

Policy Challenges for Emerging and Developing Economies

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Abstract

The 2009 global recession demonstrated once again, the importance of crisis prevention as well as the critical need for preserving policy room so that emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs) can act when their economies are hit by shocks. And now, with the global growth outlook still weak and vulnerabilities rising, these lessons underscore the need for comprehensive policies to improve EMDEs' resilience to shocks and lift long-term growth prospects. On the macroeconomic front, priorities include shoring up fiscal positions, keeping adequate foreign reserves and strengthening policy frameworks. Financial sector policies to adapt to a changing global financial environment include strengthening home-host supervisor coordination and establishing prudential authorities with the appropriate tools and mandates to mitigate systemic risks. Structural policy priorities include investment in human capital and infrastructure to offset the decline in potential growth that is expected to continue over the next decade. Renewed reform momentum is needed to create the environment that generates private sector-led, productivity-driven growth supported by measures to improve governance and business climates.

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Background to the Study

EMDEs weathered the global recession of 2009 relatively well for three reasons. First, EMDEs were generally not as exposed to the financial sector fragilities that triggered the crisis in advanced economies. Second, many EMDEs had used the 2000s to reduce vulnerabilities and rebuild policy room to respond effectively when the crisis hit. Third, at the onset of the crisis, advanced economies and some large EMDEs provided unprecedented and coordinated monetary and fiscal policy stimulus, which helped shield global economic growth.

Nevertheless, the global recession slowed per capital growth in EMDEs to 0.4 percent in 2009 from an average over much of the preceding decade of close to 5 percent. The rebound in 2010-11 was initially strong but per capital growth never returned to its rates from before the global recession. Commodity exporters faced further headwinds when global commodity prices slid to multi-year lows in 2011-16 and forced commodity-exporting EMDEs to engage in procyclical fiscal tightening. Energy-exporting EMDEs were particularly hard hit by the collapse in oil prices in 2014-16.

Amid slowing growth, most EMDEs were not able to fully unwind the policy stimulus put in place in response to the crisis fiscal deficits in the average EMDE were about as wide in 2018 as they were in 2010 and external, fiscal, and corporate vulnerabilities have increased since 2007. Several EMDEs are highly indebted, have elevated levels of foreign currency denominated debt or rely on portfolio or bank flows to finance large current account deficits.

Since the global recession, structural factors have eroded potential growth. Around 2010, the share of the working-age population in EMDEs stabilized after more than four decades of rapid increases. There is a broad literature offering policy recommendations for EMDEs and analysis of the likely effects of possible reforms and other policy actions. This paper adds to the literature in several ways. First, the paper assesses both the progress and impact of structural reforms in EMDEs since the global recession. Most studies focus on quantifying the impact these reforms would have on output (Bailiu and Hajzler 2016; Égert 2018) and the evolution of specific aspects of structural reforms (World Bank 2019). Second, compared to existing studies that focused on individual structural reforms, this paper brings together the policy priorities most relevant at the current juncture, alongside a review of the related literature analyzing the likely impact of their implementation, with a focus on possible complementarities and tradeoffs.

This paper reports the following findings. First, it documents the extent to which current macroeconomic policies undermine the resilience of EMDEs to shocks. Over 60 percent of EMDEs have primary fiscal deficits that are too large to stabilize or reduce their debt levels based on current economic conditions.

This paper points to several policy implications of this outcome. EMDEs with unsustainable fiscal positions can prioritize raising revenues and improving spending

efficiency, while maintaining growth-enhancing expenditure. Measures to enhance tax revenues include broadening the tax base, improving tax collection systems, reducing loopholes, and empowering tax administrators with greater technical skills. To improve spending efficiency and the mix of expenditures, policy makers can enhance the institutions and mechanisms used to determine investment projects and procurement and to monitor spending including on government administration and social services. Separately, in several EMDEs, international reserves are currently below levels that would be consistent with reserve adequacy. These EMDEs could focus on rebuilding foreign exchange reserves and restraining foreign currency borrowing.

