

## Approved Resolutions AGM Association for Consumer Rights 29 March 2014

### 1. Product Lifetimes and Consumer Protection

Submitted by Grace Attard ACR General Secretary

**Justification:** Planned obsolescence is associated with a form of industrial production that relies on a minimum renewal rate for its products. Although product renewal may be necessary, certain abuses need to be addressed, that is distinguishing between defects built-in deliberately and our accelerated consumption patterns.

- While we can question marketing practices that promote major innovations which often turn out to be marginal, it is important to curb the most flagrant cases and improve consumer guarantees.
- Consumers bear the brunt of the cost of shortened product lifecycles and the difficulties associated with insufficient scope for repairing them. Consumers bear the brunt of the policies of manufacturers and of some distributors, who sometimes try to sell warranty extensions after the first year even though two-year warranties are mandatory. Often, consumers are often ignorant of their rights.
- The idea is not to increase the lifetimes of products uniformly across the board but to look at the issue in terms of the product's uses.
- Consumers are often shocked to discover the legal maze they have to deal with. Although there are a good few directives on planned obsolescence (commercial practices, waste, etc.), there seems to be very little coordination between the many texts on the subject, which would need to be brought together in a package of harmonised laws.
- In terms of our understanding of the role that ethics plays in our societies, we consider it worrying that engineers might be employed to develop products with built-in accelerated ageing, or that advertisers might be launching campaigns to encourage consumers to make purchases that will not increase their level of satisfaction.

#### Recommendations

The recommendations concern technology, business, regulation and information. They form part of the strategic framework for a better production-distribution-consumption balance that is fair and appropriate with the following areas to be dealt with:

- a total ban on products with built-in defects designed to end the product's life. These rare but flagrant cases, such as the high profile case of printers designed to break down after being used a certain number of times.
- that companies make their products easier to repair. This should be done in three ways: a; technical possibilities (e.g. tablets with batteries that are welded into the device so that they are impossible to repair and thus have to be replaced), b; the possibility of replacing components within five years of purchasing the product; c. purchases should be accompanied by information on the possibilities of repair and how to have repairs carried out.
- the need for strong support for the social dimension and the repairs sector.

- encouraging voluntary certification measures. For example, in the white goods sector, 10-year or 20-year component warranties were a definite selling point. This guarantee could be standardised at the EU level for all products purchased in the 28 EU countries so as to avoid penalising European businesses.
- providing information on a product's estimated life expectancy or number of use cycles so that consumers can make informed purchasing decisions.
- expressing prices in terms of estimated cost per annum, based on life expectancy, on a voluntary basis, to encourage people to buy long-lasting products. This would definitely give companies an incentive to produce more durable products.
- relevant information that consumers need and would have to vary depending on the categories of products in order to avoid over-information on certain types of packaging.
- the information would have to focus on guaranteeing a minimum lifetime for purchased products. There are no current legal requirements for minimum product lifetimes, nor are there any EU standards for their measurement.
- that warranties should include a minimum operating period, during which the cost of any repairs should be borne by the producer.
- encouraging responsible consumption, especially during school years, to ensure that consumers assess the environmental impact of products in terms of their lifecycle, ecological footprint and quality.

Consumer representatives are to be more involved in the on-going debate, on this important and sensitive topic as their participation will ensure a more comprehensive approach.