

Belgium's experience with peer reviews

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Summary of Presentation

OECD arose from a multilateral reaction to rebuild the European economy after two world wars and the 1929 depression. OECD's convention (1961) states that the organization is empowered to make recommendations to members. Members accept to be reviewed.

After 45 years of experience, the process is now fully tailor-made for the OECD countries. It has extended beyond economic policy to many other areas. In 2006 alone, Belgium was reviewed in 6 different fields: energy, the environment, the economy, anti-bribery, money laundering, development co-operation.

The process is a system of checks and balances between three players: the country examined, the committee (ie the other members) and the secretariat.

Taking the example of the Belgian economic review of 2007, the whole process takes almost 12 months. A questionnaire of 166 questions was sent by the secretariat to the Belgian authorities; these questions were allocated by the Prime Minister's office to the various Ministries so that they prepare written answers. A field visit took place. Then a second questionnaire. Prepared answers to the 2 questionnaires amounted to 996 pages plus 1043 pages of additional documentation. A second visit took place with 30 hours of meetings with 66 persons. The draft report was then prepared and sent with reactions received. The committee finally met for 6 hours to discuss the report. After further interaction the review will be presented to the press next March by the prime minister and the secretary general of OECD.

This is a resource-intensive process. However it has many benefits which outweigh the costs. Through discussion with OECD staff, government officials get a neutral and non-political view of their policies. Since the country reviewed is free to implement the recommendations, the Secretariat is free to make clear recommendations. Also, national authorities have to match the quality of statistics used by the secretariat.

OECD recommendations represent a neutral view. Their purpose is not to fingerpoint but to help. They carry more weight than national recommendations. Their influence is increased through publication of the review. Non members have also been reviewed, for instance China, with positive results.

In conclusion, governments like the review process by the OECD because it helps them to convince their public opinion when policy adjustments are necessary.

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