by Michael Hooper

Ecolabels: greening productivity for universal good

Green Productivity is a combination of two fundamental concepts: sustainability, a synonym for continuity in production and consumption; and creating more while using less. "Green" and "productivity" are about the effective use of resources. Making more while taking less maximizes environmental benefits and economic returns, helping both commerce and the planet. How can GP-linked gains be measured and evaluated, since the latter is impossible without the former? The Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN) considered this question at its recent Annual General Meeting (AGM) of delegates from 50 countries and territories, especially relating to green or sustainable public procurement.

An ecolabel is an environmental stamp of approval, but not all are created equal. Vague terms not supported by scientific research cannot be used for measuring resource conservation or product comparisons. Included in these are "greenwash" terms such as "environmentally friendly," "natural," "harmless," and "green" itself. The weakest version of an ecolabel is one created by a producer to market a product. It may be as straightforward as an isolated, sometimes irrelevant fact ("does not contain X") or as fanciful as a dancing dolphin. The next rung up the ladder of credibility is occupied by well-supported, often third party-verified, claims in a defined sphere such as energy consumption or water use. Some examples, such as Energy Star or Fair Trade labels, are valid sources of information on specific facets of products or services.

The top rung is the preserve of ISO-defined Type 1 ecolabels. These are multifaceted, cover a range of environmental impacts, and have measurement definitions with independent verification. National and international ecolabel organizations supporting the Type 1 label code may apply to become GEN members. GEN member programs require "licensed" applicants to track the entire life cycle of product components. A take-back scheme is incorporated in many specifications, leading to recycling, remanufacturing, and extension of component life, yielding economic and productivity benefits. As recycling and waste are core infrastructure issues for local authorities, and pollution generally concerns regional and national governments, the use of Type 1 ecolabels as procurement guides is especially beneficial. GEN member ecolabels also require license applicants to question their product supply chains to ensure sustainable productivity.

Type 1 ecolabels are outward signs for ethical consumption, a rapidly growing purchasing movement worldwide. If sales are the driving force behind production, then consumer purchasing patterns are important to manufacturers. GEN Ukraine member Living Planet recently polled nearly 1,000 consumers and found 82% willing to choose products with better environmental characteristics at higher prices. Regardless of price, 25% were willing to buy ecolabeled products. A global Nielsen survey found that 55% of the public were willing to pay more for items from companies "committed to positive social and environmental impact."

In survey information provided for the GEN member (and government-owned) ecolabel Environmental Choice New Zealand, Colmar Brunton research (Better Futures 2015) found that nationwide purchasing behavior was increasingly influenced by sustainability, but 71% of respondents could not name a brand or an organization as a leader in sustainability, while 81% agreed that how businesses talk about social and environmental commitment was confusing and hard to

understand. While survey results vary, the trend is consistent. Companies are committing to green initiatives because they make good business sense, despite a lack of understanding in the marketplace.

There are two challenges in communicating the veracity, impact, and value of ecolabels. The first involves manufacturers and service providers, who may not realize that sales can increase when products and services carry a GEN-backed ecolabel. Secondly, consumers who are burdened with increasing amounts of "greenwash" need help identifying true ecolabeled products and services; research suggests they are desensitized by pseudoinformation. A clear, simple guide that shoppers can understand with ease, like the GEN member ecolabel, is necessary.

Consumers may respond to environmentally benign products and services with the so-called ecolabel effect, however. A study by the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2013 found that coffee drinkers were willing to pay more for a cup of "ecolabeled" coffee than the identical product labeled "conventional" and claimed to enjoy it more. The conclusion was: "Ecolabels not only promote a willingness to pay more for the product but also lead to a more favorable perceptual experience of it." A 2015 study by the University of Gävle, Sweden, set volunteers tasks to be conducted under two identical light sources, one labeled "environmentally friendly" and the other "conventional." They felt more comfortable under the ecolabeled light and performed the tasks better. The ground for bogus ecolabeling is therefore fertile. However, GEN member Type 1 ecolabels inform consumers in a nonpartisan, ethical way, squeezing out pseudoscience and distinguishing promotional claims from genuine environmental performance.

The increasing recognition of GEN by other global organizations such as the UNEP, OECD, and APO is being reflected in its growing online presence and physical and informational outreach. At the recent AGM, the measurability of the impact of ecolabels received considerable attention.

Bjørn-Erik Lønn, the new chair of GEN, addresses the Asia Carbon Footprint Network Conference in Hong Kong during the GEN AGM week. Photo courtesy of GEN.

Several members have been developing metrics to evaluate the environmental impact of certified product categories and gave examples. A single water tap operating to the specifications of the Korean Eco-Label Program was shown to save 4,330 liters over a three-year period. Another GEN member found that using an ecolabeled air-conditioner reduced CO_2 by 4,010 kg per year, calculated from energy savings of 6,540 kWh.

The China Ecolabel (CEL) has the most certified products of any GEN member, and their combined estimated impact is massive, avoiding the emissions of 8.59 million tons of carbon dioxide, 205,000 tons of volatile organic compounds, 482,000 tons of carbon monoxide, and 64,000 tons of nitrogen oxide over a one-year period. Even more staggering is that CEL-certified products were estimated to have saved 227 million tons of water and 13.3 billion kWh of electricity in 2013 alone. The Singapore Environment Council is another GEN

Working groups at the GEN AGM last October worked on ecolabel impact measurement and GEN growth plans. Pictured (L–R) Semyon Gordyshevsky (Russia), Hiroyuki Kobayashi (Japan), and Guy Ladvocat (Brazil). Photo courtesy of GEN.

member leading from the front. Its Envision program is a positive force for changing behavior.

"Greener" workplaces result in lower staff turnover and less absenteeism, contributing considerably to productivity. Ecolabel programs increasingly provide environmental performance specifications and assessment processes for workplaces. Air quality, commuting distances and office transport, lighting, and other physical aspects are included in most "green office" standards. "This is one of many criteria categories operated by members of GEN that have an impact on commerce, manufacturing, and the purchasing patterns of governments, companies, and consumers," stated Chair of the GEN Board of Directors Bjørn-Erik Lønn. "Ecolabeling is really a positive triple line, or win-win-win situation for the sake of reduced environmental impact, better business for the licensee, and the feeling of making the right sustainable choices among consumers and buyers for the benefit of the future. With the COP21 climate accord in Paris, the spotlight is turned, as never before, on the measurement of our efforts and our success in mitigating the human attack on the environment. GEN members have a seminal role in that process."

Michael Hooper *is an award-winning communicator, journalist, editor, and photographer. Also an experienced radio and television director/presenter, Michael is marketing communications advisor for GEN, producing its on- and offline communications. He has guided web, video, and print output for government-owned Environmental Choice New Zealand for most of the last decade. Michael studied language, politics, and administration at Victoria University, Wellington. He currently lives with his partner at the historic eco-lodge Orongo Bay Homestead in New Zealand's Bay of Islands and undertakes regular overseas assignments and engagements.*