

Progress Towards a Level Playing Field:

Outcomes of the OECD Global Forum on Taxation, Melbourne, 15-16 November 2005

Over 130 representatives of 55 governments, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the European Commission met on 15-16 November 2005 in Melbourne to review progress towards a level playing field based on high standards of transparency and effective exchange of information for tax purposes. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Papali'i Tommy Scanlan, Governor of the Central Bank of Samoa and Mr. Bill McCloskey, Chair of the OECD's Committee on Fiscal Affairs. Mr. Peter Costello, MP, Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia, opened the meeting.

The two day discussions, which were based upon the review of the legal and administrative frameworks on transparency and exchange of information in tax matters currently in place in over 80 countries, showed that considerable progress has already been made towards a global level playing field in the areas of transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters. The discussions identified a number of areas where further progress needs to be made. The review will be published early in 2006.

The statement that follows sets out the outcomes from the two day meeting as well as the next steps in the process.

A. Introduction and Background

1. On 15-16 November 2005, Australia hosted the fourth meeting of the OECD Global Forum on Taxation¹ to discuss the importance of achieving a global level playing field² in respect of improving transparency and effective exchange of information in the tax area. Over 130 representatives from 55 governments met in Melbourne to review progress towards a level playing field in these areas. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Papali'i Tommy Scanlan, Governor of the Central Bank of Samoa, and Bill McCloskey, Chair of the OECD's Committee on Fiscal Affairs. The Honourable Peter Costello, MP, Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia, opened the meeting.

2. The purpose of the Melbourne meeting was to review implementation of the process agreed at the Global Forum meeting held in Berlin in June 2004 for working towards a global level playing field based on high standards of transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters. Two key aspects of this process were to invite other significant financial centres to participate in the dialogue and to carry out a review of countries' (which included the Invitees)³ legal and administrative frameworks in the areas of transparency and exchange of information in tax matters. A draft report of the results of the review was circulated to all participants and formed the basis of the Global Forum's discussions (hereafter referred to as the "Draft Report"). The Draft Report was prepared on the basis of information gathered using a template/questionnaire.

3. The Melbourne Global Forum Participating Partners welcomed representatives from a number of countries that were attending for the first time as Invitees to the Global Forum's dialogue on transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters.⁴

¹ The OECD carries out its dialogue on tax issues with non-OECD economies under the multilateral framework known as the "Global Forum on Taxation". The composition of the Global Forum generally varies depending on the topics covered by the meeting.

² The global level playing field concept, features and role are defined in paragraph 6 of the Berlin Report as follows:

A) CONCEPT:

The level playing field is fundamentally about fairness to which all parties in the Global Forum are committed.

In the context of exchange of information achieving a level playing field means the convergence of existing practices to the same high standards for effective exchange of information on both criminal and civil taxation matters within an acceptable timeline for implementation with the aim of achieving equity and fair competition.

B) FEATURES:

Will provide for –

- i) inclusive process*
- ii) mutual benefits through bilateral implementation*
- iii) a consistent and rigorous approach to any failure to implement*
- iv) review and verification mechanisms*
- v) the standard and the timeline.*

C) ROLE:

The level playing field serves as a goal.

Achieving a level playing field in respect of exchange of information requires that all jurisdictions, OECD and non-OECD members, should act in a manner consistent with the concept in their bilateral relationships and more broadly.

³ References in this document to "countries" should be taken to apply equally to "territories", "dependent territories" or "jurisdictions".

⁴ In the context of the Melbourne Global Forum meeting and of this paper, the term "Global Forum" is understood as the grouping of OECD and non-OECD economies that have agreed to work together towards a level playing field in the areas of transparency and exchange of information in tax matters. These economies are referred to as Participating Partners. The Global Forum agreed at its 2004 meeting to invite other economies to the Melbourne meeting. See Annex. Not all the views expressed in this paper are shared by all of the Invitees.

