CONSULTATIONS ON THE OECD GUIDELINES FOR MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISES, PARIS, 19 APRIL 1999

(Aide-Mémoire)

This aide-mémoire, which has been prepared by the Secretariat, provides an informal summary of the CIME’s consultations on the Guidelines with BIAC, TUAC and other non-Governmental representatives. As agreed, this document will be made available on the OECD website [www.oecd.org/daf/cmis/cime/mneguide.htm].
1. Consultations on the Review of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises were held in Paris on 19 April, 1999. The OECD’s Committee on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises (CIME) hosted representatives from BIAC (the OECD’s Business and Industry Advisory Council), TUAC (the OECD’s Trade Union Advisory Council), as well from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for a day of discussion on the Review of the Guidelines. The primary purpose of the meeting was for CIME delegates to be able to hear and consider the views of social partners with respect to the proposed framework for the Review; thus the contributions of BIAC, TUAC and NGOs will be emphasised in this aide-mémoire as part of the continuing dialogue on the Review.

2. The CIME chairman began by noting that this meeting was the second opportunity to consult on the Guidelines, the first being a conference in Budapest, Hungary, in November, 1998. Secretariat papers providing the backdrop to the discussion were “The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises: Framework for the Review” [DAFFE/IME(99)5] and an “Annotated Agenda” [DAFFE/IME(99)8], which were circulated in advance. An updated version of the OECD Guidelines “framework” paper is available on the OECD Guidelines website at: www.oecd.org/daf/cmis/cime/mneguide.htm.

3. Conference discussion is best captured under the following headings: (i) Opening Remarks; (ii) The Guidelines in a Contemporary Economic and Social Context; (iii) General Considerations in the Review; (iv) Textual Matters; (v) Implementation and Other Procedural Issues, and (vi) Next Steps/Follow-up.

(i) Opening Remarks

4. In opening the day’s discussion, the CIME chairman noted that the Review was now at an important stage: as the discussion document indicated, the framework for the Review was taking shape. While CIME had not reached complete consensus on the changes that might be needed in the Guidelines and their operating procedures, there was broad agreement on the issues that needed exploration. First, “Global Applicability”. The question as to how or whether the status of the Guidelines in non-signatory countries should be changed has emerged as an important issue for discussion. Second, Textual Issues. Although all chapters would be covered by the Review, the chapters on employment and industrial relations, and environmental protection, have been highlighted for particular attention while other issues mentioned by delegations include competition, bribery, human rights, and sustainable development. CIME welcomed additional expertise from other OECD Committees and interested parties on these questions, a process for which was now well underway. Third, Implementation Procedures. The CIME has already indicated that these issues may be just as important as revisions to the text, and a number of changes to existing procedures have been suggested and will be discussed in further detail.

5. The chairman of BIAC’s Committee on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises outlined business’s approach to the Review. BIAC supports the Guidelines, and is ready to contemplate modernising the text where necessary, but remains cautious about some of the ideas for implementation that suggest procedures that would undermine business support and co-operation. The world has changed since the Guidelines first appeared in 1976. SMEs are increasingly important, and increasingly
international in character and focus. This needs to be taken into account in the Review, as do other new developments and changes to the global economy. Another change is the growth of individual business codes; the Guidelines could take some inspiration from them in making a flexible and positive instrument that business interests, particularly new entrants to the international market, would find useful to follow and use. Finally, a BIAC representative observed that it was going to be a challenge to operationalise widely divergent expectations in the Guidelines.

6. TUAC has always been a supporter of the Guidelines, but is now concerned that they are no longer used and little known. A TUAC representative recalled the 1998 OECD Ministerial communiqué, which called for work on the Guidelines “…to continue to update them in a timely manner, to ensure their relevance and effectiveness”. The Guidelines Review in fact had been delayed, and was now more urgent than ever given the backlash over globalisation. In addition, Kofi Annan’s 1999 address to the World Economic Forum at Davos proposing a global compact on human rights, labour, and environment suggested that this Review was indeed timely.

7. One of the NGO representatives tabled his opening statement, in which he welcomed the OECD’s greater openness to dialogue with civil society. He noted that the Guidelines could serve as a motive force to better social and ecological standards, and to serve as standardising rules for codes of conduct. Existing examples in this regard were mentioned, including recent attempts to create international standards comparable to the ISO series (social accountability 8000 or ISO 21000). These proposals have been characterised by a dialogue between business, trade unions, and NGOs; the OECD could support this process by incorporating these ideas into the Guidelines. NGOs opposed giving MNEs and investors rights without corresponding responsibilities. Chief among these responsibilities are social accountability and sustainable development.

(ii) The Guidelines in a Contemporary Economic and Social Context

8. An international environment with different characteristics since the 1970s suggests that the role of the Guidelines will be different as we approach the next millennium. Issues such as confirming the global applicability of the Guidelines, as well as enhancing the credibility of the Guidelines – in the public eye as well as for business – would be important to address during this Review.

