Collateral Damage

What Next? Where Next?

What to Expect and How to Prepare

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THIS PAPER COVERS SOME familiar ground in order to remind readers of the interplay among the most important economic developments, considers the scenarios for which companies should prepare, and suggests some steps that prudent companies may wish to consider. For those readers who are well acquainted with the economic scenarios described, we suggest that you start reading at "What Should Companies Do to Prepare?" beginning on page 13, below.

The economic travails of much of the West are reaching a decisive stage as the year ends. In 2008, we predicted sluggish recovery and a long period of low growth for the West in a two-speed world. This picture does not now properly reflect the downside risks. The policy of "kicking the can down the road" is failing, as the intensifying crisis in the euro zone and the failure of the G20 summit in late October clearly demonstrate. As to December's European summit, we describe its impact later in this paper.

Such extreme uncertainty is challenging for companies trying to prepare their budgets for next year—or, more fundamentally, trying to plot their strategic course. It helps to have a clear understanding of what may happen and why it may happen. So before we address the question of which scenarios to expect and how to prepare, let us remind ourselves about the root of the problem: the West is drowning in debt.

A World with Too Much Debt

Total debt-to-GDP levels in the 18 core countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) rose from 160 percent in 1980 to 321 percent in 2010. Disaggregated and adjusted for inflation, these numbers mean that the debt of nonfinancial corporations increased by 300 percent, the debt of governments increased by 425 percent, and the debt of private households increased by 600 percent. But the costs of the West's aging populations are hidden in the official reporting. If we included the mounting costs of providing for the elderly, the debt level of most governments would be significantly higher.[1] (See Exhibit 1.)

Add to this sobering picture the fact that the financial system is running at unprecedented leverage levels, and we can draw only one conclusion: the 30-year credit boom has run its course. The debt problem simply has to be addressed. There are four approaches to dealing with too much debt: saving and paying back, growing faster, debt restructuring and write-offs, and creating inflation.

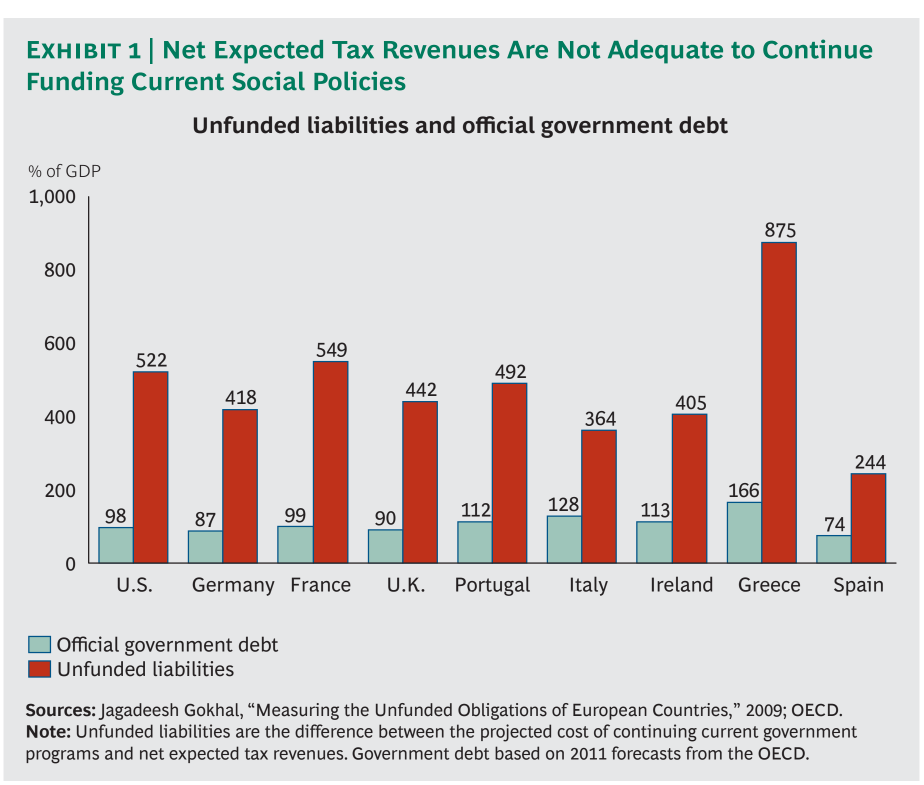


Exhibit 1 | Net Expected Tax Revenues Are Not Adequate to Continue Funding Current Social Policies

