European Semester: assessing the aggregate fiscal stance is good, discussing about its economic impact is better

by Raul Sampognaro

On November the 26th, the ECFIN launched the European Semester and published the 2016 Annual Growth Survey and the Euro Area policy recommendation. The ECFIN states that the large spillovers from fiscal policy decisions and the current constraints on the single monetary policy call for strengthened attention to the aggregate fiscal stance at the euro area level. The recommended aggregate fiscal stance should take into account the cyclical position of the euro area. Moreover, a broadly neutral aggregate fiscal stance for the next years in the euro area appears appropriate to ECFIN in light of downside risks to growth and the persistent economic slack.

Opening the debate about the aggregate fiscal stance constitutes an important step in the improvement of the macroeconomic policy framework in the EA. In fact, the crisis that Euro zone has been facing since 2012 can be explained to a large extent by the fragilities in the monetary union. The lack of economic policy coordination emerged as one of the most important weaknesses. Before the crisis, the ECB was left alone to deal with common shocks while the fiscal policy was supposed to manage asymmetric shocks. Furthermore, the fiscal policy was supposed to safeguard public debt sustainability. This double objective was supposed to be assured by the compliance with the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) rules. This framework failed during the crisis. First, the rules of the SGP were focused only on public debt sustainability and

neglected the impact of fiscal policy on macroeconomic stabilization. Second, the decentralization of the procedures resulted in a bad aggregate outcome. The asymmetry in the rules implies ill-calibrated adjustments in deficit countries while anything forces countries with fiscal space to implement growth supportive policies.

In order to assess about the global orientation of fiscal policy the weighted sum of changes in structural balances is the traditional indicator used in the European Semester. This figure evaluates the evolution of deficits in the long run, once the cyclical effects are purged. This figure depends crucially on the way structural deficits are calculated and hence on the assumptions about the potential output used: even under common budgetary assumptions, the evolution of structural balance can evolve in different ways (see lines 2 and 3 of the table 1, which are computed using the same assumptions in terms of fiscal policy). On the basis of this indicator, the aggregate fiscal stance in the euro area is neutral or slightly expansionary in 2015 and 2016. This assessment is shared by the 2016 independent Annual Growth Survey (iAGS). On the basis of the announcements of the Member States in their Stability Programmes, the iAGS team forecast that the fiscal consolidation will start again in 2017. This result differs with ECFIN forecasts, based on a no-policy change scenario that only takes into account the measures already implemented.

Table 1. Aggregate Fiscal Stance

Change in structural balance

Assumptions	2015	2016	2017
2016 iAGS	-0.1	-0.1	0.2
ECFIN, Autumn Forecast	-0.1	-0.1	-0.1
ECFIN, based on OECD's output gap	0.0	-0.1	-0.1

Note: The 2017 change of structural balance is computed on a no-policy change scenario by ECFIN, and the iAGS scenario takes into account commitments of Member States in their last Stability Programmes.
Source: Ameco, OECD, Draft Budgetary Plans and Stability Programmes.

If the change of the structural balance shows that fiscal policy is broadly neutral in the euro area as a whole, the

assessment of its economic impact needs to be completed. In the 2016 independent Annual Growth Report, we propose a new way to compute the aggregate fiscal stance that takes into account the most recent advances in the literature. According to several authors the multipliers of public expenses – which are decreasing in most of the bigger euro area economies– are higher than those associated with tax changes –which are decreasing and should have an expansionary impact. This is particularly true when output gaps are negative. Hence, the proposed indicator of the aggregate fiscal stance proposed is based on a weight that takes into account the macroeconomic impact of fiscal policy.

When the composition and the localisation of the fiscal impulses are taken into account, the assessment of the aggregate fiscal stance is modified. According to our calculation, fiscal policy will be slightly contractionary in 2016 (-0.1 point of GDP, table 2) in spite of the decrease in the aggregate structural balance. This paradox can be explained by the localisation of the impulsion, which has low impact in Germany and the composition of the expansion in Italy and in Spain (based on large tax cuts with a low multiplier partially compensated by an effort in expenses with a high multiplier).

Table 2. Impact of fiscal policy on Euro Area GDP

In points of GDP

Impact of fiscal policy on EA GDP	2015	2016	2017
2016 iAGS	0.1	-0.1	-0.2
ECFIN, Autumn Forecast	0.2	0.0	0.1
ECFIN, based on OECD's output gap	0.0	-0.1	0.1

Source: Ameco (Autumn Forecast 2015) and OECD (EO 97).

