

6.2: What Is the International Monetary System?

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the role and purpose of the international monetary system.
2. Describe the purpose of the gold standard and why it collapsed.
3. Describe the Bretton Woods Agreement and why it collapsed.
4. Understand today's current monetary system, which developed after the Bretton Woods Agreement collapse.

Why do economies need money? This chapter defines *money* as a unit of account that is used as a medium of exchange in transactions. Without money, individuals and businesses would have a harder time obtaining (purchasing) or exchanging (selling) what they need, want, or make. Money provides us with a universally accepted medium of exchange.

Before the current monetary system can be fully appreciated, it's helpful to look back at history and see how money and systems governing the use of money have evolved. Thousands of years ago, people had to barter if they wanted to get something. That worked well if the two people each wanted what the other had. Even today, bartering exists. (Chapter 9 discusses modern bartering and countertrade.)

History shows that ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia—which encompasses the land between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and is modern-day Iraq, parts of eastern Syria, southwest Iran, and southeast Turkey—began to use a system based on the highly coveted coins of gold and silver, also known as **bullion**, which is the purest form of the precious metal. However, bartering remained the most common form of exchange and trade.

Gold and silver coins gradually emerged in the use of trading, although the level of pure gold and silver content impacted the coins value. Only coins that consist of the pure precious metal are bullions; all other coins are referred to simply as *coins*. It is interesting to note that gold and silver lasted many centuries as the basis of economic measure and even into relatively recent history of the gold standard, which we'll cover in the next section. Fast-forward two thousand years and bartering has long been replaced by a currency-based system. Even so, there have been evolutions in the past century alone on how—globally—the monetary system has evolved from using gold and silver to represent national wealth and economic exchange to the current system.

Did You Know?

Throughout history, some types of money have gained widespread circulation outside of the nations that issued them. Whenever a country or empire has regional or global control of trade, its currency becomes the dominant currency for trade and governs the monetary system of that time. In the middle of a period that relies on one major currency, it's easy to forget that, throughout history, there have been other primary currencies—a historical cycle. Generally, the best currency to use is the most liquid one, the one issued by the nation with the biggest economy as well as usually the largest import-export markets. Rarely has a single currency been the exclusive medium of world trade, but a few have come close. Here's a quick look at some of some of the most powerful currencies in history:

- **Persian daric.** The daric was a gold coin used in Persia between 522 BC and 330 BC.
- **Roman currency.** Currencies such as the aureus (gold), the denarius (silver), the sestertius (bronze), the dupondius (bronze), and the as (copper) were used during the Roman Empire from around 250 BC to AD 250.
- **Thaler.** From about 1486 to 1908, the thaler and its variations were used in Europe as the standard against which the various states' currencies could be valued.
- **Spanish American pesos.** Around 1500 to the early nineteenth century, this contemporary of the thaler was widely used in Europe, the Americas, and the Far East; it became the first world currency by the late eighteenth century.
- **British pound.** The pound's origins date as early as around AD 800, but its influence grew in the 1600s as the unofficial gold standard; from 1816 to around 1939 the pound was the global reserve currency until the collapse of the gold standard.
- **US dollar.** The Coinage Act of 1792 established the dollar as the basis for a monetary account, and it went into circulation two years later as a silver coin. Its strength as a global reserve currency expanded in the 1800s and continues today.
- **Euro.** Officially in circulation on January 1, 1999, the euro continues to serve as currency in many European countries today.

Let's take a look at the last century of the international monetary system evolution. **International monetary system** refers to the system and rules that govern the use and exchange of money around the world and between countries. Each country has its own currency as money and the international monetary system governs the rules for valuing and exchanging these currencies.

Until the nineteenth century, the major global economies were regionally focused in Europe, the Americas, China, and India. These were loosely linked, and there was no formal monetary system governing their interactions. The rest of this section reviews the distinct chronological periods over the past 150 years leading to the development of the modern global financial system. Keep in mind that the system continues to evolve and each crisis impacts it. There is not likely to be a final international monetary system, simply one that reflects the current economic and political realities. This is one main reason why understanding the historical context is so critical. As the debate about the pros and cons of the current monetary system continues, some economists are tempted to advocate a return to systems from the past. Businesses need to be mindful of these arguments and the resulting changes, as they will be impacted by new rules, regulations, and structures.

