

Building social responsibility through standards

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Sintesi

In passato le associazioni dei Paesi sviluppati che componevano il Consumer International (che quest'anno festeggia il 50° anniversario) lavoravano con l'obiettivo di fornire ai consumatori informazioni che li aiutassero a prendere le migliori decisioni per le proprie necessità.

Con la globalizzazione e l'aumento della consapevolezza dell'impatto che l'industria ha sia sull'ambiente sia sull'economia, i consumatori hanno cominciato gradualmente a informarsi più approfonditamente su questioni etico-ambientali e sull'impatto sociale dei prodotti e dei servizi da loro utilizzati.

Alcune associazioni appartenenti a Consumer International (CI) hanno deciso di spiegare ai consumatori come lavorano alcune organizzazioni di *fair-trade* e alcune riviste di informazione sociale e come utilizzare alcuni strumenti per fare scelte responsabili (per esempio dati disponibili pubblicamente e questionari diretti alle aziende).

I consumatori hanno il diritto di conoscere il motivo per il quale i prodotti sostenibili hanno prezzi differenti dai prodotti normali. Inoltre desiderano avere maggiori informazioni sulle modalità tramite le quali possono modificare "la propria impronta ecologica" mediante l'utilizzo di determinati prodotti; nonostante ciò, non sempre si fidano delle informazioni sui cambiamenti climatici fornite dall'industria: per questo dichiarano di voler ricevere informazioni da enti indipendenti.

Gli standard sono uno strumento che può avere un ruolo chiave sia per orientare la produzione industriale sia per modificarne i comportamenti e, dunque, incrementarne la sostenibilità. La chiave per fare ciò è lo sviluppo di standard rigorosi e trasparenti attraverso processi basati su un rigore scientifico, che offra ai consumatori un riferimento certo mediante il quale fare delle scelte di stili di vita sostenibili.

Per questo il CI ha legami sia con Iso¹ sia con Copolco, l'organismo interno all'Iso che si occupa di policy dei consumatori. Consumer International, unica voce a livello mondiale per i consumatori, ha giocato un ruolo rilevante nello sviluppo dell'Iso 26000, che prevede gli step da affrontare perché un'organizzazione possa essere socialmente responsabile. Iso 26000 è considerato il documento che i Governi, le Organizzazioni non governative, le imprese e i sindacati dovrebbero avere come guida per la responsabilità sociale. È una lista dettagliata di principi sul rispetto dei diritti umani, sull'uguaglianza di genere, sulla promozione di

¹ L'Iso è l'organizzazione internazionale per la standardizzazione maggiormente diffusa a livello mondiale,

che pubblica standard internazionali.

organismi e governi moderni e socialmente responsabili. Consumer International coordina più di ottanta esperti per la tutela dei consumatori in tutto il mondo per lo sviluppo del processo e del contenuto dell'Iso 26000; quest'ultimo è il risultato del più credibile e integrato dibattito globale sugli standard per condotte responsabili, che ha la sua origine in un consenso *multi-stakeholders*.

Oggi, più che mai, la fiducia dei consumatori dipende dai comportamenti responsabili delle aziende. La crisi finanziaria ha drammaticamente dimostrato come le banche abbiano fallito, prevaricando i diritti dei risparmiatori rispetto a quelli di alcuni portatori di interesse. Le associazioni di consumatori hanno lavorato molto per assicurare che l'Iso 26000 ponesse le problematiche consumeristiche al pari di altre importanti questioni, quali per esempio i diritti umani, i diritti del lavoro e le questioni ambientali.

Per aiutare i consumatori a fare acquisti etici, è necessario creare le condizioni perché lo possano fare realmente. Lo scorso febbraio gli Stati partecipanti hanno votato a favore dell'avanzamento allo stadio finale della bozza dell'Iso 26000. Secondo questa bozza, i diritti dei consumatori saranno considerati la chiave per la creazione di standard non solo credibili, ma soprattutto sostenibili.

Consumers International's President Samuel Ochieng celebrates the work of the global consumer movement in its 50th anniversary year

Consumers International (CI), formerly known as the International Organisation of Consumers Unions (IOCU), was started in 1960 on a wing and a prayer by a group of five consumer organisations from the US, Western Europe and Australia.

Originally established as a global information exchange between the increasing number of consumer product-testing organisations that had sprung up in the post-war boom years, CI quickly established a formidable reputation as an agent for change on the consumer issues of the day. In 10 short years, we had attracted 50 member organisations. Another decade later, we had achieved General Consultative Status at the United Nations (UN) - having helped wage and win major campaigns against transnational companies over issues relating to baby food and pesticides.

