



Consumers International

The global voice for consumers

ISO takes social responsibility seriously

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Consumers International (CI) has been active at the first meeting of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) on developing a new international guideline for social responsibility (SR), ISO 26000. Over 300 delegates from the international community, business and consumer organisations attended the week-long meeting at Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, from 7-11 March 2005.

This meeting is a new approach by ISO to aim for 'balanced stakeholder engagement', with representatives from six designated stakeholder groups: Governments, Industry, Labour, Consumers, NGOs and Other Groups. This allowed stakeholder representatives to make direct representations at the meeting, rather than go through national committees. CI was the only liaison group at the meeting representing consumer interests.

The Bahia meeting was the first step in a process that will take several years. The process began at a COPOLCO (Consumer Policy Committee) workshop in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, in 2002. An ISO Senior Management meeting in Stockholm in June 2004 made a decision to produce a social responsibility 'guidance document written in plain language which will be understandable and useable by non-specialists' and not intended for use in certification.



CI has been involved in social responsibility initiatives for over 30 years. CI Delegation Leader Bjarne Pedersen and CI Senior Standards Officer Sadie Homer were joined by representatives from CI members to form a strong consumer presence at the meeting.

Sadie Homer, says: 'The meeting had a real buzz. Many of the 300 participants were new to ISO and all showed great energy and commitment. Delegates worked from early in the morning into the evening - sometimes through lunchtimes as well. At times, the meeting did get bogged down in intractable debates but there was always a real engagement and determination to make progress.'

The six task forces that came out of the meeting will be able to take forward the complex issues around the new guideline. CI was disappointed by the lack of consumer representation in the interim leadership structure but is pleased that Villy Dyhr from the Danish Consumer Council and Eunsook Moon from Consumers Korea were elected as consumer stakeholder representatives to the Chairman's Advisory Group.

Sadie Homer says that CI is now looking to take consumer involvement forward to the next meeting, planned for Bangkok in October. 'With most of this week's meeting dominated by process and leadership issues, CI eagerly awaits the outline proposals on how the SR guideline will work', she said.

'With our limited resources, consumer representatives will collaborate to actively influence future ISO meeting decisions from the floor. Consumer participation is essential for a SR standard, as it is for any standard where consumer protection issues are involved.'