The apparent paradox of a fiscal loosening with recessionary effects raises the matter of the fiscal space –expansionary policies should be larger in unconstrained countries– and the flexibilities in the application of SGP –expansion should be done in countries with high multipliers. Analyzing the situation of each Member State vis-à-vis the SGP, it appears

that very few countries have fiscal space with respect to the rules of the SGP. According to the ECFIN analysis of Draft Budgetary Plans, only Germany would have some fiscal space but the efficiency of a timid German based stimulus would be limited, at least from a GDP point of view. This raises new questions and particularly about the creation of a common fiscal capacity that would enable implementation of a counter-cyclical budgetary policy, especially when there is no scope for monetary policy like a situation of liquidity trap and deflation. This is the rational of the Juncker Plan that aims to increase investment in the euro zone. However, the plan relies on unrealistic leverage assumptions and the selection of investment projects, based on the profitability of the project, may lead to a pro-cyclical bias. This plan may not be sufficient to generate the demand shock needed to escape from the Zero Lower Bound, suggesting that a permanent is needed.Taking into account the very high levels of unemployment and underemployment, even the highest value of the fiscal impulse (+0.1% GDP) is far too low to deliver significant stimulus. A coordinated increase of public investment with a focus on the Europe 2020 targets would be a proper policy change for a more balanced economic policy. With the implementation of the golden rule of public investment, such a stimulus could be achieved in line with the European fiscal rules.

The euro zone in crisis: challenges for monetary and

fiscal policies

By Catherine Mathieu and Henri Sterdyniak

The 9th EUROFRAME conference [1] was held on 8 June 2012 in Kiel on issues concerning the economic policy of the European Union. The topic was: "The euro zone in crisis: challenges for monetary and fiscal policies". The conference was, of course, dominated by the issue of the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone. How did it come to this? Should the blame be put on mistakes in national economic policies? Must the way the euro zone is organized be changed?

A number of fault lines appeared (*cf*. also the related Note in French):

- Some believe that it is irresponsible domestic policies that are the cause of the imbalances: the southern countries were allowed to develop real estate and wage bubbles, while the northern countries carried out virtuous policies of wage moderation and structural reform. The southern countries must adopt the strategy of the northern countries and accept a prolonged dose of austerity. For others, the single currency has allowed the development of mirror opposite imbalances: too much austerity in the North, and too many wage increases in the South; what is needed is a convergence where stimulus in the North facilitates the absorption of the external imbalances in the South.
- For some, every country must implement policies that combine fiscal consolidation and structural reform. For others, what is needed is an EU-wide growth strategy (in particular by financing an ecological transition) and a guarantee of public debt so as to promote a convergence of national interest rates at lower levels.
- Some believe that any new solidarity measures involve developing a Union budget, which means the inclusion of

binding rules in the Fiscal Compact; for others, what is needed is the open coordination of economic policies, without pre-established standards.

We provide a report that includes brief comments [2] in a lengthy Note.

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[1] EUROFRAME is a network of European economic institutes that includes: DIW and IFW (Germany), WIFO (Austria), ETLA (Finland), OFCE (France), ESRI (Ireland), PROMETEIA (Italy), CPB (Netherlands), CASE (Poland), NIESR (United Kingdom).

[2] Most of the articles are available at: http://www.euroframe.org/index.php?id=7. Selected articles will be published in an issue of the *Revue de l'OFCE,* in the "Débats et Politiques" collection, at the end of 2012. The report reflects the views of the authors alone.

Japan's reconstruction: constrained by the deterioration in public finances

By Bruno Ducoudré

Following the earthquake that hit Japan in March 2011, the government estimated the cost of the loss at 16.9 trillion yen (3.6 points of GDP). The response in terms of the structural

deficit needed to deal with this exogenous shock conflicts with the government's desire to implement an austerity policy to reduce the deficit. The additional financing requirements are thus coming at the worst possible time, amidst the economic crisis that began in 2008, which has been accompanied by a sharp deterioration in public finances due to the need to prop up the economy.

On the growth front, 2011 was a difficult year for Japan, coming on the heels of a 4.4% rebound in GDP in 2010 following a 5.5% drop in 2009. While the economy saw renewed growth in Q3 of 2011 (1.9% GDP growth quarter-on-quarter), after two quarters of falling GDP, at year end floods in Thailand again disrupted the supply chains of Japanese firms, and the economy faltered (zero growth in Q4 and -0.7% growth for 2011). The period of reconstruction begins in 2012.

In fiscal year 2011, four additional budget bills were passed for a total of 3.9 percentage points of GDP, mainly to cope with emergency expenses (1.3 GDP points) and to prepare for reconstruction (2.3 GDP points). The services of the State have estimated the total bill for reconstruction at 23 trillion yen (4.8 GDP points). The reconstruction will be spread over the next ten years, with the main effort concentrated on the period 2012-2016. The government decided to allocate 0.8 GDP points for reconstruction in fiscal 2012, three-quarters of which is to be funded by debt (Table).

Contrary to expectations, the series of plans passed in 2011 have not resulted in a rapid surge in public spending: public consumption grew by 2.1% in 2011, unchanged from 2010 and less than in 2009, and public investment fell by 3.1% in 2011. Reconstruction costs were partly substituted for other expenses. Also, part of the budget adopted was set aside and so is just beginning to be spent. Public orders for construction work rose by 20% in Q4 of 2011 yoy, and public works in progress rose sharply at year end. Thus, the additional expenses related to the reconstruction costs

already approved will be spread in part over the coming quarters, and even beyond fiscal year 2012.

