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**Agenda item 5: Reform of the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development**

**A Simplified Peer Review Process on Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Countries: A Framework for Mutual Learning and Improvement**

**A Proposal by the Secretariat of UNEP/MAP**

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## Introduction

The Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention have been developing national activities and putting in place structures and processes pertaining to sustainable development, with varying degrees in scope, content, approach and level of implementation. They are also engaged, at the regional level, in the activities developed in the framework of the Mediterranean Action Plan – Barcelona Convention in the fields of environmental governance and sustainable development.

The approaches for the development of sustainable development policies and actions are diverse and consist, generally, of cyclical and interactive approaches for planning, participation and action to foster progress towards sustainability goals. Globally, one of the key noted weaknesses is the feedback mechanisms, including monitoring, learning and adaptation<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the Contracting Parties, collectively, or individually, are facing varying challenges in elaborating, implementing, monitoring and reviewing their strategic and operational actions towards sustainable development.

These challenges offer a great potential for exchange of experiences and sharing of good practice, as well as gathering information that could be used for the assessment of progress across the Mediterranean in terms of adoption and implementation of sustainable development.

As recommended by the 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Meeting of the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSD), and endorsed by the 18<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention (COP 18), there is clear potential and need for putting in place a simplified and affordable peer review process through which Mediterranean countries will exchange on their respective experiences and share good policies and practices on implementing sustainable development at a national level: a process for learning from other experiences and adaptation of national approaches.

## Mandate to put in place a simplified peer review

The mandate to prepare a proposal on putting in place a simplified peer review is given by the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention, through the adoption of the Decision IG. 21/12, at their 18<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Meeting (COP 18) in Istanbul, December 2013. Key statements of this Decision read as follows (excerpts):

- *Request the MCSD to encourage, through its meetings and operations, the exchange of good practice; and*
- *Request the Secretariat to prepare a proposal for the consideration of the MCSD on how a simplified peer review process could be put in place.*

This decision was based on the recommendations of the 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Meeting of the MCSD (Floriana, Malta, June 2013) on the reform of the MCSD and its mission. Among these recommendations were:

- *In terms of the periodic review of national implementation of the MSSD, a simplified peer-review mechanism was suggested by several participants as a way to upgrade the very useful role of the MCSD as a regional platform for exchanges of experiences on sustainable development which the MCSD had always been useful for; and*
- *Encourage the exchange of good practice, for which a simplified peer review could be a tool.*

## Examples of peer review mechanisms

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “*peer review is basically an examination of one state’s performance or practices in a particular area by other states. The point of the exercise is to help the state under review improve its policymaking, adopt best practices and comply with established standards and principles*”. It relies heavily on mutual trust among the actors involved, as well as on their shared confidence in the process<sup>ii</sup>.

Although there is no single recipe or a standardized mechanism for the peer review, there are certain structural elements shared by all existing peer reviews<sup>iii</sup>: (i) a basis for proceeding; (ii) an agreed on set of principles, (iii) standards and criteria against which the performance of the reviewed country will be assessed; (iv) designated players to carry out the review; and (v) a set of procedures leading to the final result.

Among the existing peer reviews, three are relevant to the development of a simplified peer review process as they represent two different approaches: OECD peer review, BRICS+G and African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

***The OECD peer review process – A tool for cooperation and change<sup>iv</sup>***: Defining the peer review as a combination of the activity of several actors (the body within which the review is undertaken; the reviewed country; the examiner countries; and the Organisation Secretariat), the procedure consists of three major phases:

- The preparatory phase: The first phase of the review often consists of background analysis and of some form of self-evaluation by the country under review. This phase includes work on documentation and data as well as a questionnaire prepared by the Secretariat.
- The consultation phase: The examiner countries and the Secretariat conduct the consultation by maintaining close contact with the competent authorities of the reviewed country, and in some cases, they carry out site visits. At the end of this phase, the Secretariat prepares a draft of the final report.
- The assessment phase: The draft report is discussed in the plenary meeting of the body responsible for the review. The examiners lead the discussion, but the whole body is encouraged to participate extensively. Following discussions, and in some cases negotiations, the final report is adopted, or just noted, by the whole body.