Pre–World War I

As mentioned earlier in this section, ancient societies started using gold as a means of economic exchange. Gradually more countries adopted gold, usually in the form of coins or bullion, and this international monetary system became known as the **gold standard**. This system emerged gradually, without the structural process in more recent systems. The gold standard, in essence, created a **fixed exchange rate system**. An **exchange rate** is the price of one currency in terms of a second currency. In the gold standard system, each country sets the price of its currency to gold, specifically to one ounce of gold. A fixed exchange rate stabilizes the value of one currency vis-à-vis another and makes trade and investment easier.

Our modern monetary system has its roots in the early 1800s. The defeat of Napoleon in 1815, when France was beaten at the Battle of Waterloo, made Britain the strongest nation in the world, a position it held for about one hundred years. In Africa, British rule extended at one time from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo. British dominance and influence also stretched to the Indian subcontinent, the Malaysian peninsula, Australia, New Zealand—which attracted British settlers—and Canada. Under the banner of the British government, British companies advanced globally and were the largest companies in many of the colonies, controlling trade and commerce. Throughout history, strong countries, as measured mainly in terms of military might, were able to advance the interests of companies from their countries—a fact that has continued to modern times, as seen in the global prowess of American companies. Global firms in turn have always paid close attention to the political, military, and economic policies of their and other governments.

In 1821, the United Kingdom, the predominant global economy through the reaches of its colonial empire, adopted the gold standard and committed to fixing the value of the British pound. The major trading countries, including Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, France, and the United States, also followed and fixed the price of their currencies to an ounce of gold.

The United Kingdom officially set the price of its currency by agreeing to buy or sell an ounce of gold for the price of 4.247 pounds sterling. At that time, the United States agreed to buy or sell an ounce of gold for \$20.67. This enabled the two currencies to be freely exchanged in terms of an ounce of gold. In essence,

$$£4.247 = 1 \text{ ounce of gold} = \$20.67.$$

The exchange rate between the US dollar and the British pound was then calculated by

$$\$20.67/£4.247 = \$4.867 \text{ to } £1.$$

The Advantages of the Gold Standard

The gold standard dramatically reduced the risk in exchange rates because it established fixed exchange rates between currencies. Any fluctuations were relatively small. This made it easier for global companies to manage costs and pricing. International trade grew throughout the world, although economists are not always in agreement as to whether the gold standard was an essential part of that trend.

The second advantage is that countries were forced to observe strict monetary policies. They could not just print money to combat economic downturns. One of the key features of the gold standard was that a currency had to actually have in reserve enough gold to convert all of its currency being held by anyone into gold. Therefore, the volume of paper currency could not exceed the gold reserves.

The third major advantage was that gold standard would help a country correct its trade imbalance. For example, if a country was importing more than it is exporting, (called a **trade deficit**), then under the gold standard the country had to pay for the imports with gold. The government of the country would have to reduce the amount of paper currency, because there could not be more currency in circulation than its gold reserves. With less money floating around, people would have less money to spend (thus causing a decrease in demand) and prices would also eventually decrease. As a result, with cheaper goods and services to offer,

companies from the country could export more, changing the international trade balance gradually back to being in balance. For these three primary reasons, and as a result of the 2008 global financial crises, some modern economists are calling for the return of the gold standard or a similar system.

Collapse of the Gold Standard

If it was so good, what happened? The gold standard eventually collapsed from the impact of World War I. During the war, nations on both sides had to finance their huge military expenses and did so by printing more paper currency. As the currency in circulation exceeded each country's gold reserves, many countries were forced to abandon the gold standard. In the 1920s, most countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, and France, returned to the gold standard at the same price level, despite the political instability, high unemployment, and inflation that were spread throughout Europe.