Our history has taken us from the US and Europe to Asia and Latin America, through Eastern Europe and across Africa. Today, we have more than 225 member organisations in 115 countries, and we continue to grow.

CI's priorities and programmes have evolved to reflect greater involvement in issues ranging from public utilities and food and drug safety, to the environment and credit and debt that affect consumers everywhere.

What has not changed is CI's commitment to building a powerful international movement to protect and empower all consumers.

As CI celebrates its 50th year, we have an organisation of which we can be justly proud. I'd like to invite you to share in some of our successes and our ambitions for the future.

Samuel Ochieng, President, Consumers International

Consumers International and its members

In the past, Consumers International (CI)¹ member organisations from developed countries worked to provide information to consumers on choice. Independent consumer organisations, who tested the products and services that were available, such as Consumers Union Usa, Que Choisir, France, Consumers Korea, Choice, Australia, became the trusted choice of consumers to find verifiable information on safety, performance, convenience and value for money. With globalisation and increased awareness of the impact of trade on both the environment and the economy, consumers have become increasingly interested in being informed on the environmental, ethical and social impacts of products and services, and the businesses that provide them.

However, consumer organisations continue to struggle to find the equivalent tools for comparing and reporting how to compare the aspects of businesses' social responsibility, which would enable them to confidently recommend one product or business over another, when taking into account their performance in terms of social responsibility. Some CI members, such as Which?, Consumer Focus, Consumentenbond (Cb) and others, working under the auspices of a Corporate social responsibility (Csr) working group as members of International Consumer research and testing² (Icrt), led the way to explain how fair-trade and social reporting work. As well as how using tools, such as publically available data and direct questioning of business, better inform consumers on how to choose responsibly. Consumers need to know why there are price differences at the till for products supporting sustainability. They also need to find a way through a proliferation of claims and critical media reports. With the exposure of irresponsible business practices by transnational corporations came an outcry from consumers who did not want their purchasing power to support poor labour, environmental and social practices.

CI's members in developing countries face further challenges - in many developing countries, social responsibility reporting and labelling of products with claims such as "fair trade" is not yet a reality. There is no or a limited market for fairly traded products. Often it is about access and not choice. However, there is a desire and a need for these members to engage in any process to develop tools to hold corporations to account globally. Developing country consumers want to have access to responsibly produced products. They do not want to pay the price for mass consumption elsewhere.

¹ Consumers International (CI) is the world federation of consumer groups that, working together with its members, serves as the only independent and authoritative global voice for consumers. With over 220 member organisations in 115 countries, CI is building a powerful international movement to help protect and empower consumers everywhere. Founded in 1960, the organisation is now needed more than ever. This modern movement is essential to secure a fair safe and sustainable future for consumers in a global

marketplace increasingly dominated by international corporations.

² International consumer research and testing (Icrt) is an international consortium of more than 45 independent consumer organisations worldwide that carry out joint research and comparative testing in the consumer interest. Icrt does not carry out tests, but commissions them at established laboratories. These tests are paid for and published by the member organisations and are their responsibility.

The world today

Today we have global recognition that unsustainable patterns of production and consumption are leading to extremely serious social and environmental impacts worldwide. Ever increasing and irresponsible consumption is putting a catastrophic strain on the environment, by causing pollution, destroying the ecosystem and undermining sustainable lifestyles. Poverty and deprivation are increasing at an alarming pace and disparity in income and consumption is becoming a feature in all countries.

Initiatives to mobilise consumer concern about sustainable consumption choices, have spread around the world over the past few years. Business, governments, civil society organisations are all involved in the development of consumer education campaigns, new products, labelling and certification initiatives.

However, when looking at actual consumer behaviour, it is clear that actions have yet to catch up with the level of concern. What then is missing?³

- *Consumers want more information from businesses about how they are addressing the climate impacts of their products.*
- *But consumers don't always trust information from businesses on climate change.*
- *Consumers say they want more independent assurance of product information.*

Whilst this particular study refers specifically to climate change, the key points are certainly applicable to other impacts of business as well. CI has long seen that standards are a tool that can play a key role in influencing sustainability and the behaviour of companies.

CI believes that the key to this, in respect to standards, is to develop rigorous and transparent standards through accountable processes of engagement and on the basis of scientific consensus, which offer consumers a trusted basis on which to make product and lifestyle choices to manage their overall ecological footprint.

