

## Will the Sovereign Debt Market Survive?

By ANDREI SHLEIFER\*

The market for sovereign debt of developing countries is alleged to be gravely ill. In the last five years, several East Asian countries, Russia, Argentina, and other borrowers defaulted on their sovereign bonds. Financial crises in borrower countries, as well as prolonged, messy and litigious debt renegotiations accompanied these defaults. Some see the so-called “rogue creditors,” who sue to get their money back and delay settlement, as the culprit of the market’s problems (Michelle White, 2002). To confront them, reformers propose to change debt-restructuring procedures by reducing creditor rights. The IMF in particular advocates using some features of U.S. Chapter 11 corporate bankruptcy that are favorable to borrowers in sovereign debt restructuring (Anne Krueger, 2002).

This paper uses the experiences with bankruptcy in other debt markets to reexamine sovereign debt restructuring. I argue that the ailment of sovereign-debt markets has been misdiagnosed. Experience shows that debt markets work best when the rights of creditors are protected most effectively. From this perspective, the troubles afflicting sovereign-debt markets result from creditor rights being too weak, not too strong.

There is a more evocative way to put this point. When he was Secretary of the Treasury, Lawrence Summers asked: Why can U.S. municipalities borrow at such low rates, and have

such low rates of default, compared to sovereign borrowers? How can the sovereign debt market become more like U.S. municipal bond market, with few defaults and low interest rates? The answer, I believe, is that creditor rights vis-à-vis defaulting U.S. municipalities are much greater than those of lenders vis-à-vis their defaulting sovereign borrowers. As a consequence, defaulting municipalities repay their creditors in full or almost in full, and municipal bond markets function well.

The objective of the paper is to consider how sovereign-debt markets can be improved. Some academics believe that the problems of sovereignty doom these markets. Except for very good borrowers who care about their reputation, the markets should not really exist (Jeremy Bulow, 2002). According to this view, existing debt should be forgiven and replaced with foreign aid. This view may well be correct. Still, in this paper, I focus on the possibility of improving the sovereign-debt market rather than writing it off.

### I. The Structure of Debt Contracts

Debt is a contract, in which the borrower accepts some money and agrees to pay it back. If the borrower fails to repay, the creditor acquires certain rights and powers vis-à-vis his assets. Except for some possible reputational concerns, those rights are the main reason that borrowers ever repay loans (Oliver Hart, 1995).

A typical debt contract is collateralized. The lender’s most basic power is to seize the collateral of a defaulting borrower. This power supports the mortgage market in the United States, much of personal lending, and standard liquidation-focused bankruptcy procedures in most countries.

For several good economic reasons, grabbing and liquidating collateral can be inefficient. As a consequence, softer bankruptcy procedures

<sup>†</sup> *Discussants:* Kenneth Froot, Harvard University; Kenneth Rogoff, International Monetary Fund; Robert Shiller, Yale University.

\* Department of Economics, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138. Thanks to Olivier Blanchard, Jeremy Bulow, Mihir Desai, Ken Froot, Robin Greenwood, Oliver Hart, Robert Inman, Anne Krueger, Rafael La Porta, Florencio Lopez-de-Silanes, Randall Picker, Michael Rashes, Lawrence Summers, Michelle White, and Nancy Zimmerman for helpful comments.



have emerged in many debt markets. In the personal-debt market, some assets of the borrower are exempt from being seized by the creditors. Likewise, many legal jurisdictions replace liquidation with reorganization, in which a plan for the borrower to pay back the lender is developed under the supervision of a court, averting the seizure of assets.

In the United States, this alternative bankruptcy procedure for corporations is known as Chapter 11. In Chapter 11, the management of a defaulting company has a few months to present the court with a reorganization and repayment plan. During this period, management retains control, creditors cannot grab assets, and the company can borrow fresh capital to continue operations. If the creditors do not accept the management's plan, they can propose an alternative, which might seek to replace the management or to liquidate the company. Crucially, under the law, the objective of the court is to choose a plan "in the best interest of the creditors."

