

Foreword

“Eco-labelling” is an issue of considerable public interest. An Eco-label is an official label for approved “green” products. It provides authoritative guidance to consumers who wish to choose products for environmental reasons. Eco-labelling aims to encourage the production of products which are more environmentally benign and to facilitate trade in these products.

Environmental labelling, or eco-labelling, and standards have been considered as “trade positive” tools for the business community. They motivate manufacturers to comply with targeted consumer requirements and develop a good image for eco-friendly products and services in order to guarantee market access.

The growing use of eco-labels reflects an important change in social attitudes to the environment. It is also part of a wider movement towards the use of market-based instruments. Eco-labels are intended to bring significant environmental benefits through their positive influence on the purchasing decisions of consumers.

However, with the proliferation of interest in eco-labelling, a series of questions and concerns about the potential trade impact of these programmes has been raised by certain industry sectors and also a number of international organisations. Because eco-labelling is normally implemented in a way that reflects national values and eco-system sensitivities, full international standardisation is not likely to occur.

Has eco-labelling resulted in the marketing of more products with reduced environmental impact? No clear answer exists. A recent United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) document noted:

Whether and how much eco-labelling has already contributed to reducing environmental stress is difficult to assess. Existing evidence of positive environmental effects which could be attributed to eco-labels is limited to specific cases. Unfortunately, however, there are no studies which have tried to make a systematic assessment of the effects of existing eco-labelling programmes on the environment. What can be said is that the environmental effects of eco-labelling depend largely on the relevance and significance of eco-labelling criteria as well as the market share of eco-labelled products, which in turn depends on consumer preferences for eco-labelled products and the responsiveness of producers and suppliers. Thus in order for eco-labelling to be an effective marketing instrument, there must be public awareness of eco-labelling programmes and eco-labelled products, and producers must be interested in making a significant volume of eco-labelled products available in the marketplace.

Many institutes, research scientists, NGOs, international and national organisations have undertaken research to determine what the effects of eco-labels are on the environment, market access for products and trade flows. In order to fill the information gap on the subject, “Eco-labelling and Trade”, CERC-ENVIS has collected information from secondary sources and is bringing out an annotated bibliography. This bibliography will be useful as background information in research projects, reference tools and information tools by which users are made aware of recent research on the subject to facilitate writing of reports or publications. It will be a good collection for libraries and will make librarians or information officers aware of existing material on the subject.

We welcome comments and suggestions from users to enable us to improve.