



So many choices, so little time; oodles of eco-labels, how to decide? The Green Building Council South Africa (GBCSA) has recognised several product certification schemes, laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive playing field.

WORDS MICHELLE LUDWIG **ILLUSTRATION** DESIGNED BY FREEPIK.COM

According to the Ecolabel Index, an online repository of global green labelling schemes, 22 out of 48 'green' labels currently relevant in South Africa are applicable to the built environment. They cover a variety of issues from the specific, such as sustainable forestry, to whole-of-life cycle.

But are these designations useful? With the variety of environmental labels in the market it can be confusing and difficult to know whom to trust. Do they measure the same things or even carry the same meanings?

DO WE NEED ECO-LABELS?

There are currently no SANS standards for level of green, and the SA Bureau of Standards (SABS) primarily tests for compliance with existing standards. "Currently, the only provisions relevant to eco-labels in South African legislation are found in Section 24 of the Consumer Protection Act, which deals with product labelling. The Act stipulates a person may not apply a trade description to goods that is likely to mislead consumers as to any matter implied or expressed in that trade description," says Rishal Bipraj, junior associate attorney focused on environmental law at Garlicke & Bousfield Inc.

According to the Green Building Council South Africa (GBCSA), product certification schemes (also known as product eco-labels) play an integral role in influencing buying behaviour, and by extension, the environmental and the socio-economic impact of the products.

When evaluating environmental performance, manufacturers typically share all their marketing and product performance information, but it is more difficult to obtain meaningful technical or production information to make one's own assessment or reach conclusions.

"Often quotes, studies and material from other parts of the world are used incorrectly for promotion in our South African conditions, which obviously results in misinformation," says Clive Archer, managing director of Crammix Bricks, Clay Brick Association past-president and champion of the energy-efficient clay brick project. Even if they provide the right information, in the right context, the issue of how to make sense of it all or compare it to an alternative choice, remains.

"Eco-labels can be very useful in creating a common language in the industry," says Francois Retief, sustainability consultant at Sow & Reap. "Sustainability issues can at times be extremely technical and complex, making it challenging to

articulate them to various stakeholders. Eco-labels can create a common language for products and materials.”

Having contributed to a few successful Green Star SA Interiors projects, Colin Myers, Collaboration Design’s Green Star SA accredited professional, says: “Local product certification schemes certifying products and materials take the burden off the specifiers, architects and designers. This is still very new in South Africa, but will make it a lot easier to certify projects in future.”

Green labelling schemes and standards have proliferated globally. In the past two years, two new product certification schemes have been piloted and launched for the South African market, namely EcoStandard and Global GreenTag, which join a few others that have been available for years.

Are all eco-labels considered equal? It depends on whom you ask. This is one reason the GBCSA is establishing a credibility assessment process for third party certified eco-labels, as well as to more easily integrate them into the Green Star SA tools.

“Honestly, we battle to make sense of all the eco-labels and are very doubtful about many schemes,” says Myers. “To take all eco-labels at face value would be falling into the green-washing sell trap. Without in-depth technical knowledge or the ability to establish the criteria by which each scheme rates products, it’s impractical for us as designers to evaluate the merit of any scheme.”

“Although eco-labels can provide a useful metric, it is important that we are cautious of green-washing,” agrees Retief. “Before blindly following labels, we need to understand a few crucial questions, such as: what are the environmental concerns relating to this product class, and what is the level of credibility and independence of the eco-label? If a label has been created specifically by a product manufacturer for their product range only, for example, it may be worth interrogating the technical criteria behind the label.”

A common public misconception of eco-labels is their confusion with the GBCSA itself, according to Sally-Anne Käsner of EcoStandard, “They often think if a product manufacturer is a member of the GBCSA, their product has been certified by an eco-label. They are also unsure about the differences between self-proclaimed labels that manufacturers have on their products, and those that have been independently third-party certified.”

WHAT MAKES A QUALITY ECO-LABEL?

“The public generally has a clear idea of what ‘certified organic’, ‘fair trade’ and maybe ‘FSC’ mean,” says Lizette Swanevelder of Ecospecifier Global GreenTag South Africa. “But in the building sector I don’t believe they do.”