Japan's fiscal situation is actually precarious. The expenditures needed to rebuild the devastated areas were decided in a context of high levels of deficit and debt related to the crisis. The budget deficit has indeed deteriorated sharply since the beginning of the crisis, rising from 2.2% of GDP in 2008 to 8.1% in 2010, while the debt has risen by 31.2 GDP points since 2007, to reach 199% of GDP in 2010. In 2011, the deficit widened to 9.3% of GDP mainly due to the increased debt burden, higher social security spending and the fall in GDP in 2011. The government announced that some plans would be financed by a combination of restrictions in other areas of expenditure, surplus tax revenues related to the improvement in activity in 2010, and the accumulated reserves from past budgets (for a quarter of the budget dedicated to reconstruction in 2011-2012).

In the short term, the government has nevertheless chosen to favor growth over fiscal consolidation. We expect, for instance, a fiscal stimulus of 0.4 GDP point in 2012 and 0.5 GDP point in 2013, and the Japanese economy should see average annual growth of 1.9% in 2012 and 1.5% in 2013 (see "Japan: reconstruction time", in our forecast dossier, in French). In these circumstances, the budget deficit will be stable at 9.2% of GDP in 2012, and will worsen to 9.8% of GDP in 2013.

Provisional budgets for 2011-2012 for reconstruction
Central government

In % GDP

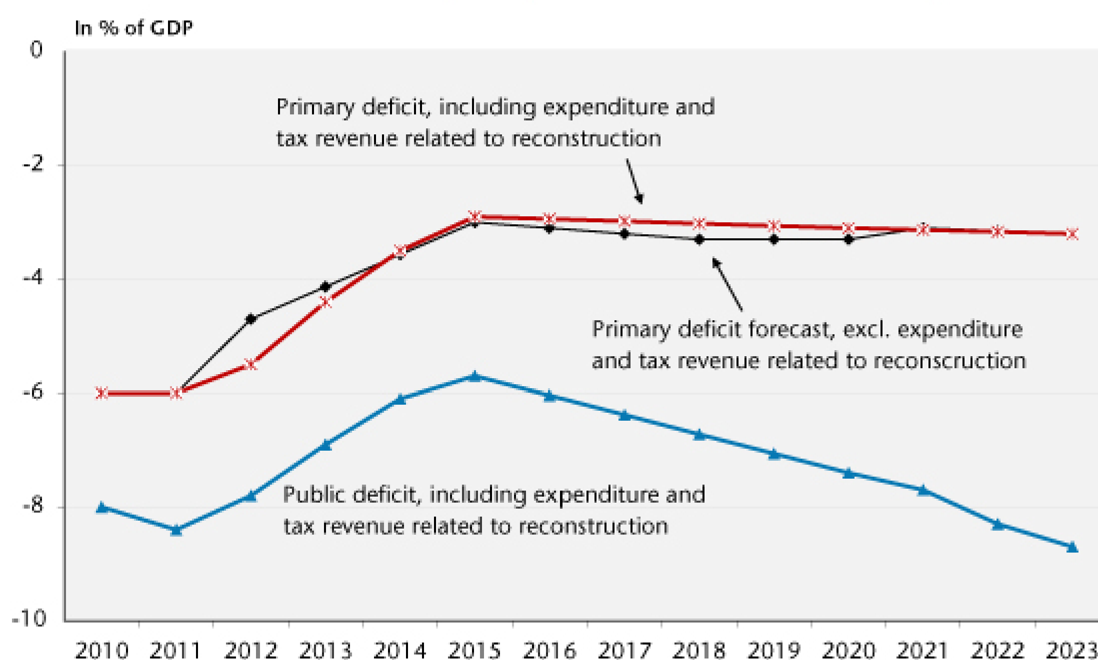
	2011	2012
Revenue and financing	3.9	0.8
Tax revenue	0.3	0.1
Non-tax revenue	0.0	0.1
Bond issues	2.1	0.6
Surplus from previous years	1.1	0.0
Reduction in expenditure	0.4	0.0
Expenditure	3.9	0.8
General expenditure, including:	3.3	0.7
Public works	*1.4*	*0.2*
Other expenditure	*1.9*	*0.6*
Transfers to local government	0.6	0.1

Sources: Cabinet Office, Ministry of Finance, OFCE calculations.

