ABSTRACT. On 9 April 1985 the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted a set of general guidelines for consumer protection. The Guidelines represent an internationally recognized set of minimum objectives, potentially being of particular assistance to developing countries. The adoption of the Guidelines reinforces the increasing recognition in recent years that consumer policy issues can no longer be seen as being of purely local concern but must be seen in an international context.

After discussing certain objectives and general principles set out, the writer discusses the Guidelines themselves, which cover seven areas: physical safety, promotion and protection of consumers’ economic interests, standards for the safety and quality of consumer goods and services, distribution facilities for essential consumer goods and services, measures enabling consumers to obtain redress, education and information programmes, and measures relating to specific areas (food, water, and pharmaceuticals).

The document finally makes a number of recommendations on international co-operation on consumer policy issues. The writer refers to existing mechanisms for such co-operation and makes suggestions for further development.

On 9 April 1985 the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted a set of general guidelines for consumer protection and requested the Secretary-General to disseminate them to Governments and other interested parties (United Nations, 1985a). The adoption of the Guidelines was the culmination of much earlier work and negotiation. In July 1981 the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) had requested the Secretary-General to continue prior consultations on consumer protection with the aim of pursuing, inter alia, the elaboration of a set of general guidelines for consumer protection, taking particularly into account the needs of the developing countries. A set of draft guidelines was submitted to Governments for comment in 1982 and in May 1983 the Secretary-General submitted to ECOSOC a further report containing a revised set of draft guidelines (United Nations, 1983). Considerable debate followed, and submissions were received from non-government organizations (IOCU, 1983b; International Chamber of Commerce, 1983). Ultimately the draft was further revised,
with quite extensive alterations being made, and it was this version which was adopted in the resolution of April 1985.

The adoption of the Guidelines was welcomed by the International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU) as a major development, though in some respects the Guidelines do not go so far as IOCU would have wished. IOCU saw the strength of the Guidelines as lying in the fact that "they map out a comprehensive set of rules for what world governments, through their unanimous vote in the UN, have set out as fair principles for protecting the interests of consumers" (IOCU, 1986). IOCU is now working to encourage its member organizations to press their own governments to implement fully the principles of the Guidelines, seeing them as a solid foundation on which demands for better consumer protection can be based (IOCU, 1986). Some Governments have already taken action. In Uruguay, a review has been commenced of consumer legislation, taking the Guidelines as a starting point (Vermeer, 1986). In Australia, the Attorney-General requested the National Consumer Affairs Advisory Council to advise him on the extent to which consumer policy in Australia currently meets the objectives set out in the Guidelines. The Council's report, published in March 1986, concluded that consumer policy in Australia very largely meets the objectives set out in the Guidelines, but identified certain areas which deserved consideration with a view to improvement (National Consumer Affairs Advisory Council, 1986). The Guidelines were also relied upon by the Australian Government when it subsequently introduced into the Trade Practices Act new provisions forbidding (except with the approval of the relevant Minister) the export of goods which do not comply with consumer product safety standards promulgated under the Act or which have been banned under powers given by the Act (Attorney-General's Department, 1986).

The purpose of the Guidelines was well described by the United Nations Secretary-General in his 1983 Report (United Nations, 1983, p. 3):

The draft guidelines represent an initial attempt to create an international framework within which national consumer protection policies and measures can be worked out. They are also intended to assist the international community in its consideration of the question of consumer protection policy and to further international co-operation in this field.

Put another way, the Guidelines have been seen as setting out "an in-