



## Analysis

# OECD organisational discourse, peer reviews and sustainable development: An ecological-institutionalist perspective

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 13 January 2009  
 Received in revised form 9 July 2009  
 Accepted 14 August 2009  
 Available online 23 September 2009

### Keywords:

Discourse analysis  
 Organisational discourse  
 Institutional economics  
 Sustainable development  
 OECD  
 Peer reviews

## ABSTRACT

As part of the recent 'ideational turn' in research on international organisations, the study of organisational discourse has gained popularity. Yet ecological economics has thus far paid little attention to the role of organisations as sites for the discursive battles over the meaning of sustainable development. For an international organisation without regulatory powers, such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), discourse is the main vehicle for policy influence, but it also plays a key role in (re)defining the organisation's identity and authority. The OECD's organisational discourse has been strongly dominated by 'modern mainstream economics', and has given little room for marginalised discourses. This paper compares, from the perspective of institutionally oriented ecological economics (IOEE), and borrowing from critical discourse analysis, the experience from attempts to integrate the concept of sustainable development within two OECD peer review mechanisms – the Economic Surveys and the Environmental Performance Reviews. The extent to which the respective conceptions of sustainable development in the two reviews are in line with the principles of IOEE and the reasons for the apparent failure of sustainable development discourse to gain foothold within the organisation are analysed.

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## 1. Introduction

Study of policy and institutional change in international organisations has recently taken an 'ideational turn' (e.g. Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; March & Olsen, 1998; Marcussen, 2001; e.g. Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004, 189; Dostal, 2004). While discourse is only one factor among the many that affect policy change, and only one aspect of ideational impact, for an international organisation without regulatory powers, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), discourse is a vital resource for policy influence. The study of organisational discourse – defined broadly as “the language and symbolic media used by organisations and the people who manage and work in them” (Grant et al., 2001, 8) – has attracted particular interest among scholars who have analysed themes such as organisational identity and the nature and impacts of discursive battles in society (Hardy, 2001; Grant et al., 2004).

Ecological economics literature has in the past highlighted discourse and rhetoric as crucial elements in shaping the institutions that govern human-nature relationships, exemplified by studies on the discursive battles whereby the dominant discourses are maintained and reproduced (Barry & Proops, 1999; Meppem & Bourke, 1999; Proops, 2001; Shi, 2004; Bøgelund, 2007), the internal and

external roles of rhetoric in economics<sup>1</sup> (Luks, 1998), and the role of discourse in environmental valuation (O'Hara, 1996; Wilson & Howarth, 2002). However, it has paid little attention to the discursive power embedded in organisations in general and international organisations in particular. This paper aims to help fill the gap by analysing the discursive battles within the OECD around the notion of sustainable development (SD) in the context of broader discursive battles concerning economic theory.

The OECD has often been criticised for being a 'club of rich countries', a flag-bearer of economic liberalism and free-market ideology – an 'expert organisation' with little need to be concerned about political legitimacy (Armingeon & Beyeler, 2003; Noaksson & Jacobsson, 2003), and its organisational discourse is allegedly dominated by selective reliance on the authority of academic mainstream economics (Dostal, 2004, 450–451). However, the OECD is not a monolith, and the dominant modern mainstream economics discourse is challenged by a number of marginalised discourses within the organisation – discourses that draw to varying degrees on institutional and ecological economics.

This paper examines OECD discourse around sustainable development by looking at two OECD peer review mechanisms – the Economic Surveys and the Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs). Two questions are addressed. First, to what extent is the way in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Luks (1998) distinguishes, relating mostly to methodological issues, from external rhetoric, which is of particular importance for the potential political impact of ecological economics.

respective peer reviews address SD dominated by what can be termed as 'modern mainstream economics' (Boven, 2003) as opposed to what will here be described as an 'institutionally oriented ecological economics' (IOEE)<sup>2</sup> view? Second, how, if in any way, was the OECD dominant discourse transformed by the introduction of a SD section in a full cycle of Economic Surveys in 2001–2004?

The background material for the study stems from the author's participation in OECD activities as: a national delegate to the OECD Working Party on Environmental Performance (WPEP) between May 1996 and July 2005,<sup>3</sup> an organiser of the Finnish EPR in 1996–97, a country expert on teams reviewing the environmental performance of Mexico (1997–98) and Russia (1998), an OECD consultant in the review of Sweden (2003–04), and a participant, on behalf of the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, in the preparation of the Economic Survey of Finland in 1998. Information was also obtained through semi-structured interviews<sup>4</sup> with 40 individuals, including officials from the OECD Environment Directorate and Economics Department involved in peer reviews, WPEP delegates of Canada, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Slovakia, other stakeholders involved in EPRs of France, Japan, the Netherlands, and Portugal, and individuals from the permanent OECD delegations of Finland, the Netherlands, and Portugal.<sup>5</sup> The empirical analysis was guided by the set of criteria (see section 3.3 below) developed for analysing the peer review reports (notably their conclusions and recommendations) and the summary report on lessons learned from the sustainable development sections of the Economic Surveys (OECD, 2004b). The main functions of the interviews and participant observation were on the one hand to place the analysis in the context of the broader social practice (see section 2 below), and on the other hand to verify the validity of the interpretations made on the basis of the documentary analysis.<sup>5</sup>

The paper is organised as follows. Section two presents a brief description of the discursive power of the OECD and introduces the basic elements of the peer reviews. Section three introduces the key concepts of analysis – organisational discourse and institutionally oriented ecological economics (IOEE) – and derives the criteria for analysis from these theoretical concepts. Section four applies the criteria to the analysis of the review framework in the two OECD peer reviews, whereas section five concludes by placing the findings of the analysis in a broader context of OECD's internal power battles, the organisation's role in international politics, and the broader discursive fields. Conclusions concern the reasons for the failure of the Economic Surveys as an instrument helping to 'mainstream' SD in the organisation's work, and the prospects of a possible weakening of the 'hegemonic' position of modern mainstream economics within the OECD.

