



KEY MESSAGES FOR STANDARD-SETTERS AND LABELLING ORGANISATIONS

The following key messages aim to guide standard-setters and labelling organisations to implement the Recommendations for Action from “Can I Recycle This?” *A Global Mapping and Assessment of Standards, Labels and Claims on Plastic Packaging* (UNEP & Consumers International 2020¹). Labels and standards which promote clear communication and action for consumers can help them to make more sustainable consumption choices and understand how to properly dispose of plastic packaging.

Harmonise definitions used in standards and consumer information labels

1. Recyclability definitions to reflect actual local recycling conditions that consumers experience

A definition of recyclability should refer to its application “in practice and at scale²”. If labels do not align with the accessibility and availability of necessary infrastructure and the real-life conditions within a geographical area, this will increase plastic leakage, contamination of waste streams and erode consumer trust.

ACTIONS

Develop labels which ensure recyclability is in line with local infrastructure available for consumers.

Examples of waste recycling labelling schemes which incorporate local accessibility data of waste collection facilities can be found in Singapore, South Africa, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

IMPACT

Informative labels on-pack which reflect the local conditions will help to guide consumers’ purchase and disposal decisions. This will increase consumer trust and empower consumers to take action to dispose of packaging correctly.

2. International standards to set definitions on compostable and biodegradable claims

There are no harmonised international standards which set definitions for “compostable” and “biodegradable” claims.

In most countries, the required systems for composting do not exist at scale. There is a risk that plastics which are technically compostable, or biodegradable, are not treated in this way and may leak into the environment. There are currently no international standards on home composting.

ACTIONS

Set international standards which ensure composting and biodegradation to work “in practice and at scale”³.

Home compostability is not currently addressed through international or European standards. International standardisation bodies, such as ASTM, CEN, ISO, should set new harmonised standards on materials suitable for home composting and add a section on how this should be communicated with consumers and whether the required systems exist at scale.

1 The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) & Consumers International (2020) “Can I Recycle This?” A Global Mapping and Assessment of Standards, Labels and Claims on Plastic Packaging <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/resource/can-i-recycle-global-mapping-and-assessment-standards-labels-and-claims-plastic-packaging>

2 Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2020) The Global Commitment 2020 Progress Report. <https://www.newplasticseconomy.org/assets/doc/Global-Commitment-2020-Progress-Report.pdf>, p.67

3 Ellen McArthur Foundation (2018) New Plastics Economy Global Commitment, 2 October. p12 <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/Global-Commitment-Document-to-download-on-website-2.pdf>.

A new British standard for biodegradable plastic, *PAS 9017*, has been developed to ensure plastics claiming to be “biodegradable” can prove to break down into harmless wax and contain no microplastic or nanoplastics. The biodegradable products created meeting the standard will contain a clear recycle-by date, to inform consumers of when they have to dispose of them before they start breaking down. Such standards help to complement the existing waste disposal methods and can be adopted more broadly.

IMPACT

A consistent landscape of standards for claims on plastic packaging will better inform consumers, allow comparison between sustainability claims on plastic packaging and help consumers dispose of packaging properly. Also, it will provide assurance to consumers that a packaging that claims to be “compostable” or “biodegradable” is suitable for this method of disposal.

Develop labels which adhere to the principles of the *Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information*

1. Labels to be informative and actionable

Some labels are not well aligned with the principles of the *Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information* (UN Environment & ITC, 2017⁴, hereafter “the Guidelines”) as evidenced in the assessment in the “Can I Recycle This?” report where only 19% of assessed labels give consumers quality information to make informed recycling and purchasing decisions.

ACTIONS

Labelling organisations need to ensure that their labels align with the principles of the Guidelines: that they are actionable for consumers and portray *reliable, relevant, clear, transparent, and accessible* information.

4 UN Environment & ITC (2017) Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information. UNEP. <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/resource/guidelines-providing-product-sustainability-information>

Collaboration and dialogue between labelling organisations, government, and managers of waste infrastructure to create labels which offer clear and contextualised guidance to consumers will help to increase reliability and local relevance of labels in the market.

See the five good practice *case studies* of sustainability labelling on plastic packaging published by the Consumer Information Programme.

The Guidelines Self-Assessment Tool⁵ is an openly accessible resource that labelling organisations can use to improve their communication to consumers according to the Guidelines’ ten principles.

IMPACT

Labels and claims on plastic packaging which align with the principles of the Guidelines will create a more consistent market for consumers and decrease consumer confusion.

2. Use ‘chasing arrows’ symbol when appropriate

The ‘chasing arrows’ symbol mirrors the universal symbol for recycling, however, the symbol often featured in labels on plastic packaging does not always indicate recyclability of all materials and thereby does not align with the principle of *clarity* in the Guidelines.



Source: Public domain

ACTIONS

The ‘chasing arrows’ symbol must be appropriately used for all components of a package, including separable and detachable items, to communicate to consumers via labelling the disposal directions for all the materials involved. A quick solution for labelling organisations is to remove or replace the ‘chasing arrows’ symbol on their labels if they do not indicate recyclability.

5 Access at: <http://www.surveygizmo.eu/s3/90136225/Self-Assessment-Tool-Guidelines-for-Providing-Product-Sustainability-Informationn>



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See the Australasian Recycling Label (ARL) and WWF South Africa's On-Pack Recycling Label (OPRL) [case studies](#) as examples of good practice communications to consumers on plastic packaging. Their use of the 'chasing arrows' only indicates recyclability.

IMPACT

Limiting the use of the 'chasing arrows' will further reinforce a consistent landscape of consumer communications on plastic packaging.

3. Utilise digital technology to support labelling efforts

Consumers are increasingly making decisions in a digital landscape (for example, online shopping) and the sustainability information provided to them is currently limited and must be strengthened.

On-pack labelling has limitations in terms of the availability of space and possibilities to share information with consumers. Utilising digital technology to support on-pack labelling can expand outreach and provide additional information on recycling guidance and proper use and disposal of plastic packaging to consumers. This will align with the principles of *transparency, accessibility and multi-channel and innovative approach* of the Guidelines.

The local context in terms of access to digital technology must be considered and the fundamental information should be accessible to all consumers offline as well as online.

ACTIONS

Standard-setters and labelling organisations can embrace scannable digital technology (for example, bar codes, QR codes) to build on on-package communications and provide further sustainability information to consumers.

New approaches to labelling can be piloted and tested in different countries to ensure information is appropriate for all consumers, not just those who are digitally aware. Learnings from such pilots can be published and help other labelling schemes to develop.

The Ellen McArthur Foundation's HolyGrail 2.0 project⁶ has the potential to simplify the sorting of packaging waste. Consumers will be able to read digital watermarks on smartphones for recycling information – this is applicable across the EU.

Founded in 2019, [The barePack App](#) enables Singaporean consumers to utilise barePack's reusable container when choosing takeaway in-store or for delivery via the app, the containers can then be returned to any of the partner restaurants in person.

IMPACT

Digital technology can enhance the transparency and accessibility of information to consumers, enable more innovative communication through multiple channels and increase progress towards sustainable solutions for a more circular economy of plastic packaging and reduced leakage into the environment.

⁶ Edie Newsroom (2020) HolyGrail 2.0: Major brands sign up to explore digital watermarks to improve packaging recycling. <https://www.edie.net/news/5/HolyGrail-2-0-Major-brands-sign-up-to-explore-digital-watermarks-to-improve-packaging-recycling/>