In many U.S. states, municipalities are unlike corporations in that they cannot seek bankruptcy protection from creditors at all. In a few instances, municipalities can seek (and have sought) such protection, known as Chapter 9. This municipal-bankruptcy procedure follows some of the principles of Chapter 11, but further weakens creditor rights. Municipal government is not replaced, and the creditors are not allowed to propose competing plans. At the same time, the law continues to specify clearly that any repayment plan must be "in the best interests of the creditors" (Michael McConnell and Randal Picker, 1993). In addition, state governments in the United States appear to take responsibility for municipal debts, and to intervene aggressively in the fiscal affairs of defaulting municipalities. The work of the Municipal Assistance Corporation in New York City and the assistance to Orange County by the California state government both show that defaulting local governments lose much of their fiscal sovereignty.

The U.S. Chapter 11 bankruptcy (and relatedly municipal Chapter 9 bankruptcy) is one of the softest (nicest to debtors) bankruptcy procedures in the world (see e.g., Rafael La Porta et al., 1998). Even the possibility of reorganization, as opposed to liquidation, does not exist

in some advanced-market economies. In the United States, management can unilaterally seek Chapter 11 protection from creditors, whereas in many other countries creditor consent is required to initiate bankruptcy. In the United States, secured creditors cannot grab assets (there is an automatic stay on assets), which they can do in about half of the developed countries. Perhaps most unusually, in the United States, management stays after filing for bankruptcy. Consistent with this picture, most studies of the U.S. Chapter 11 bankruptcy see it as too slow, too soft on the existing management, and often ineffective in setting the company on the path to economic recovery (Edith Hotchkiss, 1995; Matthias Kahl, 2002a, b).

Yet even in Chapters 11 and 9, creditors have legal rights counterbalancing the softness of the procedure. In Chapter 11, the management makes its proposal under the threat of alternative proposals from creditors that might involve its removal or liquidation of the company. Furthermore, in evaluating proposals in both Chapters 11 and 9, courts have a clear obligation to choose one in the best interest of the creditors.

These powers of the creditors are the main reason that borrowers pay back and debt markets exist and prosper. The more the creditors can recover from a defaulting borrower, and the more cheaply they can do so, the more they will lend to begin with, and on more attractive terms.

The sticks in the form of creditor rights are not the only reason why borrowers pay back. There are also carrots that encourage borrowers to settle with creditors. The main carrot in the cases of personal and municipal bankruptcy is the ability to borrow again. For corporations, the benefits of settling with creditors and emerging from bankruptcy include avoidance of liquidation, the ability of managers to keep their jobs and get paid, and the resumption of dividends and unrestricted borrowing. The combination of sticks and carrots allows the various debt markets to function.

## II. Creditor Rights and Debt Markets

In the data, the stronger are creditor rights in the event of a default, the better developed are the debt markets. In the case of personal bankruptcy, creditor rights differ across the U.S. states. Some states have a much larger personal



exemption (the assets beyond the reach of creditors in the event of personal bankruptcy) than do others. The available evidence shows that, looking across states, higher exemptions reduce the amount of credit available to low-asset households (Reint Gropp et al., 1997), raise the costs and reduce the availability of mortgages (Emily Lin and White, 2001), and reduce small firms' access to credit (Jeremy Berkowitz and White, 2002).

La Porta et al. (1997, 1998) examine the relationship between creditor rights and the size of debt markets in 49 countries. They construct an index of creditor rights based on legal rules governing the automatic stay on assets, the respect for seniority of creditors, the restrictions on going into reorganization, and the replacement of management in bankruptcy. The authors present evidence suggesting that countries with stronger creditor rights have larger debt markets (see also René Stulz and Rohan Williamson, 2002). The evidence also shows that greater legal shareholder rights are associated with broader and more valuable equity markets.