However, the revival of the gold standard was short-lived due to the Great Depression, which began in the late 1920s. The Great Depression was a worldwide phenomenon. By 1928, Germany, Brazil, and the economies of Southeast Asia were depressed. By early 1929, the economies of Poland, Argentina, and Canada were contracting, and the United States economy followed in the middle of 1929. Some economists have suggested that the larger factor tying these countries together was the international gold standard, which they believe prolonged the Great Depression. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*, s.v. "Great Depression," accessed July 23, 2010, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/GreatDepression.html>. The gold standard limited the flexibility of the monetary policy of each country's central banks by limiting their ability to expand the money supply. Under the gold standard, countries could not expand their money supply beyond what was allowed by the gold reserves held in their vaults.

Too much money had been created during World War I to allow a return to the gold standard without either large currency devaluations or price deflations. In addition, the US gold stock had doubled to about 40 percent of the world's monetary gold. There simply was not enough monetary gold in the rest of the world to support the countries' currencies at the existing exchange rates.

By 1931, the United Kingdom had to officially abandon its commitment to maintain the value of the British pound. The currency was allowed to **float**, which meant that its value would increase or decrease based on demand and supply. The US dollar and the French franc were the next strongest currencies and nations sought to peg the value of their currencies to either the dollar or franc. However, in 1934, the United States devalued its currency from \$20.67 per ounce of gold to \$35 per ounce. With a cheaper US dollar, US firms were able to export more as the price of their goods and services were cheaper vis-à-vis other nations. Other countries devalued their currencies in retaliation of the lower US dollar. Many of these countries used arbitrary par values rather than a price relative to their gold reserves. Each country hoped to make its exports cheaper to other countries and reduce expensive imports. However, with so many countries simultaneously devaluing their currencies, the impact on prices was canceled out. Many countries also imposed tariffs and other trade restrictions in an effort to protect domestic industries and jobs. By 1939, the gold standard was dead; it was no longer an accurate indicator of a currency's real value.

Post-World War II

The demise of the gold standard and the rise of the Bretton Woods system pegged to the US dollar was also a changing reflection of global history and politics. The British Empire's influence was dwindling. In the early 1800s, with the strength of both their currency and trading might, the United Kingdom had expanded its empire. At the end of World War I, the British Empire spanned more than a quarter of the world; the general sentiment was that "the sun would never set on the British empire." British maps and globes of the time showed the empire's expanse proudly painted in red. However, shortly after World War II, many of the colonies fought for and achieved independence. By then, the United States had clearly replaced the United Kingdom as the dominant global economic center and as the political and military superpower as well.

Did You Know?

Just as the United States became a global military and political superpower, US businesses were also taking center stage. Amoco (today now part of BP), General Motors (GM), Kellogg's, and Ford Motor Company sought to capitalize on US political and military strength to expand in new markets around the world. Many of these companies followed global political events and internally debated the strategic directions of their firms. For example, GM had an internal postwar planning policy group.

Notwithstanding the economic uncertainties that were bound to accompany the war's end, a few of the largest U.S. corporations, often with considerable assets seized or destroyed during the war, began to plan for the postwar period. Among these was General Motors. As early as 1942 the company had set up a postwar planning policy group to estimate the likely shape of the world after the war and to make recommendations on GM's postwar policies abroad.

In 1943 the policy group reported the likelihood that relations between the Western powers and the Soviet Union would deteriorate after the war. It also concluded that, except for Australia, General Motors should not buy plants and factories to make cars in any country that had not had facilities before the conflict. At the same time, though, it stated that after the war the United States would be in a stronger state politically and economically than it had been after World War I and that overseas operations would flourish in much of the world. The bottom line for GM, therefore, was to proceed with caution once the conflict ended but to stick to the policy it had enunciated in the 1920s—seeking out markets wherever they were available and building whatever facilities were needed to improve GM's market share. *Encyclopedia of the New American Nation*, s.v. "Multinational Corporations—Postwar Investment: 1945–1955," accessed February 9, 2011, <http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/Multinational-Corporations-Postwar-investment-1945-1955.html#ixzz18TCwg8VJ>.