9. A BIAC representative contrasted the situation in the late 70s, when the Guidelines were first adopted, with today. In the late 70s, a relatively limited number of large MNEs, mostly headquartered in the US, were multinational in scope. Today, it is estimated that there are 40,000 enterprises with international interests, from a variety of countries. The Guidelines have a role to play in this regard, in particular for new entrants in new marketplaces with respect to their interactions with governments and civil society.

10. Comments on this section of the report from one NGO representative began with noting the importance of a vision for the Guidelines in a world of increasing importance of foreign direct investment (FDI). The growing role of NGOs was important, too, which was reflected in Agenda 21 at Rio. In this environment, the Guidelines could help to set medium level standards for companies, rather than either a minimum level or “best practice”. Best companies tend to compete with each other to achieve the highest standards of corporate responsibilities. Minimum standards tend to be covered by formal legal norms. If pitched at “good practice” level, the Guidelines could come into their own, by providing (a) a reference for good practice; (b) transparency for many corporate practices; (c) a basis for pressure on poor performers. In this context, multilateral standards such as the Guidelines were useful if there was real transparency and public recognition of company performance in relation to the benchmark standards of the Guidelines. The Guidelines could also be useful in the context of the bilateral investment treaties.
11. A TUAC representative expressed support for a higher profile for labour and environmental issues, and noted that implementation would be the key during this Review. They were encouraged by the BIAC perspective with respect to the potential for the Guidelines given the changing business environment. However the low profile of National Contact Points remained a concern. It was increasingly important to take into account the social dimension of globalisation, and the Guidelines should play a role in this – emphasising them in OECD FDI reviews for example.

12. BIAC intervened to note that the Guidelines were part of a balanced package of OECD investment instruments, including the National Treatment Instrument, which was important to take into account for the credibility of the Guidelines in the business community. Procedures associated with the Guidelines have to be credible, and there has to be accountability in the process.

13. An NGO representative argued that there was nothing to prevent business from applying higher standards than those required by law. With respect to credibility, it would help to make the Guidelines more binding, and how to do this needs to be further explored. One thing that could help would be to require National Contact Points to hold public hearings regarding the application of the Guidelines. Alternatively, enforcement could be furthered by attaching eligibility for export credits to respect for the Guidelines.

14. A TUAC representative stated that the key Guidelines problem is lack of public profile. Indeed better awareness of the Guidelines was more important that textual changes, since greater awareness and even the threat of adverse publicity in extreme cases could encourage companies to adhere to the Guidelines.

15. An NGO representative noted the relationship between burgeoning codes of conduct and the Guidelines. Examples of two recent successful codes were the “Clean Clothes Campaign” and the “Ethical Trading Initiative”. Companies could do much more with respect to monitoring their conduct using the Guidelines. Concerning non-Member countries, it was noted that consumer pressure and other influences can have a positive demonstration effect on local industry, which was another reason why the Guidelines should have standing outside the OECD.

16. A BIAC representative argued that responsibility for the dissemination of the Guidelines should continue to rest with National Contact Points.

17. Several national delegations signalled their strong support for the continued participation of civil society representatives in the Guidelines Review process. Other points were registered, including the desirability of strengthening National Contact Points (on a tripartite basis with government, labour, and business representatives, or alternatively on an intradepartmental basis within national administrations), and the importance of taking into account NGO views, although some delegations pointed out that NGOs did not speak with one voice. A number of delegations found the classification of “minimum standards” vs. “best practice” in Section I of the Secretariat framework paper a useful way of conceptualising where the Guidelines could stand in relation to other instruments.

18. One delegation suggested that modifying the CIME consensus rule could help decision-making. Another expressed concern that the Guidelines were “complaint driven”; there needed to be more positive aspects associated with implementation to ensure business commitment to support the Guidelines and respect their recommendations. Furthermore, the Guidelines Review was not an isolated exercise, and was indeed related to the debate over the rights and responsibilities of investors, which included the relationship between the Guidelines and the principles embodied in other OECD investment instruments, notably the commitment of governments to provide national treatment to foreign enterprises.
(iii) Other General Considerations in the Review

19. These issues tend to pertain to both textual and implementation considerations, in particular the global applicability of the Guidelines, but also the nature of the OECD Guidelines as a non-binding instrument. In addition, other “new” issues (such as those connected with the Rio conference on the environment) have also emerged into public debate since the last Review in 1991.

20. An NGO representative identified two important general issues that would have to be taken into account: sustainable development, and transparency and accountability with respect to MNE activities in the societies in which they operate.

21. A BIAC representative differentiated between agreeing on a revised set of Guidelines vs. negotiating a “social contract” with binding rules covering all sorts of social issues. On global application, caution was expressed about the desirability of unilaterally imposing rules on developing countries in the OECD, which should rather be done in partnership with them.

22. Also on the global application of the Guidelines, TUAC noted that the Guidelines are recommendations of generally accepted principles. Two different standards between OECD and non-OECD countries was not a desirable outcome. The Guidelines were in fact stronger than most company codes, since they were comprehensive, were explicitly supported by governments, and contained implementation and monitoring procedures. Promotion was the responsibility not only of National Contact Points, but also of unions and business. It was true that globalisation had changed international relationships and that smaller and more companies were now involved in the process; another consequence of this was the development of supply chains and subcontractors, which should be taken into account in the Guidelines context.