However, beyond 2013, there is still uncertainty about the direction of government economic policy. In the Japanese government's medium-term fiscal strategy, decided in 2010, it aimed to halve the primary deficit of central and local government by 2015 compared to the level in 2010 (6.4% of GDP), and to break even by 2020. According to our calculations, balancing the primary structural deficit would require the implementation of a major fiscal consolidation effort. This would involve a negative fiscal impulse on the order of 1.1 GDP points a year in 2014, which is nevertheless a slower pace than the consolidation policies planned in the euro zone in 2012-2013 (see "He who sows austerity reaps recession" in our forecasting dossier). To this end, an increase of 5 points in the consumption tax is to be considered during the current session of the Diet, Japan's parliament, which will wind up in June. This increase would occur in two stages and yield 2.5 GDP points in tax revenue. According to the latest medium-term forecast of the Japanese government, this will not be sufficient to meet its targets (Figure 1). Moreover, the means to achieve a balance by 2020 have not been clarified, and the government has not indicated how the debt built up to finance reconstruction would be

repaid. Finally, given the continuing growth of the public debt, the interest burden, which currently is low (1.8 GDP points in 2011), will place an increasing burden on state finances in the future. This will exacerbate the government's difficulties in implementing any budgetary changes aimed at stabilizing the debt-to-GDP ratio by 2020, and then to bring it down even further.

Despite all this, Japan does not seem to need a brutal fiscal consolidation, as it is currently borrowing at low interest rates (0.86% for the last issue of 10-year government bonds). Furthermore, the share of the debt held by non-residents is still low (6.7% in Q4 of 2011), and the abundant savings of the Japanese population, together with the Japanese Central Bank's programme of share purchases, considerably reduces the risk of a sovereign debt crisis like the one seen in the euro zone.



Note: These forecasts are based on the hypothesis of a rise in the VAT rate from 2013 and a nominal GDP growth rate of about 2% on average over the period. This includes a rise in tax revenue distributed evenly over 10 years to finance reconstruction-related expenditure. The forecast covers only central and local government.
Source: Cabinet Office.

This text refers to the economic analysis and forecast for 2011-2012, which is available on the [OFCE website](#).

Fiscal reform: Now or never*

By Nicolas Delalande (*Centre d'histoire at Sciences Po)*

While the question of taxation was one of the major economic issues of the presidential election, it must not be forgotten that there often exists a gap between the political and media attention received by a set of campaign promises (what political scientists would call the "politics") and their practical implications in terms of public policy (the "policies"). It is also worth asking whether any such tax reform will actually take place.

For over a year, commentators and politicians have repeatedly argued that taxation would be a key question in the presidential election. Many saw it as one of the only real issues distinguishing the outgoing majority, which with the TEPA law of August 2007 had bet on a strategy of "fiscal shock" to unleash growth (50% cap on taxes, reduction of inheritance taxes, exemption of overtime, etc.), from the Left opposition, which has been quick to denounce the injustice and inefficacy of measures that undermine progressive taxation without obtaining the expected economic benefits, while deepening the deficit. The promise of reform, or even a tax "revolution", was high on the political agenda, particularly for the Left. However, intense conflicts and debates over taxes do not guarantee that the election of Francois Hollande will be followed by a genuine transformation of the French tax system. There may very well be a gap between the political and media attention received by campaign promises (the "politics") and their practical implications for public policy (the

“policies”). However much tax reform may be touted during the campaign, it may well be distinctly less popular when it comes time for implementation, when political will runs up against varied forms of sometimes unanticipated resistance.

There has, nevertheless, been a felt need almost everywhere in Europe to increase the taxation of the wealthy, not so much to solve the problem of government deficits as to restore a semblance of fairness and shared effort in a time of economic crisis. A number of countries have embarked on this path (the top marginal rate of income tax is 57% in Sweden, 50% in Britain, and 45% in Germany), even though some have already sounded the retreat (David Cameron’s Conservative government has proposed cutting the top marginal rate back to 45% in 2013). Even billionaires like Warren Buffett in the United States have called for raising taxes on better-off strata to put an end to the most blatant inequalities. This kind of reform actually consists of backing off the policies of the last fifteen to twenty years by reversing the trend to erode the progressivity of the tax system: strictly speaking, this is less a matter of reform than of cancelling previous reforms. Increasing tax revenue no longer results as before from creating new tax measures but from removing the tax reductions and exemptions enacted in recent years. Hence the debate, both in the US and Europe, over the real nature of the “tax increases”: the Republicans accuse the Democrats of increasing the tax burden, while the latter claim to be merely reversing exemptions that they consider unwarranted and inefficient. Reform thus amounts to nothing more than the restoration of the situation *ex ante*. In France, for example, the Socialists have pledged to cancel what remains of the tax package of 2007 (after having removed the tax cap in 2011), to significantly reduce tax loopholes and to establish a new income tax bracket: the reference point for these proposals is in fact the actual system as it existed only five to ten years ago, with the exception of the promise added during the campaign to create an exceptional 75% bracket on incomes of

over 1 million euros.