Bretton Woods

In the early 1940s, the United States and the United Kingdom began discussions to formulate a new international monetary system. John Maynard Keynes, a highly influential British economic thinker, and Harry Dexter White, a US Treasury official, paved the way to create a new monetary system. In July 1944, representatives from forty-four countries met in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, to establish a new international monetary system.

"The challenge," wrote Ngaire Woods in his book *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and Their Borrowers*, "was to gain agreement among states about how to finance postwar reconstruction, stabilize exchange rates, foster trade, and prevent balance of payments crises from unraveling the system." Ngaire Woods, *Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and Their Borrowers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 16.

Did You Know?

Throughout history, political, military, and economic discussions between nations have always occurred simultaneously in an effort to create synergies between policies and efforts. A key focus of the 1940s efforts for a new global monetary system was to stabilize war-torn Europe.

In the decade following the war the administrations of both Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower looked to the private sector to assist in the recovery of western Europe, both through increased trade and direct foreign investments. In fact, the \$13 billion Marshall Plan, which became the engine of European recovery between 1948 and 1952, was predicated on a close working relationship between the public and private sectors. Similarly, Eisenhower intended to bring about world economic recovery through liberalized world commerce and private investment abroad rather than through foreign aid. Over the course of his two administrations (1953–1961), the president modified his policy of "trade not aid" to one of "trade and aid" and changed his focus from western Europe to the Third World, which he felt was most threatened by communist expansion. In particular he was concerned by what he termed a "Soviet economic offensive" in the Middle East, that is, Soviet loans and economic assistance to such countries as Egypt and Syria. But even then he intended that international commerce and direct foreign investments would play a major role in achieving global economic growth and prosperity. *Encyclopedia of the New American Nation*, s.v. "Multinational Corporations—Postwar Investment: 1945–1955," accessed February 9, 2011, <http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/Multinational-Corporations-Postwar-investment-1945-1955.html#ixzz18TCwg8VJ>.

The resulting Bretton Woods Agreement created a new dollar-based monetary system, which incorporated some of the disciplinary advantages of the gold system while giving countries the flexibility they needed to manage temporary economic setbacks, which had led to the fall of the gold standard. The Bretton Woods Agreement lasted until 1971 and established several key features.

Fixed Exchange Rates

Fixed exchange rates are also sometimes called pegged rates. One of the critical factors that led to the fall of the gold standard was that after the United Kingdom abandoned its commitment to maintaining the value of the British pound, countries sought to peg their currencies to the US dollar. With the strength of the US economy, the gold supply in the United States increased, while many countries had less gold in reserve than they did currency in circulation. The Bretton Woods system worked to fix this by tying the value of the US dollar to gold but also by tying all of the other countries to the US dollar rather than directly to gold. The par value of the US dollar was fixed at \$35 to one ounce of gold. All other countries then set the value of their currencies to the US dollar. In reflection of the changing times, the British pound had undergone a substantial loss in value and by that point, its value was \$2.40 to £1. Member countries had to maintain the value of their currencies within 1 percent of the fixed exchange rate. Lastly, the agreement established that only governments, rather than anyone who demanded it, could convert their US dollar holdings into gold—a major improvement over the gold standard. In fact, most businesspeople eventually ignored the technicality of pegging the

US dollar to gold and simply utilized the actual exchange rates between countries (e.g., the pound to the dollar) as an economic measure for doing business.

National Flexibility

To enable countries to manage temporary but serious downturns, the Bretton Woods Agreement provided for a devaluation of a currency—more than 10 percent if needed. Countries could not use this tool to competitively manipulate imports and exports. Rather, the tool was intended to prevent the large-scale economic downturn that took place in the 1930s.

Creation of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank

Section 6.2 looks at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank more closely, as they have survived the collapse of the Bretton Woods Agreement. In essence, the IMF's initial primary purpose was to help manage the fixed rate exchange system; it eventually evolved to help governments correct temporary trade imbalances (typically deficits) with loans. The World Bank's purpose was to help with post-World War II European reconstruction. Both institutions continue to serve these roles but have evolved into broader institutions that serve essential global purposes, even though the system that created them is long gone. Section 6.2 explores them in greater detail and addresses the history, purpose, evolution, and current opportunities and challenges of both institutions.

