THE ENERGY AND RESOURCES INSTITUTE
Creating Innovative Solutions for a Sustainable Future

WCEF2026 ACCELERATOR SESSION

Circular Public Procurement and Ecolabels

Date: 18 September 2026 (Friday) | **Time:** 2:00 pm - 3:30 pm (IST) | **Format:** Virtual

EVENT SUMMARY

SUMMARY

Event Overview

The WCEF2026 Accelerator Session on **Circular Public Procurement and Ecolabels** brought together experts from government, international organisations, research institutions, academia, civil society and industry to examine how public purchasing and environmental information instruments can be linked more systematically to accelerate circularity and sustainable consumption and production in India. Convened by **The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI)** as part of the World Circular Economy Forum 2026, the discussion started from the premise that the two instruments address complementary market failures: public procurement can create predictable demand for environmentally preferable and circular products, while ecolabels, standards and certification provide credible and verifiable information to purchasers. The central challenge was framed not as strengthening Ecomark or green procurement in isolation, but as connecting environmental information to actual purchasing decisions.

Across the interventions, participants noted that India already had many of the necessary building blocks, including the Ecomark framework, BIS standards, BEE star ratings, the General Financial Rules (GFR), procurement manuals, the Government e-Marketplace (GeM), MSME procurement policies and systems for testing and conformity assessment. International experience showed that successful systems did not rely on labels alone; they combined credible criteria with procurement specifications, purchasing targets or preferences, market engagement, life-cycle costing, reporting and digital identification. Discussions centred on the distinction between enabling provisions and mandates, market readiness and MSME inclusion, recognition of equivalent evidence, life-cycle thinking, greenwashing risks, domestic traceability of recycled inputs and predictable demand for circular-economy businesses. The shared message was that the existing instruments now needed to be made to work together, starting with a limited number of high-impact, market-ready product categories.

Speaker Summaries

Dr Shailly Kedia, Senior Fellow and Director, TERI (Welcome Remarks)

Dr Kedia positioned public procurement as a powerful demand-side instrument for the circular economy, capable of creating markets for circular products and services, reducing reliance on virgin materials and strengthening secondary resource markets. She framed the session around two related market failures, inadequate demand and inadequate information, and noted that uncertain demand weakened suppliers' incentive to adopt ecolabels while a lack of verifiable information made it difficult for purchasers to identify environmentally preferable products. Drawing on TERI's parallel WCEF2026 session on ecodesign held in Gandhinagar on 16 September, she highlighted the prominence of the re-introduced Ecomark as an information instrument for Viksit Bharat.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Link demand with information:** Public procurement and ecolabels, certification and standards can jointly address the twin market failures of inadequate demand and inadequate information.
2. **Build on renewed momentum around Ecomark:** The re-notified Ecomark Rules offer an opportunity to promote environmentally preferable products, support Mission LiFE and strengthen consumer transparency, backed by reliable criteria, certification and testing.
3. **Move from propositions to pathways:** The session aimed to identify the practical policy, institutional and market conditions required to link public procurement with ecolabels and other information instruments.

Mr Pujeet Jha, Research Associate, TERI (Framing Presentation on behalf of TERI)

Mr Jha set out the scale of the opportunity: public procurement accounted for about one-fifth of India's GDP, GeM recorded transactions of around ₹5 lakh crore in 2025–26, and roughly 15% of global emissions were linked to public procurement. He traced India's experience from AGMARK

(1937) and Ecomark (1991) to the 2013 BEE star-rating mandate, GeM, the 2017 GFR and the revised Ecomark Rules. International examples from Korea, China and Japan showed how purchasing plans, priority product lists and annual reporting increased green purchasing, while the Blue Angel, Nordic Swan and EU Ecolabel illustrated independent governance, staged criteria and direct links to procurement compliance.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Learn from what has worked elsewhere:** Policy support, annual purchasing plans, priority product lists and regular reporting consistently helped ecolabels gain traction in public procurement.
2. **Connect foundations India already has:** AGMARK, BEE star ratings, ZED certification support, the MSME procurement policy and GeM can be linked more systematically rather than creating new institutional systems.
3. **Follow a phased pathway:** Begin with Ecomark visibility and filters on GeM, move to a priority list of categories with MSME certification support, and progress towards full integration of criteria and digital verification.