23. According to BIAC, the issue of global applicability of the Guidelines presented challenges and opportunities. Business liked to set global standards for their operations. However, caution was needed with respect to how non-OECD countries would feel about applying the Guidelines in their countries because they set a more demanding standard for MNE behaviour than is enforced in many developing countries.

24. An NGO expanded on the nature of “more binding” instruments, noting that this could be done in different ways aside from hard international law. Annual reports, or summons to National Contact Points, could both serve to strengthen the implementation procedures of the Guidelines. It was also noted that the draft UN Code on multinationals (now abandoned) had been supported by developing countries. And as far the environment was concerned, the “precautionary principle”, it was noted, was already embodied in Agenda 21, and endorsed by business. Finally, in developing countries a key problem is not the existence of standards, but rather their enforcement. The Guidelines could be very useful in all these contexts, in particular in developing countries.

25. TUAC noted that para. 3 of the introductory chapter already endorsed international co-operation amongst “all states”, and that it the OECD could not go backwards in the face of globalisation. A good exploration of different approaches to “binding” was in the discussion paper presented by Prof. A.A. Fatouros of the University of Athens [DAFFE/IME/RD(99)3 – “The OECD Guidelines in a Globalising World”, also available through the OECD Guidelines website].

26. National delegations intervened on a number of points during the discussion of this section of the report. While many spoke in favour of “global applicability”, they also acknowledged that this was an issue whose implications needed to be further explored, including with non-members. In addition, a number of delegations noted the increasing number of individual codes, and also suggested that the relationship between these instruments and the Guidelines warranted further examination, and that the
changing context in which the *Guidelines* operated needed further exploration. Concerning the
conditionality of eligibility for export credits with *Guidelines* adherence, one delegation recommended
cautions with respect to the OECD’s legal position since these programmes were in private hands in some
countries.

(iv) **Textual Matters in the Guidelines Review**

27. No chapter has been excluded from this process, but the chapters on employment and industrial
relations (chapter seven), and environmental protection (chapter eight) have been singled out for particular
attention in light of developments in these spheres since 1991. The expertise of other interested parties has
been welcomed by the CIME, and a process of consultations with other OECD Committees is well in train.
In addition, a number of other “new issues”, among them sustainable development, human rights, and
corporate governance have also emerged as possible avenues for further discussion as the Review
progresses. Conference participants broadly agreed with the issues identified thus far with respect to
textual revision of the *Guidelines*.

28. A business representative said that it was possible to use the OECD *Guidelines* without an
internal code of conduct; indeed his company had done so following the 1976 OECD Declaration on
International Investment and Multinational Enterprises (of which the *Guidelines* was a part). A second
business representative said that business priorities included competition, tax policy (though references to
harmful tax competition would be problematic), and corporate governance. Human Rights should be
primarily the responsibility of governments.

29. A TUAC representative argued that it was not desirable to talk about a complete revision of the
*Guidelines*; rather we needed to strengthen them before taking about, say, legal sanctions against
businesses. Similarly, we should not leap to blacklists. Human rights were indeed a primary responsibility
for governments, but companies could use the principles in the *Guidelines* to create “islands of liberty”
within jurisdictions. There may be a role for the CIME in avoiding bad or misleading publicity, or in
exposing falsehoods. Environment and sustainable development were important, and that we should not
lose sight of the purpose and value-added of the *Guidelines*, which were after all “agreed expectations of
governments for MNEs”.

30. An NGO representative stated that MNEs were not fragile institutions, and that the OECD
*Guidelines* could be more robust. If Corporate Governance Principles were referred to, we would need to
expand references to stakeholders. Human rights have to be in the *Guidelines*, as do references to
consumer health and safety, sustainable development (wherever relevant). The “precautionary” and
“polluter pays” principles were also recommended.

31. Another BIAC representative observed that this consultations session was taking place in a much
more positive atmosphere than in Budapest, which was constructive. Viewing the *Guidelines* in a positive
light, in the context of their advantages for business, was important. It is good business to have good
practices.

32. National delegations intervened to note concerns but also to outline their hopes and aspirations
for the instrument. Some delegations preferred to concentrate on the positive aspects of procedural issues;
on whitelists rather than blacklists, and the credibility and transparency that would be fostered by a
“carrot” approach in this regard. Others noted that it would be necessary to strengthen procedures to make
the *Guidelines* work effectively. Thus, the emphasis should not be on talk of legal enforcement, but rather
recommendations and more effective implementation mechanisms. It was important to be able to reinforce
procedures to further our goals with respect to workers’ rights, environmental standards, and social norms.
33. These issues have been signalled by the CIME as having particular significance during the current review. Alternative suggestions with a view to enhancing the credibility of the Guidelines, including implementation procedures as well as increasing public understanding and business support remain to be discussed.

