



WHITE PAPER

Ecolabels and their role in mitigating climate change

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Topic: Ecolabels and their role in mitigating climate change

The international type 1 ecolabelling schemes associated with the entire lifecycle of products and services had environmental and health attributes and has a significant role in mitigating climate change. Standards and criteria developed for ecolabels assist in setting the bar for manufactured products and services to limit greenhouse gas emissions and reduce climate change impacts. Climate change represents a continuing threat to humanity and the natural world. The current effects of anthropogenic climate change are far-reaching, from its effects on causing extreme weather to its impacts on natural ecosystems and human society.

Climate Change

According to the [latest UN report](#) from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, harmful carbon emissions between 2010 to 2019 have never been higher in recorded human history. It is now or never to reduce global warming to 1.5 degrees below pre-industrial levels. The impacts of human-induced climate change have been catastrophic, including devastating heatwaves, bushfires, floods, and droughts, and will likely worsen without drastic measures. Recent record heat waves and bushfires in the northern hemisphere and flooding events in the south are examples of extreme weather events that will likely continue in the years ahead and potentially worsen.

Other potential global impacts may include sea level rises, glacial retreat or disappearance, freshwater scarcity, food and political insecurity with associated economic impacts, climate change refugees, and impacts on biodiversity and human health (Carter et al. 2021, 102307; Shi-Jin and Lan-Yue 2019, p. 72; Barry and Hoyne 2021, 100259; Climate Council 2019).



Causes for human-induced climate change since the industrial age have involved greenhouse gas emissions from various human activities (refer to fig 2). For instance, the [global transport sector](#) involving rail, road, air and marine transportation significantly contributes to emissions and associated climate change. In 2016, the sector accounted for more than 24% of CO₂ emissions. Many strategies currently exist to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change. Global ecolabelling programmes represent one effective strategy.

Ecolabels

[Ecolabels](#) are marks placed on products, services or in e-catalogues that help purchasers and consumers easily and quickly identify these products that meet particular “preferred” environmental performance criteria.

Criteria must cover an entire lifecycle, including when products are produced, used, and end of life. They can be managed or owned by independent third-party bodies that may involve not-for-profit, government agencies, or private sector organisations. Approximately 37 type 1 lifecycle ecolabels are members of the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN).



Fig. 1. [Lifecycle ecolabels](#)



Many ecolabelling programmes, such as the [EU Ecolabel](#), [Nordic Swan](#), and other GEN members, adhere to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, like SDG 12, which promotes responsible consumption and production. However, it is essential to realise that many labels that refer to themselves as ecolabels do not necessarily follow the guidance of the [ISO 14024 international standard](#).

This makes a third-party system to check the overall governance and adherence to ISO 14024 critically important for purchasers to have the assurance of best practice ecolabels. This is the function of GEN, which optimises the quality of its members ecolabels and promotes their products and services, including those that limit environmental impacts and emissions. Founded in 1994, GEN is an international non-profit organisation that sets the global benchmark for ecolabel excellence. GEN's members are the world's most credible and robust ecolabels, all following ISO 14024.

Ecolabels assist in reducing the environmental impacts of products and services. The northern European GEN member Nordic Swan is one example of a lifecycle ecolabel with strict criteria for certifying [solid fuels and fire lighting products](#), which addresses such impact areas as energy efficiency and climate change. This includes associated solid fuel products of pellets, wood chips, briquettes, firewood, fire lighting products, and barbeque charcoal. Another GEN member, the Swedish ecolabel Bra Miljoval, also has strict criteria for the certification of products and services, such as for passenger and freight transport, which through their Good Environmental Choice environmental certification system, targets low emissions of greenhouse gases.