Sources: Jagadeesh Gokhal, "Measuring the Unfunded Obligations of European Countries," 2009; OECD.
Note: Unfunded liabilities are the difference between the projected cost of continuing current government programs and net expected tax revenues. Government debt based on 2011 forecasts from the OECD.

Saving and Paying Back. Could the West simply start saving and paying back its debt? If too many debtors pursued this path at the same time, the ensuing reduction in consumption would lead to lower growth, higher unemployment, and correspondingly less income, making it more difficult for other debtors to save and pay back. This phenomenon, described by Irving Fisher in 1933 in *The Debt-Deflation Theory of Great Depressions,* can result in a deep and long recession, combined with falling prices (deflation). This is amplified when governments simultaneously pursue austerity policies—such as we see today in many European countries and will see in the U.S. beginning in 2012. A reduction in government spending by 1 percent of GDP leads to a reduction in consumption (within two years) of 0.75 percent and a reduction in economic growth of 0.62 percent. Saving (or, more correctly, deleveraging) will reduce growth, potentially trigger recession, and drive higher debt-to-GDP ratios—not lower debt levels. Indeed, during the early years of the Great Depression, President Hoover—convinced that a balanced federal budget was crucial to restoring business confidence—cut government spending and raised taxes. In the face of a crashing economy, this only served to reduce consumer demand.

For the private sector and government to reduce debt simultaneously would require running a trade surplus.[2] So long as surplus countries (China, Japan, and Germany) pursue export-led growth, it will be impossible for debtor countries to deleverage. Martin Wolf put it trenchantly in the *Financial Times:* "The Earth cannot, after all, hope to run current account surpluses with the people of Mars."[3] The lack of international cooperation to rebalance trade flows is a key reason for continued economic difficulties.

Saving and paying back cannot work for 41 percent of the world economy at the same time.[4] The emerging markets would have to import significantly more, which is unlikely to happen.

Growing Faster. The best option for improving woeful debt-to-GDP ratios is to grow GDP fast. Historically, this has rarely been achieved, although it can be done—for example, in the U.K. after the Napoleonic Wars and in Indonesia after the 1997/1998 Asia crisis (although Indonesian debt levels were nowhere near contemporary highs in the West). Attacking today's debt mountain would require reforming labor markets or investing more in capital stock. Neither is happening.

- Politicians are unwilling to interfere in labor markets given today's elevated levels of unemployment. Moreover, empirical evidence shows that the initial impact of such reforms is negative, as job insecurity breeds lower consumption.

- Companies can afford to invest significantly more, as they are highly profitable. The share of U.S. corporate profits in relation to U.S. GDP is at an all-time high of 13 percent (as are cash holdings), yet corporate real net investment (that is, investment less depreciation) in capital stock in the third quarter of 2011 was back to 1975 levels. But companies are reluctant to invest while demand is sluggish, while existing capacities are sufficient, and while the outlook for the world economy remains highly uncertain.