34. TUAC opened this session by emphasising the importance of modernising National Contact Points. High level government participation was advocated, and to invigorate processes NCP membership in governments should be “interagency”. NCPs should not remain simply a letterbox. Annual meetings with reports and surveys were advocated, with a CIME experts group to periodically review NCP mechanisms. Guidelines procedures should not only be “case driven” (i.e. not limited to dealing with problems in compliance by individual companies).

35. A BIAC representative stated that clarifications should remain anonymous. This served to safeguard a neutral process. Furthermore, the clarifications process depends on the free transfer of information and on businesses having the confidence to communicate freely. If this was jeopardised, it would be necessary to consider the legal ramifications of doing so. If the Guidelines moved to being a judicial process involving legal censure, this would change the character of the Guidelines unacceptably. Furthermore, it was doubtful that the OECD was equipped to hear cases in a judicial way which could end in public censure.

36. An NGO participant replied to this intervention by stating that on the contrary the OECD should be empowered to “name names”.

37. BIAC replied that this line of procedure was not productive; business would have difficulty agreeing to a process that would involve individual businesses being named or slandered. Neither was it up to the OECD to pronounce on, say, other instruments such as the 1998 ILO Declaration. This Declaration’s follow-up procedures were not yet finalised, and nothing should be done that would jeopardise them.

38. TUAC noted that with respect to National Contact Points (NCPs), very few work well. The current complaint based approach is a minimum. There have been 25 Guidelines cases since 1978; though few of these have taken place since 1986. In the 1978-1986 period, individual businesses were always identified in the course of confidential CIME deliberations though never publicly. It was clear, however, that the current process should be improved. Appointed experts should be considered for issues that cannot be resolved at either the NCP or CIME level.

39. A BIAC representative made a plea for a positive approach, and emphasised that it would be important to emphasise advantages for business in accepting the Guidelines as an improvement for business. A positive approach would also assist NCPs as being a point of reference for new MNEs.

40. Some country delegations intervened during this session to expand on their conceptions on how to improve implementation procedures. One delegation argued that there were two possible approaches to take in the Review as a whole: one that simply developed a “model code for business”, and one that sought to make the Guidelines an international minimum standard that fostered compliance through improved implementation procedures and indeed greater enforcement. The Guidelines needed to be slightly more binding. Because of the implications of so doing, the Guidelines will need safeguards, but the process should not include a juridical process. Outside experts would be necessary to support the CIME. Other delegations intervened to say that it should be up to governments themselves to pronounce on the conduct of their own MNEs, and that there was a link between implementation procedures (on global applicability, for example) and the standards set in the text of the Guidelines.
Next Steps and Follow-up

41. BIAC reiterated its support for the Guidelines as part of a positive process for business. It noted business participation at a BIAC/Labour Management Programme meeting in March entitled “Labour and Employment Practices in Today’s Global Economy: Implications for the OECD Guidelines for MNEs. A similar meeting in May was planned on environmental issues.

42. A TUAC representative underlined the importance of establishing the CIME Working Party on the Guidelines so that the detailed work on the text and implementing procedures could begin.

43. An NGO representative stated that many NGOs remained sceptical about the Guidelines. Clarity was necessary with respect to the purpose of the Review of the Guidelines. In consulting with civil society on global applicability in particular, contacts with businesses and other civil society representatives from developing countries was very important. Direct representation from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) was also recommended. NGO representatives plan to submit an agreed statement on the Guidelines Review later this spring.

44. In concluding the meeting, the Chair thanked all participants for their contributions and assured them that their comments would be considered as the Guidelines Review proceeded. The Working Party on the Guidelines would be established soon and the CIME would continue to benefit from input from other OECD committees. It would also seek further opportunities to consult with representatives of civil society and non-Member governments. The goal was to complete the review by the time of the OECD Council at Ministerial level in Spring 2000.
Annex

List of participants

**Président - Chairman**

Ambassadeur Marino BALDI            Tel: 41-31 324 0755
Vice-Directeur, Office fédéral des affaires économiques Fax: 41-31 324 0954
extérieures, Département fédéral de l’économie   E-mail: marino.baldi@bawi.admin.ch

**PAYS MEMBRES - MEMBER COUNTRIES**

**Allemagne - Germany**

Dr. Hans-Martin BURKHARDT            Tel: 49 228 615 22 41
Deputy Director General             Fax: 49 228 615 37 92
Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology E-mail:

Mr. Manfred KUPITZ                   Tel: 49 228 615 43 47
Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology Fax: 49 228 615 35 41
E-mail:

Ms Alexandra LANGNER                Tel: 49 228 305 2451
Federal Ministry of Environment,   Fax: 49 228 305 3336
Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety E-mail:

Mr. Wolfgang STÖCKL                Tel: 33 1 44 17 16 05
First Counsellor,                  Fax: 33 1 45 01 29 77
Permanent Delegation of Germany to OECD E-mail:

**Australie - Australia**

Ms Jan HARRIS                        Tel: 01 40 59 33 71
Counsellor (Economic)               Fax: 01 40 59 33 94
Permanent Delegation to the OECD    E-mail: jan.harris@dfat.gov.au