Collapse of Bretton Woods

Despite a fixed exchange rate based on the US dollar and more national flexibility, the Bretton Woods Agreement ran into challenges in the early 1970s. The US trade balance had turned to a deficit as Americans were importing more than they were exporting. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, countries had substantially increased their holdings of US dollars, which was the only currency pegged to gold. By the late 1960s, many of these countries expressed concern that the US did not have enough gold reserves to exchange all of the US dollars in global circulation. This became known as the **Triffin Paradox**, named after the economist Robert Triffin, who identified this problem. He noted that the more dollars foreign countries held, the less faith they had in the ability of the US government to convert those dollars. Like banks, though, countries do not keep enough gold or cash on hand to honor all of their liabilities. They maintain a percentage, called a **reserve**. Bank reserve ratios are usually 10 percent or less. (The low reserve ratio has been blamed by many as a cause of the 2008 financial crisis.) Some countries state their reserve ratios openly, and most seek to actively manage their ratios daily with open-market monetary policies—that is, buying and selling government securities and other financial instruments, which indirectly controls the total money supply in circulation, which in turn impacts supply and demand for the currency.

The expense of the Vietnam War and an increase in domestic spending worsened the Triffin Paradox; the US government began to run huge budget deficits, which further weakened global confidence in the US dollar. When nations began demanding gold in exchange for their dollars, there was a huge global sell-off of the US dollar, resulting in the Nixon Shock in 1971.

The Nixon Shock was a series of economic decisions made by the US President Richard Nixon in 1971 that led to the demise of the Bretton Woods system. Without consulting the other member countries, on August 15, 1971, Nixon ended the free convertibility of the US dollar into gold and instituted price and wage freezes among other economic measures.

Later that same year, the member countries reached the Smithsonian Agreement, which devalued the US dollar to \$38 per ounce of gold, increased the value of other countries' currencies to the dollar, and increased the band within which a currency was allowed to float from 1 percent to 2.25 percent. This agreement still relied on the US dollar to be the strong reserve currency and the persistent concerns over the high inflation and trade deficits continued to weaken confidence in the system. Countries gradually dropped out of system—notably Germany, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland, all of which began to allow their currencies to float freely against the dollar. The Smithsonian Agreement was an insufficient response to the economic challenges; by 1973, the idea of fixed exchange rates was over.

Before moving on, recall that the major significance of the Bretton Woods Agreement was that it was the first formal institution that governed international monetary systems. By having a formal set of rules, regulations, and guidelines for decision making, the Bretton Woods Agreement established a higher level of economic stability. International businesses benefited from the almost thirty years of stability in exchange rates. Bretton Woods established a standard for future monetary systems to improve on; countries today continue to explore how best to achieve this. Nothing has fully replaced Bretton Woods to this day, despite extensive efforts.

Post–Bretton Woods Systems and Subsequent Exchange Rate Efforts

When Bretton Woods was established, one of the original architects, Keynes, initially proposed creating an international currency called Bancor as the main currency for clearing. However, the Americans had an alternative proposal for the creation of a central currency called unitas. Neither gained momentum; the US dollar was the reserve currency. **Reserve currency** is a main currency that many countries and institutions hold as part of their foreign exchange reserves. Reserve currencies are often international pricing currencies for world products and services. Examples of current reserve currencies are the US dollar, the euro, the British pound, the Swiss franc, and the Japanese yen.

Many feared that the collapse of the Bretton Woods system would bring the period of rapid growth to an end. In fact, the transition to floating exchange rates was relatively smooth, and it was certainly timely: flexible exchange rates made it easier for economies to adjust to more expensive oil, when the price suddenly started going up in October 1973. Floating rates have facilitated adjustments to external shocks ever since.

