# What role for central bank balance sheets in the conduct of monetary policy?

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By adjusting the size and composition of their balance sheets, the central banks have profoundly changed their monetary policy strategy. Although the implementation of these measures was initially envisaged for a period of crisis, questions are now arising about the use of the balance sheet as an instrument of monetary policy outside periods of crisis.

The central banks' securities purchase policy has resulted in significantly expanding the size of their balance sheets. In September 2017, the balance sheets of the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank amounted, respectively, to nearly 4,500 billion dollars (23.3% of US GDP) and 4,300 billion euros (38.5% of euro zone GDP), while in June 2007 they were 870 billion dollars (or 6.0% of GDP) and 1,190 billion euros (12.7% of GDP). The end of the financial crisis and the economic crisis calls for a gradual tightening of monetary policy, which is already underway in the United States and forthcoming in the euro zone. The Federal Reserve, for instance, has raised the key interest rate five times since December 2015, and in October 2017 it began to reduce the size of its balance sheet. However, no precise indication has been given as to the size of the bank's balance sheet once the process of normalization has been completed. Beyond simply size, there is also the question of the role that these balance sheet policies will play in the conduct of monetary policy in the future.

Initially, the measures taken during the crisis had to be exceptional and temporary. The aim was to satisfy a need for substantial liquidity and to act directly on the prices of certain assets or on the long end of the yield curve at a time when the standard monetary policy instrument – short-term interest rates – was constrained by the zero lower bound (ZLB). The use of these measures over a prolonged period – the last ten years – suggests, however, that the central banks could continue to use their balance sheets as a tool of monetary policy and financial stability, including in so-called "normal" periods, that is to say, even when there is enough maneuvering room to lower the key rate. Not only have these unconventional measures demonstrated some effectiveness, but their transmission mechanisms do not seem to be specific to periods of crisis. Their use could thus both enhance the effectiveness of monetary policy and improve the central banks' ability to achieve their macroeconomic and financial stability objectives. We develop these arguments in a recent publication that we summarize here.

In an article presented at the 2016 Jackson Hole conference, Greenwood, Hanson and Stein suggested that the central banks could use their balance sheets to provide liquidity to meet a growing need in the financial system for liquid, risk-free assets. The extra reserves thus issued would increase the stock of safe assets that could be drawn on by commercial banks, enhancing financial stability. The central banks could also intervene more regularly in the markets to influence the price of certain assets or risk premiums or term premiums. What is involved here is not necessarily a matter of increasing or reducing the size of the balance sheet, but of modulating its composition in order to correct any distortions or to strengthen the transmission of monetary policy by intervening in all segments of the rate curve. During the sovereign debt crisis, the ECB launched a Securities Market Programme (SMP) aimed at reducing the risk premiums on the yields of several countries (Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain and Italy) and at improving the transmission of the common monetary policy to these countries. In 2005, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve encountered an enigma on the bond markets when noting that long-term rates did not seem to be responding to the ongoing tightening of US monetary policy. The use of targeted purchases of securities with longer maturities would no doubt have improved the transmission of the monetary policy, as was being sought at that time by the Federal Reserve.

In practice, the implementation of a strategy like this in "normal" times raises several issues. First, if the balance sheet policy complements the interest rate policy, the central banks will have to accompany their decisions with the appropriate communications, specifying both the overall direction of monetary policy and the reasons justifying the use and the goal of such a policy. It seems that they managed to do this during the crisis, even as the number of programmes proliferated; there is therefore no reason to think that suddenly communications like this would become more difficult to implement in a "normal" period. Furthermore, using the balance sheet as a monetary policy instrument more frequently would result in holding more, and potentially riskier, assets. In these circumstances, there would be a trade-off between the efficacy that could be expected from monetary policy and the risks being taken by the central bank. It should also be noted that using the balance sheet does not necessarily mean that its size would be constantly growing. Central banks could just as easily choose to sell certain assets whose price was deemed to be too high. However, in order to be able to effectively modulate the composition of the central bank's assets, its balance sheet must be large enough to facilitate its portfolio operations.

It should be recognized that economists have not yet fully analyzed the potential effects of balance sheet policies on macroeconomic and financial stability. But the remaining uncertainty should not prevent the central banks from making use of balance sheet policies, as only experience can lead to a comprehensive assessment of the power of balance sheet policies. The history of the central banks is a reminder that the objectives and instruments used by central banks have changed steadily [1]. A new paradigm shift thus seems possible. If balance sheet policies are able to enhance the effectiveness of monetary policy and improve financial stability, central banks should seriously consider their use.

For more, see: Christophe Blot, Jérôme Creel, Paul Hubert, "What should the ECB 'new normal' look like?", *OFCE policy brief* 29, 20 December.

[1] See Goodhart (2010).