She recommends using “schemes that have been verified and recognised by independent groups like the GBCSA,” as well as “programmes that have active local involvement, websites with clear information on the programme rules and standards, public and stakeholder consultation reports, and [schemes] certified for quality management under ISO 9001”.

“The best eco-labels indicate an independent organisation has verified that a product meets a set of meaningful and consistent standards for environmental protection, usually taking into consideration the life cycle, as opposed to an over-emphasis of specific environmental qualities,” Bipraj says.

Käsner advises: “Make sure it is third-party audited on-site; ask the eco-label questions about how the label was developed and what it is based on; ask the credentials of the people managing the label, and assess the intentions of the label.”

Even between quality eco-labels, the methodologies vary enough to make an apples-to-apples comparison difficult. “The GBCSA’s new eco-label assessment tool aims to assist in undertaking this review, making it simpler to identify best practice certification schemes,” explains Retief.

GBCSA’S EVALUATION OF PRODUCT CERTIFICATION SCHEMES

The GBCSA does not test, review or certify products or materials, only building projects. Instead, it will rely on credible, third-party certification bodies. To evaluate the credibility and comprehensiveness of established eco-labelling product certification bodies, the organisation has developed a product certification scheme assessment tool.

The Australian market demonstrated how the assessment and inclusion of product certification schemes and eco-labels in Green Star rating tools could result in a rapid increase in products pursuing certification. “This same process... has resulted in over 900 products targeting environmental certification since 2009,” says Lesley Sibanda, technical co-ordinator at the GBCSA. “Recognising product certification schemes has led to market

transformation in Australia and has helped clarify best practice benchmarks and establish expectations for manufacturers and suppliers of products.”

The GBCSA seeks to have a similar impact on the domestic industry.

The Green Building Council of Australia’s successful version was therefore adapted to local market conditions. In consultation with Arup, the GBCSA produced a set of criteria against which the eco-labels are assessed, including issues specific to the South African context, explains Sibanda.

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This assessment criteria applies only to voluntary third-party certification schemes that: conduct product-focused environmental and social assessment of products that are directly applicable to the built environment; award a licence and label that is representative of overall environmental preference of a product; and authorise the use of this label on products.

Firstly, the product certification scheme (or eco-label) is evaluated on its structure and development process, which includes its independence, transparency, public access, data collection, and whether it conducts on-site verification audits. Secondly, it is evaluated on the comprehensiveness of environmental aspects covered, such as energy and water consumption, toxicity, resources, local content and end-of-life options.

The results categorise the certification scheme as Level A, B or C. This ranking determines how many points any product with that designation is awarded in the Green Star SA Interiors materials credit calculator. Those that achieve a Level A or B can be assumed to be more meaningful as they

are more comprehensive in their consideration of environmental concerns.

Lower ranking schemes are still useful but most likely focus on narrower criteria, such as emissions-only or minimum standards within a product-type. It is important to note eco-labels that are issue-specific – such as the energy-efficiency of equipment or sourcing of timber – still have an important role to play in many of the Green Star SA credits and a low- or no-ranking does not indicate illegitimacy.

Practitioners approve of this development. “Of

massive value is the GBCSA’s approval of certification schemes... we can have confidence in the real environmental and socio-economic impacts of a particular product. With schemes being categorised, the choice of product with regard to sustainability is simplified,” says Myers.

ONE TOOL FOR ALL

With the myriad of eco-labels – some directly competing with each other – would things be less confusing if there was a ‘one tool’, all-encompassing solution? Possibly. That is if a consensus on criteria and methodology could be achieved – and therein lies the challenge. Tool developments are always complex and difficult, usually balancing many stakeholders’ interests and varying priorities.

Some say it should be legislatively mandated. However, it is unlikely most government legislative bodies could agree, or overcome their bureaucracy, not to mention be that prescriptive to the market.

It is much easier for the private and non-profit sector to develop and administer voluntary certification schemes to which legislation can point.

Similar to many building-rating schemes, some labels have been developed country-specific to reflect their own priorities or market realities, as EcoStandard is in South Africa for example. An EU-based label, while applicable globally, it was initially developed in response to a different market, but adapted for local realities.

The three major certification schemes that currently rank at the top of the GBCSA's approved list – Global GreenTag, EcoStandard, and Cradle to Cradle: all take a whole-of-life approach to the assessments of their products; align with ISO 14024 recommendations for eco-labels; encompass similar

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environmental concerns; and can be applied to multiple product types, making them more versatile.