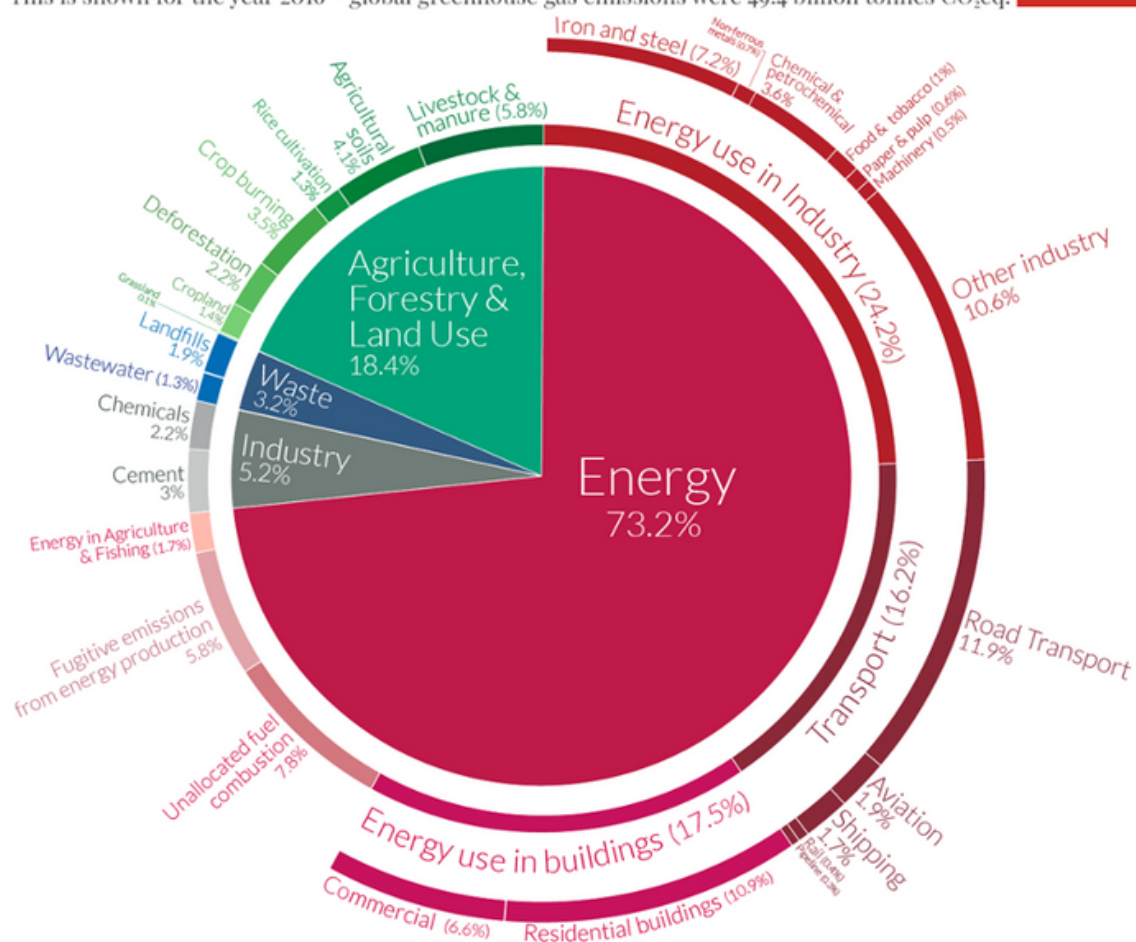
Another prime example of an ecolabel standard directly linked to climate impacts is [GECA's Refrigerants \(Rv2.0ii-2015\) standard](#). Refrigerants are used for refrigeration, air conditioning, and cooling applications in various domestic and commercial settings and in "reverse-cycle" systems or heat pumps.



Historically, refrigerants used in air conditioning and refrigeration have significantly contributed to global warming and ozone depletion. Ozone-depleting CFC and HCFC compounds found wide application as refrigerants before the significance of ozone depletion was discovered. GECA's lifecycle ecolabel Refrigerants standard includes criteria for various environmental, human health and social impacts and ensures the product is fit for purpose.

Global greenhouse gas emissions by sector Our World in Data

This is shown for the year 2016 – global greenhouse gas emissions were 49.4 billion tonnes CO₂eq.



OurWorldinData.org – Research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems. Source: Climate Watch, the World Resources Institute (2020). Licensed under CC-BY by the author Hannah Ritchie (2020).

