

## Preface

**E**nvironment at a glance 2015 highlights the many OECD countries that have succeeded in reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, and those that have increased their share of renewables in energy supply, improved their waste management, or innovated to more efficiently manage their water resources. The data are there to prove it: whether we are talking about natural resource consumption, waste generation or air emissions, decoupling is possible. These positive developments are attributable both to the rise of the services sector and with it, the displacement of resource- and pollution-intensive production abroad, as well as to policy action and technical progress. The economic crisis also contributed to relieve some pressures on the environment.

Environment at a Glance also reveals where progress has slowed or is insufficient. There is substantial scope for strengthening air and climate policies, changing patterns of energy consumption, improving waste and materials management, preserving biodiversity and natural assets, and implementing more integrated policies – all critical components of green growth and sustainable development. Many positive developments still take place at the margin and policies often lack coherence, thus undermining efforts to reduce negative environmental impacts.

Climate change has been on our agenda for many years. It is now an urgent challenge and a potentially irreversible threat to future economic development and well-being. The carbon intensity of the energy used in human activities has hardly changed since 1990 and fossil fuels continue to dominate energy supply. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fuel combustion, calculated by the International Energy Agency, have increased by 36% globally since 2000, in line with global economic growth. With current policies, global energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are estimated to reach three times the level they need to be at in 2050 to limit the long-term increase in global temperatures to 2°C. More recent estimates indicate a flattening of the CO<sub>2</sub> emission growth rate in 2014, not tied to economic activity. Whether this indicates a new trend remains to be seen in the years to come.

Countries continue to support fossil fuel production and consumption in many ways. Not all fossil fuels are treated equal. Variations in energy tax rates, uneven price signals, low levels of taxation on fuels with high environmental impacts, and exemptions for fuel used in some sectors impede the transition to a low-carbon economy. Coal is usually the least heavily taxed of all fossil fuels but the most carbon-intensive fuel available for electricity generation. This suggests important opportunities for reforming countries' tax systems, aligning policies and achieving environmental goals more cost-effectively.

This is all the more important as the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) will convene in Paris in December 2015. The stakes are high: the aim is to reach a new legally binding international agreement to combat climate change effectively and keep global warming below 2°C. To achieve it, governments and businesses have to urgently confront the challenge of making the transition from a carbon-intensive present to a zero-net carbon future, at a time when many also have to cope with economic challenges and painful trade-offs. It will involve a long-term transformation with structural adjustments and the full engagement of all major economies in the world.

*Strong and predictable policies for the decarbonisation of the global economy are needed, with proper price signals and the elimination of environmentally harmful support to producers and consumers, including subsidies that support fossil fuels. Such policies require political will and a long-term view of economic development. They also need to be based on reliable and consistent data that are harmonised at the international level.*

*Governments, decision makers and civil society need to know how their country is performing, over time and compared to other countries. This is one of the reasons that the OECD has been at the forefront of international efforts to develop environmental indicators since the early 1990s, and green growth indicators since 2011. The OECD also monitors quality of life and well-being as part of its better life initiative. As environmental challenges can seldom be tackled by one country alone, regular monitoring through indicators is used to encourage the sharing of good practices among countries.*

*There is scope for further improving the information available to assess countries' environmental progress. In many areas, data are weak or missing, and the absence of reliable time series makes it difficult to monitor the effect of policy measures. It is the OECD's task to work with countries to monitor and report on their progress, bearing in mind their specific circumstances. It is also the OECD's task to help countries improve their environmental information systems and produce reliable and coherent indicators.*

*We will continue to provide governments with harmonised environmental indicators and remain committed to working closely with countries and international partners to improve their quality.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a long horizontal stroke on the left that curves upwards and then down into a vertical line on the right, ending in a small loop.

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