International organisation for standardization (Iso)

One of the arenas that CI lobbies on behalf of consumers is Iso. Iso, the International organization for standardization, is the world's largest developer and publisher of International standards. CI, through its recognition by the Un, has liaison status with Iso and Copolco, the body that advises Iso on issues relating to consumer policy. CI and its members engage with this body to ensure that international standards reflect the concerns and needs of consumers. At a national level many of CI's members participate in their own countries, within

³ What assures consumers on climate change? Consumers International, 2007.

their national standards bodies (Nsbs), as well as representing consumers at the international level within their national delegations or together with CI.

In recent years, CI has prioritised its work through Copolco, and directly at Iso committee level, to meet our its vision statement - a world where everyone has access to safe and sustainable goods and services. Where the strength of the collective power is used for the good of consumers throughout the world.

Consumers International and Iso 26000

CI, the only global voice for consumers, has played a key role, in the development of Iso 26000.⁴ To choose responsibly, consumers need a benchmark against which companies can be measured. Companies operate internationally, and even small and medium enterprises source globally, so a meaningful standard has to be an international one.

It was a Copolco initiative that spawned the project that became - Iso 26000, guidance on social responsibility. However, this was just the start of the process and CI continued to influence the structure under which the Iso Wgsr (Working group on social responsibility)⁵ would operate through representation on a Strategic advisory group. Iso recognised that developing a standard for social responsibility brought a new range of challenges to its own established practices.

One of the main challenges for consumers trying to influence the content of standards, has been their inability to speak directly of consumer issues at the international level, without the support of other stakeholders at the national level.

The Iso Wgsr operates under a unique process where country experts, representing each of six stakeholder groups, have been able to contribute and comment openly about the challenges of social responsibility. The other major improvement to process is the transparency and accountability of the working group. A special task group was set up in the Wgsr specifically to explore and resolve issues that resulted from a multi-stakeholder process, such as accountable reporting of comments received from an Nsb, identified by the stakeholder category. Transparency also took a leap forward with all working documents of the group made publicly available at www.iso.org/wgsr.

For consumer organisations, the ability to at long last influence international processes, in equal measure with businesses and other stakeholders, has been worth the fight. CI coordinates over 80 consumer experts from across the world

⁴ Iso 26000 addresses questions such as: what steps does an organisation need to take to be socially responsible? Who should pay for pollution? What do product designers need to think about to protect consumers? Iso 26000 is envisaged to be the document that governments, Ngos, businesses and corporations refer to for guidance on Social Responsibility. It is a detailed checklist of the underlying principles, such as human rights and gender equality, and promo-

tes modern, socially responsible organisations and governments. Iso 26000 is not a management systems standard (such as Iso 9000 or 14000) and is not intended or appropriate for certification. Over 100 countries participate in this, the largest of the Iso committees, with its aim to reach common understanding on issue of social responsibility.

⁵ Working group on social responsibility.

within the Iso process, all of whom have been central to developing the process and content of Iso 26000.

Although, as one of the underrepresented groups, alongside labour, the consumer stakeholder group has been highly effective in influencing the content of the standard. Consumer organisations from all over the world have attended each of the seven Iso Wgsr meetings so far, taking on key roles in the policy and strategic leadership of the group.

Consumers, representing our stakeholder group from Malaysia, Usa, India, Australia and Sweden, are now working with other stakeholders towards the final draft of the standard. CI, represented by our member organisations, the Danish consumer council and more recently by Vzvb, from Germany, have been instrumental in providing the expertise needed to build position papers and provide technical comments to the documents. These are developed with the input of all the members of CI working with social responsibility to ensure that the needs of consumers around the globe are represented.

Key issues under consideration include the precautionary principle, supply chain, sphere of influence, Wto trade issues and incorporating consumer rights.

Iso 26000 recognises consumer issues as one of the essential elements of social responsibility. Issues such as fair marketing practices, the protection of consumer health and safety, sustainable consumption and access to essential services are embedded within the heart of the standard. Iso 26000 is the result of the most credible and integrated global debate on standards about responsible conduct, having its roots in a balanced, multi-stakeholder consensus. This gives it a potential authority that should not be underestimated.

In terms of information disclosure and reporting, the standard, with its clear structure of required actions, is invaluable. It presents what should at least be carried out before calling yourself a responsible organisation. Comparison of organisational activities becomes possible using the context of Iso 26000. Consumer protection agencies should use Iso 26000 as the prime reference model for ranking or assessing a corporation's activities in the future.