B. The Review of Countries' Legal and Administrative Frameworks

4. Eighty-one countries were included in the review of their legal and administrative frameworks initiated at the 2004 Berlin Global Forum meeting and the discussions at the Melbourne meeting reveal that progress is being made towards a level playing field in the areas of transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters. The review of the template information (the "review") carried out at the Melbourne meeting suggests that on the information currently available:

- 80 of the countries reviewed reported having legal mechanisms in place to permit the exchange of information in criminal tax matters in certain circumstances.
- 65 of the countries reviewed have legal mechanisms in place that permit the exchange of information for both criminal and civil tax matters.
- Of the countries that are able to exchange information for both civil and criminal tax purposes, the vast majority do not require a domestic tax interest to obtain and respond to a request for information.
- 73 of the countries reviewed are able to obtain and provide banking information in response to a request for information related to a criminal tax matter in some or all cases.
- 53 of the countries reviewed are able to obtain and provide banking information in response to a request for information related to a civil tax matter in some or all cases.
- All countries that are able to exchange information reported having safeguards in place to protect the confidentiality of any information exchanged.
- 74 of the countries reviewed reported that ownership information is available for companies and 45 countries reported it was available with respect to partnerships. In most cases, legal ownership information is available. Beneficial ownership information is available in an increasing number of countries.
- 74 of the countries reviewed require accounting information to be maintained by or for companies. Of the 53 countries that have trust law, 43 require trusts to keep accounting records.

5. The review undertaken suggests that both OECD and non-OECD countries have implemented or made considerable progress towards implementing many of the transparency and effective exchange of information standards that the Global Forum wishes to see achieved. There is no longer any OECD country where a domestic tax interest, of itself, is an impediment to exchange of information. A growing number of non-OECD economies are negotiating agreements that provide for exchange of information⁵ many countries have improved transparency by implementing the FATF customer due diligence requirements and several countries have recently required bearer shares to be immobilised or held by an approved custodian (e.g., the British Virgin Islands, the Cook Islands, Saint Kitts & Nevis). The Global Forum welcomes these developments but further progress is needed if a global level playing field is to be achieved. The remainder of this note discusses possible next steps in the Global Forum's work.

C. Next Steps

6. It is useful to consider the next steps in terms of the categories of actions that formed the basis of the process established in Berlin. The process endorsed at the Berlin Global Forum meeting recognised that integrated individual, bilateral and collective actions would be needed both to achieve and to maintain the goal of a level playing field.

⁵ For example, Aruba, Bahrain, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Guernsey, Jersey, Isle of Man, Mauritius, the Netherlands Antilles and the Seychelles.

(i) Individual actions

7. In terms of *individual actions*, the Berlin Report referred to the fact that some countries may need to modify some existing laws and practices to fully implement the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters. Despite the progress referred to in the previous section, further actions at the individual country level remain necessary.

8. The Global Forum recognised that countries will not be able to move simultaneously to make the necessary changes due to differences in legal systems and in the issues – political, economic and institutional -- that different countries would need to address. Nevertheless, all countries are strongly encouraged to take the necessary steps towards a level playing field. In particular:

(i) Further progress is required in some countries to address the constraints placed on international co-operation to counter criminal tax abuses. In today's global environment it is important for all countries to co-operate with other countries in the fight against all financial crimes, including tax crimes, and this requires the implementation of transparency and the establishment of effective exchange of information mechanisms. The small number of countries that have such constraints on their ability to co-operate in fighting tax crimes are encouraged to review their current policies and to report the outcome of their review at the next Global Forum meeting.

(ii) Further progress is required to address those instances where countries require a domestic tax interest to obtain and provide information in response to a specific request for information related to a tax matter. Those countries where this is still a requirement are encouraged to review their current policies on this issue and to report the outcome of their review at the next Global Forum meeting.

(iii) Further progress is required in the area of access to bank information for tax purposes. Although most countries reported being able to obtain such information for criminal tax matters, a number of countries continue to have strict limits on access to bank information which excessively constrain their ability to respond to specific requests for information in civil and criminal tax cases. Those countries are encouraged to review their current policies on this issue and to report the outcome of their review at the next Global Forum meeting.

(iv) Further progress is required in some countries to ensure that competent authorities have appropriate powers to obtain information for civil and criminal tax purposes. Although the majority of countries have such powers some countries reported limitations on the use of their information-gathering powers to the onshore sector or otherwise lack the power to obtain information for exchange of information purposes. Those countries are encouraged to review their current policies and to report the outcome of their review at the next Global Forum meeting.