The few existing municipal bankruptcies illustrate a similar pattern. Courts expect creditors to be repaid, and generally speaking, they are repaid in full or nearly in full, and with only a short delay. This is done through municipal tax increases, expenditure cuts, and assistance from state governments in the form of cash or guarantees of long-term bonds. Because they know they have to repay, municipalities borrow moderately, and lenders provide funds at low rates. There is even insurance against municipal default, pointing to the insignificance of moral-hazard problems. In light of the evidence, the answer to Summers's question is straightforward: The municipal bond market in the U.S. functions so well, with low spreads and few defaults, because creditors' rights are sufficient to get paid in full after a default.

### III. Sovereign Debt Markets

Sovereign debt markets could not be more different. Some countries borrow massively, often to the point where both they and the lenders know they cannot pay back, and at interest rates that reflect the high likelihood of default. They default with some regularity, and when they do,

often pay back a fraction of what they have borrowed, even when they have the ability to pay, as was the case in Russia in 1998. Debt renegotiation takes years and is accompanied by massive litigation. In short, in this market, unlike in the municipal bond market, overborrowing, default, and limited repayment are completely normal and expected by both borrowers and lenders.

As Bulow and Kenneth Rogoff (1989a, b) showed in now-classic papers, this is exactly what one would expect in a market where lenders have no power. Because the borrowers in sovereign debt markets are, well, sovereign, creditors have virtually no rights. Creditors cannot grab assets in the country. The most they can do is to seize a few airplanes or barges of oil, which does not get them far except as a strategy of harassment. Management (i.e., government) is not replaced. Countries default unilaterally, without the consent of creditors. Last but not least, there are no courts with authority over sovereign states whose mandate is to protect the interest of creditors. Bulow and Rogoff conclude by suggesting that there is no good reason why the sovereign debt market exists.

The situation is not quite this dire, since at least some sticks and carrots are available. One power of the creditors, recognized by Bulow and Rogoff, is to disrupt and litigate, since sovereign-debt contracts are signed under international law. As importantly, sovereign borrowers settle with their creditors because they want to borrow again, and they run the risk that the fresh loans are seized by the old creditors unless there is a settlement. Under the current system, sovereign borrowers in default continue some borrowing from the IMF and in local markets under domestic law. To resume borrowing in international markets, countries settle with creditors and pay them more than zero. Indeed, local financial markets interpret settlement with creditors as very good news (Serkan Arslanalp and Peter Henry, 2002).

The development community is quite unhappy with the status quo, and in particular with the litigation and disruption surrounding sovereign default. Such litigation delays settlement, possibly prolonging recessions and raising the cost of IMF programs. There is also a concern that the payment to creditors is in part subsidized by the IMF loans, which puts political and



economic pressure on the Fund to demand that burdens be shared.

In making reform proposals, the IMF has two admirable objectives. The first is for sovereign states to be able to borrow at low rates in private international markets to finance their development. The second is for sovereign states not to pay their creditors back, especially during the times of economic distress. The tension between these objectives explains the challenges of reform.

At least superficially, the current proposals focus on making sovereign bankruptcy more like the U.S. Chapter 11. There are three key elements of the current IMF proposal. The first involves collective-action clauses in debt renegotiations, the purpose of which is to make it more difficult for "rogue" or "maverick" creditors to opt out of proposed settlement agreements and litigate. The IMF indeed argues that the goal of its proposals is to limit the rights of these minority creditors, rather than of all creditors. The second feature is the creation of a sovereign bankruptcy court, which at the time of the initial proposal was intended to be the IMF itself, but is now envisaged as an independent agency. Third, in parallel to U.S. Chapter 11, the sovereign state in default will be allowed to borrow in arrears so that its economy is not disrupted, and the new debt will be senior to the existing debt.

