

Executive summary

Since 2007, the OECD has undertaken a substantial and growing body of analytical work under the aegis of its “Making Reform Happen” (MRH) project, which seeks to better understand both the obstacles to reform that governments face in different policy domains and the most effective ways of overcoming them. This volume presents some of the findings that have so far emerged from ongoing work within the context of MRH. Its principal aim is to see how an understanding of past reform experiences may be of use to policy makers seeking to design, adopt and implement reforms in the years to come. The chapters that follow examine the particular challenges to reform and explore possible ways to meet those challenges in nine different fields of public policy: competition and market opening; pensions and labour markets; tax policy; environmental protection; education; health care; public administration; regulatory policy and fiscal consolidation. They reflect the experiences of the OECD and its member countries in each domain, with reference to both OECD-wide trends and specific cases, in the belief that a better understanding of past successes and failures should enhance prospects for better design and implementation of future reforms.

Despite the wide range of issues areas and countries covered, the conclusions that emerged from the chapters collected here suggest that such cross-country comparisons can be fruitful.

- They highlight evidence of institutional and policy convergence in some domains. This suggests that the scope for cross-country learning and policy/institutional transfer is considerable, despite wide variation in individual country contexts.
- The MRH work points to broad lessons for policy makers undertaking reforms – lessons that appear to hold good across a wide range of countries and issue areas. While policy makers may at times need both toughness and political cunning when advancing contentious reforms, OECD experience suggests that successful leadership is often about winning consent rather than securing compliance. This makes effective communication, underpinned by solid research, all the more important. Other cross-cutting themes concern the respective roles of leadership and institutions, questions of timing and sequencing of reforms, and strategies for dealing with the opponents of policy change.
- A further set of lessons that emerge are more “domain-specific”, addressing the specific challenges that arise in conjunction with different kinds of reform.

The importance of such reform lessons is all the greater in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis. As OECD governments confront the challenge of trying to restore public finances to health without undermining a recovery that in many areas may remain weak for some time, they will need to pursue a careful mix of fiscal policies and growth-enhancing structural reforms. Designing, adopting and implementing such a policy mix will require the crafting of effective reforms and effective strategies for implementing them. A number of the studies presented here thus explore the particular challenges associated with reform after the crisis and the role of the OECD in meeting those challenges.