Since the early 1980s, the OECD has emphasised the potential contribution of structural reforms to achieving durable non-inflationary growth with high levels of employment. By extending and improving the functioning of markets, reform can remove impediments to the full and efficient use of resources, making it easier to achieve widely-held economic and social goals. This report, "Assessing Structural Reform: Lessons for the Future" summarises the OECD Economics Department's surveillance of structural policy in Member countries over the period January 1990 to June 1993. Viewing these three and a half years as a whole, the following generalisations can be made about the evolution of structural policy in the OECD.

First, the process of structural reform in the OECD area has continued on a broad front with few exceptions as to sectors or countries. Second, despite some evidence of convergence in some areas, the extent of reforms undertaken to date differs across both countries and areas of policy. Third, the scope for further reform remains considerable. The report identifies several areas as priorities for future action: labour markets and associated social policies, improving competition in product markets via trade liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector.

In assessing the impact of past reforms the report finds -- based on OECD experience in such areas as privatisation, deregulation and trade liberalisation -- that economies operate more efficiently when market forces are permitted to work. Releasing such forces has enhanced consumers’ welfare and improved the functioning of the sectors concerned.
This is true even for those sectors where reform efforts have led to significant adjustment difficulties. Regulatory reform of air transport in the United States, for example, brought massive gains for consumers. It did pose challenges for carriers, who had to adjust not only to the shock of deregulation itself but also, more recently, to adverse cyclical developments. In financial markets, liberalisation has provided greater choice and flexibility for both savers and borrowers. The problems experienced in a number of cases, notably the United States and several Nordic countries, reflected a turbulent but necessary adaptation to the reform of regulatory regimes that were no longer sustainable. However greater attention to appropriate prudential supervision and to interaction with other aspects of structural reform, such as tax changes, would have reduced the disruptions.

The report also includes a substantial statistical annex and a country-by-country description of measures taken during the period under review.

Journalists may obtain a copy of the report from the OECD Press Division, 2 rue André Pascal, 75775 Paris cedex 16 (tel. 45 24 80 88 or 80 89 - fax. 45 24 80 03).

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