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IMF Reviews Its External Communications Strategy

On March 5, 2003, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reviewed the IMF's external communications strategy¹.

Background

The discussion was the Board's third within five years on external communications strategy. The first Board discussion, in July 1998, called for preserving and enhancing the IMF's credibility, including by providing more information to the public, extending the reach of IMF communications, and engaging critics more effectively. A second Board discussion, in February 2000, considered plans to strengthen IMF external communications, including recommendations from outside consultants that the IMF develop a strategy comprising: a clearer message; sharper focus and improved coordination of the IMF's public output; and more proactive external communications.

The IMF's external communications strategy has also been shaped by: (1) Board decisions to expand transparency by publishing staff country reports (when the country concerned agrees) and many other Board documents, and Public Information Notices, shortly after Board discussions; (2) the policy of encouraging and facilitating wide consultation in Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility countries as part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper process; and (3) by increased emphasis in the IMF's revised conditionality guidelines on promoting national ownership of IMF-supported economic policy programs.

¹ The Fund's "external communications" do not include its communications with the authorities and officials of member countries. Also excluded are its communications with other international organizations. The Board's March 5, 2003 discussion was based on the staff paper entitled, "A Review of the Fund's External Communications Strategy."

Executive Board Assessment

Executive Directors welcomed the opportunity to review the Fund's External Communications Strategy. Their discussion took stock of the progress achieved in recent years in increasing the IMF's openness and enhancing its responsiveness to outside views, including concerns and criticism. Despite the significant improvements made in these areas, Directors agreed that challenges remain, and that more needs to be done. They considered that continued improvements in external communications are needed to improve further the public's understanding of the IMF's work, so that it can serve its member countries more effectively.

Directors felt that the current relatively high media visibility of the IMF offers a valuable opportunity to enhance the implementation of its external communications strategy. They observed that, although the work of the IMF—based on its mandate to safeguard the macroeconomic and monetary foundations of economic growth—is vital to economic welfare and rising living standards worldwide, much of its work tends to attract controversy. This is not least because a prominent part of the IMF's job is to advise countries on how best to face economic reality in difficult circumstances, including when they need the IMF's financial support. In this context, Directors considered that improving understanding of the IMF's work and respect for its competence, and enhancing the credibility of its policies, are key objectives of its communications—and more so than increasing its popularity. A continuing, concentrated effort to improve understanding of the institution will, over time, be valuable in increasing support for its work in member countries even if progress may seem incremental and modest. Directors generally considered that more can be achieved by better focusing and prioritizing external relations activity within the existing budgetary envelope, although a few Directors thought that the budget should be reviewed if additional funds are deemed necessary in view of the critical importance of this effort.

Focus and coordination

Directors agreed that the IMF's communications should be sharply focused and that the main themes should be derived from guidance provided by the International Monetary and Financial Committee and from Executive Board decisions and work plans. Directors recognized that external communications are a shared responsibility of the Executive Board, management, and staff, and that the External Relations Department (EXR) necessarily plays a crucial role in ensuring that the IMF's external communications are well developed, coordinated, and delivered. EXR's responsibilities, Directors noted, include keeping staff informed about the key issues for external communications, drafting and revising material for public statements, and coordinating and advising on public speaking opportunities and interactions with the media. In this connection, Directors generally commended the staff, especially EXR, for their substantial efforts to strengthen internal communication and coordination aimed at improving external communications. With the inevitable involvement of an increasing number of IMF players in such activities, Directors believed that it will become increasingly important to ensure that consistent messages are being delivered.

Availability and accessibility of information

Directors observed that the IMF's transparency policy has led to the release of a greatly increased volume of policy and country papers and summaries of Board discussions, with the IMF's external website (www.imf.org) being the primary vehicle for dissemination. The IMF also publishes vast quantities of research and statistical data as well as comprehensive information on the IMF's finances. Directors acknowledged that the sheer volume of information released by the IMF, together with its technical and specialized content, increases the importance of providing clear and brief summaries and explanatory material for non-specialists. Directors indicated their support for ongoing efforts to improve the drafting, editing, and summarizing of IMF material intended for public dissemination. They considered, however, that more needs to be done to make such material understandable—including by presenting it in plain English and reducing jargon. In a similar vein, Directors called for continued efforts to enhance the communication skills of all IMF staff, which will be important not only for improved interactions with the public, but also for enhancing the learning culture of the institution more broadly. Many Directors underlined that senior staff across the Fund can make a positive contribution in external communications, and we will need to consider how best to advance in this respect.