***BRICS+G - Dialogue About Sustainability And Growth In Six Countries - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (the BRICS) and Germany<sup>v</sup>***: This is a platform for exchange among experts (government, economic actors and civil society) of the countries involved about their experiences with sustainability and growth, with emphasis on: (i) examples from thematic areas such as energy, resource management and the social dimension, and (ii) concrete experiences with designing, managing and implementing national strategies for sustainability or comparable approaches. It consists of national conferences within which discussions are guided by four lead questions (excerpts from<sup>vi</sup>):

- *What is the current state of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (Overview/Stocktaking)?*
- *How is the National Strategy for Sustainable Development linked to Sector Policies (evaluating experiences from at least two exemplary sectors: Energy, Natural Resources and /or the Social Dimension)?*
- *What were factors for successes and failures of the national Sustainable Development Strategy and why? What consequences are being drawn?*
- *What are the conclusions regarding the relation of the national Sustainable Development Strategy, sustainability and growth?*

***African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM):*** In the framework of NEPAD<sup>vii</sup>, the APRM has been put in place with the mandate to ensure that the policies and practices of participating countries conform to the agreed values in the following four focus areas: democracy and political governance, economic governance, corporate governance and socio-economic development. As part of the APRM there are periodic reviews of the participating countries to assess progress being made towards achieving the mutually agreed goals.

Structurally the peer review mechanism is constituted as such:

- The Committee of Participating Heads of State and Government (APR Forum) is the highest decision making authority in the APRM;
- The Panel of Eminent Persons (APR Panel) oversees the review process to ensure integrity, considers reports and makes recommendations to the APR Forum;
- The APRM Secretariat provides secretarial, technical, coordinating and administrative support for the APRM; and
- The Country Review Mission Team (CRM Team) visits member states to review progress and produce an APRM Report on the country.

Based on the above mentioned MCSD recommendations and the requests of the Decision IG. 21/12, it is suggested to consider the BRICS+G approach for dialogue as basis for a simplified peer review, with a suggestion of “designated actors” based on the OECD approach. The reasons for this choice are among others: (i) the approach consist of a dialogue among willing countries and it is not a classical ‘peer review’; (ii) in addition to their voluntary commitment, the countries engaged in the simplified peer review are required to contribute their own resources (human and financial) throughout the process; and (iii) an equal participation of all involved countries without focus on a specific country’s structures and processes.

## **Proposed simplified peer review on implementing sustainable development for Mediterranean countries**

### ***Aim***

To undertake a simplified peer review, in form of a dialogue about national sustainable development structures and processes through which two or more Mediterranean countries engage in a mutual improvement and learning process.

### ***Scope***

The thematic scope of the peer review process will be the reviewed country’s overall structures and processes that have been put in place to implement sustainable development at the national level, with focus placed on concrete experiences in designing, managing, implementing and monitoring national policies and activities for sustainability. Specific sectors (e.g. natural resources, water), along with the social dimension, might be the core themes for exchange and dialogue.

### ***Underlining Principles***

The following main principles are essential to the peer review process:

***Voluntary:*** The involvement in the simplified peer review process is entirely voluntary and it is the choice of two or more countries to undertake a collaborative meaningful process of mutual improvement and learning.

***Learning by doing and sharing:*** Countries involved engage in constructive and positive joint process based on gathering and sharing information on respective practices and experiences.

Participatory: The participation of relevant national stakeholders (e.g. government departments, economic actors, civil society), at the level of experts and/or practitioners, is crucial to the success and credibility of the process.

Flexibility: There should be sufficient flexibility so that involved countries can agree adapted and adequate thematic scopes as well as procedures leading to final results.

### ***Enabling conditions***

Commitment and ownership: The improvement and learning process can function properly only if there is an adequate level of commitment and ownership by the involved countries. The political back-up is essential to its success.

Resources: Involved countries, and maybe a third party, should secure sufficient resources (financial and human) to undertake this joint cooperative process.

### ***Criteria for success***

Value sharing: Participating countries should share the same views on the standards and criteria for a successful improvement and learning process.

