

Expert workshop: 22nd January 2008, Brussels

Responsible Competitiveness in the Retail Sector – what role and benefits for companies and the EU?

Background: The conCISE.net project

ConCISEnet is an international networking project funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research. The project aims to contribute to the discourse on European industrial policy and its links with sustainable development, innovation and competitiveness. To meet this aim it will co-ordinate international networking activities and by disseminate good practice on how to successfully combine sustainability and competitiveness.

One of the particular themes looked at within the **conCISEnet** project is “responsible competitiveness” – examined from a business perspective. The core question to be discussed and promoted in this context is: *Is responsible business practice in a globalising world a driving force or a stumbling block for the European Economic Area?* This question will be examined for both the retail sector and the chemicals industry. Both of these sectors are increasingly exposed to the pressure of global competitiveness while at the same time possessing great opportunities to contribute to a more sustainable development.

Background: The key concepts – CSR and competitiveness

Responsible business practice and its effect on the competitiveness of companies, industries and nation states has been subject to the international research agenda since the 1990s.. The recent rise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), describing the wide range of responsible business practices in the social and environmental realm, has increased the attention paid to the competitiveness effects of such practice.. The conviction that **companies** with strategic CSR are more successful in achieving competitive advantage and in increasing their profits is communicated in company reports and is supported by an increasing number of research findings. Additionally, the **political relevance** of CSR as an instrument to support national and EU policy goals has grown. In its contribution to the March 2005 Spring Council, the European Commission recognised that CSR “*can play a key role in contributing to sustainable development while enhancing Europe’s innovative potential and competitiveness.*”

However, there remains scepticism among many actors about the competitiveness effect of responsible business behaviour. David Vogel, as a leading US academic on CSR, expresses scepticism, stating that : “*Although CSR may not make firms any less profitable, it is possible that [...] more responsible firms might be even more profitable if they were less responsible*”. Furthermore, some doubt whether EU policy initiatives for a sustainable development really promote the competitiveness of the EU region in times of globalising value chains and consumer markets. Accountability puts the challenge that: “*In a globalizing economy Europe can succeed if it integrates with other regions while building competitiveness at home.*”

Within conCISEnet, we would like to enable a useful discussion about the links between CSR and competitiveness at both a company and on EU level in order to come up with good practice examples on how to move forward in the direction of sustainability.

The workshop: Responsible competitiveness in the retail sector.

The aim of the workshop is to provide space for an exchange of ideas and perceptions on the links between CSR and competitiveness.

Specifically the following questions will be addressed: How does, or can, responsible business practice support companies in gaining competitive advantage? In what ways do companies' actions for sustainability promote or hinder the competitiveness of the EU?

Participation at our workshop will provide your organisation with the following benefits:

- The opportunity to learn about the particular social and environmental challenges the retail sector will face in the future and how it may react on them
- Highlight some best practice examples from the retail sector in addressing social and environmental challenges
- The space to discuss and clarify the competitiveness effects on EU level that result from responsible business practice in a globalising economy

The workshop will pay particular attention to current and future sustainability challenges relevant to the retail sector e.g. Product Carbon Footprinting, labour standards and social impacts in the supply chain, the promotion of sustainable consumption patterns, and the role of retailers in emerging economies.

The workshop will bring together a diverse range of experts in responsible retailing practices, from business, NGOs, academics and politics. It will take place in Brussels on Tuesday, **22. January 2008**, from 10am to 5pm.

Workshop Venue:

Fondation Universitaire / Universitaire Stichting
Rue d'Egmont (Egmontstraat) 11
1000 Bruxelles

The workshop isorganised by:



It is being supported by:



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