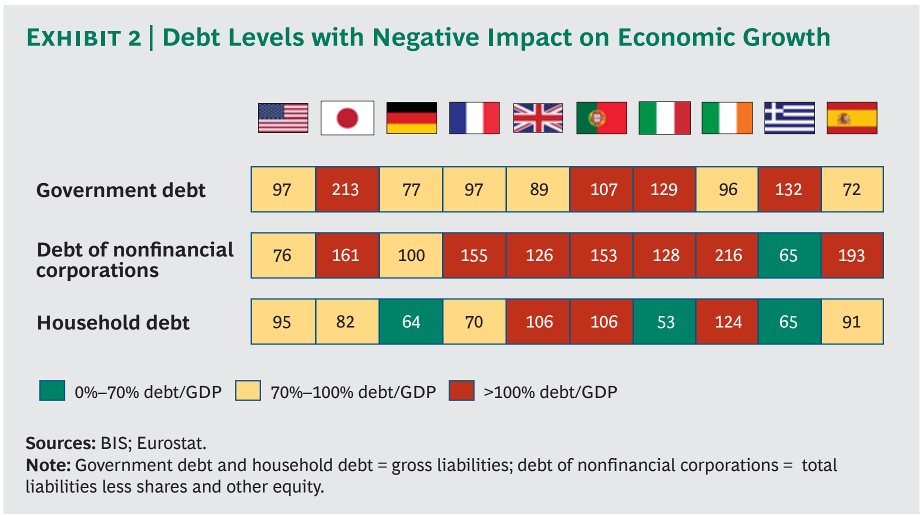
The aging of Western societies will be a further drag on economic growth. By 2010, the workforce in Western Europe will shrink 2.4 percent, with that of Germany shrinking 4.2 percent.

The inability to grow out of the problem is bad news for debtors. Look at Italy, for example: Italian government debt is 120 percent of GDP. The current interest rate for new issues of ten-year bonds is 7 percent—up from 4.7 percent in April 2011. If Italy had to pay 6 percent interest on its outstanding debt, such a high rate would materially increase the primary surplus (that is, the current account surplus before interest expense) that Italy would need to run in order to stabilize its debt level. If we assume that Italy's economy grows at a nominal rate of 2 percent per year, the government would need to run a primary surplus of 4.8 percent of GDP (calculated as 6 percent interest incurred on its debt minus 2 percent nominal growth multiplied by 120 percent debt to GDP) just to stabilize debt-to-GDP levels; the latest forecasts show only a 0.5 percent surplus for 2011.[5] Any effort to increase the primary surplus through austerity and tax increases runs the risk of creating a downward spiral. When investors start doubting the ability of the debtor to serve its obligations, interest rates rise even further, leading to a vicious circle of austerity, lower growth, and rising interest rates.[6]

Debt in itself makes it more difficult to grow out of debt. Studies by Carmen Reinhardt and Kenneth Rogoff and the Bank for International Settlements show that once government debt reaches 90 percent of GDP, the real rate of economic growth is reduced. This also applies to the debt of nonfinancial corporations and private households. Exhibit 2 shows the current debt level of key economies by sector. In all

countries, the debt level of at least one sector is beyond the critical mark. Somewhat perversely, only in Greece are the two private sectors below the threshold. And only in Germany and Italy (in addition to Greece) do private households have a debt level below 70 percent of GDP.

Exhibit 2 | Debt Levels with Negative Impact on Economic Growth



Government debt	97	213	77	97	89	107	129	96	132	72
Debt of nonfinancial corporations	76	161	100	155	126	153	128	216	65	193
Household debt	95	82	64	70	106	106	53	124	65	91

Sources: BIS; Eurostat.
Note: Government debt and household debt = gross liabilities; debt of nonfinancial corporations = total liabilities less shares and other equity.

Debt Restructuring and Write-offs. We explored this option in our last paper (*Back to Mesopotamia: The Looming Threat of Debt Restructuring,* BCG Focus, September 2011). Assuming a combined sustainable debt level of 180 percent of GDP for private households, nonfinancial corporations, and governments, we estimated the debt overhang to be €6 trillion for the euro zone and $11 trillion for the U.S. We argued that (some) governments might be tempted to fund this through a one-time wealth tax of 20 to 30 percent on all financial assets.