The IMF responded to the challenges created by the oil price shocks of the 1970s by adapting its lending instruments. To help oil importers deal with anticipated current account deficits and inflation in the face of higher oil prices, it set up the first of two oil facilities. “The End of the Bretton Woods System (1972–81),” International Monetary Fund, accessed July 26, 2010, <http://www.imf.org/external/about/histend.htm>.

After the collapse of Bretton Woods and the Smithsonian Agreement, several new efforts tried to replace the global system. The most noteworthy regional effort resulted in the European Monetary System (EMS) and the creation of a single currency, the euro. While there have been no completely effective efforts to replace Bretton Woods on a global level, there have been efforts that have provided ongoing exchange rate mechanisms.

Jamaica Agreement

In 1976, countries met to formalize a floating exchange rate system as the new international monetary system. The Jamaica Agreement established a **managed float system of exchange rates**, in which currencies float against one another with governments intervening only to stabilize their currencies at set target exchange rates. This is in contrast to a completely **free floating exchange rate system**, which has no government intervention; currencies float freely against one another. The Jamaica Agreement also removed gold as the primary reserve asset of the IMF. Additionally, the purpose of the IMF was expanded to include lending money as a last resort to countries with balance-of-payment challenges.

The Gs Begin

In the early 1980s, the value of the US dollar increased, pushing up the prices of US exports and thereby increasing the trade deficit. To address the imbalances, five of the world’s largest economies met in September 1985 to determine a solution. The five countries were Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and the United States; this group became known as the **Group of Five**, shortened to G5. The 1985 agreement, called the Plaza Accord because it was held at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, focused on forcing down the value of the US dollar through collective efforts.

By February 1987, the markets had pushed the dollar value down, and some worried it was now valued too low. The G5 met again, but now as the Group of Seven, adding Italy and Canada—it became known as the G7. The Louvre Accord, so named for being agreed on in Paris, stabilized the dollar. The countries agreed to support the dollar at the current valuation. The G7 continued to meet regularly to address ongoing economic issues.

The G7 was expanded in 1999 to include twenty countries as a response to the financial crises of the late 1990s and the growing recognition that key emerging-market countries were not adequately included in the core of global economic discussions and governance. It was not until a decade later, though, that the G20 effectively replaced the G8, which was made up of the original G7 and Russia. The European Union was represented in G20 but could not host or chair the group.

Keeping all of these different groups straight can be very confusing. The news may report on different groupings as countries are added or removed from time to time. The key point to remember is that anything related to a G is likely to be a forum consisting of finance ministers and governors of central banks who are meeting to discuss matters related to cooperating on an international monetary system and key issues in the global economy.

The G20 is likely to be the stronger forum for the foreseeable future, given the number of countries it includes and the amount of world trade it represents. “Together, member countries represent around 90 per cent of global gross national product, 80 per cent of

world trade (including EU intra-trade) as well as two-thirds of the world's population.”“About G-20,” G-20, accessed July 25, 2010, www.g20.org/en.

Did You Know?

G-ology

“At present, a number of groups are jostling to be the pre-eminent forum for discussions between world leaders. The G20 ended 2009 by in effect replacing the old G8. But that is not the end of the matter. In 2010 the G20 began to face a new challenger—G2 [the United States and China]. To confuse matters further, lobbies have emerged advocating the formation of a G13 and a G3.”Gideon Rachman, “A Modern Guide to G-ology,” *Economist*, November 13, 2009, accessed February 9, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/14742524>. The G20 is a powerful, informal group of nineteen countries and the European Union. It also includes a representative from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The list developed from an effort to include major developing countries with countries with developed economies. Its purpose is to address issues of the international financial system.

So just who's in the current G20?

G20 Countries	
Argentina	Japan
Australia	Mexico
Brazil	Russia
Canada	Saudia Arabia
China	South Africa
France	South Korea
Germany	Turkey
India	United Kingdom
Indonesia	United States
Italy	European Union

Today's Exchange Rate System

While there is not an official replacement to the Bretton Woods system, there are provisions in place through the ongoing forum discussions of the G20. Today's system remains—in large part—a managed float system, with the US dollar and the euro jostling to be the premier global currency. For businesses that once quoted primarily in US dollars, pricing is now just as often noted in the euro as well.