Proactive outreach and dialogue

Directors shared the view of management and staff that the purposes of outreach and dialogue include listening and learning as well as informing and providing explanations for interlocutors, and that the IMF now, more actively than in the past, seeks to take into account the views of its critics as well as supporters in developing and revising IMF policies, practices, and advice. Directors welcomed the considerable expansion in recent years of the IMF's communications with nonofficials, particularly legislators and civil society organizations. Going forward, they agreed that, given its limited resources, the IMF, like other international organizations, will need to be selective and set priorities for outreach and dialogue. Most Directors supported giving priority to communications with legislatures, labor unions, and the private sector, in coordination with national authorities. Several Directors urged a further strengthening of efforts at constructive dialogue with nongovernmental organizations and academic and policy research institutes on IMF-related issues, especially major international NGOs and those active in program countries. Most Directors supported a more active role for IMF resident representatives and mission chiefs in outreach, with several Directors noting that outreach should take care to respect the preferences of the authorities and be tailored to the needs of each country in order to be effective in complementing the IMF's core work. Directors also noted the important impact of management speeches—which are direct and clear—as well as visits by management to member countries. Directors welcomed the staff's proposal to prepare a guidance note for Fund staff outreach to civil society organizations. While encouraging staff to highlight the IMF's successes, Directors considered that the IMF's public image and accountability can only benefit from the institution's willingness to learn lessons from its experience and to openly acknowledge mistakes when they do happen. Directors were generally supportive of prompt, vigorous responses to biased or inaccurate media reports regarding the Fund and its activities, while recognizing that a key objective should be to provide consistent long-term messages to opinion leaders throughout the world.

Broadening the reach of IMF communications

Directors welcomed the significant contribution to communications and outreach being made by the availability of vast amounts of information on the IMF's external website. They favored continued development and expansion of the website, which should focus on the quality of information provided and maintain its ease and speed of access for users everywhere. Several Directors encouraged the efforts to make the content of the IMF website more user-friendly, less technical, and more streamlined. Directors supported efforts to expand distribution of the Fund's print publications, especially in developing countries. They also welcomed efforts under way by EXR and area departments to better plan and coordinate the IMF's external communications programs for specific regions and countries, taking into account the differing circumstances and perceptions from one country to another and without ignoring any region. Directors also noted that, within a given country, the impact of Fund communication will vary across groups and institutions, calling for gearing communication efforts to the particular background and concerns of different audiences. Several speakers suggested the adoption of a Mission Statement by the IMF to help convey the essential purposes and goals of the institution in plain language.

Publications in languages other than English

Directors discussed the conclusions of a report from an interdepartmental task force on IMF publications in languages other than English. They agreed that increased publication of IMF documents and other information in languages other than English, including local languages as well as the most widely used international languages, can be very helpful for increasing understanding and support for IMF policies and advice as well as fostering country ownership. For country policy intentions documents available in local languages in the original, the practice of linking to authorities' websites, or posting on the IMF website in the case of the major languages for which links exist on the homepage, should be encouraged. In other cases, translation costs may be significant. Although some Directors favored an exceptional allocation of resources for the purpose, most considered that this should be accommodated within existing budget ceilings on an as needed and case-by-case basis. They encouraged the staff to identify low-cost options and cases where the benefits of publishing translated material are likely to be high relative to costs. For example, some Directors suggested that the Fund should actively encourage the translation of appropriate documents into local languages by local entities, with the Fund possibly bearing some cost, particularly where easier access to documents will help provide a better and wider understanding of the Fund's message.

Role of the Executive Board

Directors expressed a range of views on the role of Executive Directors in the external communication process. Several Directors noted the complexities involved in playing a prominent public relations role, as this entails balancing their roles as representatives of their countries and as officers of the IMF. Several thought that Executive Directors could play a useful and active role, including in explaining the IMF in their constituencies. The suggestion

was made that Directors could be guided by a “code of conduct” that the Board itself could develop subsequently.

At the conclusion of the Executive Board’s discussion, Mr. Shigemitsu Sugisaki, Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chairman, stated the following:

“This has been a useful and constructive discussion on the points captured above, and many others. We have noted the many valuable suggestions made by Directors and will endeavor to incorporate them into our communications strategy. We have also noted the interest of Directors in having more regular—perhaps annual—Board reviews of the communication strategy and, as needed, informal seminars focused on particular issues in the strategy, and we will be prepared to do so.”

Public Information Notices (PINs) are issued, (i) at the request of a member country, following the conclusion of the Article IV consultation for countries seeking to make known the views of the IMF to the public (this action is intended to strengthen IMF surveillance over the economic policies of member countries by increasing the transparency of the IMF’s assessment of these policies); and (ii) following policy discussions in the Executive Board at the decision of the Board.