Second, to improve longer-term resilience, EMDEs need to strengthen fiscal and monetary policy frameworks by adopting transparent and rules-based approaches. Fiscal rules can help countries maintain sustainable finances and accumulate resources when the economy is doing well. Better fiscal frameworks also assist monetary policy by restraining pro-cyclical spending that could contribute to demand pressures. A transparent and independent central bank will be better placed to maintain price stability, thereby helping to create a macroeconomic environment that is conducive to strong growth.

Third, pro-active financial sector supervision and regulation can mitigate risks, especially in countries with financial markets that are developing rapidly and becoming more integrated globally. In EMDEs without a prudential authority or prudential powers, creating or empowering these institutions is a priority. In EMDEs with the appropriate institutions, flexible and well-targeted tools are needed to manage balance-sheet mismatches, foreign currency risk, and asset price misalignment with fundamentals. In EMDEs facing destabilizing capital flows, capital flow management measures in conjunction with sound macroeconomic policies, exchange rate policy, and sufficient levels of financial and institutional development can reduce the risk of financial instability (IMF 2012). In regions where EMDE-headquartered banks have gained prominence, efforts to strengthen home-host supervisor coordination may pay dividends during the next episode of financial stress.

Fourth, to reverse the trend slowdown in productivity growth, ambitious and comprehensive structural reforms are needed. While EMDEs were able to make some progress in improving their business climates in the three years prior and during the global recession, in many areas' momentum was not maintained. Meanwhile, governance in EMDEs has failed to improve since the 1990s and some EMDEs have taken steps to rein in openness to international capital flows. Reform priorities include building institutions that support economic growth and resilience; enhancing productivity and encouraging investment; building human capital; investing in growth-enhancing public infrastructure; helping to address, as well as adapting to, climate change; improving governance; strengthening competition; and reducing regulatory burdens.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it examines macroeconomic policies that build resilience. This is timely because EMDEs are more vulnerable today than before the global recession. Next, it explores financial sector policies that address existing and emerging financial stability challenges. Finally, it highlights reforms that address structural impediments to stronger, balanced and sustainable growth in EMDEs.

Macroeconomic Policies to Build Resilience

As global economic growth slows, EMDE policymakers must strive to make their economies more resilient to shocks. Efforts are needed to strengthen fiscal and monetary policy frameworks and calibrate international reserves, particularly in economies that have experienced rapid increases in debt and have become more exposed to debt-rollover risks, currency volatility, or spikes in interest rates. Countercyclical macroeconomic policies and financial stability can lean against pro-cyclical fluctuations in capital flows. EMDE policymakers must also prepare for spillovers from disorderly market adjustments and policy shocks in advanced economies.

Financial Sector Policies for Stability and Growth

Since the global financial crisis, the global financial architecture has improved, the resilience of major banking systems has strengthened, and new monetary and macro prudential tools have been developed and widely employed. Yet, EMDEs face a number of challenges, new and old, related to the financial sector, the architecture of financial regulation and supervision, and macro prudential policy. These include the deterioration of bank balance sheets, the legacy of post-recession credit booms in some countries, the rise in EMDE-headquartered and regional banks, the need for home-host supervisor coordination, the rise in nonbank intermediaries, and the management of volatile capital flows.

The post-recession rebound in EMDE growth, shifts in investor risk appetite, and low borrowing costs have fueled credit to nonfinancial corporations and, in many EMDEs, outright credit booms (Ohnsorge and Yu 2016). Credit extended to the private sector by banks in EMDEs increased by 10.5 percentage points of GDP between 2007 and 2016, with especially rapid increases in EAP and MNA.

There has also been a shift toward riskier borrowing by nonfinancial corporations, at least in some EMDEs. While much of the credit growth was domestic, capital inflows (especially, portfolio flows which can be fickle) also contributed to rising nonfinancial sector debt. On average, portfolio flows accounted for 17 percent of capital flows to EMDEs in 2010-17 up from 8 percent in 2002-07. In some EMDEs, the share of nonresident holdings in local currency bond markets has grown to more than 30 percent (Czech Republic, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Poland, South Africa), which exposes these countries to the risk of changing global risk sentiment even if it mitigates currency risk (Agur et al. 2018).

