The Trade and Environmental Effects of Ecolabels: Assessment and Response

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Foreword

The research undertaken for this report has made it clear that there is not enough concrete evidence to determine what the effects of ecolabels are on the environment, trade flows or market access for particular products. More research would be required to determine these effects, as set out in the conclusions of the report. The other broad lesson drawn from this examination of the effects of ecolabels is that participation of a broad range of stakeholders is required to design effective and equitable information tools which promote sustainable consumption. UNEP hopes that the findings from this report will contribute to the design and implementation of such tools.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary v

Acronyms ix

1. Introduction 1

2. The Environmental Effectiveness of Ecolabelling Programmes 3

Do ecolabels achieve their intended environmental objectives? 4

The Blue Angel labels 5

IFOAM accreditation 5

FSC and MSC certification 6

Fair Trade labels 6

What determines an ecolabel's success? 7

Is one ecolabel more effective than another? 9

Summary: The environmental effectiveness of ecolabelling 10

3. Economic Incentives to Adopt Ecolabelling 13

Profit margins and predictability 14

Price premia 15

The predictability of future profits 17

Summary: Incentives to adopt ecolabelling 18

4. Ecolabelling and Trade Flows 20

The Blue Angel labels 21

Marine Stewardship Council certification 21

Forest Stewardship Council certification 21

Fair trade labels 23

IFOAM accreditation 26

Potential impacts of ecolabelling 24

Summary: Implementation-related impacts 26

5. Overview of Discussions within the WTO 28
The CTE has no authority and the CTBT will not focus on ecolabels 29
The TBT Agreement does not impose obligations directly on non-governmental bodies 29
Like products and non-product related PPMs 30
Are ecolabels the least trade-restrictive measure available? 31
Summary: What do governments hope to achieve within the WTO? 32
6. Future Trends in Ecolabling 34
7. Conclusions: Lessons Learned and Strategic Implications 37
Interactions between labels, markets and public policies 37
A framework for understanding ecolabels 38
Appropriate and effective forums and tools for analysis and policy-making 40
Balancing environmental and trade policy concerns 41

Annex 1 Sales Figures: Selected Commodities 43
Annex 2 Sales and Market Share of Organic Agriculture 44

Executive Summary

Ecolabelling entered mainstream environmental policy-making in 1977, when the German government established the Blue Angel programme. Since that time, ecolabels have become one of the more high-profile market-based tools for achieving environmental objectives. Ecolabelling has also run into criticism from those who claim that it may, in some cases, operate as an unjustified non-tariff barrier to trade.

This report reviews what is known about ecolabelling as an environmental policy tool and as a potential trade barrier. It focuses on five well-known ecolabelling programmes that incorporate environmental requirements: the Blue Angel programme in Germany, and the programmes associated with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM).

The report's ultimate aim is to identify specific issues and policy integration challenges that need to be addressed if ecolabels are to be designed and applied in ways that support sustainable development – balancing environmental, social and economic outcomes. In the report it is demonstrated that considerable additional data collection and research needs to be undertaken if the effects of ecolabelling are to be understood and policy recommendations developed.

The environmental and trade effects of ecolabelling

Evaluating the effects of policies in the real world is difficult. Ecolabelling policies are no exception to this rule. There is no easily accessible, independent body of data on the environmental effectiveness of ecolabelling. Despite the relatively high profile of the five labels that are the focus of this study, adequate data does not even exist on them. Anecdotal evidence and proxy indicators (many of which are imperfect) are not a sufficient basis for evaluating the environmental usefulness or desirability of ecolabelling programmes. In addition, it is currently difficult to isolate the effects of labelling from other variables that could lead to more sustainable production and consumption. There remains an urgent need to collect additional, reliable scientific data on the environmental effects of existing ecolabelling programmes.

Neither is reliable, quantified evidence available concerning changes in trade flows – positive or negative – related to ecolabelling. Until trade statistics differentiate between labelled and non-labelled products, the only basis for discussion will be anecdotal evidence and imperfect proxies, such as percentage growth of a labelled market segment. It is currently difficult to evaluate the effects of ecolabelling among all the other variables that affect trade flows. This is particularly the case in regard to developing countries, about which less information is generally available. Thus there is an urgent need to collect additional reliable economic data on the trade effects of ecolabelling programmes.

Research on (and analysis of) the trade or environmental effects of ecolabelling cannot be conducted effectively without a more refined and comprehensive methodology for categorizing ecolabels. Many more types of ecolabels exist than is reflected in the relevant International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards. Rather than focusing on the aggregate categorization of ecolabels into broad 'types' (e.g. ISO Types I, II and

III), a new methodology should be developed for differentiating among their multiple characteristics. More detailed categorization relating to criteria, procedures and standards for labelling would make it easier to define, understand and address potential environmental and trade effects.

While there is inadequate data on which to base an assessment of the environmental effectiveness of ecolabelling, it is clear that ecolabelling can have a significant role in combination with other policy tools. It can provide a tool for operationalizing public or private environmental policy measures, particularly in regard to procurement policies.

Private sector policies

Commercial policies in the private sector are becoming a far more important factor in the spread of some environmental requirements than, for example, any formal environmental or trade policies. In some sectors the requirements of retailers and supply chains are also becoming more important than direct consumer preferences. Because of their market power, retailers have far greater capacity to change the practices of producers than do individual consumers.

Companies are increasingly motivated to impose requirements in relation to employee concerns, access to capital, reputational risk management, and the emerging trend of corporate social responsibility. Large multinational companies' impact on market access can be as important in some sectors as that of many national governments; in some situations multinationals can impose environmental requirements more easily than can governments. Furthermore, as price competition increases in many sectors, a relatively small proportion of concerned consumers might also be able to influence a whole company's purchasing policy.

Minimizing undesirable trade effects

Two problems deserve to be given particular attention:

- the lack of checks or balances in regard to the proliferation of ecolabels, including the lack of any way to harmonize existing and new ones; and
- the cost of conformity assessment (often the most significant barrier for developing country producers), which is related to the proliferation of ecolabels.

The discussions on ecolabelling within the World Trade Organization (WTO) seem unlikely to progress in the short to medium term. Discussions on 'labelling for environmental purposes' under the Doha agenda are taking place in the Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE). This committee has no authority to create new rules on labelling or to amend existing ones. The Committee on Technical Barriers to Trade (CTBT) has the authority to create new rules in this area, but it remains unconvinced that rules for ecolabelling should differ

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