Consumers: general framework for Community activities 1999-2003

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The European Commission has presented a report on the implementation and evaluation of Community activities 1999-2001 in favour of consumers under the General Framework as established by Decision 283 /1999/EC. The Commission recalls that Decision 283/1999/EC fixed a multi-annual programme of expenditure, set out clear procedures, eligibility and award criteria for financial support and defined possible areas for action for a 5-year period. This has enabled substantial progress to be made in terms of forward planning, a high level of budget utilisation as well as the increased transparency of procedures. The Decision, on the other hand, has provided considerable procedural detail on the co-financing of specific projects. This has resulted in greater transparency in the application and allocation process. The report states that : - Commission actions in favour of consumers have taken up the bulk of the expenditure over the past three years, almost 75 % of the total commitments. Amongst the most important actions financed are the Scientific Committees, scientific studies and technical support for legislative activities (for example validation of BSE tests) and improvements in rapid alert systems. Other important actions include opinion polls on consumer attitudes, food safety information and education campaigns, and actions related to the introduction of the Euro, and actions to monitor consumer rights implementation. Actions to facilitate access to justice and to extra-judicial redress, and to set up and support the European Consumer Centres Network were undertaken in co-operation with the Member States. The policy relevance of these actions was high, as in general was their effectiveness. - Almost 10% of the total commitments were for financial support to European consumer organisations. The policy relevance and effectiveness of this expenditure has improved over the past three years. The eligibility criteria for this type of financial support proved effective in concentrating resources on those organisations whose core business is to defend consumer interests at European level. At the same time, it also fostered new initiatives in this field. - The third category of expenditure was the co-financing of specific projects in favour of consumer interests in the Member States. This has proved to be the least effective instrument over the past three years. The evaluation and allocation process, and the monitoring of the execution of such projects demanded an administrative investment that proved disproportionate to the policy relevance and impact of the projects financed. - Experience with implementing the instruments as provided for in the Decision, particularly the specific project co-financing, also brought to the fore the question of the effective use of EU funds to strengthen national consumer organisations. The role of the EU budget in supporting national consumer organisations generally requires clarification. Financial support for the operating costs of national organisations should, therefore, remain a national responsibility. For its part, the Commission can make a complementary contribution through its direct actions such as the ongoing training programme for the staff of consumer organisations. It can also encourage Member States to give due attention to the needs of the national consumer organisations by facilitating theexchange of best practice. The development of a formal framework for administrative co-operation, which is one of the priorities of the Commission's new Consumer Policy Strategy, could also open up the possibility of jointly funded initiatives to support consumer organisations. Lastly, any future legal framework for expenditure in favour of consumers should contain a better alignment of policy and budgetary frameworks. Important shifts in the policy context, such as enlargement and new governance, and the adoption of the Consumer Policy Strategy 2002-2006 also require adjustments. On the basis of the Strategy the Commission can now more effectively define the instruments and actions needed to meet its policy objectives.