

The case for a food 'omni-label' - it's time to give consumers what they need to know

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At present... competing appeals

Look for the logo? – *Ethical Consumer's* choice - but many logos; not all for food



The A to Z of our Best Buy brands:



Ethical Consumer Research Association

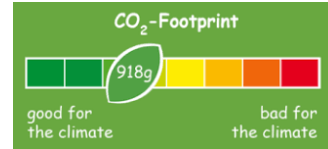
<https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/promote-your-business-ethical-consumer/best-buy-label-for-business>

Each burger contains:

ENERGY	FAT	SATURATES	SUGARS	SALT
924KJ 220kcal 11%	13g MED 19%	5.9g HIGH 30%	0.8g LOW <1%	0.7g MED 12%

% of an adults reference intake.

Typical values per 100g: Energy 966kJ/ 230kcal



Some info is stronger than others: some gaps... country / region variations

- **MANDATORY**

- Ingredients (e.g. EU QUID format)
- Health / nutrition

- **PARTIAL**

- Allergy
- Packaging

- **LOGO APPEALS**

- Mostly environmental and animal welfare
- Franchised / commercial / licensed

- **WEAK OR MISSING**

- Carbon / CO₂e
- Water / H₂O
- Biodiversity
- Social conditions

What matters?

- Who sets standards?
- Who checks data?
- Who is responsible?
 - Delivery?

NB. FOOD IS A TRUST RELATIONSHIP

Consumers need some order brought to this messiness....

1. Clear
2. Graded (1-5 or traffic lights or $A \rightarrow G$?)
3. Evidence-based (simple up-front \rightarrow more info on demand)
4. One system for coherence
5. Trusted
6. International and national

