CH62-2ZD UNITED KINGDOM
Tel: 44 151 641 4103
Fax:
Email: hamish.will@unilever.com

Mr. Hubert J.J. VAN BREEMAN
VNO-NCW
Confederate of Netherlands Industry and Employers
12, Bezuidenhoutseweg
P.O.Box 93002
2509 AA The Hague THE NETHERLANDS
Tel: 31 (0)70 349 0358
Fax: 31 (0)70 349 0360
Email: HJJvBreemen@vno-ncw.nl

Mr. Manus VAN BRAKEL
Milieudefensie/Friends of the Earth Netherlands
PO Box 19199
100GD Amsterdam THE NETHERLANDS
Tel: 31 20 550 7300
Fax: 31 20 550 7410
Email: manus.van.brakel@milieudefensie.nl
brakel@milieudefensie.nl

Ms. Cathrine WINBLAD
Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
106 48 Stockholm SWEDEN
Tel: 46 8 698 10 38 mobile: 46 70 657 02 16
Fax: 46 8 698 14 33
Email: cathrine.winblad@environ.se

OECD

OECD Environment Directorate
2, rue André-Pascal
75775 Paris Cedex 16 FRANCE

Mrs. Joke WALLER-HUNTER
Director
Tel: 33 1 45 24 93 00
Fax: 33 1 45 24 78 76
Email: joke.waller-hunter@oecd.org

Mr. Jean-Philippe BARDE
Head of Division
National Policies Division
Tel: 33 1 45 24 98 22
Fax: 33 1 45 24 78 76
Email: jean-philippe.barde@oecd.org

Ms. Elaine GEYER-ALLELY
Administrator
Tel: 33 1 45 24 79 36
Fax: 33 1 45 24 78 76
Email: elaine.geyer-allely@oecd.org

Ms. Adriana ZACARIAS-FARAH
Consultant
Tel: 33 1 45 24 13 80
Fax: 33 1 45 24 78 76
Email: adriana.farah@oecd.org

Mr. Dan BILLER
Administrator
Tel: 33 1 45 24 14 86
Fax: 33 1 45 24 78 76

Ms. Sabrina LUCATELLI
OECD Directorate Food, Agriculture and
Fisheries
Administrator
Tel: 01 45 24 87 04
Fax: 01 44 30 63 06