A GUIDE TO ENVIRONMENTAL LABELS
- for Procurement Practitioners of the United Nations System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Introduction to environmental labelling

Environmental labels are valuable tools for implementing sustainable procurement, as they bridge the competency gap existing between procurement practitioners and environmental experts. Environmental labelling schemes are very numerous and multifaceted; they can be more or less reliable, and more or less accurate; different labels also mandate very different levels of environmental performance. To navigate safely in this complex area, procurement practitioners should learn how to distinguish labels, how to evaluate their features, and how to use their criteria in line with UN procurement system rules and principles.

Environmental labels or ecolabels?

There are several environmental labels out there, yet only some of them are ecolabels.

“An ecolabel is a label which identifies overall environmental preference of a product or service based on life-cycle considerations”

An ecolabel is:
- Voluntary
- Certifying distinction in environmental performance
- Based on sound scientific evidence
- Based on life-cycle considerations
- Third-party and independent
- Objective

To know more on environmental labels, read chapter 2. Introduction to environmental labelling

So how can a procurement practitioner distinguish between different types of labels? And what are their main characteristics? The International Standards Organisation (ISO) has classified labels into three typologies: Type I (ecolabels), Type II (green claims) and Type III (environmental impact labels).

Type-II labels are unverified claims from companies and entail a risk of greenwashing; to know more about it, read chapter 7. Green claims or greenwashing?

There is a fourth group, that we call “Type I-like”. These labels have a verification and certification process similar to that of ecolabels, but focuses on single issues such as energy consumption, sustainable forestry, etc.

Type I and Type I-like labels are recommended for use in UN system procurement.

To know more on different types of labels, read chapter 3. Environmental labels classification
Life cycle assessment

One of the distinguishing features of ecolabels is that of being based on life cycle considerations. This means that ecolabels consider the negative impacts on the environment at every moment of the life cycle of a product. This is called life cycle assessment (LCA) and it considers impacts such as greenhouse gas emissions, water use, air pollution, use of non-renewable resources, chemical emissions and waste amounts. The purchase of a product with reduced energy consumption or other negative environmental impacts has often a justification in economic terms.

Environmental labels in UN procurement

The advantage of using environmental labels in procurement is that the procedure of drafting the green specifications, evaluating them, etc. is greatly simplified.

What you can do:

- Use criteria from labels to draft your technical specifications
- Verify compliance through labels
- Benchmark offers at the award stage
- Use single issue labels for a progressive approach
- Use alternative proposals to enhance flexibility

What you shouldn’t do:

- Never require products to carry a label
- Don’t use a label without verifying its credibility, independence and scientific basis
- Don’t raise the level of environmental requirement without first conducting a market analysis
- Don’t use criteria that have not been published in advance

For more guidance on how to use environmental labels, read chapter 4, The use of environmental labels in the UN system procurement.

One of the consequences of the increasing attention paid to environmental issues is the multiplication of environmental labelling schemes. This overabundance of labels can be an obstacle for procurers and requisitioners, who may not know which scheme is more suitable for their needs.

The best assurance of quality and reliability of the criteria is choosing to use an ecolabel (Type-I) as a base for your procurement. Very well known ecolabels are the European Ecolabel (the Flower), the Nordic Swan and the Blue Angel.

There are many other ecolabel schemes in both developing and developed countries. Procurers may consider the following list of reliable ecolabels (this list is not intended to be exhaustive).
Besides ecolabels, there are additional environmental labels that can be used for commonly procured items in the UN system; here we propose an illustrative selection.

**Hotel accommodation/conference centres:**

Useful indication and recommendation can be found in the UNEP 2009 *Green Meeting Guide – Roll out the Green Carpet for your Participants*.

**Paper, prints and publications:**

The FSC trademark and PEFC

**Computer and other IT office equipment:**

ENERGY STAR and EPEAT

**Energy:**

100% energia verde – 100% green energy, the OK-Power Label and GreenPower
For more information on useful environmental labels, read chapter 6. Some relevant labels for UN procurement.

Other labels, logos and schemes

These symbols should not be confused with environmental labels, even if they appear on products and packaging: they give indications on how the products can be recycled, but they do not mean that products have actually been recycled nor contain any recycled content!

To know more on these symbols, read chapter 8. Recycling symbols and schemes.

Environmental management systems (EMS) are often confused with labels, but it is important to understand that they certify a company, and not a product. They certify that a system is in place in the organisation to keep track of the environmental performance.


Labels that certify social performance are called social labels. Social labels are less numerous than environmental ones, and their use in procurement is not as straightforward.

For more information label certifying social performance, read chapter 10. The other labels: social labelling.