**Autriche - Austria**

Mr Manfred SCHEKULIN                Tel: 43 1 711 00 5180
Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs Fax: 43 1 714 2722
E-mail: manfred.schekulin@bmwa.gv.at

Mrs Ingrid BEDNAR                   Tel: 43 1 404 20 5331
Austrian National Bank              Fax: 43 1 404 20 5399
E-mail: ingrid.bednar@oenb.co.at

Mr Norbert SCHUH                    Tel:
Permanent Delegation of Austria to OECD Fax:
E-mail:
Belgique/Belgium

Mr. R. CHARLIER
Président du Point National de Contact belge
Tel: (32-2) 206 5873
Fax: (32-2) 230 0050
E-mail:

Mme. C. VANSTRAELEN
Inspecteur Principal,
Administration des Relations Economiques,
Ministère des Affaires Economiques
Tel: (32-2) 206 5873
Fax: (32-2) 5140389
E-mail: invest.belgium@pophost.eunet.be

Canada

Mr. Robert READY
Director
International Investment and Services Policy
Department of Industry
Tel: 1 613 954 23 54
Fax: 1 613 952 05 40
E-mail: ready.robert@ic.gc.ca

Mr. Vernon MACKAY
Investment Trade Policy Division
Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade
Tel: 1-613 944 1596
Fax: 1-613 944 0679
E-mail: vernon.mackay@x400.gc.ca

Mr. Martin ROY
International Relations Officer
Sectoral Trade and Investment Policy
Department of Finance
Tel: 1-613 992 5614
Fax: 1 613 943 1177
E-mail:

Mr. Greg GALLO
First Secretary
Permanent Delegation of Canada to the OECD
Tel: 01 44 43 20 13
Fax: 01 44 43 20 99
E-mail:

Corée - Korea

Mr. Jin-Sik YOON
Minister
Permanent Delegation to the OECD
Tel: 33 1 44 05 20 51
Fax: 33 1 44 05 21 75
E-mail:

Mr. Hyung-Ik AHN
Deputy Director
Foreign Capital Management Division
Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE)
Tel: 
Fax: 
E-mail:

Mr. Beom-Seok KIM
Deputy Director, Foreign Investment Promotion Division
Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE)
Tel: 
Fax: 
E-mail:

Mr. Jung-Hwan LEE
Counsellor
Permanent Delegation to the OECD
Tel: 33-1 44 05 2071
Fax: 33-1 44 05 2175
E-mail: jh.lee@wanadoo.fr
Mr. Suk-Bum PARK  
Counsellor  
Permanent Delegation to the OECD  
Tel: 33-1 44 05 21 88  
Fax: 33-1 44 05 83 44  
E-mail:  

Mr. Yong-Sik JOO  
First Secretary  
Permanent Delegation to the OECD  
Tel: 33-1 44 05 21 88  
Fax: 33-1 44 05 83 44  
E-mail:  

Mr. Herluf HANSEN  
Ambassador  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Tel: 45 33 92 08 16  
Fax: 45 33 92 08 12  
E-mail: n4@um.dk  

Ms Soledad ABAD  
Permanent Delegation to the OECD  
Tel: (33-1) 44 43 30 32  
Fax: (33-1) 40 70 06 54  
E-mail: soledad.abad@parisocde.ofcomes.mcx.es  

Mr Wesley SCHOLZ  
Director, Office of Investment Affairs  
Department of State  
Tel: 1 202 736 42 47  
Fax: 1 202 647 03 20  
E-mail:  

Ms Amy HOLMAN  
Financial Economist, Office of Investment Affairs  
Department of State  
Tel: 1 202 736 42 74  
Fax: 1 202 647 03 20  
E-mail: holmanae@state.ga  

Ms Kimberly EVANS  
International Economist  
Office of Investment Affairs  
Department of the Treasury  
Tel: 1 202 622 0416  
Fax: 1 202 622 0391  
E-mail: kimberly.evans@do.treas.gov  

Ms Frances HUEGEL  
Director  
Multilateral Investment Affairs  
Office of the United States Trade Representative  
Executive Office of the President  
Tel: 1 202 395 4510  
Fax: 1 202 395 3891  
E-mail: Fhuegel@USTR.gov  

Ms Martha KELLEY  
Investment Policy Advisor  
US Mission to the OECD  
Tel: 01 45 24 74 22  
Fax: 01 45 24 74 87  
E-mail:  