An example of where consumers have been damaged by businesses behaving badly is the recent credit crunch. The irresponsible behaviour of banks has triggered financial and economic crises of historic dimensions. Loans were given to consumers who could not repay them and risks were irresponsibly managed.

Today, more than ever, consumer confidence is dependent on responsible behaviour by companies. What the financial crisis shows, is that the banks failed to take responsibility for their core business, ie consumer loans. Consumer representatives who make up the stakeholder group have worked hard to ensure that Iso 26000 puts consumer issues on par with other important issues, such as the respect for human rights, labour practices and the environment.

To enable consumers to "shop" ethically, we need to create conditions that enable them to do so. Iso 26000 will contribute to an enhanced transparency on corporate activities and enable consumer and consumer organisations to assess their activities. Consumer organisations are the watchdogs of society. Iso 26000

is not only a tool that enables them to assess how corporations behave, but also gives consumer groups an ability to inform consumers about how to compare companies and make an informed choice. It is certainly a step towards more responsible models of consumption. For consumer organisations, actively engaging in promoting of Iso 26000 does not mean stopping other kinds of activities, but it is in our own interests to see the standard put into practice and 'road-tested' as soon as possible. Only then will it be possible to collect and present evidence of possible deficiencies, as well as substantiating its benefits.

More than this though, it gives companies the opportunity to demonstrate they can provide goods and services in a responsible way. This is what consumers want - responsible companies!

On 14 February 2010, the participating countries voted "yes" to move to the final stage of drafting for Iso 26000. Reaching this crucial stage came after the consumer movement led a campaign to move the process to the next level in the face of industry reluctance. The open statement was signed by over 50 experts from consumer, labour, other civil society groups - www.consumersinternational.org.

The Iso Wgsr next meets during the week of 17 May 2010 in Copenhagen, Denmark, an apt destination for this anticipated final meeting of the working group. This will mean a social responsibility standard will become reality in 2010. Its success will owe much to the working group multi-stakeholder approach and the equal participation of those stakeholders.

Other initiatives towards sustainability

Energy services

Our latest proposal for an international standard on energy services fits neatly into Iso's own initiatives in the utilities and services sector with sustainability, an essential dimension.

Access and sustainability are sometimes seen as being in opposition to one another. We see them as problems in tandem. While the world is concerned about excessive emissions, there are approaching two billion people without access to energy services. In developing countries, the lack of access often leads to excessive emissions, due to the use of alternative energy sources such as burning of wood and dung, and deforestation due to foraging for fuel.

We believe that an Iso standard on services to users of energy, will go some way towards reconciling the objectives of improving access and sustainability. CI's Global energy charter⁶ emphasises reduction of waste, promotion of energy efficiency, and consumer responsibility. It was endorsed by a CI member survey

⁶ <http://www.consumersinternational.org/Templates/Internal.asp?NodeID=98515>.

in 2007 - sustainability was endorsed by many developing country members as a top priority, along with access.

Building consumer confidence in Ethical trade

The Ethical trade fact-finding process (Etfp)⁷ was established following the workshop Can consumers rely on fair trade claims?, held by Copolco in 2007 following research by CI and Copolco to see if standards could help build consumer confidence. Its aim is to build consumer confidence in purchasing ethically traded products and services by recommending solutions to reduce the potential for consumer confusion caused by inaccurate and unreliable “ethical” claims.

The project brought together consumers, industry, government, Ngo, standard setters and research institutes from 35 countries, which convened to get a shared understanding of consumer attitudes to ethical trade and propose ways forward. The project is still in progress, however the report of phase one can be found on the CI website, who hosted the co-ordination of the group.

After government and industry, consumers are a fundamental force in building long term sustainability. But to really be able to make a difference, they must be fully supported by the other relevant stakeholders, such as businesses, civil society organisations, and standards setters.

CI looks to Iso and all standards developers to take a lead in not only recognising, but proactively engaging with consumers. This means not just, as it has successfully done, through its internal structures, but also through recognising that “consumers” need to be represented at all levels of decision-making within standardisation.

Consumers are key in making standards not only credible but also sustainable, in their own right.

⁷ The Etfp is led by a Steering Group consisting of Consumers International (CI), the French national standards body (Afnor), the Brazilian national standards body (Abnt), the Isfai Alliance and the Fair trade organisations Flo and Wfto (Fair trade advocacy office),

with the Secretary of Iso Copolco as an observer. The Etfp project, with support from the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Iso, runs in two phases, from March 2009 until September 2010.