Futuro – a sustainable consumption network

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ABSTRACT

Individuals get more and more concerned about quality of goods (especially food) and services, but they have little means by which to judge the ecological and social impact of production, transport, use and disposal of goods and services. There are some established eco-labels, for example the Austrian "Umweltzeichen", that award some goods as "better" than others. But they don't answer questions like "how much better", which would allow for price-like comparisons – a well-established habit in shopping.

In order to overcome this gap, FUTURO aims to label goods and services with their "true prices": Where EURO shows the market price, FUTURO will show the "ecologically and socially fair price" (the "sustainable price").

This paper will deal with the description of the process which formulates the FUTURO on the one hand and the methodological problems of such a "sustainable consumption" measuring rod on the other hand.

The process to arrive at the FUTURO "price" will comprise three steps:

First, the definition of the ecological and social indicators to be included. This could probably be environmental indicators like CO_2 emissions, pollutants (toxicology), material input or consumption of arable land and social indicators like child labour or exploitation of workforce. For step 1 people have been invited, via direct mailings by NGO project partners, to post their opinions about which indicators to include in the algorithm. They can post their opinions on the web portal www.futuro-preise.at, and the opinions will be saved automatically in the web portal's database.

Second, for any of the selected indicators a scale has to be introduced for the assessment.

Third, the selected indicators have to be "converted" to FUTUROs, which means that the assessment values for each of the indicators have to be aggregated to one single assessment value, the FUTURO "price" - which includes that people will be asked to rank the selected indicators in order of their specific importance to them.

This aggregation procedure will lead to the methodological options to be employed and the consequences attached to each of them. Basically two fundamentally different methods will be discussed – i.e. Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) and Multicriteria Analysis (MCA). They differ widely in their basic methodological assumptions, in their capacities, in their advantages and drawbacks and in their outcomes. Both alternatives will be presented and evaluated according to their applicability for FUTURO. Empirically no decision has been made so far which of the methods shall be used.

The web platform which is used for the accomplishing of the FUTURO "price" will also fulfil other important tasks:
FUTURO prices will be listed on the platform and update of these prices and the underlying algorithm with its calculation factors will be organised through the platform. Producers will be able to register for the assessment of their goods and services via web.
Individual users will be attracted to the platform by new media technologies and will be invited to hold their personal "futuro accounts", which offers continuous monitoring of their "futuros" and possibilities to compare with other members of the platform.

The project was started by SOL (www.nachhaltig.at) in co-operation with Klimabündnis (www.klimabuendnis.at), akaryon (www.akaryon.com) and experts of the University of Economics, Vienna at the beginning of the year 2002. Further co-operations with NGOs from environmental and fairtrade sectors are planned, as well as intensive networking with scientists.

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