## 2. Discursive power, sustainable development and the OECD peer reviews

Peer reviews of the member countries' policies constitute a key working method for the OECD, its 'trademark' central for the organisation's identity and power over the member countries. As an

<sup>2</sup> For the definition of IOEE, see section 3.2 below.

<sup>3</sup> This work also included participation in workshops preparing the 'second cycle' of EPRs, and a survey concerning experiences from the 'first cycle' of EPRs, carried out by the author and Environmental Counsellor Heikki Sisula from the Ministry of the Environment in Finland, with assistance from the OECD Secretariat (OECD, 1997b).

<sup>4</sup> The interviews lasted in general between an hour and an hour and a half. A one-page list of key themes was sent to the interviewees in advance, and used as a guide in the actual interviews. In order to ensure the validity of the interpretations by the researcher, a summary report (two to six pages) of the interview was sent back to the interviewee for comments and corrections.

<sup>5</sup> An attempt was made to include the individuals organising the reviews in the member countries and the OECD secretariat, those most likely to participate in the implementation of the review recommendations, and other stakeholders participating in the policy debates concerning the review. 'Snowball' sampling was a major tool for identifying the key interviewees.

<sup>6</sup> A more thorough description of the research method as well as a list of interviewed individuals can be found in Lehtonen (2005a).

organisation lacking direct regulatory power, the OECD influence on member countries' policies relies on a mechanism that Marcussen (2003) has described as 'idea games'. These involve processes whereby international organisations create international norms by diffusing ideas, shaping a certain 'repertoire' of reform, and providing domestic actors with arguments with which to legitimise their actions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; March & Olsen, 1998). The OECD also helps to socialise individuals, and influence agenda-setting at different levels of policymaking "by providing a controlled environment for the creation, development and dissemination of political discourse" (Dostal, 2004, 440). This is manifest, for instance, in the adoption of a shared terminology, similar methods of inquiry, and a unified style of presentation in the OECD's peer review exercises.

Arguably, these processes of subtle, long-term impact from OECD work derive, to varying degrees, from processes of discourse. *Discourses* can be defined as "structured collections of meaningful texts – along with the related practices of producing, disseminating and consuming these texts – that systematically form the object of which they speak" (Foucault 1979, 49; in Maguire & Hardy, 2006, 9). Our attitudes and behaviour, as well as our perceptions of what we take to be reality are shaped by the discursive practices and interactions that we are involved in and are exposed to. 'Talk is action'; what organisations (or managers) do (e.g. planning, co-ordinating, leading, organising, motivating, controlling) must be put into effect via discourse (Grant et al., 2001, 7, 14). Discourses may exhibit varying degrees of internal coherence, yet this is only one among many factors that define the influence of a discourse. Discursive practices and their influence are decisively shaped by, for example, the formal and informal networks of power, which control the access of actors to the discursive arenas and define the degree of authoritativeness of their claims. The influence of OECD discourse does not rely merely on the logical persuasiveness of the message, but also on the organisation's position and reputation as an independent source of information in a number of areas of public policy on the one hand, and as an authoritative advocate of liberalisation, economic growth and free trade on the other.

The OECD defines *international* peer review as "the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a State by other States, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed State improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles" (OECD, 2003, 9). It further argues that the review process is characterised by *dialogue* and interactive investigation, it should be *non-adversarial* and rely on mutual *trust* between the States involved, as well as on shared *confidence* in the process. In this way, peer reviews would create a system of mutual *accountability*. The reviews aim to influence policies through '*peer pressure*', whereby media involvement, public scrutiny, dialogue and comparisons with peer countries put pressure on domestic public opinion, national administrations and policymakers (OECD, 2003, 9–10). This process is particularly effective in the 'laggard states', since no country wants to be seen in an unfavourable light among its peers (Strang & Chang, 1993; Marcussen, 2003). By closely involving the reviewed country government in the process, peer reviews aim to guarantee sufficient 'ownership', while at the same time seeking to maintain the independence upon which the credibility of the process relies.

Earlier research (e.g. Armingeon & Beyeler, 2003; Noaksson & Jacobsson, 2003; Dostal, 2004; Lehtonen, 2005a; Lodge, 2005) has shown that the *direct impacts* of OECD peer reviews tend to be modest and highly dependent on issues such as the country-specific context, existence of 'agents of change' within the national administration, political will at the highest hierarchical level, and the 'windows of opportunity' that may enable the take-up of OECD policy recommendations (e.g. Lehtonen 2005a; Lehtonen, 2007). By contrast, and in line with findings from multiple areas of research on the role of knowledge (e.g. assessments, evaluations, indicators) in policymaking (Weiss, 1987; Weiss, 1999; Eckley, 2001; Romsdahl, 2005; Hezri & Dovers, 2006), the more *indirect conceptual and political effects* such as issue framing,

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