Mr R. R. Rashmi, Distinguished Fellow & Programme Director, TERI (Chair)

Mr Rashmi observed that achieving higher circularity required combining market, information and behavioural instruments. Certification brought transparency and knowledge, but without corresponding demand these instruments did not succeed beyond a point. With public procurement across the Central and state governments in the range of 20–22% of GDP, directing even part of it towards Ecomark-certified products could achieve a great deal. In his synthesis, he stressed that the time had come for procurement processes and officers to be equipped for this shift, and noted the emphasis placed on domestic traceability.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Align demand with certification:** Coherence between market forces and certification systems is essential; information alone will not shift the wider economic system.
2. **Use the scale of public purchasing:** GeM and wider public procurement can create substantial demand for products meeting environmental and circularity standards.
3. **Build capacity and demonstrate through pilots:** Train procurement officers, develop practical tools, focus on critical categories where MSMEs are comfortable, develop standards across the value chain and use pilots to show what works.

Mr Virendra Singh, Scientist E / Director & Head, Environment and Ecology Department, Bureau of Indian Standards

Mr Singh explained that circularity terms such as durability, repairability and recycled content often expressed policy intent and had to be defined and verified to avoid loose claims. BIS did this through a structured framework that specified attributes and performance requirements, test methods, traceability or chain-of-custody requirements and conformity assessment. He cited IS 14543 on plastic recycling (where an R25 marking indicated 25% recycled content), fly ash bricks and cement standards, durability standards for work chairs and household goods, and horizontal standards for replaceable and repairable batteries. He noted that BIS had standards for about 2,000 products that were in high demand on GeM and was examining a further list of around 4,000.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Translate circularity into measurable requirements:** Standards convert recycled content, durability and repairability into performance requirements supported by test methods, traceability and conformity assessment.
2. **Align standards with procurement platforms:** Closer coordination between BIS and GeM can ensure that procured products are linked to certified standards.

3. **Engage stakeholders and act swiftly:** Standards need market participation to avoid remaining on the shelf, and India must respond quickly to international developments such as Digital Product Passports and Environmental Product Declarations.

Mr Saubhagya Dixit, Scientist D, Central Pollution Control Board

Mr Dixit explained that Ecomark criteria were product-specific, developed through consultation with BIS, producers and consumers, and backed by verification through field inspections, sampling and testing, and reconciliation of material inflow and outflow data. Ecomark was therefore not a self-declared environmental signal. Circularity differed by product: paper criteria addressed recyclable content, de-inkability and pulpability, while durable goods such as fire extinguishers, computers and air conditioners focused on durability, repairability, refurbishment and end-of-life management. Procurement linkages also needed to respect fair competition principles.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Ensure credibility through verification:** Product-specific criteria and multiple verification mechanisms distinguish Ecomark from self-declared environmental claims.
2. **Recognise that circularity is product-specific:** Requirements may relate to recycled content, durability, repairability, refurbishment, recyclability or end-of-life management depending on the product.
3. **Explore stronger procurement linkages:** Options include examining a GFR amendment to prefer Ecomark products or, where competition rules constrain this, including measurable requirements such as buyback provisions in specifications.

Mr Anil Kumar, Deputy Secretary, Procurement Policy Division, Ministry of Finance, with Mr Vikram Rajvanshi, Consultant, Procurement Policy Division, Ministry of Finance

Mr Kumar outlined the enabling provisions for sustainable public procurement in the GFR since 2017, including Rule 136(iii) on life-cycle cost, Rule 153(ii) and the MSE Procurement Policy requiring 25% procurement from MSEs, Rule 173(xi) on environmental characteristics in evaluation where specified in the tender, and Rule 173(vii) on minimum energy-efficiency star ratings, along with buyback and maintenance-contract provisions. The Manual for Procurement of Goods, 2024, also addresses ecolabels. An earlier assessment found that 85% of paper procured through GeM was Ecomark-certified. He noted that works procurement, largely conducted outside GeM, accounted for most procurement volume, and that QCBS had been permitted for works and non-consultancy services since 2021 with up to 30% technical weight.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Use existing entry points:** The GFR and procurement manuals already enable life-cycle costing, environmental characteristics, star ratings, buyback arrangements and rated criteria.
2. **Establish market evidence before mandates:** There is no general GFR requirement to procure Ecomark products; any move towards preference or mandates requires data on licences, manufacturers, capacity and competition.
3. **Look beyond goods procurement:** Works procurement and construction and demolition waste offer significant opportunities, while frameworks should remain practical and accessible for small enterprises.