Mutual trust: A climate of mutual respect and sharing and large degree of mutual trust are important to the success of the improvement and learning approach.

Credibility: The effectiveness of the improvement and learning process heavily relies on the credibility of the review process and its mechanisms. For this it is key to involve an independent body (namely UNEP/MAP staff supporting the MCSD and staff from Plan Bleu) and, if at all possible, external experts (from another country or organization).

### ***Mechanism***

Designated Actors: A proper functioning of the simplified peer review requires the active involvement of the following actors:

- The participating countries: Two or more countries will be involved in the improvement and learning process. The participation of at least three countries would be a more effective option as it will enrich the exchanges and dialogue, provided sufficient funds are secured by the countries themselves or through a third party. The Coordinating Unit of the Mediterranean Action Plan will initiate the process through a call for proposals, for the Contracting Parties, to undertake a bilateral or multi-lateral improvement and learning process.
- Entity in charge: The MCSD, through its supporting staff at UNEP/MAP, will be the overall collective body within which the review is undertaken. This is in line with COP 18 Decision IG. 21/12, requesting the MCSD to encourage, through its meetings and operations, the exchange of good practice.
- Organization Secretariat: The Coordinating Unit of the Mediterranean Action Plan, through its staff supporting the MCSD, along with the support of Plan Bleu, will be the entity responsible for the peer review. It will, among others, support the process by producing documentation and analysis, facilitating interactions with involved countries, organising meetings, stimulating the exchanges and ensuring conformity and continuity.

- External experts: Depending on the scope of the improvement and learning process the participating countries will chose, there might be a need to involve external experts who can bring an independent perspective and enhance the credibility of the process.

*Functioning:* The proposed approach is not a classical peer review, but rather a cooperative, constructive and positive process of mutual improvement and learning. It should operate on the following basis:

- Guiding principles: (i) concerned countries participate at an equal level (no reviewed country, no examiner country); (ii) in-country multi-stakeholders involvement (government, economic actors, NGOs, civil society, academia, etc.); and (iii) high ranking participation to ensure credibility and commitment.
- Guiding questions: The participating countries, with the assistance of the Organization Secretariat and the guidance of the MCSD Steering Committee, should agree on lead questions that will guide the overall dialogue discussions and related round-tables.
- Implementation process: It should consist of (i) national preparatory round-tables; (ii) international (bilateral) joint meeting, and (iii) joint presentation of the outcomes at the MCSD Meeting.

### *Sought benefits for involved countries*

*Enhanced cooperation and partnership:* The improvement and learning process can further the cooperation among the involved countries, and lead to enhanced partnerships among various stakeholders, nationally and internationally.

*Contribution to capacity-building:* The proposed process can be an important capacity building instrument. It will foster sharing information and skills, benefiting concerned countries and involved stakeholders. The national experts and/or practitioners, otherwise focussed on domestic issues, will be engaged in international exchanges and experiences.

*Encouragement and enhancement of compliance:* As the Mediterranean countries are engaged in environmental governance, under the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols, this improvement and learning process offers a platform for encouraging and enhancing the compliance for the Contracting Parties.

*Cost-effectiveness:* The participating countries will have access to expertise from other countries, free of charge. This simplified form of peer review will be definitely be more cost-effective than the expensive assessments by consultants and specialised firms.

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<sup>i</sup> Swanson DA and Pinter L et al. (2004): National Strategies for Sustainable Development: Challenges, Approaches and Innovations in Strategic and Co-ordinated Action International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/site/peerreview/peerreviewatagance.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/site/peerreview/howdoesitwork.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/site/peerreview/theprocedures.htm>

<sup>v</sup> PRIME-SD - Peer Review Improvement through Mutual Exchange on Sustainable Development: A guidebook for peer reviews of national sustainable development strategies; 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> PRIME-SD - Peer Review Improvement through Mutual Exchange on Sustainable Development: A guidebook for peer reviews of national sustainable development strategies; 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), an African Union strategic framework for pan-African socio-economic development, is both a vision and a policy framework for Africa in the twenty-first century. NEPAD is a radically new intervention, spearheaded by African leaders, to address critical challenges facing the continent: poverty, development and Africa's marginalisation internationally.