



FACT SHEET — WINTER 2021

Eco-score or how to measure the environmental impact of our plates

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Executive summary

We live in a world of increasing openness, connectivity and transparency. Thanks to the rise of social media, citizens expect more information about the goods and services that they use.

We also live in a world where it is increasingly clear that the production of the food we eat has significant environmental impacts, from deforestation to greenhouse gas emissions to water scarcity and destruction of biodiversity.

At the same time, because of the imperative to tackle climate change, the European Union is embarked upon a process of decarbonising its entire economy, with measures ranging from more ambitious renewable energy targets to a green taxonomy for investors and a new circular economy strategy.

These trends come together in initiatives such as the European Climate Pact. Launched by the European Commission, the Climate Pact is part of the European Green Deal and is “a movement of people united around a common cause, each taking steps to build a more sustainable Europe for us all”. A key part of the Pact is pledges by individuals to reduce their own climate impacts. Of the 16 steps the Pact suggests, three are food-related - cut food waste, eat more plants and eat seasonal- highlighting the importance of the food system in cutting emissions.

Yet information about the environmental impact of particular food products has been hard to find until now. A food labelling scheme that includes environmental information could play a powerful role in changing consumer behaviour and encouraging companies to offer more sustainable products.

Introduction

As part of the general trend towards greater transparency that has been fostered by the digital revolution, consumers are taking an increasing interest in the food they eat and its impact on their own health as well as that of the world around them.

Awareness and concern has risen in recent years that our diet can have significant impacts on the environment as well as individual wellbeing. Livestock reared to provide red meat contribute to issues such as deforestation, destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems, water scarcity and increased greenhouse gas emissions, for example.

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There is also a growing movement of people pledging actions to make positive changes on environmental and sustainability issues. One example of this is the joint campaign between the European Climate Pact and the global Count Us In campaign, which aims to inspire citizens and communities to cut their own carbon footprint through measures including reducing food waste.

And there are already initiatives to give consumers more information about the health implications of their food, such as Nutri-score. However, until now there has been limited information about food's environmental footprint.

A survey by BEUC, the European Consumers' Organisation, showed that although consumers have some awareness about the impact of food in general, they tend to underestimate the environmental impact of their own eating habits.

More than half say that sustainability concerns influence their eating habits, but price, lack of information, the challenge of identifying sustainable food options and their limited availability are the main perceived barriers to sustainable eating.

“Two thirds of consumers are open to changing their eating habits for environmental reasons, with many willing to waste less food at home, to buy more seasonal fruit and vegetables and to eat more plant-based foods,” BEUC says. “However, decreasing their dairy consumption or spending more money for sustainably produced food is more of a challenge for consumers.”

Most consumers (57%) want sustainability information to be compulsory on food labels but they are less keen on taxes less

sustainable food. But they do want their governments lead in promoting sustainable food production and consumption. And they want the EU to maintain its current level of ambition on food sustainability, regardless of whether or not other countries around the world are doing the same.

One way to reconcile consumers' desire to act with their lack of awareness of what to do and what sustainable options are available is through the use of food labels with an environmental focus.

CASE STUDY

GIZ — Measuring Sustainable Consumption and Production in middle-income and newly-industrialised countries

As part of a 10-year framework on globally sustainable food systems, Germany, Indonesia and Consumers International led a project to develop credible consumer information, ambitious label systems and to disseminate good practice in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

These South-East Asian countries have already made good progress in introducing eco-labels for climate-friendly products and using them in public procurement. However, a lack of harmonisation in eco-labels is hindering trade in environmentally friendly products and there are few economic and financial incentives for producers and consumers to buy more sustainable products.

The project, which ran from 2015 to 2018, aimed to integrate climate-relevant criteria into existing labels in the four countries and have these labels be mutually recognised in each market.

A system to inform customers about sustainable goods and services was created, taking into account product life cycles to assure a climate perspective. The team also developed a handbook on nationally appropriate mitigation action (NAMA) to highlight opportunities to cut emissions.