A more ambitious structural reform, for example along the lines proposed in the recent book by Camille Landais, Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, would involve an entirely different scale. Opening the “black box” of the redistribution machine actually implies a much wider debate on the missions of the tax system, its administrative organization and its relationship to social and family policy. This is where the “costs” of policy reform, such as the eventual cancellation – or modulation – of France’s “family quotient” tax-splitting system, may be felt most directly. In any case, the erosion of the belief that the only reforms that could possibly be any good involve reducing the tax burden means that the current environment has never been more favourable for initiating this debate. The political, social and financial implications of this new configuration will certainly be complex and demanding in terms of democracy, but, in light of the numerous critics of the failings of the existing system, there is little doubt that 2012 offers a unique opportunity for undertaking ambitious reform. Tax reform implies the need for an effective political coalition to overcome the various social, institutional and technical obstacles that are likely to arise and to be able to take advantage of the favourable circumstances in which ideologies and beliefs that were thought to be firmly established are now on shaky ground. From a historical standpoint, it should not seem absurd that the current economic crisis, which is often compared to the 1930s, calls for and indeed even requires a renegotiation of the fiscal pact on a scale as significant as that experienced by Europe and America in the first third of the 20th century. The process of reform will, however, inevitably be more complex than before: the systems for collection and redistribution, now more sophisticated than ever, are based on an array of measures that have arisen in different periods and in unique political, economic and social contexts.

** This text is taken from the article “The political economy of tax reform: a historical analysis”, which was published in a special Tax Reform issue of the OFCE Revue and is available on the OFCE web site.*

Fiscal policy honoured

By Jérôme Creel

“The size of many multipliers is large, particularly for spending and targeted transfers.” Who today would dare to write such a thing?

The answer is: 17 economists from the European Central Bank, the US Federal Reserve, the Bank of Canada, the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in an article published in January 2012 in the American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics.

They continue in the abstract: “Fiscal policy is most effective if it has moderate persistence and if monetary policy is accommodative. Permanently higher spending or deficits imply significantly lower initial multipliers.”

What are the values of these multiplier effects, and what about the significant reduction in such effects if fiscal policy is expansionary over the long term? According to these 17 economists, based on eight different macroeconometric models for the US and four different models for the euro zone, the conclusion is clear: a fiscal stimulus that is in effect for 2 years, accompanied by an accommodative monetary policy

(the interest rate is kept low by the central bank) produces multiplier effects that are well above one both in the United States and in the euro zone (between 1.12 and 1.59) if the stimulus plan targets public consumption, public investment or targeted transfers. For other instruments available to government, such as VAT, the effects are smaller, on the order of 0.6, but still decidedly positive.

What if the stimulus is continued? The multiplier effects of a permanent increase in public consumption dwindles, of course, but they remain positive in the euro zone, regardless of the model used and regardless of the assumption made about the monetary policy pursued. Rare cases of negative multiplier effects are reported for the United States, but these depend on the model used or on assumptions about monetary policy.

Finally, a comment and a question raised by this recent article.

The comment: the choice of an optimal fiscal policy in the euro zone is well worth a few moments of reflection, reading and analysis of current work, rather than a truncated and distorted vision of fiscal policy that is judged without fair consideration as harmful to economic activity.

The question: an expansionary fiscal policy has … expansionary effects on gross domestic product; must we really deprive ourselves of an instrument that is, after all, effective?

The economic crisis is a crisis of economic policy

By Jean-Luc Gaffard

The simultaneous increase of inflation and unemployment in the 1970s indicated that Keynesian theory and policy had run into a wall. No longer was it simply possible to arbitrate between the two evils and fine-tune economic activity by acting solely on aggregate demand through the budget channel. This failure together with the persistence of high inflation eventually convinced policymakers of the need and urgency of prioritising the fight against inflation.

The economic theory devised by the new classical school came in support of this policy decision with the claim that inflation and unemployment were distinct phenomena that should be handled with distinct methods. If inflation takes off, it is because of a lack of monetary discipline. If unemployment rises, it is due to increased rigidities in the functioning of the markets. The famous Phillips curve, the basis for arbitrating between the two, theoretically becomes vertical, at least in the long run. Macroeconomic policies thus become dissociated from structural policies: the first are intended to stem inflation, the second to curb unemployment. The only relationship that they have with each other is that cyclical policy does not allow the economy to escape for long from the position determined by structural policy, a position that reflects the so-called natural unemployment rate. One attraction of this theory is the simplicity of its recommendations to government. Policymakers can (and should) meet a single target, inflation, by using a single instrument wielded by a central bank that is now independent, especially as hitting this target also ensures that the natural employment level will be achieved at the lowest cost in terms of inflation. If by chance the unemployment rate is considered

too high, policymakers should take the view that this reflects dysfunctions in the markets for goods and labour, and they can then decide to introduce a well-organised set of structural reforms designed for market liberalisation. In this wonderful world, reducing the budget deficit is always profitable. The basic model teaches that, after such a reduction, income and employment decrease initially, but then, thanks to a reduction in interest rates, private investment quickly increases and with it income and employment. The new medium-term equilibrium may even correspond to a higher level of income and employment, as private investment expenditure is considered to be more efficient than government expenditure. An independent central bank and financial markets that are deemed efficient play the role of disciplining the government by punishing any inappropriate budget deficits.

