ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE REVIEWS: ACHIEVEMENTS IN OECD COUNTRIES

Following a decision of the Environment Policy Committee, at its 1991 meeting at ministerial level, the OECD launched a programme of Environmental Performance Reviews. Since then, the environmental performance of Member countries has been reviewed and a second cycle of reviews has recently been started. Three non-member countries have also been reviewed in cooperation with the UN-ECE.

Despite the wide diversity of economic, social, environmental and political conditions among Member countries, a number of broad conclusions can be drawn concerning progress in environmental management and the steps towards sustainable development made in OECD countries in the 1990s.

... major lessons can be drawn on the achievements and challenges of OECD countries with respect to their environmental policies.

In most Member countries, the environmental progress made in the 1980s was consolidated and further enhanced during the 1990s:

- Emissions of acidifying substances to air, particularly those of sulphur oxides have been reduced significantly.
- Emissions and concentrations of a few major air pollutants such as SO2, CO and lead have declined because of strengthened standards and enforcement applied to major stationary sources and vehicles.
- Economic restructuring (dematerialisation) and changes in the energy mix have further contributed to decoupling releases of air pollutants from economic growth.
- The most pressing pollution problems arising in regard to surface waters have been tackled, mainly through construction of waste water treatment facilities, regulation of discharges from large point sources, better implementation of existing legislation, water taxation and integrated water management.
- Progress has been made on the issues of hazardous waste and municipal waste, with a number of innovative programmes being established for prevention, collection and reuse/recycling of waste.
- In the area of nature conservation, most Member countries have made progress in protecting threatened species by establishing protected habitats, encouraging beneficial changes in land use practices, and adopting new legislation to protect biodiversity.

Despite efforts made during the 1990s, problems remain in areas such as eutrophication of surface water and groundwater pollution by nitrates and pesticides. Other problematic areas include emissions of NOx and small particulates and ground-level ozone concentration. The potential gains in pollution reduction from regulating large point sources of air and water pollution are, or will soon be (with some exceptions), practically exhausted. A change of approach is needed to deal effectively with small-scale and diffuse sources (e.g. small businesses, service industries, transportation, agriculture, households/consumers, end of life products). Increased generation of waste combined with the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) syndrome is a source of difficulties. Management of biodiversity, particularly outside protected areas and for all species (not just those that are threatened), has not proven an easy task. Adopting an ecosystem approach to nature conservation remains a challenge.
There is a need to better integrate environmental concerns in sectoral policies...

A number of countries have adopted national plans for environmental management, or more broadly for promoting sustainable development. Because of economic pressure or lack of sufficient societal and policy support, however, progress in implementing them has been limited. Over the last 20 years, the manufacturing industry as a whole, and the chemical industry in particular, have shown that integration of environmental and industrial policies can be carried out successfully without endangering competitiveness or employment. Other economic sectors have also begun taking greater account of environmental requirements, but not yet to the extent of significantly modifying their overall impacts on the environment. As a result, little progress has been made in areas where effective implementation depends on significant changes or reforms in economic or sectoral policies. The sectors with the greatest environmental impact at present are energy, transport, agriculture and, in some countries, industry. The experience of several countries, in particular those which joined the OECD relatively recently, proves that environmental convergence can be achieved without jeopardising economic development and social cohesion.

... and to strengthen international co-operation.

In terms of international co-operation, important progress has been made by giving effect to a range of international agreements -global, regional and bilateral- and to other commitments made, for example, through ministerial declarations. Notable achievements include reductions in emissions of ozone-depleting substances, abatement of SO\textsubscript{x} emissions, severe restrictions on the dumping of waste at sea, and protection of some species (e.g. cetaceans, migratory birds). Transboundary movements of hazardous waste are strictly controlled, and the abuses of the past in this regard have been eliminated. Emissions of pollutants to regional seas, such as the North Sea and the Baltic, have been reduced and emissions of toxic substances, especially to many international lakes and rivers, greatly restricted. International co-operation at the bilateral level has progressed considerably, and regional co-operation has grown under a variety of new agreements. However, substantial efforts are still needed to achieve full implementation of the numerous commitments made at international level, such as concerning air pollution or climate change- and not all environment related problems have proven equally amenable to international solutions.
Environmental policies carried out in the 1990s have clearly contributed to improving the state of the environment in OECD Countries. Moreover, these policies have not in themselves posed significant economic costs in Member countries, implying total expenditures in the order of only 1-2% of GDP. Furthermore, they have not created significant distortions in international trade or had detrimental effects on employment. On the contrary, environmental policies have often provided positive incentives for economic restructuring and technological innovation.

To meet national and international environmental commitments, however, it will be necessary to strengthen the integration of environmental, economic and social concerns in policy design and implementation in the near future, especially in the energy, transport and agriculture sectors, and to provide price signals that reflect social and environmental costs and are not biased by environmentally damaging subsidies. Environmental policies will need increased emphasis on implementation and enforcement. Openness, accountability and access to information will need to be improved, and stakeholder participation further encouraged. In addition, international co-operation will need to be increased even further.