The team identified industries with significant potential for emissions savings to create consumer ‘sustainability information systems’ for products manufactured primarily in these industries. They also informed public procurement decision makers about environmentally friendly products with eco-labels and worked to develop joint criteria for eco-labels so they were mutually recognised in each country.

What are the European institutions doing on this topic?

The European Union has turned its attention to the sustainability of the food sector along with the rest of the economy. It is looking to transform the way Europeans produce, distribute and consume food through its new Farm to Fork strategy, which it hopes will make the European food system the global benchmark for sustainability.

The European Commission has proposed that the use of pesticides and antibiotics be halved by 2030 from current levels, as well as a 20% cut in fertiliser use. The strategy also sets out a target of having a quarter of agricultural land in the EU devoted to organic farming and it aims for at least 30% of Europe's land and sea to be protected to reverse losses in biodiversity.

■ ■ *Europe needs a food system that is robust and resilient to the impacts of climate change and other sustainability challenges, a need that has been reinforced and brought into sharper focus by the Covid-19 pandemic.*

As part of the strategy, the European Commission has also put forward a proposal for a harmonised food labelling scheme that takes into account both the nutritional aspects of food products and their sustainability elements. In October 2021, the European Parliament voted to support the labelling initiative while calling on the Commission to define how the scheme will work and what aspects of sustainability will be covered.

The new label will go further than existing initiatives such as the EU Ecolabel, which are broader in scope but voluntary, and therefore have less impact. As the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan points out, there is no comprehensive set of requirements to ensure that all products placed on the EU market become increasingly sustainable. At a time when the Union is rolling out its Green New Deal, Green Taxonomy and other measures, a more comprehensive approach is needed.

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Part of this is giving consumers clear information that empowers them to make healthy and sustainable choices about what they eat and how they can reduce food and packaging waste.

In June 2021, the European Commission registered a European Citizens' Initiative

calling for a "European Eco-score" to inform consumers about the ecological impact of different products. The initiative, following on from pilot projects already launched in some countries, now has to collect one million signatures to be discussed by the European Commission.

CASE STUDY – OPEN FOOD FACTS

Open Food Facts' Eco-Score helps consumers who wish to move towards a more sustainable diet, by encouraging them to: eat less, but better quality, meat; consume more organic and quality labelled products; favour products that are local, seasonal and have little packaging; limit consumption of products with unsustainable ingredients such as endangered fish or unsustainable palm oil.

By encouraging more informed choices by consumers, it incentivises manufacturers to make their products more sustainable to improve their rating, improving sustainable choices for all consumers.

Based on a life cycle assessment (LCA) of every stage of a product's life, from agriculture to processing to distribution and consumption, the Eco-Score summarizes 15 environmental impacts, from climate change to resource depletion, grading them from A (very low impact) to E (very high impact). The weighting is moderated to take into account certain impacts that LCA does not cover well, such as biodiversity.

It also rewards products that already have some kind of certification, to avoid a duplication of effort, as well as those with local ingredients while penalising those containing ingredients that adversely affect biodiversity and ecosystems, and poor packaging.

Accurately calculating the Eco-Score requires increased transparency around ingredients and Open Food Facts is asking manufacturers and citizens to provide relevant information.

Consumers can see Eco-Scores by scanning products with the Open Food Facts app and compare scores for more than 750,000 products on its website.

To encourage product improvements, the platform for producers automatically analyses manufacturers' data to identify avenues for improvement, both in terms of the quality of food and its ecological impact.

Bringing in the experts

A recent Oxford University study shows that nutrition and health labelling on food is widespread and can lead to small changes in purchasing and consumption behaviours. An 'Eco-score' system can boost the consumption of more sustainable foods. However, there is little standardisation in the information given and how the scores are presented, which may limit the tools' effectiveness.

"Preliminary evidence suggests ecolabeling maybe a means of meeting societal demands for greater transparency in reporting food production methods," the study says. "Ecolabels may have potential to change behaviour and increase demand for more environmentally sustainable products."