Europe has been a prime testing ground for this theory. Monetary policy is in the hands of a central bank, and its governing treaties ensure that it is independent and that its sole objective is price stability. Structural policies and reforms are a matter for the states, which are responsible for choosing the natural unemployment rate that they consider acceptable or, if they consider unemployment to be too high, they can impose reforms. If unemployment is higher in one country than in another, in the medium term, this can only be due to structural differences, in other words, to the existence of greater rigidities in the way the markets in this country operate. Once the recommended reforms are implemented, things will get back to normal. The theory thus formulated is expected to survive the crisis: for Europe to regain its lost coherence is a simple matter of policy choices. Excessively indebted countries need to reduce their budget deficits and make the structural reforms that they have put off for too long in order to restore growth, full employment and price stability. At most, some are proposing that debts be pooled in return for a commitment to implement structural reform. Germany, which has preceded the others down this particular

path to virtue, has nothing to fear from this scenario, since the renewed growth of its partners will ensure the long-term viability of its commercial outlets. Furthermore, the European Central Bank does not need to concern itself with financial stability, as markets punish impecunious States and force them into fiscal austerity by driving up the interest rates paid on their borrowings.

This entire beautiful structure rests on assumptions that are not very robust, in particular that any increase in market rigidities, particularly on the labour market, *e.g.* due to an increase in unemployment benefits, redundancy costs or employee bargaining power, shifts the long-term equilibrium position of the economy and inevitably produces an increase in the “natural” unemployment rate. It is, of course, always possible to compare long-run equilibria that are distinguished only by the value of certain structural data. It is riskier to deduce the path that leads from one to another. We should have learned from the experience of the 1930s that rigidities in prices and wages are a way to stem rising unemployment in a depressed economy, that is to say, when it becomes important to block reductions in prices and wages that are increasing the burden of private debt and putting downward pressure on aggregate demand. It should also be clear that structural reforms intended to reduce the natural rate of unemployment often lead immediately to a redistribution and reduction in income, which leads in turn to higher unemployment. But nothing says that this increase will only be temporary and will not trigger a chain reaction through the channel of aggregate demand. Rigidities remain a factor in reducing the risk of instability inherent in any structural change, whether this involves reforms in market organisation, the emergence of new competitors on the market or technological breakthroughs. A better allocation of resources may justify calling these rigidities into question, but care must be taken to avoid the inherent risk of instability. Certainly, when structural reforms aimed at introducing more flexibility undermine

domestic demand, the latter can then be boosted by stimulating external demand with lower prices. The unemployment rate may then fall. But it is actually exported to countries that might well not yet have undertaken such reforms, where unemployment thus inevitably exceeds the level deemed natural. “Every man for himself” begins to prevail over solidarity.

Europe is currently going through this scenario. Germany, in particular, carried out the structural reforms required by the prevailing theory, but at the cost of the segmentation of its labour market and the growth of low-paid insecure jobs, which resulted in turn in a slowdown in domestic demand. The improvement in Germany’s export performance, based on the quality of its goods as well as on the international fragmentation of the production process, has been offsetting the slowdown and helping to contain or even reduce the budget deficit. The unemployment rate has been rising in many other European countries in parallel to their budget deficits. The correction required by the experts (and in fact imposed by the financial markets), which involves simultaneously reducing public spending, raising taxes and making structural reforms, will very likely further reduce domestic demand in these countries, increase their budget deficits and ultimately hit German exports. Recession, if not a general depression, lies at the end of this path. The cause is a series of internal and external imbalances. And things could get even more complicated if performance gaps in the countries concerned widen even further and lead to divergences in their goals and interests.

Economic policy is unfortunately more complex than modern macroeconomics would have it. The long term is not independent of the short term; and the goals pursued are not independent of each other, and not always inter-compatible. Policies that are categorised as cyclical and structural are not really independent of each other, nor can they be targeted exclusively at a single goal. If there must be structural

reforms, they need to be accompanied by expansionary cyclical policies to counteract the immediate recessionary effects that they may amplify. Even so, cyclical policies are not sufficient in themselves to ensure strong, steady growth.

It is unrealistic and dangerous to expect to break free of the current impasse through generalised fiscal austerity in Europe. Compromises are needed that involve the acceptance of some disequilibria in order to alleviate others. The only way out is to accept budget deficits for a while longer. Without a recovery in the balance sheets of both firms and households, there will be no positive outcome from the rebalancing of public accounts, if indeed that even occurs.

