

## Energy Safety is A Consumer Right!!!

15 March is World's Consumer Rights Day. The National Consumer Forum will be holding a conference under the theme *Consumer rights and the fight against poverty*. According to the United Nations guidelines for consumer protection, the interests and needs of consumers in all countries, particularly those in developing countries must be taken into account. It calls on governments to protect 'consumers from hazards to their health and safety'. It further calls on governments to 'develop and maintain a strong consumer protection policy'. The intention of the World's Consumer Rights Day is to highlight the rights of consumers. Safety is one of the most critical rights of consumers.

Our government has made some impressive progress in various aspects of consumer protection. They have set up consumer watch dogs such as the Ombudsmen for various industries. In 2007, they implemented the National Credit Act to protect consumers from the credit sharks. However it is in the area of safety that the government has done very little to protect the citizens and workers. For example, we continue to hear horrific stories of high death rates in our mines. Additionally, a week ago, an explosion in a manganese factory in Pietermaritzburg took 6 lives, according to the media.

The key problem here is that, although we have some good policies, standards and regulations in place, no sufficient resources for implementation, monitoring and enforcement are allocated. For example, the Minister of Trade and Industry implemented a regulation of SANS 1906 for non-pressure appliances effectively banning unsafe wick stoves. However, we understand that the South African Bureau of Standards has only a few inspectors to handle standards enforcement for the whole country. Hence we see some unscrupulous businesses who sell the illegal stoves. The real test of any government's resolve to deal with a public policy issue is how much money they put behind it.

One of the most neglected aspects of safety is household energy safety. The worst part here is that there is not even an intention to deal with this, whilst thousands of people continue to be injured and to die every month. No policy exists in our country to deal holistically with the prevention of household energy hazards. The Department of Minerals and Energy (DME), which is tasked with dealing with this matter, has absolutely no interest in it. Who wants to deal with the issue of the poor, who continue to burn and die, when DME can deal with diamond deals? Who wants to deal with the issue of the poor who continue to live in fear, when DME can deal with the electricity crisis because it affects business and those linked to the grid?

So the World Consumer Rights Day comes at a very opportune time. It provides us with an opportunity to once again highlight the plight of the poor energy users. Our constitution states that everybody has a right to an environment which is not harmful to their health and wellbeing. Surely, this applies to people who live in informal settlements as well as those who are not linked to the electricity grid.

As the Paraffin Safety Association of Southern Africa, we will be working with the National Consumer Forum on lobbying and public education activities on consumer safety issues. I conclude with words from DME Minister, Buyelwa Sonjica at the DME Energy Summit last year where she said, “ *we live in a developmental state, a state in transition and that solutions that we propose must take into cognisance the need to lift the majority of our people out of poverty*”. If our government officials do nothing to effect meaning to their own statements, who will lift the poor consumers of household energy from their safety poverty?

Until next time, God bless you.

Patrick Kulati

March 2008