Multi-Criteria Approach

17 goals
→ 6 headings



 **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**
17 GOALS TO TRANSFORM OUR WORLD



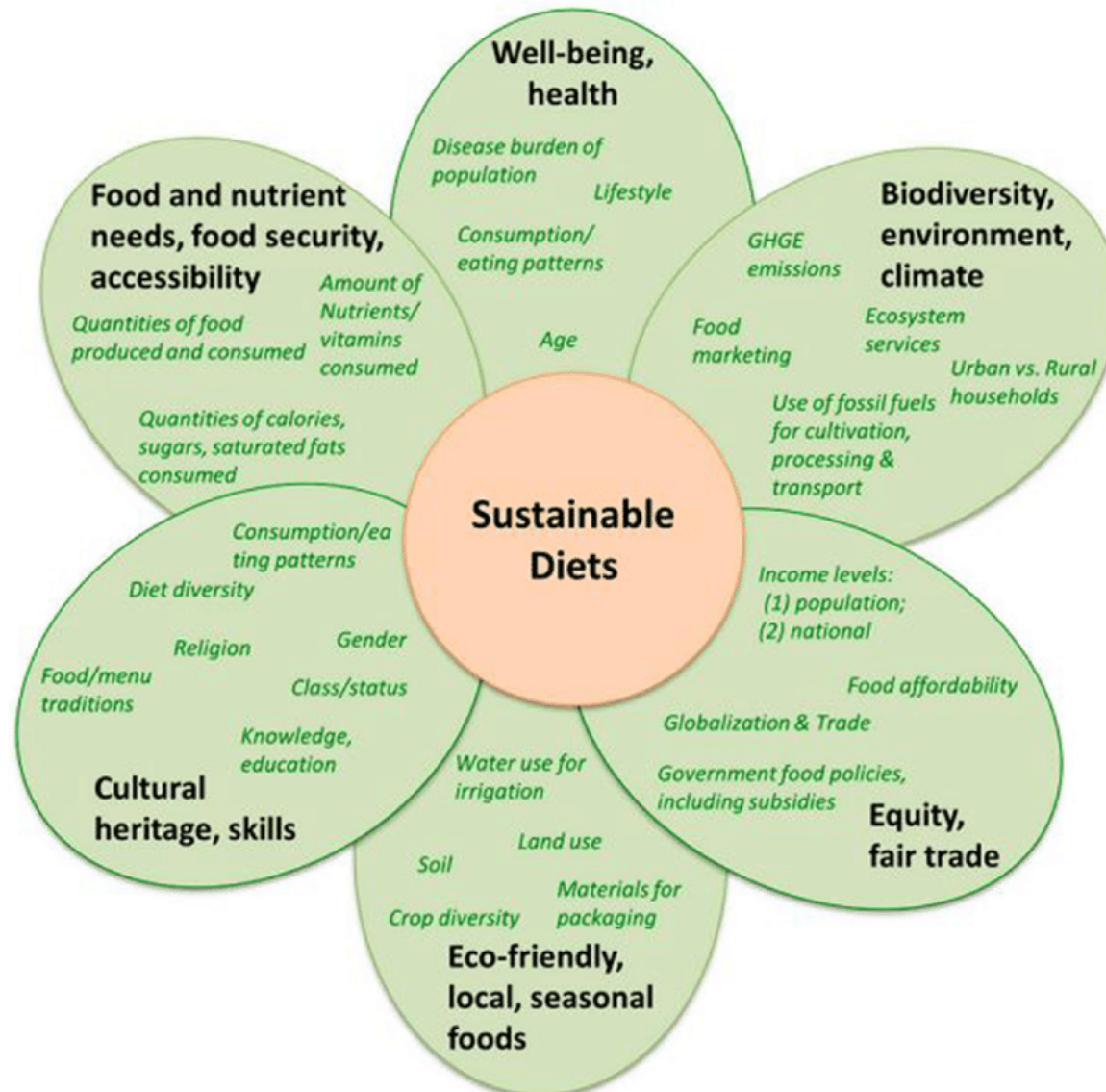
UN 2015 – 17 Goals

Source: Mason P & T Lang (2017)
Sustainable Diets
Routledge

multi-criteria approach



...mostly translated into sustainable diet advice (i.e. culture influence)



Why omni-label now? (1) a policy moment

- UN Food Systems Summit
- COP26 UN Framework on Climate Change
 - 31 Oct – 12 Nov
- COP15 UN Convention on Biodiversity
 - 11-24 October
- Post-Covid-19 world
- Tracking the 2015 SDGs



UNITED NATIONS
FOOD SYSTEMS
SUMMIT 2021



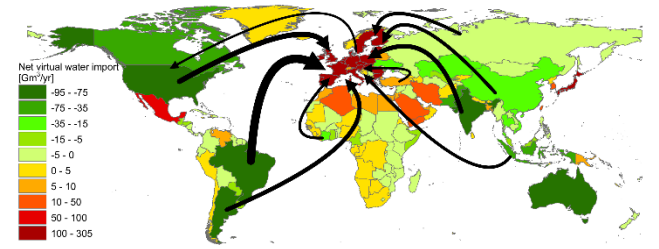
UN BIODIVERSITY
CONFERENCE
COP15-CP/MOP10-NP/MOP4
Kunming, China, 2020



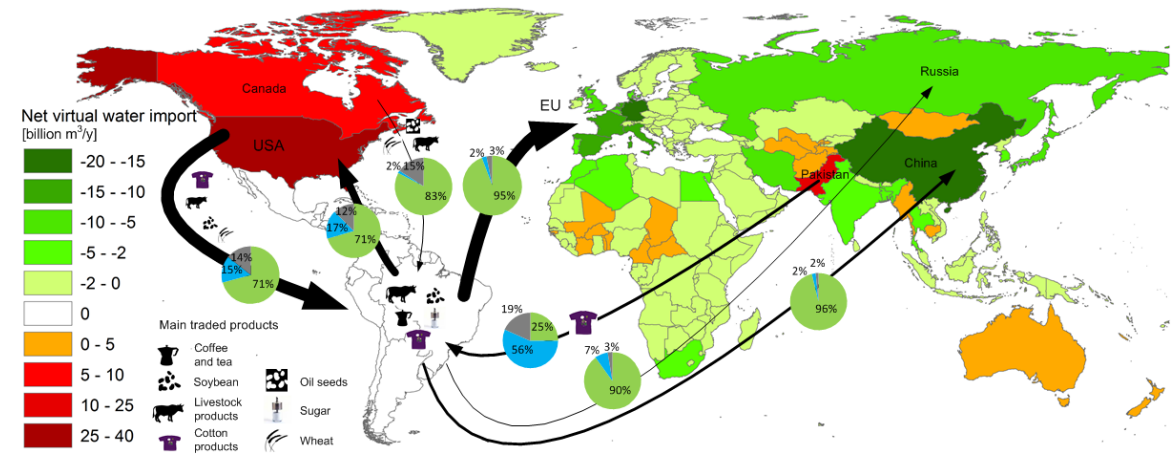
Why omni-label now?

(2) clear direction for supply

- C21st food challenge is..
- ... not selling more stuff
- ... but better stuff
- ... clarity about characteristics
- ... reconnect production with consumption
- ... declaration of what is actually in food
- ... process, not just product ie total impact



Mekonnen & Hoekstra (2011) national water footprints – UNESCO
<https://waterfootprint.org/media/downloads/Report50-NationalWaterFootprints-Vol1.pdf>

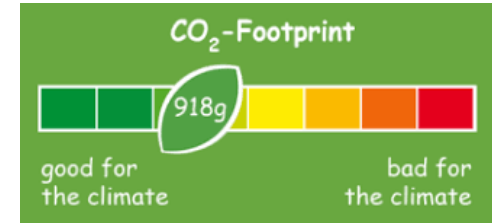


Mekonnen, Pahlow et al (2015)
<https://waterfootprint.org/media/downloads/Mekonnen-et-al-2015-WFA-LAC.pdf>

Why omni-label now?