(v) Most countries have access to legal ownership information of companies, trusts, partnerships, foundations and other organisational structures. Beneficial ownership information is available in a far fewer, but an increasing, number of countries. Further improvement is necessary. A large number of countries still allow bearer shares. In some countries the availability of ownership information is further complicated by the fact that responsibility for corporate law is in the hands of political sub-divisions. Progress in this area is expected to be assisted by countries' implementation of Recommendations 5, 33 and 34 of the FATF Recommendations and other international initiatives (e.g. EU Second and Third Money Laundering Directives⁶). Countries are

⁶ The EU Second Money Laundering Directive has been transposed into the domestic law of all EU Member States. The EU Third Money Laundering Directive has been adopted by the Council of Economic and Finance Ministers but has not yet been transposed into the domestic law of the Member States.

encouraged to review their current policies, including those of political subdivisions, if relevant, and to report the outcome of their review at the next Global Forum meeting.

(vi) Most countries reviewed reported requiring the keeping of accounts by companies and partnerships. However, certain exceptions to this requirement exist, notably in the context of some international company regimes. Those countries that do not require the keeping of accounting records for international company regimes are encouraged to review their current policies and to report the outcome of their review at the next Global Forum meeting.

9. The Berlin Report also referred to the important role that individual countries can play in encouraging other countries to implement the principles, including through the use of “other organisations to which they belong, fora in which they participate, and communications with their business communities to encourage the adoption of these practices”. Over the last year, several countries did use their participation in other organisations and groups to promote the implementation of the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information. In July 2005, the G-8 Heads of Government endorsed at the Gleneagles Summit the work on transparency and exchange of information and encouraged all countries to implement those principles⁷. The G-20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors issued a statement on 21 November 2004 committing themselves “to the high standards of transparency and exchange of information for tax purposes that have been reflected in the Model Agreement on Exchange of Information on Tax Matters” and “call[ed] on all countries to adopt these standards.” They further “strongly support[ed] the efforts of the OECD Global Forum on Taxation to promote high standards of transparency and exchange of information for tax purposes and to provide a cooperative forum in which all countries can work towards the establishment of a level playing field based on these standards.”⁸ Further actions by such groupings and in other fora could help foster progress towards a level playing field.

10. The Berlin Report also suggested that countries should develop and implement communications strategies aimed at promoting the principles of transparency and exchange of information for tax purposes to their business communities. Members of the Global Forum have participated in numerous events organised by the financial community and this has helped to promote a better understanding of the objectives of the Global Forum. Ensuring that business understands the objectives of the Global Forum’s work and the importance of transparency and effective exchange of information in an increasingly globalised world will make the implementation of these principles more politically acceptable.

11. Public awareness campaigns are also important in efforts to improve taxpayer compliance. Voluntary compliance with the tax laws is often influenced by the public’s perceptions of overall compliance. Until all countries adopt and implement the high standards of transparency and effective exchange of information, there will continue to be a risk that the public will perceive that secure tax evasion opportunities exist abroad. Individual countries can counter such perceptions by publicising their efforts to pursue taxpayers that fail to comply with their tax obligations in their countries of residence by abusing the anonymity offered by some countries. Countries should also publicise that they are entering into bilateral agreements to be able to obtain the information necessary to ensure compliance with the tax laws by all taxpayers.

⁷ See paragraph 14(i) of The Gleneagles Communiqué on Africa, July 14.

⁸ The members of the G-20 are the finance ministers and central bank governors of 19 countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi-Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. Another member is the European Union, represented by the Council presidency and the President of the European Central Bank. The managing director of the IMF and the president of the World Bank, plus the chairpersons of the International Monetary and Financial Committee and Development Committee of the IMF and World Bank, also participate in the talks as ex-officio members.

12. Individual countries can also pursue acceptance of the principles of transparency and exchange of information by not marketing themselves as places where anonymity from foreign tax authorities is assured and by countering attempts at such marketing or the promotion of structures or arrangements that rely upon anonymity to avoid tax obligations and by encouraging any political subdivisions that do so market themselves to desist from doing so.

(ii) Bilateral actions

13. In terms of *bilateral actions*, the Berlin Report highlighted that the principle of effective exchange of information for civil and criminal tax matters will generally be implemented through a process of bilateral negotiations. The Berlin Report acknowledged that “[i]t would be ideal if all significant financial centres would agree to and implement high standards of information exchange at the same time and manner” but recognised that because exchange of information is generally implemented on a bilateral basis, there would be some timing differences in implementation. The global level playing field concept as defined in the Berlin Report does, however, incorporate the expectation that bilateral implementation of those standards should be achieved within an acceptable timeframe and not be open-ended so as to ensure fairness and equity of the process.