Mr. Jorma IMMONEN  
Senior Government Secretary  
Ministry of Trade and Industry  
Tel: 358-9 160 4689  
Fax: 358-9 160 2622  
E-mail: jorma.immonen@ktm.vn.fi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Tel</th>
<th>Fax</th>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>M. Olivier FERRAND</td>
<td>Ministère de l’Economie et des Finances</td>
<td>33 1 44 87 70 84</td>
<td>33 1 44 87 74 59</td>
<td><a href="mailto:olivier.ferrand@dt.finances.gouv.fr">olivier.ferrand@dt.finances.gouv.fr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grèce-Greece</td>
<td>M. E. KONTOGIANNOPoulos</td>
<td>Legal Advisor</td>
<td>30 1 328 6231</td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:nia@hol.gr">nia@hol.gr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr P. KONTOS</td>
<td>First Counsellor</td>
<td>33-1 45 02 24 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs E. KARACHALIOU</td>
<td>First Secretary</td>
<td>33-1 45 02 24 13</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Permanent Delegation to the OECD</td>
<td>33 1 45 00 71 55</td>
<td>001_DELEG/GRC/OECD/FR@O</td>
<td>LIS.OECD.ORG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hongrie-Hungary</td>
<td>Mr Tibor TEJNÓRA</td>
<td>Senior Counsellor</td>
<td>361 235 4618/4533</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms Enikő SZILÁRD</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>361 327 2693</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr Csaba KÁKOSY</td>
<td>Attaché</td>
<td>33-1 5365 6500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irlande-Ireland</td>
<td>Mr Gerard MONKS</td>
<td>Ministry of Enterprise, Trade and Employment</td>
<td>353 1 631 2471</td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:monksg@entemp.irlgov.ie">monksg@entemp.irlgov.ie</a></td>
</tr>
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Italie - Italy

Ms Silvana CERAVOLO
Ministère du Trésor
Rome
Tel: 39 06 47 61 39 29
Fax: 39 06 47 61 39 32
E-mail: silvana.ceravolo@tesoro.it

Ms Roberta INGUSCIO
Banca d’Italia
Rome
Tel: 39 06 47 92 28 32
Fax: 39 06 47 92 32 67
E-mail: roberta.in@iol.it

Japon - Japan

Mr Shigeru HOTTA
Ministry of International Trade and Industry
Tel: 81 3 3501 6623
E-mail:

Mr Yoichi MATSUMOTO
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Tel: 81 3 3581 0018
Fax: 81 3 3581 9470
E-mail:

Ms Chikako FUJII
Permanent Delegation to the OECD
Tel: 33-1 5376 6100
Fax: 33-1 4563 0544
E-mail: chikako.fujii@mofa.go.jp

Luxembourg

Ms Jeanne CRAUSER
Ministère des Affaires Etrangères
Tel: 00 352 478 2450
Fax: 00 352 22 20 48
E-mail: Jeanne.Crauser@mae.etat.lu

Mexique - Mexico

Mr Rogelio ARELLANO
Permanent Delegation to the OECD
Tel: 33 1 53 67 86 02
Fax: 33 1 47 20 07 91
E-mail: rogelioa@secofi.gob.mx
rogelio@worldnet.fr

Norvège - Norway

Mr. Sten E. RUUD
Assistant Director General
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Tel: 47 22 24 33 46
Fax: 47 22 24 27 84
E-mail:

Mr. Tom HUGO-SØRENSEN,
Deputy Director General
Ministry of Trade and Industry
Tel: 47 22 24 66 70
Fax: 47 22 24 66 69
E-mail: tom.hugo-sorensen@nhd.dep.telemax.no
Pays-Bas - Netherlands

Mr. Marinus W. SIKKEL
Head of Investment Policy & International Organisations
Ministry of Economic Affairs
Tel: 31-70 379 7152
Fax: 31-70 379 7924
E-mail: m.w.sikkel@minez.nl

Portugal

Mr. Christiano DOMINGUES
Permanent Delegation of Portugal to the OECD
Tel: 01 45 03 31 00
Fax: 01 45 03 22 03

République Tchèque - Czech Republic

Mr Pavel KLIMA
Permanent Delegation to the OECD
Tel: 33-1 4520 3530
Fax: 33-1 4520 3554
E-mail: csdeleg003@olis.oecd.org

Ms Jana KRELINOVA
Czech National Bank
Tel: 42-02 2441 2110
Fax: 42-02 2441 1137
E-mail: jana.krelinova@cnb.cz

Mr. Vaclav ROMBALD
Ministry of Finance
Tel: 42 02 5704 2441
Fax: 42 02 5704 2407
E-mail: vaclav.ROMBALD@mfcr.cz

Royaume-Uni - United Kingdom

Mr. Tom SMITH
Head, International Investment Policy
Department of Trade & Industry
Tel: 44-171 215 4547
Fax: 44-171 215 4577
E-mail: tom.smith@eirv.dti.gov.uk

Mr. Nick GRIFFITHS
Permanent Delegation to OECD
Tel: 33 1 45 24 98 34
Fax: 33 1 45 24 98 37

Suède - Sweden

Mr Sven ÖSTBERG
Ministry for Foreign Affairs
Tel: 46 8 405 1970
Fax: 46 8 723 1176
E-mail: sven.ostberg@foreign.ministry.se
## Suisse - Switzerland

M. Roland LEMPEN  
Office fédéral des affaires économiques extérieures  
Département fédéral de l’économie  
Tel: 41 31 324 0854  
Fax: 41 31 324 9042  
E-mail: roland.lempen@bawi.admin.ch

Mr. Christian SCHOENENBERGER  
Division politique V, Service économique et financier  
Département fédéral des affaires étrangères  
Tel: 41 31 322 30 34  
Fax: 41 31 324 90 72  
E-mail: christian.schoenenberger@eda.admin.ch

