
Tax Reform in Developing Countries

What constitutes successful tax reform? A review of developing country experience

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Tax reform has become an increasingly important element of adjustment programs in developing countries supported by the World Bank and IMF. Balance of payments disequilibria often have their origins in inappropriate fiscal policies, and there is a growing recognition that fiscal imbalances cannot be addressed simply by curtailing expenditure. Moreover, tax systems of many developing countries are often distortionary and also contribute significantly to distributional problems. Restructuring tax systems is thus perceived to be critical for the success of both macroeconomic and structural reform policies.

A World Bank research project, initiated in early 1988, examined the experience with tax reform in ten developing countries with a view toward drawing lessons for other countries contemplating similar reforms. The countries included in the study were Bolivia, Colombia, Jamaica, Indonesia, Malawi, Mexico, Morocco, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, and Zimbabwe. The results of the project, as well as of recent Bank research on a number of specific tax policy issues, were reviewed at a conference held at the Bank in

March 1990. This article aims to highlight the main themes that emerged and the conclusions of the discussions.

Impetus for reform

The review of tax reform experiences indicates that tax structures in most developing countries are:

- complex—difficult to administer and comply with;
- inelastic—unresponsive to growth and the changing structure of economic activity;
- inefficient—introduce serious economic distortions while often raising relatively little revenues;
- inequitable—treat individuals and businesses in similar circumstances differently; and
- unfair—tax administration and enforcement are selective and favor those with the ability to defeat the system.

Most developing countries also face a common set of fiscal problems. There is a heavy reliance on import duties and export taxes, which undermines their long-term international competitiveness, while the potential to raise revenue through consumption taxes is not exploited. Agricultural incomes, fringe benefits, and, in some countries, public sector wages are not taxed, while taxes on unearned income, property, and wealth contribute only a small proportion of total revenues. As a consequence, personal and corporate income taxes are levied on narrow tax bases at high rates.

The existing tax systems are also widely used to advance wide ranging and often conflicting economic policy objectives, such as revenue enhancement, industrial and regional

development, savings, investment, employment, and export promotion. A common practice is to levy preferential tax rates, or provide exemptions or special deductions for the preferred activity. Revenue foregone to encourage specific activities is termed a "tax expenditure" in the public finance literature. For example, to promote investment in less developed regions, many countries allow an initial tax-free period (tax holiday). However, given poor compliance and enforcement, such measures are often ill-suited to achieving individual policy objectives and simply lead to increased inefficiency as other activities have to be taxed at even higher levels.

In recognition of these factors, many countries have been reforming and many more have begun to critically evaluate their tax systems. The broad goal of tax reform is to secure an efficient tax system based on taxes that are politically feasible and administratively practicable, and produce sufficient revenue with a minimum of economic distortion. Although the scope for tax reform varies from country to country depending on the nature of the initial tax system, administrative constraints, and the government's social and economic priorities, some general conclusions about the appropriate direction of tax reform can be drawn from the experience of the ten countries mentioned above.

Lessons from tax reform

Broadening the tax base and lowering tax rates should be the foremost goal of any tax reform initiative in developing countries. Developing countries typically levy high tax rates on narrow bases, encouraging tax evasion and com-

The World Bank hosted a conference in March 1990 to review tax reform experiences in developing countries and to discuss a range of issues—including taxation of foreign investment, resources and financial institutions, design of indirect taxes, tax incidence, tax policy models, and tax policy and economic growth—that are expected to dominate tax policy discussions in the 1990s. A conference volume edited by these authors will soon be published by the World Bank.

Tax Reform In Developing Countries

Karin Nielsen-Saines



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