14. The Berlin Report pointed out that the bilateral “process permits the contracting parties to take account of the totality of their bilateral relations, their respective legal systems and practices, and their mutual economic interests.” The Berlin Report encouraged all countries to strive to achieve effective exchange of information and transparency by 2006 but recognised that countries could adapt their bilateral arrangements to suit their specific needs and mutual interests.

15. The review of countries’ legal and administrative frameworks suggests that the vast majority of countries are already in a position to exchange information in cases of tax crimes. It is important for all countries to participate in the fight against all financial crimes, including tax crimes, and those countries that are not yet able to do so are encouraged to enter into bilateral arrangements for exchanging information with other countries to combat tax crimes. Those countries that currently are able to provide such assistance are encouraged to review their current legal and administrative frameworks with a view to ensuring the widest possible co-operation among countries to combat tax crimes.

16. The review suggests that most countries reviewed also have laws and legal instruments in place that would enable effective exchange of information for criminal and civil tax purposes. Progress in bilateral negotiations has been made recently by some countries and others are in the process of such negotiations.

17. An indicator of the developing co-operation between OECD and non-OECD countries is the increase in tax information exchange agreements and double taxation agreements.⁹ Countries that are currently in negotiations are encouraged to complete them and those countries which have not initiated such negotiations are encouraged to do so.

18. In the vast majority of cases where bilateral arrangements exist for effective exchange of information for both civil and criminal tax matters, including the agreements referred to above, the parties derive mutual benefits from the arrangement either as a result of a likely balance in the exchange of information or through other benefits. Ensuring that mutual benefits are derived by both parties will

⁹ As stated in paragraph 6 of the introduction to the Model Agreement on Exchange of Information on Tax Matters, “[T]he Agreement is intended to establish the standard of what constitutes effective exchange of information for the purposes of the OECDs initiative on harmful tax practices. However, the purpose of the agreement is not to prescribe a specific format for how this standard should be achieved. Thus, the Agreement in either of its forms is only one of several ways in which the standard can be implemented. Other instruments, including double taxation agreements may also be used provided both parties agree to do so, given that other instruments are usually wider in scope.”

further the goal of helping financial centres that meet the high standards set for transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters to be “fully integrated into the international financial system and the global community.”¹⁰ Further, it is hoped that by providing mutual benefits, greater progress towards a level playing field will be made. The nature of any such benefits would necessarily depend on the legal systems and particular circumstances of the two parties to the arrangement. Countries are encouraged to try to ensure that their bilateral arrangements for effective exchange of information for all civil and criminal tax matters provide benefits for both parties.

19. Public recognition is an important benefit to those countries that implement the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information and OECD countries are encouraged to give recognition where such implementation occurs. Such recognition benefits the other country by enhancing its reputation.

(iii) Collective actions

20. In terms of *collective actions*, the Berlin Report called for a review of countries’ legal and administrative frameworks in the areas of transparency and information exchange, an assessment of the convergence of existing practices and the involvement of significant financial centres that are not currently Participating Partners. The initial analysis of the data received is now well advanced and most of the significant financial centres invited to the Global Forum attended the meeting.

21. Eighty-one countries were included in the review, which was carried out using a detailed template/questionnaire developed by the Global Forum. As foreseen in the Berlin Report, all of the countries included in the review were invited to complete the template/questionnaire. The information gathered through the template/questionnaire has been summarised in the Draft Report, which will be finalised in early 2006. The issuance of the final report will help to provide public recognition to those countries that have implemented the high standards of transparency and effective exchange of information and ensure that current information on countries’ legal and administrative frameworks is widely available.

22. The Global Forum will provide periodic progress reports on developments after the initial report is released. Countries will be encouraged to regularly provide updates on developments in their legal and administrative frameworks with respect to transparency and effective exchange of information and that information will be made available to all participants. The Report and its updates are expected to play an important role as an ongoing reference tool and as a tool to assess transparency and the effective exchange of information in tax matters.

