



Defining criteria and indicators for a sustainability label of local public services



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ABSTRACT

The assessment of sustainability of public services is an important issue, especially at local level, taken into account the central role of local governments as a major public employer and provider of a diversity of services. Local governments are close to citizens and are moving faster than other public sector levels with regard to the integration of sustainability principles in their operations and strategies. A sustainability label to communicate public service performance enables to disclose information directly to service users. However, there is a dearth of research about labels addressing specific sustainability criteria for local services. The main aim of this research was the development of a conceptual framework to define a sustainability label, as a tool to assess and communicate sustainability of local public services. The approach was developed taking into account criteria of the European Union Ecolabel and indicators of the Global Reporting Initiative guidelines. The ecolabel is a relatively well-known voluntary instrument in Europe and has the potential for application in public service activities and operations, but only assess the environmental component of sustainability. The Global Reporting Initiative, in particular the Sector Supplement for Public Agencies, was then used to integrate the other sustainability components. Thirty-six (36) criteria and respective indicators were adapted for the proposed sustainability label conceptual framework. A Portuguese local public service was used as an exploratory case study to test the proposed conceptual model into practice. The overall results demonstrate that few criteria were accomplished in this local public service, stressing that new practices and public policies need to be adopted to invert the current trend, especially through the application of assessment systems. This exploratory case study research has shown how useful can be a sustainability label to support local governments in evaluating and communicating the sustainability performance of their public services. This case could drive and support other government levels, including central and regional public administration, in adopting and exploring public service labels and their associated performance approaches.

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1. Introduction

Environmental labels act as market regulators, when applied by third parties, to prevent the advertisement of any product (goods and services) as green when it does not comply with strict environmental standards (Dosi and Moretto, 2001). In a society where consumption patterns are one of the major driving forces behind environmental degradation, environmental labelling schemes emerge as an environmental policy instrument with a

large potential to contribute to an effective reduction of environmental impacts associated to economic activities (Santos et al., 2006). These labels result from criteria that take into account the environmental impacts that products may have in their life-cycle to make sure that the label gives consumers/users the possibility to choose the products that are least harmful to the environment (Lavallée and Plouffe, 2004). They are a way to narrow the information gap, where independent third parties assure consumers/users that the product meets those environmental standards (van Amstel et al., 2008). Therefore, they can motivate consumers/users to switch to less environmentally harmful and resource-consuming products (Thøgersen, 2002), with simple, useful and credible information about complex issues along the supply chain (Hartlieb and

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Jones, 2009; Ibanez and Grolleau, 2008). Flexible and market sensitive self-regulatory information instruments, such as ecolabels have been increasingly adopted and recognised worldwide as an alternative to governmental command and control regimes towards environmental management, as discussed by Bratt et al. (2011).

Environmental labels, often named as ecolabels, are supported by procedures and criteria that are usually defined in standards or regulations. The International Standards from the 14020 series (ISO, 2006, 2000, 1999a,b), which encompasses aspects related to environmental labels and declarations or the European Union (EU) ecolabel (EC, 2010) are examples of broad international initiatives in this field. This EU label, launched in 1992, is well established and promotes products with less environmental impacts than their similar, ensured by meeting the label's environmental performance criteria throughout the product life-cycle. Currently, the EU ecolabel mainly covers goods (e.g. paints and varnishes, cleaners, textile products, paper, televisions) and only two product groups related to services: tourist accommodation and campsites (EC, 2009a,b). Criteria of the EU ecolabel for services are intangible as they cannot be stocked and easily be demonstrated. Services can be sold but there is not necessarily any transfer of ownership. It is one of the most well-known ecolabels in Europe and it is usually considered as a credible and reliable performance assessment and communication tool (ICLEI European Secretariat et al., 2012).