Ethics in Action

The *Wall Street Journal*'s July 30, 2010, edition noted how gangsters are helping provide stability in the euro zone. The highest denomination of a euro is a €500 bill, in contrast to the United States, where the largest bill is a \$100 bill.

The high-value bills are increasingly “making the euro the currency of choice for underground and black economies, and for all those who value anonymity in their financial transactions and investments,” wrote Willem Buiter, the chief economist at Citigroup....

When euro notes and coins went into circulation in January 2002, the value of €500 notes outstanding was €30.8 billion (\$40 billion), according to the ECB [European Central Bank].

Today some €285 billion worth of such euro notes are in existence, an annual growth rate of 32 percent. By value, 35 percent of euro notes in circulation are in the highest denomination, the €500 bill that few people ever see.

In 1998, then-U.S. Treasury official Gary Gensler worried publicly about the competition to the \$100 bill, the biggest U.S. bank note, posed by the big euro notes and their likely use by criminals. He pointed out that \$1 million in \$100 bills weighs 22 pounds; in hypothetical \$500 bills, it would weigh just 4.4 pounds.

Police forces have found the big euro notes in cereal boxes, tires and in hidden compartments in trucks, says Soren Pedersen, spokesman for Europol, the European police agency based in The Hague. “Needless to say, this cash is often linked to the illegal drugs trade, which explains the similarity in methods of concealment that are used.” Stephen Fidler, “How Gangsters Are Saving Euro Zone,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2010, accessed February 9, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704532204575397543634034112.html>.

While you might think that the ECB should just stop issuing the larger denominations, it turns out that the ECB and the member governments of the euro zone actually benefit from this demand.

The profit a central bank gains from issuing currency—as well as from other privileges of a central bank, such as being able to demand no-cost or low-cost deposits from banks—is known as seigniorage. It normally accrues to national treasuries once the central banks account for their own costs.

The ECB's gains from seigniorage are becoming increasingly important this year....

In recent years, the profits on its issue of new paper currency have been running at €50 billion.” Stephen Fidler, “How Gangsters Are Saving Euro Zone,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2010, accessed February 9, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704532204575397543634034112.html>.

Some smaller nations have chosen to voluntarily set exchange rates against the dollar while other countries have selected the euro. Usually a country makes the decision between the dollar and the euro by reviewing their largest trading partners. By choosing the euro or the dollar, countries seek currency stability and a reduction in inflation, among other various perceived benefits. Many countries in Latin America once dollarized to provide currency stability for their economy. Today, this is changing, as individual economies have strengthened and countries are now seeking to dedollarize.

Spotlight on Dollarizing and Dedollarizing in Latin America

Many countries in Latin America have endured years of political and economic instability, which has exacerbated the massive inequality that has characterized the societies in modern times. Most of the wealth is in the hands of the white elite, who live sophisticated lives in the large cities, eating in fancy restaurants and flying off to Miami for shopping trips. Indeed, major cities often look much like any other modern, industrialized cities, complete with cinemas, fast-food restaurants, Internet cafés, and shopping malls.

But while the rich enjoy an enviable lifestyle, the vast majority of the continent's large indigenous population often lives in extreme poverty. While international aid programs attempt to alleviate the poverty, a lot depends on the country's government. Corrupt governments slow down the pace of progress.

Over the past two decades, governments in Ecuador and Peru—as well as others in Latin America including Bolivia, Paraguay, Panama, El Salvador, and Uruguay—have opted to dollarize to stabilize their countries' economies. Each country replaced its national currency with the US dollar. Each country has struggled economically despite abundant natural resources. Economic cycles in key industries, such as oil and commodities, contributed to high inflation. While the move to dollarize was not always popular domestically initially, its success has been clearly evident. In both Ecuador and Peru, dollarizing has provided a much needed benefit, although one country expects to continue aligning with the US dollar and the other hopes to move away from it.