While these credit booms had largely subsided by 2016, they have left a legacy of elevated private sector debt in a number of EMDEs. This, coupled with disappointing economic growth, has contributed to a deterioration in the health of banks' balance sheets. Banks' profitability has declined, with returns on assets and equity recently reaching their lowest levels since 2010. EMDE banks' asset quality has also deteriorated, with the share of non-performing loans rising in nearly two-thirds of EMDEs between 2007 and 2017, although remaining at still-manageable levels in most EMDEs.

Structural Policies to Boost Equitable Growth

EMDEs have seen potential growth slow to 4.7 percent in the 2013-18 periods, down by 1.2 percentage points compared to 2003-07 (World Bank 2018e). Part of the slowdown is due to lower productivity growth, attributable to several factors including slower investment growth; diminishing gains from factor reallocation as the pace of urbanization slows; and a stabilization of global value chains. Demographic trends have turned from tailwinds to headwinds as the share of the working-age population stabilized in EMDEs around 2010, following more than four decades of steady increases. At this point, all major economies face demographic trends that slow potential growth prospects: economies with rising working-age populations accounted for 19 percent of global GDP in 2013-17, sharply down from 60 percent of global GDP in 2003-07. At current trends, potential growth in EMDEs is expected to continue to slow, to 4.3 percent a year in the next decade, with 60 percent of EMDEs experiencing a slowdown. Demographic trends alone would account for almost one-half of this slowdown and would weigh most heavily on potential growth prospects in EAP and ECA.

Some of this progress has been driven by trade-related reforms, again with increased momentum visible in the three years prior and during the global recession. Thus, the number of trade-related reforms in EMDEs increased from 24 to 37 between DB2008 and DB2010. However, these numbers imply that still only a minority of EMDEs were undertaking reforms that lowered the cost and time required to import and export. Reform momentum slowed after 2010. Since DB2017, however, there seems to have been some renewed vigor in trade reform, with the number of relevant reforms rising to 34 in that year. In contrast to these efforts to lower within-border trade-related costs, G20 economies have imposed a growing number of tariffs and non-tariff restrictions on trade (WTO 2019).

Finally, better education serves a critical function in reducing inequality both within and between countries. As EMDEs' workforce grows—while that of advanced economies shrinks—and becomes more skilled, the global economy is expected to benefit and global income inequality is expected to fall (World Bank 2018a).

Policy Priorities

Where demand is weak but fiscal positions are sound and there is monetary policy room, fiscal or monetary stimulus could help support activity. Where fiscal positions are weak, priorities may include shifting public spending toward more productive and poverty-

reducing expenditures and improving revenue frameworks. Some economies in LAC and SSA have experienced rapid debt accumulation and face risks of fiscal unsustainability. Energy-exporting EMDEs, particularly in MNA, face rising vulnerabilities that require policy action. Where central banks lack independence and transparency, policymakers could prioritize implementing rule-based frameworks and building credibility through proper implementation of policy. Where corporate balance sheets face rising vulnerabilities, policymakers can implement macro prudential policies that mitigate risks. While fiscal, monetary, and financial policies can build resilience in the short-term, structural policies are needed to boost longer-term growth. Specific policy priorities will depend on country-specific bottlenecks to growth.

The specific policies depend on the extent to which an important market failure has to be rectified and the likelihood of success in governments' efforts to address this failure (Maloney and Nayyar 2018; Rodrik 2008). Several priority areas can be considered.

Conclusion

A decade after the global recession, EMDE policymakers are at a crossroads. EMDE growth has slowed over the past decade, with downside risks becoming more prevalent. At current trends, most EMDEs will face slower potential growth in the next decade than the previous one. While some progress has been made in implementing more resilient macroeconomic policy frameworks – including through rules-based policy frameworks; increasing the flexibility of exchange rates; and strengthening prudential policies, including with macro prudential tools – most EMDEs remain some distance from best practices. At the same time, significant policy room that was used in response to the global recession has not yet been restored. There have been efforts to implement business-friendly reforms to improve efficiency and promote investment. But with governance stalling and reform momentum slowing in several areas, those efforts may not suffice to stem the decline in potential output growth.

To raise per capita incomes, eradicate poverty, and bring about shared prosperity, policy makers need to adopt ambitious and credible reform agendas that focus on all aspects of policy in an integrated way. EMDEs on unsustainable fiscal paths can prioritize actions that can help shore up fiscal positions while protecting growth-enhancing expenditures.

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