The target level of 180 percent can be debated (and was debated by many readers of *Back to Mesopotamia*), but a level of 220 percent would still imply a debt restructuring of $4 trillion in the U.S. and €2.6 trillion in the euro zone, leading to a one-time wealth tax of 12 percent and 14 percent, respectively. Given the unpopularity of such a tax, we are likely to see less incendiary taxes imposed. This means that politicians must resort to the last option: inflation.

Inflation. Another option to reduce Western debt loads would be financial repression—a situation in which the nominal interest rate is below the nominal growth rate of the economy for a sustained period of time. After World War II, the U.S. and the U.K. successfully used inflation to reduce overall debt levels. In spite of today's low-interest-rate environment, we have the opposite situation: interest rates are higher than economic growth rates. As risk aversion in financial markets increases and a new recession in 2012 looms large, the problem could get even worse.

So the only way to achieve higher nominal growth will be to generate higher inflation. Aggressive monetary easing has barely moved the inflation needle in the U.S. and most of Europe, although the impact on U.K. inflation has been greater. Inflation is not being generated, because the expectation of inflation remains low

and because there is still overcapacity and overindebtedness in the private and public sectors. Continued monetary easing could (and will) lead to a substantial monetary overhang that could, if the public loses trust in money, lead to an inflationary bubble. Some argue that inflation is unlikely because of the oversupply of labor and continued competition from new market entrants like China.[7] Certainly we may see continued pressure on wages because of globalization, although the longer low growth persists in the West, the more likely it is that Western governments will resort to increased protectionism, leading to upward pressure on prices. Moreover, some observers believe that the inflation indicators do not give a true reading of the underlying rates of inflation.

It is also a matter of trust. Take, for example, the history of hyperinflation in Germany in the early 1920s. The German Reichsbank funded the government with newly printed money for several years without causing inflation. But once the public lost trust in money, people started to spend it fast. This led to higher demand and an inflationary spiral. Today the velocity of money in the U.S. is at an all-time low of 5.7. If the number of times a dollar circulates per year to make purchases returned to the long-term average of 17.7, price levels in the U.S. would rise by 294 percent over that period—unless the Federal Reserve simultaneously reduced its balance sheet by $1.8 trillion. Some inflation is probably attractive to those seeking to reduce debt levels. The problem is stopping the inflation genie once it has left the bottle.

There are no easy solutions to the debt problem. At best, we expect a sustained period of low growth in the West. Even this would require the following:

- A coordinated effort to rebalance global trade flows, which would require the emerging markets, Germany, and Japan to import more, thereby allowing the debtor countries to earn the funds necessary to deleverage

- Stabilizing the overstretched financial sector through recapitalization and slow de-risking and deleveraging—in contrast to today's new rules, which encourage banks to shrink their balance sheets rather than finance commercial activity (it is worth noting that the effect of monetary easing during a period when ultra-low interest rates are below the rate of inflation is essentially to provide additional support to the banking system through the provision of low-cost liquidity)

- Reducing excessive debt levels, ideally through an orderly restructuring or higher inflation

Current policies fall short against all these criteria. The coordinated intervention of several global central banks on November 30 could be construed as a positive sign of global cooperation, given that the whole world fears the implications of a (disorderly) breakup of the euro zone. In reality, it was once again merely a case of pulling the only lever left—that of printing money—and so did not address the one fundamental problem facing the world economy. Even China's participation reflected its worries about its biggest export market (Europe) and the risk of another (possibly deep) recession more than a true willingness to support the West by rebalancing trade flows.

Any new recession, given growing and unsustainable debt levels, would increase the risk of short-term defaults and significantly increase the medium-term risk of higher inflation. Companies should therefore prepare for these scenarios. But they also need to consider how the situation in Europe could amplify the problem.