One example of an Eco-score is Open Food Facts, an initiative funded by the Google Impact Challenge on Climate, which compiles food data from all around the world to assess products' environmental and nutritional characteristics and calls itself a "Wikipedia of foods that anyone can use freely and for free". The scheme, which is profiled in a case study below, is based on a life cycle assessment (LCA) approach with extra parameters including how the product is made, the origin of ingredients, packaging and the impact on biodiversity.

Another Eco-score pilot scheme has been launched recently by [Foundation Earth](#), focused on carbon emissions, water consumption, water pollution and biodiversity, rating products on a scale from A+ to G. The initiative has attracted a number of big brands and retailers, including Nestlé, Starbucks, Pepsico, Danone, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Lidl and Marks & Spencer, to look at how to make environmental labelling work.

Foundation Earth is using two systems for measuring and communicating environmental impact – a traffic light system developed by a company called Mondra and a system developed by the EU-funded EIT Food Consortium. It is also running a nine-month development programme, sponsored by Nestle and aims to produce a system that will be rolled out across the EU and the UK in 2022.

Another EIT Food-supported initiative comes from Belgian retailer Colruyt, which has launched an Eco-score in Belgium for its Boni Foods brand. It aims to roll it out for use on other brands in 2022.

Conclusion

The way forward

With the consequences of our dietary choices on climate change, resource availability, biodiversity and other issues becoming more apparent daily, it is clear that the choices consumers make can have a big impact on the sustainability of our food systems, both because choosing the right products reduces impacts immediately and because these choices encourage companies to provide the more sustainable products that consumers demand.

Consumers are concerned about the impacts of the food that they buy and they are ready to take ownership of their purchasing choices but they need the information to enable them to do so. There is currently a lack of information about the environmental footprint of food, but the data and the technology to deliver it are becoming more readily available.

As part of the Consumer Agenda, companies will increasingly have to substantiate information on the environmental footprint of products or services to make environmental claims more reliable, comparable and verifiable and thus reduce greenwashing. The European Consumer Agenda also has a strong focus on the digital and green transitions.

- The time has come for an Eco-score environmental food labelling system. It ties in with the European Commission's work on the European Consumer Agenda, which aims to help consumers to play a more active role in the transition to a more sustainable economy by providing reliable and useful product information.
- Eco-labelling can be a powerful driver of change in the food industry. Mandatory nutritional labelling has encouraged companies to make foods healthier, bringing benefits that go far beyond changes in what people buy. Eco-labelling could have the same impact from an environmental perspective and drive rapid improvements in food sustainability.

- A number of initiatives are already happening, including schemes from Open Food Facts, Colruyt and Foundation Earth. To ensure that these Eco-scores gain traction and provide the maximum benefit, their messaging must be consistent, comparable and easy to understand. If more than one Eco-score is to thrive, consumers must be able to look at products covered by different schemes, work out which one is the more sustainable and have confidence in their conclusion.
- However, it may be best to introduce one EU-backed Eco-score to avoid confusion and mixed messages. This should also be co-ordinated with similar schemes in other markets to help to facilitate trade in more sustainable food products.
- Lessons can be learnt from other labelling schemes, from nutri-scores to energy labelling for consumer goods, to ensure best practice within the scheme.
- A first step will be to establish what information is available and where there are gaps that need to be filled. There is lots of information on the impact of livestock in Europe, for example, but less about the effects of smallholder coffee farmers in Africa. The same is true of new and emerging products such as plant-based milk substitutes or lab-grown meat. New research may be needed to establish the impacts of certain products.
- Clear boundaries will need to be set for what is included – for a cheese product, for example, do you include the fertilizer used to grow the feed for the cow, or the transport emissions of farm workers?
- Such a move would fit in with other recent policy moves such as the Green Taxonomy and the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation that aim to direct capital to the most sustainable companies, and the Circular Economy Action Plan, a key part of which is aimed at reducing food waste.
- And as with the Green Taxonomy, the benefits of the labelling should be clearly explained. It will create new opportunities for producers to provide new products, realise efficiencies, get ahead of regulation and open up new markets. The cost to producers should be kept as low as possible and care must be taken to ensure that the label does not become a protectionist tool discriminating against producers from particular countries.



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