Mr. William FREI  
Ministre, Représentant permanent adjoint  
Tel: 33 1 49 55 74 52  
Fax: 33 1 45 51 01 49  
E-mail: william.frei@pzo.rep.admin.ch

## Turquie - Turkey

Mrs. Ipek INCESULU  
Section Chief,  
General Directorate of Foreign Investment  
Undersecretariat of Treasury  
Tel: 90 312 212 8800/2000  
Fax: 90 312 212 8916  
E-mail: ipek.incesulu@treasury.gov.tr

Mr. Osman EMED  
Permanent Delegation to OECD  
Tel: 33 1 42 88 50 02  
Fax: 33 1 45 27 28 24  
E-mail: oecdhaz@mail.club-internet.fr

## Commission des CE - EC Commission

Mr Olivier CHASSAGNE  
Expert National Détaché DGI-M-2  
European Commission  
Tel: 32 2 296 65 77  
Fax: 32 2 299 16 51  
E-mail: olivier.chassagne@dg1.cec.be

Mr G. LEMONIDIS  
Permanent Delegation  
Tel: 33-1 44 05 31 63  
Fax: 33-1 44 05 31 79  
E-mail:
**OBSERVATEURS - OBSERVERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Chili - Chile**        | Mr Alexis GUARDIA BASSO       | Tel: 33-1 44 18 59 60  
Fax: 33-1 44 18 59 61  
E-mail: echilefr@iway.fr |
|                          | Embassy of Chile in Paris     |                                                      |
| **République Slovak - Slovak Republic** | Ms Iva PAVLOVICOVÁ           | Tel: 42-17 5443 0568/5175  
Fax: 42 17 5443 0569/5022  
E-mail: oecd@ba.pubnet.sk |
|                          | Head of Slovak National Contact Point |                                                      |
|                          | SNAZIR, National Agency for Direct Investment |                                                      |

**OTHER ORGANISATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **BIAC**     | Mr. Robin Aram                | Tel: 44 171 934 5270  
Fax: 44 171 934 6625  
E-mail:                                              |
|              | Head of External Relations    |                                                      |
|              | Shell International Ltd.      |                                                      |
|              | United Kingdom                |                                                      |
|              | Mr. Andrew W.A. Berkeley      | Tel: 44 181 343 4050  
Fax: 44 181 343 1762  
E-mail: aberkeley@aol.com |
|              | Barrister                     |                                                      |
|              | United Kingdom                |                                                      |
|              | Mr. Stephen J. Canner        | Tel: 1 202 371 1316  
Fax: 1 202 371 8249  
E-mail: scanner@uscib-dc.org |
|              | Vice President, Investment Policy |                                                      |
|              | U.S. Council for International Business |                                                      |
|              | United States                 |                                                      |
|              | Mr. Hyun Chung                | Tel: 82 2 3771/0213  
Fax: 82 3771/0131 or 0110  
E-mail: jh@mail.korbiz.or.kr |
|              | Head of International Business Department |                                                      |
|              | Federation of Korean Industries |                                                      |
|              | Mr. Hans Ekdahl               | Tel: 00 46 8 783 8058  
Fax: 00 46 8 660 5204  
E-mail: hans.ukdahl@industriforbundet.se |
|              | Trade Policy Advisor          |                                                      |
|              | Federation of Swedish Industries |                                                      |
|              | Mr. Jan A. Eggert            | Tel: 00 49 221 3708 415  
Fax: 00 49 221 3708 577  
E-mail: J.Eggert@bdi-online.de |
|              | Head of Department International Affairs – Economic Policy |                                                      |
|              | Federation of German Industries |                                                      |
|              | Dr. Kristian Ehinger         | Tel: 00 49 53 61 923214  
Fax: 00 49 53 61 92436  
E-mail: kristian.ehinger@volkswagen.de |
|              | General Counsel, Foreign Holdings |                                                      |
|              | Volkswagen AG                |                                                      |
|              | Germany                       |                                                      |
Mr. Douglas A. Gregory  
European Public Affairs Executive  
IBM Europe, Middle East and Africa  
Canada  
Tel: 00 32 2 655 5870  
Fax: 00 32 2 655 5300  
E-mail dgregory@caibm.com

Dr. Arnold Knechtle  
Industrie-Holding  
Groupement de holdings industrielles suisses  
Tel: 41-31 352 7788  
Fax: 41-31 352 3255

Mr. Bruno Lamborghini  
Chairman of the BIAC MNE Committee  
Olivetti Lexikon S.p.A.  
Italy  
Tel: 39 0125 522 007  
Fax: 39 0125 522 782  
E-mail b.lamborghini@olivetti.com

Mr. Winand L.E. Quaedvlieg  
Senior Advisor  
Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers  
VNO-NCW (Netherlands)  
Tel:  
Fax:  
E-mail

Dr. Gert Stemberger  
Federation of Austrian Industry  
Tel:  
Fax:  
E-mail

Mr. Roland Tschanz  
Economics & International Relations  
Nestlé SA (Switzerland)  
Tel: 41-21 924 3712  
Fax: 41-21 924 4582  
E-mail

