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Consumer Protection in the Asia-Pacific Region  

ABSTRACT. This report outlines recent developments at an international level affecting consumer policy in the Asia-Pacific Region. Outcomes of a South Pacific Workshop, a United Nations Regional Seminar, and of a training seminar in Vietnam are considered and a range of consumer and systemic problems are outlined. The need for continued expert assistance to developing countries in the region is emphasised.

After an apparent hiatus in activity throughout much of the 1980's there has been a recent upsurge of interest by governments in the Asia-Pacific region in consumer protection.

The catalyst for this renewal of interest has been the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific of the International Organisation of Consumers Unions (IOCU). The focus of the activity has been the United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection.

In 1988 the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN adopted resolution 1988/61 which urged all Governments to implement the Guidelines, and requested the Secretary-General, in cooperation with the regional commissions and other bodies and agencies in the UN system, to provide assistance to Governments, in particular those of developing countries, in implementing the Guidelines. This resolution effectively freed the UN from the strictures on funding of consumer protection activity that had been imposed at the time of the adoption of the Guidelines in 1985.

SOUTH PACIFIC

As a practical contribution to carrying out the spirit of the ECOSOC resolution, the Australian Government hosted a week long consumer affairs workshop for the member countries of the South Pacific Forum in February 1990.

Held in Sydney, the workshop was attended by government
officials from the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Tonga, Vanuatu, Western Samoa as well as Australia. Vietnam which wished to gain some experience in running a similar workshop also attended.

Recognizing that most of the countries in attendance did not have distinct consumer protection agencies, the workshop focussed on identifying consumer problems in the South Pacific island states and measures, including legislative and administrative mechanisms, that could be developed to solve them.

The problems included driftnet fishing with its impact both on island economies and on sources of fresh food; the lack of access to repair facilities and spare parts for goods; the inability to identify the country of origin or the manufacturer of dangerous or defective goods; the lack of adequate labelling or labelling in foreign languages on imported foodstuffs and chemicals; the lack of testing facilities outside Australia and New Zealand and the lack of technical expertise; the substitution of imported packaged and processed food for more nutritious local food (because of its appeal as “foreign” and therefore better); lack of knowledge of consumer rights; the absence of consumer protection law and of appropriate redress mechanisms; and an urgent need for practical training schemes.

A number of recommendations were made by the Workshop participants calling on the UN system and the South Pacific Forum to assist countries in the South Pacific to develop their consumer protection capacity (Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs, 1990). Of particular note were:

1. a recommendation for the establishment of a Consumer Policy Forum for Asia and the Pacific with Terms of Reference that include the following:

a) to examine questions relating to consumer policy in the various countries and within international and regional and sub-regional organizations and to contribute to the further development and strengthening of co-operation between Member and Associate Member countries in the field of consumer policy;
b) to examine and comment upon specific aspects of consumer policy with particular regard to measures bearing upon enhancing the health, safety and welfare of peoples of the Region and upon international trade, and to follow work in other parts of the UN system of relevance to consumer policy in the Region and to contribute to such work as appropriate;