Ms Gina Torregroza, Sustainable Public Procurement Lead, UN Environment Programme

Ms Torregroza drew three lessons from UNEP's international work. First, a clear policy and regulatory bridge was needed between credible environmental criteria, procurement requirements and verification, with labels used as one means of demonstrating compliance alongside equivalent evidence. Second, credibility and life-cycle thinking are essential: high recycled content did not automatically mean the lowest overall impact, so durability, repairability, resource use, reuse and

end-of-life had to be considered. Third, market engagement and supplier support were critical, since strong criteria placed in tenders without understanding the market might attract few compliant offers.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Build a functioning policy-to-procurement bridge:** Connect ecolabel criteria, standards and procurement requirements so that environmental information leads to actual purchasing decisions.
2. **Apply life-cycle thinking and accept equivalents:** Criteria should be credible, verifiable and informed by life-cycle assessment, with ecolabels serving as one means of verification rather than the only route.
3. **Sequence and raise ambition gradually:** Identify high-impact categories, define criteria, assess market readiness, engage suppliers, translate criteria into tenders, measure results and progressively raise ambition.

Ms Barbara Ziolkowska, Senior Procurement Specialist and Procurement Team Lead (Europe and South Caucasus), The World Bank

Ms Ziolkowska explained that the World Bank Procurement Regulations, applied in more than 140 countries, already provided the framework for incorporating circularity and life-cycle costing. Rated non-price criteria became mandatory in 2023, with a minimum 50% technical weight for large-value, high- or substantial-risk contracts, and market engagement was mandatory for international tenders above US$10 million. Life-cycle costing was available as an option in standard bidding documents, and the Environmental and Social Framework allowed sustainability requirements across the procurement cycle. The remaining challenge, she noted, was implementation capacity.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Move beyond lowest price:** Rated criteria and substantial technical weighting signal that quality and sustainability matter, while market engagement preserves transparency.
2. **Standardise life-cycle costing:** Common life-cycle-costing models and clear circularity methodologies prevent teams from reinventing approaches for every tender.
3. **Start with priority categories:** Introduce mandatory ecolabel requirements for priority spend categories where suppliers can already respond, and expand through a structured roadmap.

Mr Shouvik Datta, Senior Programme Manager, Delegation of the European Union to India and Bhutan

Mr Datta described how the EU Ecolabel, together with EU Green Public Procurement criteria and the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products framework, served as a verifiable benchmark for translating environmental goals into concrete requirements. Ecolabels had limited impact when confined to consumer information but became strong drivers of innovation when public buyers use their criteria in high-volume tenders. The EU used core and comprehensive criteria to include smaller suppliers, translated label parameters into template clauses, specifications, award criteria and contract-performance clauses, and required acceptance of equivalent evidence. He cited a Dutch refurbishment firm that scaled up after a tender favouring remanufactured computers, and Copenhagen's use of life-cycle costing for street lighting.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Translate labels into tender rules:** Recycled-content and repairability thresholds from ecolabels can be converted into ready-to-use clauses so that buyers need not become environmental experts.
2. **Integrate digitally and guard against greenwashing:** Searchable e-procurement tags, digital catalogues and Digital Product Passports should be tied to verifiable certification databases and audit trails.
3. **Phase implementation by market maturity:** Begin with standardised, high-volume categories such as paper and stationery, office furniture, textiles and uniforms, and cleaning products.

Mr Amrat Singh, Director, CUTS International

Mr Singh framed the objective as "credibility without exclusion": procurers needed confidence in environmental claims, while capable MSMEs should not be shut out by unnecessary costs. In his view, an ecolabel should make clear what claim was made, what evidence supported it and who had verified it. He argued for rigorous performance requirements with proportionate routes for demonstrating compliance, acceptance of credible equivalent evidence, and technical, testing and certification support for smaller suppliers. He cited the GeM–Textiles Committee initiative on upcycled textiles as an example of a platform that built an ecosystem rather than simply listing green products.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Be credible by design and proportionate in compliance:** Environmental performance requirements should be rigorous, while documentation and testing burdens should match the assurance they actually add.
2. **Include smaller suppliers:** Equivalent evidence, capacity building and access to testing and certification can reduce transaction costs for MSMEs without lowering standards.
3. **Pilot the full chain before scaling:** Test the complete chain, from criteria and verification to specifications, evaluation, supplier participation and purchase, in selected categories.

