25 Years of Type I Ecolabeling to Save the Planet

Published by the Ecological Union, Saint-Petersburg, 12 December 2019

This year, the Global Ecolabeling Network celebrates 25 years since its founding, combining leading Type I ecolabeling programs.

Could one eco-labeling program, even the most authoritative one, promote the idea of evaluating products on a lifecycle at a global level and push global supply chains to work on this principle?

Unlikely. Even the oldest eco-label like the German Blue Angel, which celebrated 40 years last year, has influence only at the national level.

To use Type I ecolabels for sustainable production and consumption and preserve the planet on a global scale, in 1994, a non-profit organization was founded in Stockholm - the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN).

GEN brings together leading ecolabeling programs around the world that strictly follow the principles of ISO 14024. Joining GEN as a full member is preceded by a verification process by experienced GEN member programs. Thus, GEN membership is an indicator of the high level of professionalism of the ecolabeling program.

GEN's work is aimed at promoting, increasing efficiency, and developing Type I ecolabeling at the international level -- protecting the planet through eco-certification of sustainable products and services.
Type I ecolabels comply with the ISO 14024 requirements and are awarded to products and services that meet complex lifecycle criteria.

Today GEN is:
- 28 Type I ecolabeling programs representing about 60 countries, as well as Affiliate members including the ISEAL Alliance, International Green Purchasing Network, Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council and Google Inc.
- 1,445 stringent environmental standards for the lifecycle
- Over 600,000 certified products and services

Russia is represented in the GEN by the Vitality Leaf ecolabel operated by the Ecological Union.

What does GEN give to its members?

GEN members have the opportunity to exchange information and experience in the development of standards and marketing of ecolabeling, optimize the processes of environmental certification of products in their countries, harmonize their standards, and recognize each other's criteria.

“The ecolabel Vitality Leaf joined GEN more than ten years ago. We received a lot of useful information from GEN, which really helped our program, and we are pleased to share this knowledge today with beginner programs,” said Yulia Gracheva, director of the Ecological Union, and member of the board of the Global Ecolabeling Network.
“We have learned a lot from the GEN members, including the experience of public green procurement. Of course, this idea was not currently in our country. Based on our experience we created a law on green procurement, and made it work. GEN allows us to communicate with other well-functioning ecolabeling programs,” said Chin-Yuan Chen, manager of the Chinese Taipei Green Mark ecolabeling program. “For me, this is not just an organization, it is a community of like-minded people. And I love this community. It works to share knowledge and scale up ecolabeling,” said Kate Harris, CEO of the Good Environmental Choice Australia ecolabeling program.

What does GEN give the market?

GEN represents ecolabeling bodies that educate world-wide environmental, economic and commercial organizations on ecolabeling opportunities. The Network helps to create reliable environmental information in the market so that the consumer has the opportunity to make the right choices.

Over the past 25 years, the Network has launched many important initiatives relevant to the market. Members of the GEN Board of Directors, which also includes the Ecological Union, noted the following achievements:

- An important expert role in the development of environmental management standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), in particular, the ISO 14000 series.

- GEN efforts to promote Type I ecolabeling at the level of global environmental and economic organizations. For many years the Network has been collaborating with the United Nations Environment Program. In recent years, it has been actively working with the UN Sustainable Consumption platform “One Planet”, releasing various educational products. A lot of work has also been done with the OECD, the WTO, and other market players.

- Establishment and development of GENICES, the GEN International Coordinated Ecolabelling System, a program for the mutual recognition of eco-labels. If a company has an ecolabel in one country, but wants to sell products in another, ecolabels can recognize each other's certification procedures. This makes it easier for the company to sell in other regions. In GENICES audits of GEN programs are held at least once every 5 years. The Ecological Union and the Vitality Leaf received GENICES review in 2011 and again in 2017. So, today the Vitality Leaf is the only Russian ecolabel that has received such international recognition.

- An expert assistance program for beginner ecolabeling programs, which provides training for such programs by experienced professionals. For example, in 2019 the Ecological Union developed and conducted full-cycle training for colleagues from Uzbekistan.

- World Ecolabeling Day has been established. This is a tool for disseminating knowledge among consumers and companies about Type 1 ecolabels, eco products and changing patterns of consumption on a global scale. Today it is celebrated in more than 50 countries of the world, including Russia.

- Conducting an Annual General Meeting of GEN members around the world to exchange experiences, ideas and contacts and promote the ecolabeling tool at the national level. And an equally important annual event, the meetings of the GEN Board of Directors, which include discussions on the implementation of the current strategy. By the way, in 2020 a meeting of the Board of Directors will be held in Russia.
What does GEN do for the planet and society?

Thanks to GEN, ecolabeling programs do not work in isolation, but in concert for the good of the planet. They respond to global environmental challenges, not just local problems at the level of individual countries. Both the offices of global companies and local manufacturers receive a universal message - the importance of an integrated approach in determining environmental friendliness, transparency and reliability of information.

**Type I ecolabeling standards cover many aspects: air quality, energy use, processability, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), carcinogens and other problem areas. Many small steps help solve global problems.**

Here are some examples of what important global environmental issues GEN helps solve by combining the efforts of all Type I ecolabels:

- Reduction of energy consumption and energy loss to help combat the threat of climate change
- Reduction of plastic waste by minimizing packaging and barriers to the use of disposable plastics
- Reduction of toxins in product ingredients to protect our air and water
- Greening the urban environment through the promotion of sustainable practices, reducing the disposal of construction waste and green mortgages
- Reduced use of natural resources to prevent deforestation and habitat destruction

The mission of the Global Ecolabeling Network - Lead, Serve, and Grow - encourages members to work together to protect the environment.
Type I ecolabelling is recognized by the UN as one of the key tools for the development of sustainable production and consumption - the 12th of the Sustainable Development Goals.

“We have room to move until all products and services become sustainable by default. Products with ecolabels serve as a guide for greening the market. State regulation and other mandatory instruments cannot respond quickly enough, and the voluntary nature of ecolabeling is an effective way to move the economy in a sustainable direction. Everyone benefits from this: the environment, the consumer and the producer.” said Björn-Eric Lonn, Chairman of the Global Ecolabelling Network.

Especially for the 25th anniversary of the Global Ecolabelling Network, Russia’s well-known environmental journalist Angelina Davydova spoke with members of the Board of Directors about the past, present and future of the Global Ecolabelling Network:

Source: Ecological Union

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