



25 Years of Defining Leadership in Sustainability

The Global Ecolabelling Network celebrates a quarter century of inspiring credible and critical green products and services.



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1994-2019

June 26, 2019–2019 marks the 25th year of the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN). The non-profit is celebrating a quarter century of protecting the planet by improving, promoting and developing the ecolabelling of green and sustainable products and services. The 33 member organisations of GEN work every day to recognise and reward the most environmentally responsible products and services available worldwide.

Although some GEN ecolabels are much older—the Blue Angel in Germany celebrated its 40th anniversary last year—the network has much to celebrate. Ecolabel products and services worldwide currently exceed 600,000, up from 380,000 in 2015. The results of a 2018 survey of members indicate 1,445 standards for numerous product and service categories. GEN members represent nearly 60 countries and affiliate members include the ISEAL Alliance, International Green Purchasing Network, Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council, and Google Inc.

The Global Ecolabelling Network was formally established in Stockholm in November 1994 to promote ecolabelling and improve its effectiveness on an international level through the transfer of experience and technical information. Some initial challenges, according to co-founder Dr. Arthur Weissman of the USA, were multinational corporations' concerns about inconsistent standards from different national and regional ecolabelling programmes, the variety of GEN members and interested programmes at different stages of development, and perhaps the biggest challenge, industry feeling threatened about independent certifications beyond their control and their efforts to restrict ecolabelling.

GEN played a critical role in the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) development of standards for environmental management (ISO 14000 series), including a set of standards on environmental information by ecolabels, claims and declarations (ISO 14020 series), that curtailed industry efforts to restrict the efficacy of ecolabels. GEN members later participated in World Trade Organization (WTO) discussions about the right to use ecolabels in the marketplace.

Dr. Ning Yu of Taiwan, who served on the GEN Board for nearly 15 years, sees GEN participation in ISO as critical to its success. “Successfully representing the voice of ecolabelling organisations at the ISO meetings and producing a standard which is accepted by all stakeholders (including consumer groups and industry) and is still workable after so many years is a significant impact,” Dr. Yu said.

GEN established mutual recognition programs among member ecolabels and encouraged the development of common criteria to address international trade concerns and overcome inconsistencies. The *Global Ecolabelling Network International Coordinated Ecolabelling System* (GENICES) was launched in 2004 as a formal peer review process based on ISO 14024 guidelines to benchmark member programmes as a basis for mutual trust.

Robin Taylor of New Zealand, GEN Board Chair from 2008 until 2014, said, “I think that GEN’s biggest impact has been the development of the GENICES process and its gradual adoption by members—it has helped pull people together and facilitated mutual recognition, encouraging countries to work together.”

In 2008 GEN developed an internal *Technical Assistance Program* to help start-up programmes receive expert onsite assistance from a team of experienced ecolabelling practitioners. This programme has improved the consistency and credibility of member programmes, among both the members and their stakeholders.

Over the years GEN has leveraged its international expertise, building relationships with important global players. In 1996 GEN was part of an expert group of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to develop a discipline for ecolabelling and trade. GEN continues to engage with the UN on environmental issues to this day.

John Polak of Canada served as GEN Board Chair twice between 2000 and 2008. “When I was Chair, GEN held an annual series of meetings with the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), WTO, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UNEP, various foundations, selected national governments and others,” said Polak. “We briefed them on what ecolabelling was about, how we interacted with business, trade issues, and opportunities for cooperation.”

When asked “Where do you see GEN and environmental labelling in the next 25 years?”, the current GEN chair, Bjorn-Erik Lonn of Norway said, “There is still a way to go until all products and services on the market are sustainable *as the default*. The voluntary ecolabelled products provide a model and act as benchmarks in greening the market. Regulatory actions and other mandatory instruments cannot react fast enough and the voluntary characteristics of ecolabelling are an effective means for moving the economy in a sustainable direction.”

GEN owes its success and longevity to its members for developing strong and credible labels, to providers of ecolabel products for demonstrating leadership, to procurement officials for their commitment to purchasing green, and to consumers for not settling for anything less than the safest products for themselves, their families and the environment.

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About GEN: The Global Ecolabelling Network is a non-profit association of leading ecolabel organisations worldwide. Network members follow ISO 14024 Principles for Type 1 ecolabels, awarding certification to products and services that meet multi-attribute, life cycle-based criteria. GEN was founded in 1994 to help protect the environment by improving, promoting, and developing ecolabelling. www.globalecolabelling.net