Globally, they are also in a unique minority that reward a product's environmental success and improvement by ranking this on a scale, as opposed to setting minimum pass/fail compliance criteria.

“A rating system such as Global GreenTag SA's labels with EcoPOINT scores allows everyone to tell which product is good, better, and world-leading respectively,” explains Swanevelder. “Even when one has two gold-rated products to compare, one can easily figure out the most sustainable choice by referring to the EcoPOINT score.”

There are variations between the three tools, including but not limited to whether they are a non-profit organisation, developed locally, use full life cycle analysis-calculation, and are recognised and applicable globally. The extent of each one's marketing exposure, and the cost and complexity of the assessment process also differ. This is where having some choice as a manufacturer may not, and perhaps should not, be a one-size fits all.

FUTURE OF ECO-LABELS

“Competition, created by a multitude of genuine [certification] entities... and possibly with a multitude of genuine eco-labels and valid certification processes, could result in better quality goods and cheaper prices for consumers of green goods,” Rishal says.

“In an environment not regulated by legislation, however, what needs to be guarded against is green-washing, and this can be achieved... by creating knowledge in the mind of the consumer as to the benefits, quality and accuracy of the particular goods and the eco-label attached to it.”

Many eco-labels are, in effect, brands in themselves. Like branded goods, they work on the basis of trust – that the brand or label guarantees a certain minimum level of quality or meets certain minimum criteria.

“At the heart of the eco-label movement is simply a need for transparency in the market,” says Retief. “Consumers are increasingly interested in sustainability factors and suppliers will need to be more transparent in order to gain trust... Suppliers should beware; in the age of information, consumers are becoming harder to fool. Even more importantly, once their trust is lost, it may be lost for good.”

Turn over for info on GBCSA's top ranking eco-labels...

SOURCEBOOK

Crammix Bricks • Clive Archer • www.crammix.co.za
Sow & Reap • Francois Retief • www.sowandreap.co.za
Garlicke & Bousfield Inc • Rishal Bipraj • www.gb.co.za
EcoStandard • Sally-Anne Käsner • www.ecostandard.co.za
Ecospecifier Global GreenTag South Africa • Lizette Swanevelder
www.ecospecifier.co.za • www.globalgreentag.com
GBCSA • Lesley Sibanda • www.gbcsa.org.za

THREE LOCAL ECO-LABELS AT A GLANCE Compiled by Michelle Ludwig				
	EcoStandard EcoProduct	Global GreenTag GreenRate	Global GreenTag LCARate	Cradle to Cradle
GBCSA criteria				
Eco-label scheme aspects				
Independent assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rewards best practice	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transparent methodology	no	✓	✓	no
Onsite verification audits	✓	✓	✓	✓
Environmental claims *ISO 14021 / 14024 compliant	✓	✓	✓	✓
Data collection and public database	✓	✓	✓	no
Environmental aspects				
Energy	✓	✓	✓	✓
Toxicity	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resources	✓	✓	✓	✓
Water	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social and Environmental	✓	✓	✓	✓
Durability and end of life	✓	✓	✓	✓
Local contents	✓	no	✓	no
GBCSA recognition of label	Level A Level B Level C	Level A Level B Level C	Level A Level B Level C	Level B
Certification levels available	5-Star 4-Star 3-Star 2-Star 1-Star	Level A Level B Level C	Platinum Gold Silver Bronze	Platinum Gold Silver Bronze Basics
Additional aspects and criteria				
Non-profit organisation	✓	no	no	✓
Full life cycle analysis calculations	no	no	✓	no
Product-specific supplementary standards	in progress	✓	✓	no
Innovative initiative credit	✓	no	✓	no
Green procurement policy	✓	no	no	no
Staff environmental training	✓	no	no	no
Product energy efficiency (in use)	✓	✓	✓	no
Product water efficiency (in use)	✓	✓	✓	no
Transport impacts	✓	no	✓	no
Synergies of systems	no	no	✓	✓
Biodiversity impact assessment	no	no	✓	✓
Optimisation of chemicals	no	no	no	✓
Cost for initial certification	R14k to R47k	R25k	Varies, proportional to scope	US\$3800

Note: Discounts available for previously certified products and multiple similar products