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## Introduction

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The background to this book is non-sustainable development of production and consumption in modern society and the goals set by political authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the national, regional and global level to turn this trend towards more sustainable development. This is a challenge for environmental policy, which may apply a number of economic, political and information tools. Researchers and societal stakeholders are also aware of these non-sustainable trends and have proposed or elaborated different proposals and tools.

We will focus on one of these tools—environmental product information schemes (EPIS). Our aim is to make a contribution to the role of EPIS in contemporary environmental policy, and to do this by formulating scientifically based recommendations to stakeholders involved in the articulation and realisation of policy.

EPIS are systems that provide ecological information on products and services. They may address business clients or private consumers. They range from mandatory (e.g. product declarations) to voluntary approaches (e.g. national eco-labels) and cover third-party labelling as well as ‘green’ claims by companies.

EPIS play an important role in environmental policy. They are used to award and promote environmentally superior goods and services and offer information on quality and performance with respect to consumer health, resource consumption and so on. EPIS fit well into a multi-stakeholder policy framework—as enhanced recently by integrated product policy (IPP)—since the elaboration of criteria and their acceptance in the market require the involvement of a number of different parties, from government, to business, to consumer and environmental organisations.

There are a series of key questions with regard to eco-labelling, such as: Are EPIS an effective tool to foster the development, production, sale and use of products with lower environmental impacts? Are EPIS an effective tool to provide consumers with useful information as to the environmental impacts of products? Are EPIS a marketing-oriented tool? What factors contribute to the development of successful EPIS? More than ten years after its establishment, can the EU Flower label be considered a success? Are ‘older’ national eco-labels such as the Blue Angel and the White Swan more effective? Should eco-labels be harmonised? Have the original objectives of eco-labels been achieved (e.g. to provide information to consumers and to foster sustainable production and consumption)? For which product groups are ISO Type I eco-labels appropriate or inappropriate? Are other labels (e.g. mandatory, ISO Type II and Type III

labels) more effective in some cases? Do eco-labels focus on the main environmental policy targets in practice, or just on ‘low-hanging fruits’? Are eco-labels really linked to the other tools in an IPP?

The present book tries to give an answer to each of these questions. However, the often-discussed relationship and potential conflict between national and regional eco-labels and international trade has not been dealt with in our research and will not be treated in this book (on these aspects, see Dröge 2001; GEN 2003; Zarrilli *et al.* 1997; see also the website of the EU-funded research project, ‘Concerted Action on Trade and Environment’ [CAT&E], at [www.cat-e.org](http://www.cat-e.org)).

## 1.1 Outline and content of this volume

This book summarises the findings of the a project titled ‘Developing Effective and Efficient Product Information Schemes (DEEP): Assessing and Expanding Product Information Schemes between Voluntary and Mandatory Approaches’. In Chapter 2, ‘Background: theoretical contributions, eco-labels and environmental policy’, we present an overview of relevant theoretical contributions from social sciences with respect to eco-labelling, followed by categorisations and definitions of EPIS. We then go on to include a rough analysis of the recently created IPP policy field.

In Chapter 3, ‘Environmental product information schemes: an overview’, we introduce the plethora of EPIS and give a broad overview of the establishment of EPIS, their market diffusion and their monitoring and assessment mechanisms. In each phase, a distinction is made between mandatory and voluntary labels and between qualitative and quantitative labels.

In Chapter 4, ‘Eco-labels and consumers’, we present the findings of our representative survey of 4,000 consumers in four countries—Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain. In this context, we describe general consumer attitudes before providing a detailed analysis of consumer information search activities with regard to washing machines, paper products and tourist accommodation. The chapter concludes with consumer preferences for information dissemination.

In Chapters 5–7 we present three case studies—for washing machines; tissue paper and copying paper; and tourist accommodation. For each case study we provide a background description, an overview of applied EPIS and the applied IPP toolkit, the EPIS process, followed by some conclusions and recommendations.

In Chapter 8, ‘Conclusions’, we present a first attempt at generalising the findings so far. First, we reflect on success criteria before providing an overview of the key influencing factors in the success or failure of an EPIS, identifying several clusters of product groups. We close Chapter 8 with a discussion of the need for an integrated strategy in order to develop efficient and effective EPIS

In Chapter 9, ‘Recommendations’, we present some general recommendations under the headings of ‘Integrated EPIS strategy within IPP’, ‘Multi-stakeholder approach’, ‘Product category orientation’, ‘Interaction of EPIS’, ‘Establishment of EPIS’, ‘Promotion and communication of EPIS’, ‘Monitoring and assessment of EPIS’ and ‘Future challenges: from eco-labels to sustainability labels?’ before providing some product-specific recommendations.