Mr. Stephen Walzer  
Senior Solicitor  
BAT Industries PLC  
United Kingdom  
Tel: 44 171 845 1472  
Fax: 44 171 8445 2146  
E-mail stephenwalzer@britamtob.com

BIAC SECRETARIAT

Ms. April Tash  
Manager  
Tel: 33-1 42 30 09 60  
Fax: 33-1 42 88 78 38  
E-mail tash@biac.org

Mr. Steven Bate  
Executive Director  
Tel: 33-1 42 30 09 60  
Fax: 33-1 42 88 78 38  
E-mail bate@biac.org

Ms. Hanni Rosenbaum  
Manager  
Tel: 33-1 42 30 09 60  
Fax: 33-1 42 88 78 38  
E-mail rosenbaum@biac.org
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Tel.</th>
<th>Fax.</th>
<th>E-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jerry Zellhoefer</td>
<td>Working Group on Global Trade and Investment</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor &amp; Congress of</td>
<td>33-1 43 87 74 57</td>
<td>33-1 43 87 74 60</td>
<td><a href="mailto:71112.2205@compuserve.com">71112.2205@compuserve.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Denis Jacquot</td>
<td>Secrétaire Confédéral</td>
<td>Département International</td>
<td>33-1 42 03 80 73</td>
<td>33-1 42 03 80 74</td>
<td><a href="mailto:international@cfdt.fr">international@cfdt.fr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Benoît Robin</td>
<td>Assistant – Secteur économique</td>
<td>Force Ouvrière (Cgt-FO)</td>
<td>33-1 40 52 84 50</td>
<td>33-1 40 52 84 48</td>
<td><a href="mailto:economique.fo@fo.fr">economique.fo@fo.fr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Erlend Hansen</td>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO-N)</td>
<td>47 23 06 16 42</td>
<td>47 23 06 17 53</td>
<td><a href="mailto:ehansen.lo@loit.no">ehansen.lo@loit.no</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jan-Erik Moreau</td>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO-S)</td>
<td>46 8 796 25 00</td>
<td>46 8 796 27 88</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jem@lo.se">jem@lo.se</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Veronica Nilsson</td>
<td>Economist</td>
<td>Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees</td>
<td>46 8 782 9171</td>
<td>46 8 782 9310</td>
<td><a href="mailto:veronica.nilsson@tco.se">veronica.nilsson@tco.se</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Louise Walsh</td>
<td>Assistant European Representative</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor and Congress of</td>
<td>33-1 43 87 74 57</td>
<td>33-1 43 87 74 60</td>
<td><a href="mailto:louisewalsh.paris@compuserve.com">louisewalsh.paris@compuserve.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jim Baker</td>
<td>International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)</td>
<td>International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)</td>
<td>Mr. Jim Baker</td>
<td>Mr. Jim Baker</td>
<td>Trade Unions (ICFTU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Richard Langlois</td>
<td>Economist</td>
<td>Education International (EI)</td>
<td>32 2 224 0611</td>
<td>32 2 224 0606</td>
<td><a href="mailto:langric@hotmail.com">langric@hotmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TUAC SECRETARIAT

Mr. John Evans  
General Secretary  
Tel: 33-1 47 63 42 63  
Fax: 33-1 47 54 98 28  
E-mail evans@tuac.org

Mr. Roy Jones  
Senior Policy Adviser  
Tel: 33-1 47 63 42 63  
Fax: 33-1 47 54 98 28  
E-mail jones@tuac.org

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS/ORGANISATIONS NON GOUVERNEMENTALES

Friends of the Earth

Mr Duncan MCLAREN  
Senior Research Co-ordinator  
Friends of the Earth  
– England, Wales and Northern Ireland  
26-28 Underwood Street  
London N1 7JQ  
Tel: 44 171 566 1682  
Fax: 44 171 490 0881  
E-mail: duncanm@foe.co.uk

Germanwatch North-South Initiative

Dr. Rainer ENGELS  
Geschaeftsfuehrer/Secretary  
Germanwatch North-South Initiative  
Budapester Strasse 11  
D-53111 Bonn  
Tel: 49 228 60492 15  
Fax: 49 228 60492 19  
E-mail: germanwatch@germanwatch.org

OXFAM

Mrs Malini MEHRA  
OXFAM UK  
Oxford,  
United Kingdom  
Tel: 44 1 865 312 279  
Fax: 44 1 865 312417  
E-mail: mmehra@oxfam.org.uk

Worldwide Fund for Nature

Mr. Nick MABEY  
WWF-UK  
Panda House  
Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR  
United Kingdom  
Tel: 44 1 483 426 444  
Fax: 44 1 483 426 409  
E-mail: nmabey@wwfnet.org
SECRETARIAT

Directorate for Financial, Fiscal and Enterprise Affairs

Mr. William Witherell
Mr. Rainer Geiger
Mr. Robert Ley
Ms Kathryn Gordon
Mr. Christopher Wilkie

Environment Directorate

Mr. Tom Jones

Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs

Mr. Peter Tergeist

Legal Service

Mr. Nicola Bonucci