(3) unite NGOs / civil society

- Beyond sectionalism
- End policy cacophony -- 'me, me, me' interests
- Clear demands
- Filling gaps e.g. H2O



Each 1/2 pack serving contains

MED	LOW	MED	HIGH	MED
Calories	Sugar	Fat	Sat Fat	Salt
353	0.9g	20.3g	10.8g	1.1g
18%	1%	29%	54%	18%

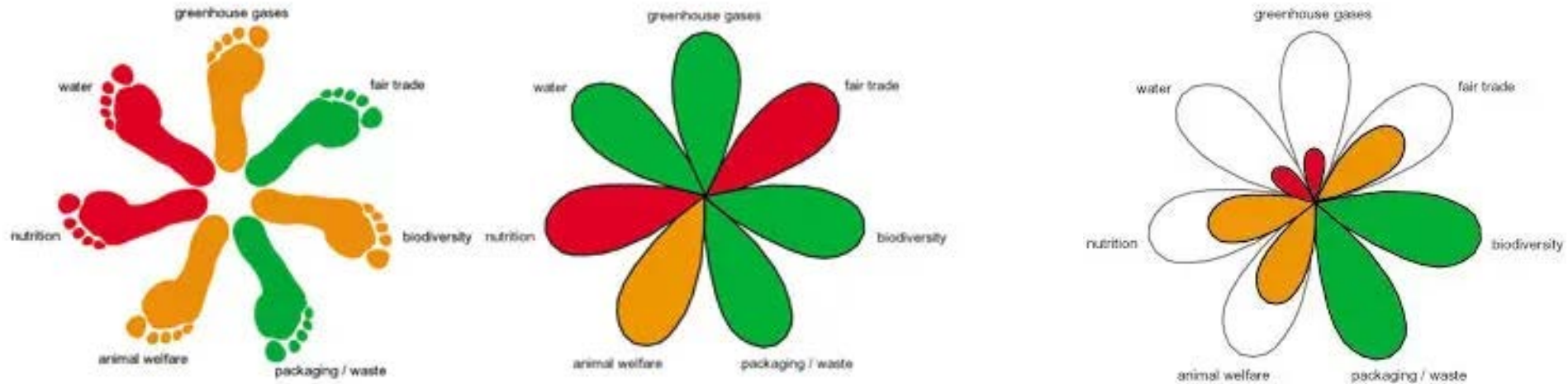
of your guideline daily amount

Source: Food Standards Agency



What it could look like?

(UK NGO experimentation 2010s)



<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/sep/09/food.ethicalliving>

Huge challenges face food system: can labels really do all this?

- **Market economics**

- Efficiency from *information* flow to consumers → block / control 'green-/ health-wash'
- Righting *imbalance of power* between consumers and producers

- **Democracy**

- The people have *too little information* about what matters in food
- encourage *behaviour change*

- **Diet change**

- *Health*: over-, under-, mal-consumption → ill-health and premature death
- *Environment*: food big factor in BD, CO₂e,
- *Social justice*: food is major driver of inequalities between & within societies

- **Production methods:**

- Disclosure of *hidden processes* eg. animal welfare
- *Source* of food e.g. distant factories and production

Connecting up = *the* challenge for consumers and supply systems

- Bring order to fragmentation of labels, messages and interests
 - Must be evidence and data – based
 - Must have clear governance – trust is key
- Technology possible
 - Apps emerging
 - Use of QR code
- Multi-criteria / omni-label mooted in 2010 –13
 - Lang BAAS 2010 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/sep/09/food.ethicalliving>
 - Defra 2010 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324603225_Effective_approaches_to_environmental_labelling_of_food_products_Final_report_for_Defra_project_F00419
 - Dendier (Univ Manchester) 2013 https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/54535926/FULL_TEXT.PDF
- Time to relook?



Political steps now

- Governance
 - How would this be managed? By whom? Process leadership?
- Data
 - Multi-disciplinary collaboration
- Design experimentation
 - Graphics
- Public acceptability
 - Test different versions

Priority for those interested....

