

The First OECD Ministerial Conference on SMEs

It is now recognised world-wide that the contribution of SMEs and entrepreneurship to employment, innovation and overall economic dynamism is essential to growth performance both in OECD and non-OECD economies. In June 2000, the OECD organised the first Ministerial-level international conference on SMEs in Bologna, Italy, at the invitation of and in co-operation with the Italian Government on "Enhancing the Competitiveness of SMEs in the Global Economy: Strategies and Policies", thus launching the Bologna Process. It was certainly one of the most successful international events of the year 2000. This conference was a major opportunity to identify public and private sector actions to help SMEs develop their local strengths while capturing the benefits of globalisation and trade liberalisation. Its major outcome and final declaration, the Bologna Charter on SME Policies, was adopted on 15 June 2000, by almost fifty participating OECD member and non-member economies, and welcomed by over 200 international and national organisations and NGOs.

The Bologna Conference was not a "one-off event" but a groundbreaking meeting which gave the OECD an incontestable role in the international arena in the area of SMEs. Bologna was meant to mark the beginning of a long-term process: it is now known as "**The (OECD) Bologna Process**". The OECD is firmly committed to developing the **Bologna Process**, which is an important horizontal activity, and to contributing to the implementation of the Charter through its substantive work on SME issues and policies and through strengthening the policy dialogue on SMEs with non-member economies and international organisations.

The Bologna Process is a mechanism to foster the entrepreneurial agenda and SME competitiveness at the global level. It brings together at present over 70 countries (including all APEC countries) and its backdrop is globalisation. One of the main objectives of the Bologna Process is to help governments facilitate entrepreneurs and SMEs worldwide in meeting the challenges and reaping the benefits of globalisation.