In Ecuador, for example, a decade after dollarizing, one cannot dismiss the survival of dollarization as coincidence. Dollarization has provided Ecuador with the longest period of a stable, fully convertible currency in a century. Its foremost result has been that inflation has dropped to single digits and remained there for the first time since 1972. The stability that dollarization has provided has also helped the economy grow an average of 4.3 percent a year in real terms, fostering a drop in the poverty rate from 56 percent of the population in 1999 to 35 percent in 2008. As a result, dollarization has been popular, with polls showing that more than three-quarters of Ecuadorians approve of it. Pedro P. Romero, “Ecuador Dollarization: Anchor in a Storm,” *Latin Business Chronicle*, January 23, 2009, accessed February 9, 2011, www.latinbusinesschronicle.com/app/article.aspx?id=3096.

However, this success could not protect the country from the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis and economic downturn, which led to falling remittances and declining oil revenue for Ecuador. The country “lacks a reliable political system, legal system, or investment climate. Dollarization is the only government policy that provides Ecuadorians with a trustworthy basis for earning, saving, investing, and paying.” Pedro P. Romero, “Ecuador Dollarization: Anchor in a Storm,” *Latin Business Chronicle*, January 23, 2009, accessed February 9, 2011, www.latinbusinesschronicle.com/app/article.aspx?id=3096.

Peru first opted to dollarize in the early 1970s as a result of the high inflation, which peaked during the hyperinflation of 1988–90. “With high inflation, the U.S. dollar started to be the preferred means of payments and store of value.” Mercedes García-Escribano, “Peru: Drivers of De-dollarization,” International Monetary Fund, July 2010, accessed May 9, 2011, www.bcrp.gob.pe/docs/Publicaciones/Documentos-de-Trabajo/2010/Documento-de-Trabajo-11-2010.pdf. Dollarization was the only option to stabilize prices. A key cost of dollarizing, however, is losing monetary independence. Another cost is that the business cycle in the country is tied more closely to fluctuations in the US economy and currency. Balancing the benefits and the costs is an ongoing concern for governments.

Despite attempts to dedollarize in the 1980s, it was not until the recent decade that Peru has successfully pursued a market-driven financial dedollarization. Dedollarization occurs when a country reduces its reliance on dollarizing credit and deposit of commercial banks. In Peru, as in some other Latin American countries—such as Bolivia, Uruguay and Paraguay—dedollarization has been “driven by macroeconomic stability, introduction of prudential policies to better reflect currency risk (such as the management of reserve requirements), and the development of the capital market in soles” (the local Peruvian currency). Mercedes García-Escribano, “Peru: Drivers of De-dollarization, International Monetary Fund,” July 2010, accessed May 9, 2011, www.bcrp.gob.pe/docs/Publicaciones/Documentos-de-Trabajo/2010/Documento-de-Trabajo-11-2010.pdf.

Dedollarizing is still a relatively recent phenomenon, and economists are still trying to understand the implications and impact on businesses and the local economy in each country. What is clear is that governments view dedollarizing as one more tool toward having greater control over their economies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The international monetary system had many informal and formal stages. For more than one hundred years, the gold standard provided a stable means for countries to exchange their currencies and facilitate trade. With the Great Depression, the gold standard collapsed and gradually gave way to the Bretton Woods system.
- The Bretton Woods system established a new monetary system based on the US dollar. This system incorporated some of the disciplinary advantages of the gold system while giving countries the flexibility they needed to manage temporary economic setbacks, which had led to the fall of the gold standard.
- The Bretton Woods system lasted until 1971 and provided the longest formal mechanism for an exchange-rate system and forums for countries to cooperate on coordinating policy and navigating temporary economic crises.
- While no new formal system has replaced Bretton Woods, some of its key elements have endured, including a modified managed float of foreign exchange, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank—although each has evolved to meet changing world conditions.

EXERCISES

(AACSB: Reflective Thinking, Analytical Skills)

1. What is the international monetary system?
2. What was the gold standard, and why did it collapse?
3. What was Bretton Woods, and why did it collapse?
4. What is the current system of exchange rates?

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