In the discussions of the IMF proposals, collective-action clauses have received by far the most attention. Nouriel Roubini (2002) explains persuasively why the problem of "rogue creditors" is vastly overstated. Lenders are already under tremendous pressure to settle with sovereign borrowers, since any lender who does not agree to a proposed debt exchange or other settlement risks receiving nothing. Collective-action clauses increase the pressure to settle on the borrower's terms. Litigation is one of the few (relatively weak) powers the lenders have if they do not like these terms. Indeed, many of the recent settlements, unlike those for municipal debt in the United States, take place on terms highly favorable to the borrowers. This is wonderful *ex post* for countries in financial crisis, but unlikely to be conducive to the long-term health of the sovereign debt market.

The creation of a bankruptcy court can be a very beneficial development for the sovereign

debt market if, like the courts in U.S. municipal bankruptcy, the objective of settlement is to best serve the interests of creditors. Of course, the objective of the IMF is exactly the opposite—again admirable *ex post*, but incompatible with long-term health of the market. It wants the court to protect the country from creditors rather than to serve their interests.

But perhaps the crucial, and most neglected, feature of the IMF proposal is a radical increase of lending into arrears. The development objective here is clear and laudable: such borrowing can finance exports and deficit spending and thereby relieve economic hardship. But basic logic, as well as the evidence discussed in the previous section, suggests that this reform is likely to damage the market by eliminating the crucial carrot that allows recovery by creditors. If the country can borrow fresh funds without repaying old debt, it has no incentive to pay creditors anything and, in fact, has every reason to remain in "sovereign bankruptcy" forever. The crucial features of U.S. Chapter 11 which counterbalance borrowing in arrears (the threats of liquidation or of acceptance of the creditors' reorganization plan by the judge) do not exist for sovereign debt. Without these threats, and with the possibility of continued borrowing senior to the old loans, there is no reason to repay. And with no reason to repay, there is no sovereign debt market in the long run.

In summary, all the proposals by the IMF share a common element: they reduce creditor rights. These ideas serve the admirable goal of reducing the burden of default on debtor countries. Yet, by cherry-picking the features of Chapter 11 most favorable to creditors, these proposals ignore the delicate balance between debtor protections and creditor rights that exists in both Chapter 11 and Chapter 9. As all the evidence indicates, enhancing borrower rights while emasculating creditor rights is unlikely to promote the health of emerging debt markets.

#### IV. Alternatives

Sovereign debt markets are likely to shrink if the IMF's proposals are adopted, at least for developing countries. Indeed, governments of several significant emerging-market borrowers oppose these proposals, precisely because they



recognize the consequences of weakening creditor rights for their ability to borrow in the future. Still, there may well exist good strategies for reform. Such strategies must look at successful institutions in their entirety, including both debtor protections and creditor rights.

Traditional collateralized lending, supported by the creditors' right to seize collateral, can probably be expanded even in emerging markets. Countries can pledge their natural-resource export revenues, for example, especially when there is no practical way to stop production and export. Mexico successfully pledged a portion of its oil revenues to the United States during the 1995 rescue, and there is no reason why this experience could not become more common.

Relatedly, the IMF could encourage sovereign issuance of securities whose returns are linked to commodity prices or economic performance. Such equity-like securities would require lower payments during economic hardship, and higher payments in times of prosperity. They would avoid many of the problems of self-fulfilling crises that the IMF is concerned with.

Suppose, however, that the reformers wish to pursue bankruptcy procedures similar to Chapter 9 or 11, the concern about the softness of these procedures notwithstanding. These reforms could include collective-action clauses and lending into arrears. If they do, they could only work if counterbalanced by other features of Chapters 9 and 11. The most crucial of these is the presence of a court with power to enforce its decisions and a duty to find solutions that best serve the interests of creditors. To be effective, such a court must stay away from pursuing development objectives. It should also have jurisdiction over both sovereign borrowers and their lenders, including the IMF.