Dr Bhabesh Hazarika, Economist, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy

Dr Hazarika argued that, from a public-finance perspective, the question was whether resources delivered value over the full life of an asset, not only whether a product is environmentally preferable. GFR Rule 136 and Department of Expenditure advisories already provided for life-cycle costing; the task was to make it practical and consistent. Citing a TERI study of three government buildings, he noted that green features raised initial investment by around 56–90% but produced net savings of about 18–40% over 25–30 years, with payback in roughly five to ten years, while cautioning that results would vary between buildings.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Assess whole-life value:** Higher upfront prices can be offset by lower energy, maintenance and replacement costs, so purchase price alone can give a misleading fiscal picture.
2. **Standardise and target life-cycle costing:** Develop simple, consistent methodologies and apply them where whole-life costs matter most, such as buildings, vehicles, equipment and lighting.
3. **Specify methods and support officers:** Evaluation criteria should be set out in tenders in advance, and procurement officers need evidence and tools to justify choices that offer better value over time.

Dr Amit Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of Natural and Applied Sciences, TERI School of Advanced Studies

Dr Singh noted that ecolabels had originally been designed to provide visibility for specific products rather than to operate across mass public procurement. He recommended starting with low-entry-barrier categories where MSMEs can participate and disclosure can be simplified, supported by product-category rules developed with industry bodies. He cautioned that recycled content did not always mean a lower footprint, highlighted the absence of freely available life-cycle-assessment databases in India and the Global South, and noted that GeM currently offered limited filters beyond price. He also flagged greenwashing risks, particularly in paper.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Start small and build identifiability:** Begin with simpler product sub-categories where MSMEs can make disclosures, and use platform data to track whether environmental filters shape buying.
2. **Open up life-cycle data:** Sector- and product-specific LCA databases in the public domain are needed to develop robust environmental criteria and assessments.

3. **Develop a home-grown approach:** India should design solutions suited to its context rather than copying international models, and guard against labels that invite greenwashing.

Ms Pratibha Dewett, Chief Sustainability & Marketing Officer, Lucro Plastecycle Private Limited

Ms Dewett observed that tender language was often too loose, relying on terms such as "environmentally friendly" or "sustainable" rather than defined thresholds. She challenged the assumption that recycled material implies lower quality, noting that formal recyclers, supported by EPR requirements, placed strong emphasis on quality and competed closely with virgin material. She called for imported recycled granules not to count towards recycled-content requirements, and for long-term procurement visibility, citing an example where an unrelated eligibility condition excluded smaller firms from bidding.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Put a number on it:** Tenders should specify clear, verifiable thresholds such as defined recycled-content percentages rather than broad environmental terms.
2. **Judge recycled products on performance:** Products containing recycled material should be tested against the same performance benchmarks as those made from virgin material.
3. **Ensure domestic traceability and predictable demand:** Recycled inputs should be traceable to Indian waste streams, and multi-year procurement pipelines would help recyclers plan feedstock, capacity and investment.

Vote of Thanks

The vote of thanks was delivered by **Ms Ishita Srivastava** (Associate Fellow), TERI, who thanked the speakers, the Chair, the World Circular Economy Forum 2026 Secretariat, TERI colleagues and participants.

Summary

The discussion pointed towards a practical implementation pathway rather than new standalone instruments. Speakers broadly agreed that India should identify a limited number of high-impact, market-ready product categories; translate environmental and circularity criteria into usable tender specifications; strengthen verification and digital identification on procurement platforms; allow equivalent means of demonstrating compliance where appropriate; develop standardised life-cycle-costing tools; support MSMEs with testing and certification; and build the capacity of procurement officials. Views differed on the degree of prescription, with some favouring mandatory requirements in categories where suppliers can already respond and others emphasising performance-based requirements and equivalent evidence to avoid excluding capable smaller suppliers. Market evidence, domestic traceability of recycled inputs and predictable multi-year demand were seen as essential to credibility and investment. The Chair's synthesis reinforced the need to move from individual instruments to an integrated procurement ecosystem in which standards, environmental information, market capacity and purchasing decisions reinforce one another, demonstrated through pilots before being scaled up.

Suggested Citation: The Energy and Resources Institute (2026), WCEF2026 Accelerator Session on "Circular Public Procurement and Ecolabels", Event Summary, New Delhi: The Energy and Resources Institute.

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