D. Public Recognition

23. The Global Forum acknowledges that, for political and historical reasons, changes to improve transparency and to establish effective exchange of information are not always easy and that it is important for international bodies to give public recognition when such changes are implemented.

24. International bodies may wish to consider providing tangible forms of positive recognition, through their work programmes and in public statements, to countries that implement the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information.

¹⁰ See paragraph 28 of Berlin Report.

E. Relevance of OECD List of Tax Havens Published in 2000

25. A number of countries have expressed concern at the way in which some countries have used the 2000 OECD list. If a country chooses to use a list of countries derived from the OECD list, it should do so based on the relevant current facts. Thus, progress made in the implementation of the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters should be taken into account by such countries and their legislatures. The 2000 OECD list should be seen in its historical context¹¹ and as an evaluation by OECD member countries at a particular point in time of which countries met the criteria set out in the 1998 Report. More than five years have passed since the publication of the OECD list and positive changes have occurred in individual countries' transparency and exchange of information laws and practices since that time. The Report, once completed and as updated periodically, will provide more up-to-date information. This does not reflect any judgement by the Global Forum on the tax or other policies underlying country lists.

F. Endorsement of Principles of Transparency and Effective Exchange of Information

26. The Global Forum welcomed the endorsement by Argentina; China; Hong Kong, China; Macao, China; the Russian Federation and South Africa of the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information in tax matters and their willingness to work towards a level playing field in these areas.

G. Next Meeting of the Global Forum

27. The Global Forum welcomed the progress made by the Sub-Group on Level Playing Field Issues¹² in carrying out the mandate given to it at the Berlin Global Forum meeting, confirmed that it would wish the Sub-Group to continue its work and complete its mandate and agreed that the Sub-Group should propose a date for the next meeting of the Global Forum at which the further progress made on the items discussed in Melbourne would also be addressed.

¹¹ The 2000 Report described the list as follows: "this listing is intended to reflect the technical conclusions of the committee only and is not intended to be used as the basis for possible co-ordinated defensive measures"

¹² The Sub-Group members are: Australia, The Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, France, Germany, Ireland, Isle of Man, Italy, Japan, Jersey, Mauritius, Mexico, Panama, St. Kitts and Nevis, Samoa, Seychelles, the United States. The Commonwealth Secretariat is an observer.

ANNEX

Global Forum Participating Partners

ANGUILLA*	DOMINICA	KOREA	SAN MARINO
ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA	FINLAND	MALTA	SEYCHELLES
ARUBA**	FRANCE	MAURITIUS	SLOVAK REPUBLIC
AUSTRALIA	GERMANY	MEXICO	SPAIN
THE BAHAMAS	GIBRALTAR*	MONTSERRAT*	ST. KITTS & NEVIS
BAHRAIN, Kingdom of	GREECE	NAURU	ST. LUCIA
BELIZE	GRENADA	NETHERLANDS**	ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES
BERMUDA*	GUERNSEY***	NETHERLANDS ANTILLES**	SWEDEN
BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS*	HUNGARY	NEW ZEALAND	TURKEY
CANADA	ICELAND	NIUE	TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS*
CAYMAN ISLANDS*	IRELAND	NORWAY	UNITED KINGDOM
COOK ISLANDS	ISLE OF MAN***	PANAMA	UNITED STATES
CYPRUS	ITALY	POLAND	U. S. VIRGIN ISLANDS****
CZECH REPUBLIC	JAPAN	PORTUGAL	VANUATU
DENMARK	JERSEY***	SAMOA	

Invitees

In addition to the Participating Partners, set out above, the following countries were invited to contribute to the factual assessment and to attend the Global Forum meeting. The countries in **bold** also attended the Melbourne meeting.

ANDORRA	GUATEMALA	MONACO
ARGENTINA	HONG KONG, CHINA	PHILIPPINES
AUSTRIA	LIBERIA	RUSSIAN FEDERATION
BARBADOS	LIECHTENSTEIN	SINGAPORE
BELGIUM	LUXEMBOURG	SOUTH AFRICA
BRUNEI	MACAO, CHINA	SWITZERLAND
CHINA	MALAYSIA	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (DUBAI)
COSTA RICA	MARSHALL ISLANDS	URUGUAY

- * Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom
- ** The Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba are the three countries of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
- *** Dependency of the British Crown
- **** External Territory of the United States