Fig. 2. Global greenhouse gas emissions by source (Ritchie 2020).



Ecolabels have further developed globally as a response to global agreements to lessen goods and services' environmental and human health impacts. Indeed, the adoption in 2015 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the associated ISO standards, has been significant in providing standards and drivers for ecolabels. For instance, the [ISO/DIS 14020](#) series of standards for environmental labels and declarations provide essential guidance for the use and development of environmental labels and declarations and promotes the adherence to SDG 11 of Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 12 of Responsible Consumption and Production, and SDG 13 of Climate Action.

The Built Environment

Another sector that is recognising the value of ecolabelling as a tool to ensure measurable reduction in energy and climate change impacts is the built environment. Historically, the built environment - encompassing commercial and residential building construction and energy usage - has been linked to significant emissions contributing to climate change. Building energy outputs account for about [55 per cent of global electricity production](#). In industrial nations its energy use is related to "winter heating, summer cooling, domestic hot water production, lighting and household appliances" (Ciancio et al. 2020, p. 102213). Estimates of emissions from material production related to the build environment continue to rise and represent about [23 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions](#).

Rising to the challenge of creating sustainable, more energy-efficient buildings is where ecolabels can play a significant global role in setting appropriate standards and criteria. Indeed, GECA has lifecycle ecolabel standards relevant to the green building sector, which cover building materials, and products such as [building insulation materials](#), with criteria to reduce its impact on climate change.



GECA is just one example, but many GEN members have developed lifecycle ecolabel standards for products, materials and services that mitigate the impacts of climate change. Indeed, another example of a GEN member who is ensuring high quality standards in materials is [GreenPro](#) in India who takes a lifecycle approach to ecolabels and promotes to product manufacturers the implementation of sustainable measures in the lifecycle stages of raw materials, the manufacturing process, the product performance during use, and the recycling and disposal stages.

We know that infrastructure and the built environment will continue to rise with an increase in population, and concrete continues to be the second most used building material in the world - only after water. Indeed, concrete can add to the '[overall impact of materials in masonry residential buildings on greenhouse gas emissions by 41.2%, having a higher impact than steel](#)'. Many of GEN members have lifecycle ecolabel standards for building and construction materials, including Singapore's Green label, New Zealand's Environmental Choice label, Nordic Swan and the Hong Kong Green label- just to name a few.

Tech Sector and Ecolabels

The [global tech industry](#) is another sector that contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for 2 to 3% of total global greenhouse gas emissions. Sören Enholm, CEO of TCO Certified, who leads an international sustainable certification organisation for IT products, indicates that "Since the main part of the GHG emissions is created in the manufacturing phase, the most urgent focus is to address the manufacturing processes which use the most energy.

Many factories still use compressed air in the manufacturing lines. Compressed air requires lots of energy and is not energy efficient, so from a GHG emission perspective, it's important to change this to newer technology. Soldering of components to printed circuit boards also requires lots of energy, and there is a big potential in lowering this by using newer lower temperature soldering technology".



Indeed, tech products certified as type 1 ecolabels from a lifecycle perspective are often purchased due to their delivery on reduced greenhouse gas emissions throughout the manufacturing and product use phase. The [Korean Eco-Label](#) program, is another example – but there are many, ecolabels that certify computer monitors, technology equipment and printer cartridges.

Additionally, Sören from TCO Certified also states that “for IT products and some other electrical equipment, ecolabelling programmes have pushed for more energy-efficient products, thereby lowering the GHG footprint for many years with good results. Now many IT products are very energy efficient, so it's more urgent to push for reduced energy use from a lifecycle perspective and especially in the manufacturing phase, where for some products, more than 90% of the GHG emissions are created (there are lots of lifecycle studies which show this). The main way to push for lower GHG emissions from a lifecycle perspective is to use the products longer and produce fewer new products. In TCO Certified, we have many criteria which enable longer use of certified products”.

Government Policy and Procurement

Government policy can play an important role in influencing how ecolabels through processes of procurement can mitigate climate change. Some ecolabels are owned and run by governments to promote sustainable procurement solutions. For instance, the EU is one international government body promoting on a voluntary basis the sustainable public procurement of ecolabels (Neamtu and Dragos 2015, p. 97).