- Discuss
- In and outside UN FSS
- Experiment
- Build common approach
- Bottom-line: must be more than Ingredients + Health
- Essential to inject SOCIAL + ENVIRO criteria

Arguments against omni-labels

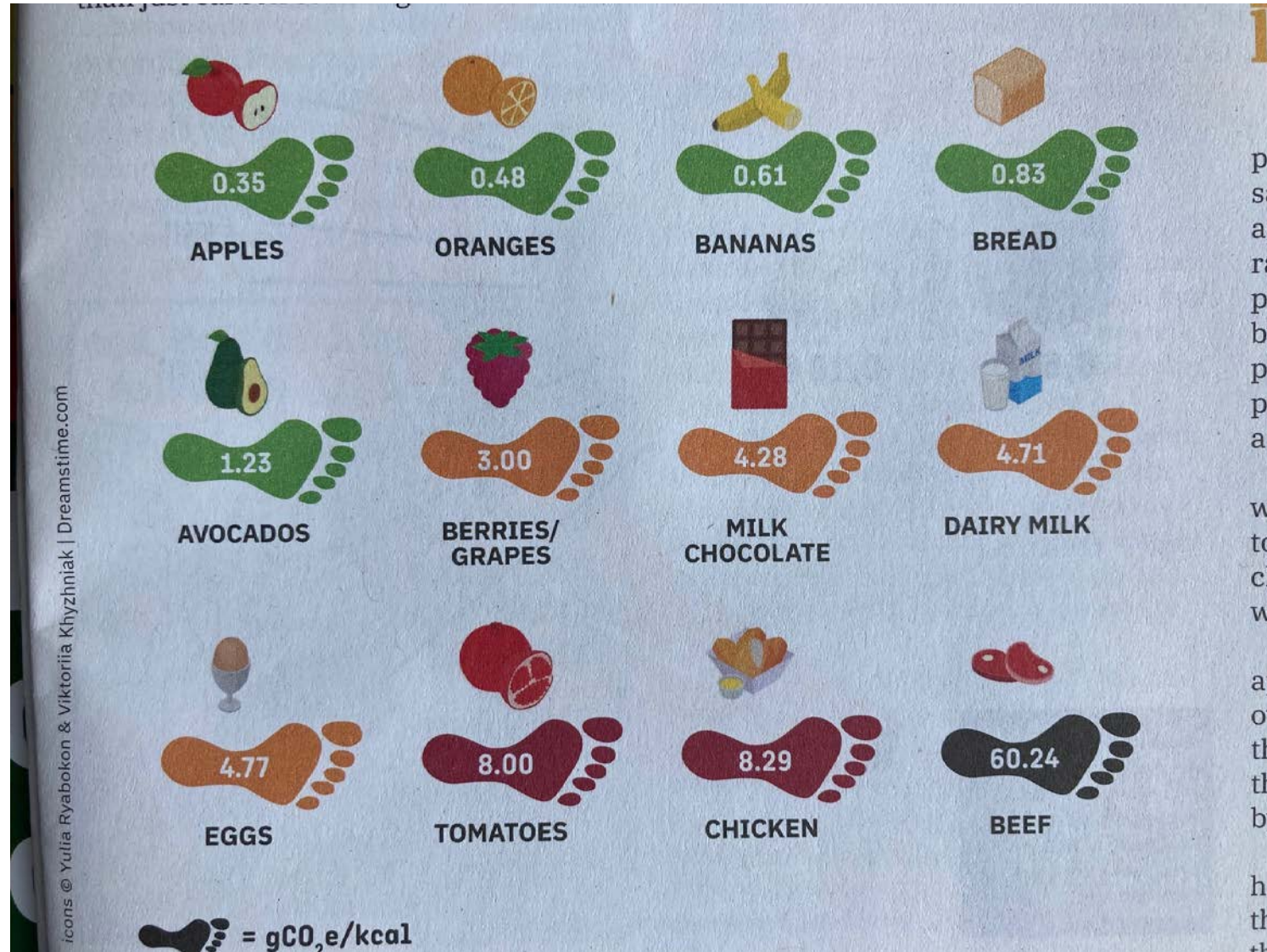
- An avalanche of new technologies confounds consumers
 - *Reply:* an omni-label would be an anchor for truth
- Too complex / keep it simple (eg CO₂e + kcal)
 - *Reply:* Complexity has to be faced e.g. H₂O + BD + social
 - *Reply:* Consumers juggle complexity all the time
- Data are not there (2011 Defra report)
 - *Reply:* Abundant data now
 - *Reply:* now many methods eg footprint, LCA
- No support
 - *Reply:* test it!
 - *Reply:* company creep is below the radar or as marketing

Food labelling - overview

- Labels are 'entry level' change mechanisms
 - 1st step on the Nuffield 'Ladder of Intervention' (see right)
- They are a blunt instrument!
- Some +ve impact on health
 - eg. Ni Mhurchu, Eyles et al (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.11.105>
 - eg. Clarke, Pechey et al (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104744>
- Some +ve evidence on environmental choice
 - eg. Potter, Bastounis et al (2021) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/001391652>
- They can lead to reformulation
 - embarrasses producers to change recipes



Why it matters... even on a product basis – which consumer knows these carbon footprints?



Source: *Ethical Consumer* 2020

Thank you! t.lang@city.ac.uk

