



In 1985 Gerd Billen, 55, was one of the founders of the consumer association Verbraucher Initiative e.V. and became its national chairman. From 1993 to 2005 he was CEO of the German nature conservation association NABU. He then moved to the Otto Group as head of its environmental and social policy department and played a key part in setting up the „Cotton made in Africa“ project. He is qualified in social and nutritional sciences and is a member of the council of Consumers International, the German UNESCO Commission, the advisory council of the German Energy Agency and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

“The carbon footprint is not a valid sales argument on its own”

It can be difficult for consumers to get hold of the information they need if they want to buy climate-friendly products. But would quoting the carbon footprint on all products and services really help them? The information would have to be provided on very different products in ways that would make it easy for non-experts to compare them. One must also ask whether the information would really be useful for consumers or whether it would simply serve to increase confusion.

In the interview: Gerd Billen, President of the Federation of German Consumer Organisations

Mr Billen, do consumers want a carbon footprint label on products?

Last year we published a study of consumers' views on climate issues in connection with transport and food. Eighty-three percent of people surveyed were in favour of carbon footprint labelling for food.

For example, do consumers take in the information about CO₂ emissions per kilometre which the EU directive says must be specified for new vehicles?

I think they do. But I'm not sure that they draw decisive conclusions from it. In Germany the information is provided in the form of bare figures, without comparisons or explanation – that's completely inadequate! We are calling for a clearer and more easily understood format, based on the label on household appliances.

From the consumer's point of view, does it make sense to have a separate carbon label?

One can't expect consumers to be familiar with all the labels currently found on the German market. For that reason it makes little sense to develop yet another seal. Especially as there are already labels that state how climate-friendly a product is in the production or use phase – for example, the energy efficiency class label on household appliances.

What do you think of the carbon labels that are already in use in other countries?

We are currently witnessing a growing trend for manufacturers and service providers to use the „climate argument“ as an advertising point – in other words to point out that their product is climate-friendly or even climate-neutral. In Great Britain and Sweden there are already companies that give details of the carbon footprint on their product. But they combine it with a reduction commitment or a ranking within the product group. At present the carbon footprint cannot and must not be used as a sales argument, because there is no standard method of calculating it. It cannot be taken seriously when used for marketing purposes.

From the consumer's point of view it makes more sense for businesses and service providers to optimise their processes. Consumers can't be expected to take responsibility for choosing which product to buy for climate-related reasons. It is more important to explain to them how to use the product in ways that help protect the climate. Considerable quantities of emissions are still produced during a product's „use phase“; consumers can influence these through their behaviour.

How can consumers assess the climate change impact of food – is an organic label enough for this?

Organic production is one factor among many that consumers can take into account when buying climate-friendly food. The majority of products from certified or-

ganic sources have a better carbon footprint. But there are also other ways of making one's shopping climate-friendly: buying seasonal and regional products, avoiding food that is brought in by air, and buying low-fat milk products and meat.

What do you think of the Blue Angel environmental label?

It offers consumers reliability, because it sets high standards – both with regard to climate performance and energy efficiency and in terms of all the other factors that are important for protecting the environment and health. Now there is the additional label „Protects the climate“. Products that are awarded the Blue Angel are very energy-efficient and particularly energy-saving. The Blue Angel for climate protection will be awarded within product groups that play a particularly important part in climate change mitigation – such as netbooks, washing machines and espresso machines – and not just electrical appliances but other things such as gas cookers, car tyres and even services such as car-sharing.

Thank you very much.

The interviewer was Katharina Hien.