



Comparing the purchase of eco-labelled products across Europe

Ecolabels can help encourage sustainable consumption. A new study has compared the national organisation of environmental (eco and organic) labels and its impact on purchases of labelled products in 18 European countries. Levels of ecolabelled product purchasing varied across the countries, with the highest rates in Northern Europe.

Currently, a wide variety of environmental label schemes aimed at guiding and promoting sustainable consumption exist throughout Europe^{1,2}. These labels are part of an environmental policy, which is market-based, consumer driven and both formulated and implemented by the state and businesses. In the last few decades, the use of labelling has become politically easier with the introduction of common legal frameworks.

The way in which labelling is organised and labelled products are supplied varies considerably between European countries. There are two main aspects that form the organisational diversity: the level of state involvement in labelling and the number of existing private and public environmental labels. Additionally, market structures, such as the supply of labelled products or the dominant type of retailing outlets that potentially affect purchasing decisions of labelled goods, vary across Europe.

In this study, the researcher used data from the 2007 Special Eurobarometer³ to analyse and compare the effect of organisational and market structures of ecolabelling across 18 European countries. Across all countries, consumers' individual socio-economic characteristics, but also national market demand-side determinants, such as national differences in average income, values and trust in the labels, were considered.

The results revealed that there is a large variation in the purchase of ecolabelled products across the 18 countries considered. Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and Luxembourg are the leading countries in the purchase of ecolabelled products, whereas consumers in Eastern and Southern European countries tend to buy the fewest ecolabelled products.

Yet, neither the involvement of the state nor the multitude of the ecolabels had a strong effect on the purchases of ecolabelled products. Instead, market supply and demand seem to be the most important drivers of the consumption of ecolabelled products.

However, without the legal framework provided by the state, such new environmental policy instruments would not be possible. The state is also essential in promoting the production of ecolabelled products through subsidies, which might be more important for encouraging sustainable consumption than state labelling and certification initiatives. On the other hand, retailers play an active role in providing opportunities and develop new markets where state or private actors have not managed to establish common labels.

Lastly, buying ecolabelled products is only one aspect of sustainable consumption. The low number of people that reported purchases of labelled products in the Southern European countries does not necessarily mean that these countries consume less sustainably. People in these countries might rely on other ways of sustainable consumption, such as purchasing local products or shopping close by at market stalls. Thus, buying labelled goods may well be a functional equivalent to other forms of sustainable consumption that has spurred and institutionalised by differing market and retailing conditions.

1. See EU-Ecolabel: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/menus/about_en.htm
2. See: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/useful_links/other_ecolabels_en.htm
3. See: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_295_en.pdf

Source: Koos, S. (2011) Varieties of Environmental Labelling, Market Structures and Sustainable Consumption across Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Organizational and Market Supply Determinants of Environmental-Labelled Goods. *Journal of Consumer Policy*. 34:127-151.

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Theme(s): Sustainable consumption and production.

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To cite this article/service: "[Science for Environment Policy](#)"; European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.