Indeed, ecolabels may work in closer partnership with government bodies to promote appropriate and effective sustainable procurement solutions, such as in the EU, which under [its procurement law](#), promotes the use of type 1 (lifecycle) ecolabels in public procurement.



The public procurement of ecolabels may also help to facilitate a greater reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, like the procurement of materials with low embodied carbon. For instance, in Germany, public authorities specify and refer to ecolabels, such as [Blue Angel](#), who defines the relevant environmental criteria for products, such as buses, to reduce environmental impacts and greenhouse gas emissions.

When it comes to the issue of climate change, there is a feeling of urgency, "...since we, as a global community, are running out of time to fulfil the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius" (Johnsson et al. 2020, p. 110029). Furthermore, Nils Heuer, Associate Programme Officer, Consumption and Production Unit of the UN's Environmental Programme also indicates in relation to the issue of climate change and the role of ecolabels in its mitigation, in stating "I think limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees will be difficult at this point but overall, I do believe ecolabels can contribute to limit global warming".

Climate change does represent a challenge for ecolabels to adapt relevant criteria to standards to reduce greenhouse gas emissions of associated products and services. Indeed, Nils Heuer indicates that "many traditional type 1 ecolabels were originally more focussed on pollution/waste as core issues, so some of them might need to define additional climate-related criteria to better cover this important issue", and states "there is a need to upscale existing ecolabelling programmes and a need for better harmonisation at a global level to ease mutual recognition among various schemes".

An example of an ecolabel that is voluntarily utilised by the governments of Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and Finland is the Nordic Swan Ecolabel. Under this arrangement, country-based organisations play an active role in developing appropriate product standards, such as for stoves, which have criteria established that [limit the amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced by such products](#).



Therefore, it is evident that an ecolabelling network node like GEN provides important stewardship globally to coordinate its members in the fight against climate change. The Chair of GEN, Bjorn-Erik Lönn explains the current role it plays in leading change, in terms of environmentally sustainable ecolabels and climate change, indicating that “the main function for ecolabels is to offer the marketplace a credible environmental information about products, including services, and both in the B2C- and the B2B-markets”.

Furthermore, Dr Yulia Gracheva also states that “GEN sets the standards for a sound ecolabeling program, based on ISO 14024”, and through GENICES, the Global Ecolabelling Network’s Internationally Coordinated Ecolabelling Systems process of “mutual auditing of ecolabeling programs, there is a high degree of trust in each other’s procedures, both among GEN members and externally.

The lifecycle approach we base our requirements on must always include climate-related issues where relevant, but all other environmental issues like hazardous chemicals, resource efficiency, product quality and longevity, impact on biodiversity are also covered. By considering the energy efficiency and energy sources in use in all phases in the whole lifecycle of the product the positive effect will always be there”.



GEN ECOLABELS REPRESENT



1,232
valid standards



15,040
licensees



1.8 million
certified products
and services



more than 600
staff members

STANDARD DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW

81%

developed new or updated existing standards

Most common categories: building products, cleaning products, office equipments, textile, food related products

70%

plan to develop new standards, adding 58 new standards

It includes a variety of categories: toys, infant mattress, electric vehicles, building products, sanitary products, hotel services, financial products

74%

plan to update existing standards,

It includes a variety of categories: building products, mattresses, textiles, furniture, plant products, cleaning and personal care products, hotel/ tourism services, recycled products

3-5 Years

is the typical interval for standards review and revision

Main determining factors: major changes in technologies, stakeholder suggestion, change in government policy, ISO interval

Fig. 3. Global Ecolabelling Members Data from 2020-2021 BiAnnual Survey



Ecolabels as a solution to Climate Change mitigation

There are many potential methods for addressing anthropogenic climate change. The role of ecolabels in mitigating climate change is one possible significant method in the global fight against it. Dr Yulia Gracheva, Director of the Vitality Leaf lifecycle-based ecolabelling program, argues that "Ecolabels alone cannot solve the climate problem; comprehensive solutions are needed. Nevertheless, since the share of consumer products in the economy is very large and consumer influence is growing, ecolabels can be an effective companion tool. It is also important to note that ecolabels are a tool whereby everyone can contribute to the fight against climate change simply by shopping in-store and making the right choices".