If the analogy to Chapter 11 is taken seriously, creditors should also be able to present to the court restructuring plans that compete with the proposals of the borrowers (perhaps going second). As long as these proposals are feasible, they should be considered by the court, which should select and enforce the plan "in the best interest of the creditors." Likewise, if the development community wishes to imitate the success of the U.S. municipal bond market by pursuing a procedure like Chapter 9, mechanisms of takeover of national finances by an international

authority must be considered. Ricardo Caballero and Rudiger Dornbusch (2002) make precisely such a proposal for Argentina.

In the end, a supra-national bankruptcy court may or may not be feasible. But such a court is essential if sovereign default and bankruptcy are to proceed as smoothly as the IMF wants. The success of the municipal bond market in the United States suggests that a bankruptcy procedure for a government can work well. But the foundation of such a procedure is the existence of a credible arbiter whose mandate is to protect creditor rights. Without exception, the powers of such an arbiter in every kind of bankruptcy entail some loss of sovereignty by the borrower. Without such an arbiter, however, the loose analogies to Chapter 11 lose credibility. It would be better to leave the market alone. Despite all the turmoil, it has delivered vast amounts of private capital to the developing world.

## REFERENCES

- Arslanalp, Serkan and Henry, Peter.** "Debt Relief: What Do the Markets Think?" Mimeo, Stanford Business School, 2002.
- Berkowitz, Jeremy and White, Michelle.** "Bankruptcy and Small Firms' Access to Credit." National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, MA) Working Paper No. 9010, 2002.
- Bulow, Jeremy.** "First World Governments and Third World Debt." *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2002, (1), pp. 229–55.
- Bulow, Jeremy and Rogoff, Kenneth.** "A Constant Recontracting Model of Sovereign Debt." *Journal of Political Economy*, February 1989a, 97(1), pp. 155–78.
- . "Sovereign Debt: Is to Forgive to Forget?" *American Economic Review*, March 1989b, 79(1), pp. 43–50.
- Caballero, Ricardo and Dornbusch, Rudiger.** "Argentina: A Rescue Plan that Works." Mimeo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002.
- Gropp, Reint; Scholtz, John Karl and White, Michelle.** "Personal Bankruptcy and Credit Supply and Demand." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, February 1997, 112(1), pp. 217–52.

- Hart, Oliver.** *Firms, contacts, and financial structure*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Hotchkiss, Edith.** "Postbankruptcy Performance and Management Turnover." *Journal of Finance*, March 1995, 50(1), pp. 3–21.
- Kahl, Matthias.** "Economic Distress, Financial Distress, and Dynamic Liquidation." *Journal of Finance*, February 2002a, 57(1), pp. 135–68.
- . "Financial Distress as a Selection Mechanism: Evidence from the United States." Mimeo, University of California–Los Angeles, 2002b.
- Krueger, Anne.** "A New Approach to Sovereign Debt Restructuring." Unpublished manuscript, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, 2002.
- La Porta, Rafael; Lopez-de-Silanes, Florencio; Shleifer, Andrei and Vishny, Robert.** "Legal Determinants of External Finance." *Journal of Finance*, July 1997, 52(3), pp. 1131–50.
- . "Law and Finance." *Journal of Political Economy*, December 1998, 106(6), pp. 1113–55.
- Lin, Emily and White, Michelle.** "Bankruptcy and the Market for Mortgage and Home Improvement Loans." *Journal of Urban Economics*, July 2001, 50(1), pp. 138–62.
- McConnell, Michael and Picker, Randal.** "When Cities Go Broke: A Conceptual Introduction to Municipal Bankruptcy." *University of Chicago Law Review*, Spring 1993, 60(2), pp. 425–495.
- Roubini, Nouriel.** "Do We Need a New Bankruptcy Regime?" *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2002, (1), pp. 321–33.
- Stulz, René and Williamson, Rohan.** "Culture, Openness, and Finance," Dice Center Working Paper No. 2001-2, Ohio State University, 2002.
- White, Michelle.** "Sovereigns in Distress: Do They Need Bankruptcy?" *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2002, (1), pp. 287–319.

Copyright of American Economic Review is the property of American Economic Association. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.