## 1.2 Background information on the research process

The main objectives of the project underlying this book were:

- To analyse the conditions under which EPIS are or can become an efficient and effective tool to meet objectives and to achieve sustainable development, covering mandatory and voluntary labels as well as more recent forms of communication of product-related environmental information, such as the Internet
- To assess previous experiences with EPIS in different European countries and the relationship of these schemes with business strategies, IPP and market conditions
- To define strategies aimed at linking EPIS with other IPP measures
- To explore how EPIS can be used to realise sustainable consumption patterns, create green markets, foster innovation and development of green products and services and implement multi-stakeholder initiatives
- To elaborate an integrated environmental labelling strategy

We made three important choices at the beginning. First, we decided to leave out food products because this would expand the project substantially and would also raise other scientific and political questions. Second, we decided to concentrate mainly on *environmental* product information schemes and to treat social, political and ethical issues only at a minor level. Last, our main focus was on business-to-consumer relations, although business-to-business relations were considered for the relevant EPIS (i.e. for ISO Type III environmental product declarations).<sup>1</sup>

The research process consisted of two major phases, each of which was subdivided into several steps. The first phase consisted of the assessment of past experience of EPIS in Europe, with a particular focus on Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain. This phase consisted of three steps, or work packages:

- A description of EPIS in the (former) 15 European countries (EU-15) and Norway
- A detailed description and analysis of EPIS in four selected countries for three product groups (case studies)
- The derivation of generalisations and conclusions from case studies

The second phase consisted of the elaboration of operative and strategic proposals for the development of effective and efficient product information schemes within the IPP context, by providing:

1 Public (and also commercial) environmentally oriented procurement is an important tool in the dissemination of eco-efficient products and services, and EPIS may have a role to play in such procurement. In particular, public procurement might be an effective instrument for supporting market transformation. However, analysis of this tool was beyond the scope of this research. Some interesting findings are documented in the work of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI, [www.iclei.org](http://www.iclei.org); see also Erdmenger 2003; ICLEI 2001; OECD 1997b, 2003; Russel 1998).

- A preliminary listing of operative and strategic proposals, based on a consultation process (through workshops) with key national and international actors
- The elaboration and delivery of the final report, summarising major findings and implications and elaborating a list of recommendations for stakeholders

To obtain an overview of practices in Europe we reviewed primary and secondary literature and collected first-hand information through qualitative interviews (face-to-face or by phone). In each country, the research was focused on environmental policy and IPP, their link to EPIS, descriptions of mandatory labels and, in large part, detailed information on voluntary labels. Although not the primary focus of the research, where social or food labels were found these were reported.

The main focus of the research was oriented towards eco-labelling in the four countries where primary empirical data was collected—Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain. In addition, we gathered material on eco-labelling activities in each of the EU-15. Results from this part of the research have been published elsewhere (Rubik and Scholl 2002), representing the first general overview of EPIS throughout the EU. We also dedicated some effort to describing the situation in Japan and the USA. However, a global review and assessment of EPIS in all countries practising eco-labelling was not possible (on the global situation of eco-labelling, see Appleton 1997; Dröge 2001; US EPA 1998; eco-labelling initiatives are documented on the Global Eco-labelling Network [GEN] website, at [www.gen.gr.jp](http://www.gen.gr.jp)).

The second step of the project was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research in the four case-study countries. In order to allow a comparison between product groups and between products and services, three strategic product groups were selected:

- Tissue paper, as an example of a consumable good<sup>2</sup>
- Washing machines, as an example of durable goods
- Tourist accommodation, as an example of services

Other products and products groups were discussed during the research process but, together, these products represent the main challenges as far as industry, political authorities and consumers are concerned. In the case of tissue paper we also included other paper products, such as printing paper, in response to questions raised within the paper industry during the project.

Relevant information was gained through three main research methods:

- A study of literature (i.e. relevant political and scientific documents) and of secondary data
- A representative quantitative survey of consumers in the four countries, carried out by phone interviews of 4,000 consumers (1,000 in each country, in the period June–September 2001)
- Qualitative interviews with main stakeholders (around 40 in each country)

2 For a definition of tissue paper in this context, see Chapter 6.

The case studies were structured according to a multi-stakeholder approach. This is reflected both in the analysis and in the elaboration of recommendations and strategies. After carrying out the 12 cases studies (three product groups in each of the four countries) the findings were analysed and generalised.

After the case studies were conducted and a list of first conclusions was drawn up, a set of preliminary strategic and operative proposals was put forward. To discuss these proposals, the project held four national workshops, in Frankfurt, Germany (5 July 2002), Rome, Italy (4 July 2002), Oslo, Norway (20 August 2002), and Barcelona, Spain (2 July 2002). As potential participants, national key stakeholders from business, administrations, industrial organisations, environmental and consumer NGOs and academia were invited to the workshops. Based on the outcome of these four national workshops, a final international stakeholder meeting was held in Brussels on 3 October 2002.

In total, about 100 external stakeholders participated in the five meetings, making a very valuable contribution to the success of the research project.