In addition, Michelle Thomas, CEO of GECA also indicates that "on top of the vital worldwide efforts to transition to renewable energy and increase energy efficiency, we will also need to address the remaining 45% of greenhouse gas emissions from producing the cars, building materials, food, and other products we use every day". Thomas refers to embodied energy which is a key impact that ecolabels address through their ecolabelling standards and criteria.

Thomas also states that recent research has demonstrated applying circular economy strategies to ecolabel programmes "in the five critical areas of cement, aluminium, steel, plastics, and food can eliminate almost half of the remaining emissions from the production of goods – 9.3 billion tonnes of CO₂e in 2050. This is equivalent to cutting current emissions from all transport to zero".

Indeed, transitioning to a circular economy involving ecolabels, such as currently demonstrated by all GEN members, largely depends on manufacturers designing products that can be reused, have durability, recyclable, abled to be upgraded, disassembled, and repaired, as well as involving consumers changing how and what they purchase, how they use them, care for, dispose of, and share (Meis-Harris 2021, p. 127-134).



Challenges and Future Opportunities

There are many potential existing challenges for how ecolabels can mitigate climate change. Bjorn Erik Lönn articulates the contemporary challenges of ecolabelling worldwide, in saying that “we have to show all actors that ecolabels can be the leading way on creating credible agency information towards a sustainable consumption and production, including for climate change issues.

Focusing on a carbon footprint on products seems to be a mantra for some politicians and media. An ecolabel shall cover the climate change impact, and also all other important environmental issues in the whole lifecycle perspective. This extraordinarily strong position is difficult to get through to all influential public actors”.

Other identifiable challenges for ecolabels, as stated by Sören Enholm, is that it is not “easy to create good criteria and verify criteria fulfilment for energy efficiency in the manufacturing phase as it is for energy efficiency of the products”, and that the “prolonging the life length of the products are in many cases outside the control of the brands and manufacturers of the products, and then also normally outside the control of the ecolabels”.

The challenge of greenwashing is significant in combating how influential ecolabels can be in mitigating climate change. Ecolabel organisations such as GEN and its members can play an important role in combating greenwashing. Indeed, the concept of greenwashing can be understood as untruthful environmental claims made by companies about their products. While some companies ‘have genuinely decreased their environmental footprints, others exaggerate their efforts or simply claim to be environmentally responsible when they are not’ (Szabo and Webster 2020, p. 719).



The challenge of greenwashing is articulated by Dr Yulia Gracheva, who also states, that the “biggest problem with greenwashing is the lack of government regulation, as well as low consumer awareness”, and states for instance that a European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) survey found that “61% of EU consumers find it difficult to understand which products are truly environmentally friendly”. Greenwashing is something all purchasers and indeed readers of this article can respond to by being informed and questioning credibility of “labels” that are not known.

In conclusion, this article has examined how ecolabels can play a critical role in mitigating climate change. Challenges such as greenwashing present ongoing issues for ecolabelling. Corporations must be held accountable to ensure products they say are environmentally sustainable, and are produced and certified according to certain environmental standards. Ecolabels have a critical role to play in mitigating climate change, but not in isolation. Ecolabel organisations need to work with stakeholders and partners in the public and private spheres to drive responsible consumption. Ecolabelling programmes properly managed and supported can have a valuable role in limiting climate change and its worst impacts, if organisations, governments, and the public recognise this, and work together to ensure results for the future of our planet and its people.

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About the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN)

Founded in 1994, GEN is the leading network of the world's most credible and robust ecolabels. We're a nonprofit organisation that sets the global benchmark for ecolabel excellence. We bring expertise, clarity and trust to sustainable procurement. We develop, expand and strengthen ecolabels as a tool for embedding sustainability into every major procurement decision - by businesses and governments.