There is of course no doubt that we must achieve greater harmony in the fiscal positions of countries belonging to the same monetary zone. Fiscal federalism is necessary to deal with monetary federalism. But federalism does not stop with the actions of a central bank that has been stripped of its basic functions and is unable to carry out common national fiscal contractions. It demands genuine budget solidarity, including to intervene to prevent the insolvency of States that are facing exorbitant interest rates. It also involves structural policies that not only refrain from reforms that could exacerbate fiscal and social competition, but also promote industrial and technological projects funded by a common European budget that has been strengthened through the establishment of a federal tax. State budget deficits will not be contained and the objectives and interests of states will not converge without the implementation of the cyclical and structural policies needed for a general recovery of growth.

In defense of France’s “family quotient”

By Henri Sterdyniak

At the start of 2012, some Socialist Party leaders have renewed the claim that the “family quotient” tax-splitting system is unfair because it does not benefit poor families who do not pay taxes, and benefits rich families more than it does poor families. This reveals some misunderstanding about how the tax and social welfare system works.

Can we replace the family quotient by a flat benefit of 607 euros per child, as suggested by some Socialist leaders, drawing on the work of the Treasury? The only justification for this level of 607 euros is an accounting device, *i.e.* the total current cost of the family quotient uniformly distributed per child. But this cost stems precisely from the existence of the quotient. A tax credit with no guarantee of indexation would see a quick fall in its relative purchasing power, just like the family allowance (*allocation familiale* – AF).

With a credit like this, taking children into account for taxation purposes would lose all sense. As shown in Table 1, families with children would be overtaxed relative to childless couples with the same income (per consumption unit before tax), and their after-tax income would be lower. The Constitutional Council would undoubtedly censor such a provision.

France is the only country to practice a family quotient system. Each family is assigned a number of tax parts or shares, P, based on its composition; the shares correspond

roughly to the family’s number of consumption units (CU), as these are defined by the OECD and INSEE; the tax system assumes that each family member has a standard of living equivalent to that of a single earner with revenue R/P; the family is then taxed like P single earners with income R/P.

The degree of redistribution assured by the tax system is determined by the tax schedule, which defines the progressivity of the tax system; it is the same for all categories of households.

The family quotient (QF) is thus a logical and necessary component of a progressive tax system. It does not provide any specific support or benefit to families; it merely guarantees a fair distribution of the tax burden among families of different sizes but with an equivalent standard of living. The QF *does not* constitute an arbitrary support to families, which would increase with income, and which would obviously be unjustifiable.

Let’s take an example. The Durand family has two children, and pays 3358 euros less than the Dupont family in income tax (Table 1). Is this a tax benefit of 3358 euros? No, because the Durands are less well off than the Duponts; they have 2000 euros per tax share instead of 3000. On the other hand, the Durands pay as much per share in income tax as the Martins, who have the same standard of living. The Durands therefore do not benefit from any tax advantage.

The family quotient takes into account household size; while doing this is certainly open for debate, one cannot treat a tax system that does not take into account household size as the norm and then conclude that any deviation from this norm constitutes a *benefit*. There is no reason to levy the same income tax on the childless Duponts and the two-child Durands, who, while they have the same level of pay, do not enjoy the same standard of living.

Table 1. Family size and income taxation in euro

		Monthly wages / by tax share	Annual income taxation	Disposable income by consumption unit
Dupont	Couple	6 000/ 3000	8 472	2 526
Martin	Couple	4 000/ 2000	3 409	1 858
Durand	Couple + 2 children	6 000/ 2000	5 114	1858
Durand*	Couple + 2 children	6 000/ 2000	7 258	1798

* with a uniform tax credit.
Source: author calculations.

In addition, capping the family quotient [1] takes into account that the highest portion of income is not used for the consumption of the children.

Society can choose whether to grant social benefits, but it has no right to question the principle of the fairness of family-based taxation: each family should be taxed according to its standard of living. Undermining this principle would be unconstitutional, and contrary to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which states that "the common taxation … should be apportioned equally among all citizens according to their capacity to pay". The law guarantees the right of couples to marry, to build families, and to pool their resources. Income tax must be family-based and should assess the ability to pay of families with different compositions. Furthermore, should France's Constitutional Council be trusted to put a halt to any challenge to the family quotient? [2]

The only criticism of the family quotient system that is socially and intellectually acceptable must therefore focus on its modalities, and not on the basic principle. Do the tax shares correspond well to consumption units (taking into account the need for simplicity)? Is the level of the cap on the family quotient appropriate? If the legislature feels that it is unable to compare the living standards of families of different sizes, then it should renounce a progressive system of taxation.

Family policy includes a great variety of instruments [3]. Means-tested benefits (RSA, the "complément familial", housing

benefit, ARS) are intended to ensure a satisfactory standard of living to the poorest families. For other families, universal benefits should partially offset the cost of the child. The tax system cannot offer more help to poor families than simply not taxing them. It must be fair to others. It is absurd to blame the family quotient for not benefitting the poorest families: they benefit fully from not being taxed, and means-tested benefits help those who are not taxable.