The work conducted by UNOPS (2009), stresses that only independent and reliable labels that consider the life-cycle impact of products are called ecolabels, to avoid misconceptions commonly found in the booming green market. Currently, and according to the Ecolabel Index (Big Room, 2014), a global directory of ecolabels, there are about 458 different ecolabels in 197 countries covering 25 different industry sectors. In addition, the concept of ecolabels can be enlarged to the one of sustainability labels, aiming the assessment and communication of sustainability performance of goods or services, integrating in a holistic way different dimensions of sustainability (economic, social and the environment). However, despite some literature regarding sustainability labels, there has been a misuse of the term sustainability in labels that do not encompass the main sustainability dimensions but rather just one of them (mainly the environment). In fact, some labels have “sustainability” or “sustainable” in their name, but overall they encompass mostly environmental and social aspects.¹ Nevertheless, other examples like the Sustainable Winegrowing New Zealand (New Zealand Wine, 2014) have criteria from different dimensions of sustainability, although most of them are environment related. Similarly, the scientific literature, shows different works that have investigated environmental or sustainability related labels, for example the consumer's attitudes to sustainability labels on meat using only three criteria related to organic meat, free range, animal welfare and carbon footprint (van Loo et al., 2014), consumer preferences among fair trade, rain forest alliance and carbon footprint labels (Vecchio and Annunziata, 2015) or public perceptions regarding a sustainable forestry label (Hansmann et al., 2006). However, only few works, such as the one conducted by Hansmann et al. (2006), attempt to analyse the integrated sustainability dimensions.

Therefore, and despite the above-mentioned works and several research studies related with sustainability labels, there is a lack of research that explores an integrative analysis of product

performance sustainability in different dimensions. Most labels, that claim to be sustainable, are in fact based on environmental criteria and to a lesser extent on social criteria as well. In addition, most of the labels address goods, so there is the need to further address service labels and not only goods. To achieve this integration, ecolabels could learn and be supported by other performance assessment and reporting tools, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (GRI, 2013a), a common framework applicable and recognised internationally (Lamprinidi and Kubo, 2010; Farneti and Guthrie, 2009), where a set of indicators is proposed to assess and communicate (throughout a report) the sustainability performance of organisations.

It should be also noted that the majority of environmental related label initiatives were developed for goods and services that are produced by the private sector, as demonstrated by the products covered by the EU ecolabel (see EC, 2014) or by the overview provided by Ecolabel Index (Big Room, 2014). The lack of action on developing and investigating ecolabels for public sector service reflects a general dearth of research on integrative tools to assess and communicate the sustainability performance of public services, which is explored by Ramos et al. (2007) and Lundberg et al. (2009). Until now there are no sustainability labels for public services and sustainability performance measures for the public sector are poorly developed and implemented since this sector do not notice the need to be competitive (Adams et al., 2014). Indeed, the major focus has been to assess sustainability performance of private sector companies and their corporate reporting schemes (Enticott and Walker, 2008; Walker and Brammer, 2012; Williams et al., 2011). However, the public sector covers a significant number of human resources, provides various services and consumes many resources (GRI, 2005). Given its size and influence, and particularly at the local level, public agencies are expected to lead by example the achievement of sustainability goals, informing policy formulation, supporting planning and decision-making from sustainable development based standpoints (Williams et al., 2011). The integration of sustainable development principles and practices into government processes, including policy formulation and operations is crucial for the achievement of sustainable development since public sector represents an important part of international economic activities (Ball and Grubnic, 2007; Walker and Brammer, 2012).

Public services at local level are close to general public and users, so a label is a simple way to communicate the sustainability performance of the service to stakeholders. It has the same goal as a reporting scheme, to communicate the performance to stakeholders due to legitimacy and accountability motivations (Bebington et al., 2009; Comyns et al., 2013; Farneti and Guthrie, 2009), whereas the label provides the information at the time that the user interacts with the service (Dosi and Moretto, 2001). According to Navarro Galera et al. (2014), who analysed the practices of sustainability disclosure in local governments in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, the development level of a country and/or the governance quality is not inevitably related to the transparency of local governments regarding sustainability. Consequently, a sustainability label for local public services could not only enable the assessment of the sustainability performance of activities and operations of public organisations from countries regardless their characteristics (developing or developed countries), but it could also be used as a communication tool to stakeholders and entire worldwide society.

The main aim of this research was the development of a conceptual framework to define a sustainability label, as a tool to assess and communicate sustainability of local public services. This framework was based on a set of criteria and performance indicators adapted from the EU ecolabel criteria and the GRI indicators, which complement the lack of economic and social aspects in the EU ecolabel and constitutes the only reporting guidelines that

¹ Some example are the following: Florverde Sustainable Flowers, NSF Sustainability Certified Products (for carpet, resilient floor coverings, commercial furnishings fabric, wallcovering products), Sustainable Carpet Certification (based on NSF/ANSI 140 Certification Standard), Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials, Sustainable Forestry Initiative, Sustainable Green Printing Partnership, Sustainable Tourism Education Program (eco-certified sustainable travel), and Water Quality Association (WQA) Sustainability Mark (Big Room, 2014).

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