Tool for Cooperation and change: concept and function of the peer review mechanism

By Nicola Bonucci *

Summary of Presentation

The concept of peer review has first been developed in the scientific field. The conclusion of scientific studies due to be published were reviewed by other scientists: the peers.

Peer reviews are now widely used in a number of different areas, including within international organizations. Several UN bodies and specialised agencies use peer review to monitor and assess national policies in various sectors like environment or labour rights. Peer reviews are also carried out in other international organisations be they universal or regional.

It is however recognised that, as far as peer review is concerned, the OECD is the organisation with the broadest and longest experience. Peer review has been used at the OECD since the Organisation was established more than 40 years ago. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the OECD, there is no and there cannot be a standardised peer review mechanism. However, even if each peer review has its own procedure a number of common elements and characteristics can be pointed out.

Peer review in the OECD is characterised by an active role of the secretariat, a recognition that procedures need to be agreed from the outset but they also have to evolve and the strong weight given to an evidence based evaluation more to an evaluation based on political or value judgement.

Peer review need an adequate level of resources, they need to be carried out in a transparent manner, they must be seen by the countries concerned but also by other stakeholders as credible and they require a sustainable effort.

Other international organisation should analyse and take into account the main principles and concepts that have made the success of peer review in the OECD in elaborating their own system of peer review. This would seem a more promising avenue than to copy or replicate the procedures followed in the OECD.

* Director for Legal Affairs, Legal Directorate, OECD, Paris. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the OECD or of its members.