Table 2 shows the disposable income per consumption unit of a married employed couple according to the number of children, relative to the income per consumption unit of a childless couple. Using the OECD-INSEE CUs, it appears that for low-income levels families with children have roughly the same standard of living as couples without children. By contrast, beyond an earnings level of twice the minimum wage, families with children always have a standard of living much lower than that of childless couples. Shouldn't we take into account that having three or more children often forces women to limit their work hours or even stop work? It is the middle classes who experience the greatest loss of purchasing power when raising children. Do we need a reform that would reduce their relative position still further?

Table 2. Living standard of a family according to the number of children and employment status relatively to a couple without children

In euro per month by CU in 2009

Adult 1	MI	MW	MW	MW	2 MW	3 MW	6 MW
Adult 2	Inactive	Inactive	½ MW	MW	1 MW	2 MW	4 MW
1 child	99.9	99.4	89.9	85.0	84.9	85.5	85.2
2 children	102.6	97.5	87.1	79.9	77.1	76.2	75.7
3 children	105.8	98.4	93.6	84.0	75.7	70.6	70.5

MI: minimum income; MW: minimum wage.
Source: author's calculations.

The standard of living of the family falls as the number of children rises. Having children is thus never a tax shelter, even at high income levels. So if a reform of family policy is needed, it would involve increasing the level of child benefit for all, and not the questioning of the family quotient system.

Overall, redistribution is greater for families than for couples without children: the ratio of disposable income between a couple who earns 10 times the minimum wage and a couple who earns the minimum wage is 6.2 if they have no children; 4.8 if they have two children; and 4.4 if they have three. The existence of the family quotient does not reduce the progressivity of the tax and social welfare system for large families (Table 3).

Table 3. Income distribution is more equal between families

	10*minimum wage/ minimum income	10*minimum wage/ 1*minimum wage
0 child	9.2	6.2
1 child	7.8	5.3
2 children	6.8	4.8
3 children	6.0	4.4
4 children	5.7	4.2

Source: author's calculations.

Consider a family with two children in which the man earns the minimum wage and the wife doesn't work. Every month the family receives 174 euros in family benefits (AF + ARS), 309 euros for the RSA and 361 euros in housing benefit. Their disposable income is 1916 euros on a pre-tax income of 1107 euros; even taking into account VAT, their net tax rate is negative (-44%). Without children, the family would have only 83 euros for the PPE and 172 euros in housing benefit. Each child thus "brings in" 295 euros. Income is 912 euros per CU, compared with 885 euros per month if there were no children. Family policy thus bears the full cost of the children, and the parents suffer no loss of purchasing power due to the presence of the children.

Now consider a large wealthy family with two children where the man earns 6 times the minimum wage and the woman 4 times. Every month this family receives 126 euros in family benefits and pays 1732 euros in income tax. Their disposable income is 7396 euros on a pre-tax income of 10,851 euros; taking into account VAT, their tax rate is a positive 44%. The French system therefore obliges wealthy families to contribute, while

financing poor families. Without children, the wealthy family would pay 389 euros more tax per month. Its income per CU is 4402 euros per month, compared with 5819 euros if there were no children. The parents suffer a 24.4% loss in their living standard due to the presence of the children.

Finally, note that this wealthy family receives 126 euros per month for the AF, benefits from a 389 euro reduction in income tax, and pays 737 euros per month in family contributions. Unlike the poor family, it would benefit from the complete elimination of the family policy.

It would certainly be desirable to increase the living standards of the poorest families: the poverty rate for children under age 18 remains high, at 17.7% in 2009, versus 13.5% for the population as a whole. But this effort should be financed by all taxpayers, and not specifically by families.

No political party is proposing strong measures for families: a major upgrade in family benefits, especially the “complément familial” or the “child” component of the RSA; the allocation of the “child” component of the RSA to the children of the unemployed; or the indexation of family benefits and the RSA on wages, and not on prices.

Worse, in 2011, the government, which now poses as a defender of family policy, decided not to index family benefits on inflation, with a consequent 1% loss of purchasing power, while the purchasing power of retirees was maintained. Children do not vote …

I find it difficult to believe that large families, and even families with two children, especially middle-class families with children, those where the parents (especially the mothers) juggle their schedules in order to look after their children while still working, are profiting unfairly from the current system. Is it really necessary to propose a reform that increases the tax burden on families, especially large

families?

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[1] The advantage provided by the family quotient is currently capped at 2585 euros per half a tax share. This level is justified. A child represents on average 0.35 CU (0.3 in the range 0 to 15 year old, and 0.5 above). This ceiling corresponds to a zero-rating of 35% of median income. See H. Sterdyniak: "Faut-il remettre en cause la politique familiale française?" *[Should French family policy be called into question?], Revue de l'OFCE*, no. 16, January 2011.

[2] As it has already intervened to require that the Prime pour l'emploi benefit takes into account family composition.

[3] See Sterdyniak (2011), *op.cit.*