The Euro Zone: Pouring Fuel on the Flames

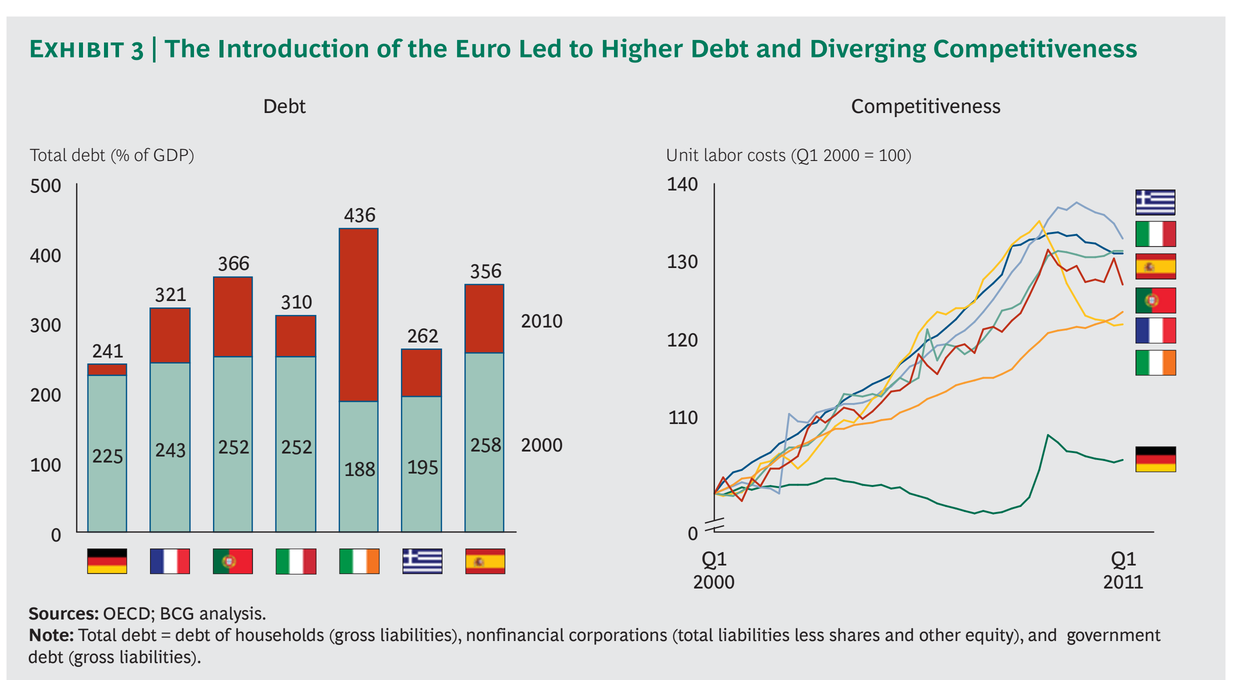
The crisis of the euro zone makes dealing with the debt overhang even more difficult. The introduction of the euro was followed by two important developments:

- Debt grew quickly in most countries of the euro zone because credit became cheap and, in many instances, negative real-interest rates fueled real estate bubbles. Consumers in the countries of the periphery, made confident by newly strong currencies and low interest rates, also embarked on a spending boom.

- Competitiveness diverged between Germany and the Netherlands, on the one hand, and the countries of the south (the periphery), on the other, with the countries of the periphery failing to rein in excessive wage increases which, in the past, could be addressed through currency devaluation. Having lost the ability to adjust through exchange rate devaluations, the countries of the periphery can now only resort to painful internal devaluations (in short, salary cuts). (See Exhibit 3.)

December's EU summit was supposed to restore confidence in the future of the euro zone. The European leaders made the following decisions:

Exhibit 3 | The Introduction of the Euro Led to Higher Debt and Diverging Competitiveness



Sources: OECD; BCG analysis.
Note: Total debt = debt of households (gross liabilities), nonfinancial corporations (total liabilities less shares and other equity), and government debt (gross liabilities).

- The members of the EU will change their respective constitutions and national laws in order to impose limits on allowable budget deficits.

- The members of the EU will accept stricter supervision of their budgets by EU institutions (such as the European courts), including quasiautomatic sanctions should their national budget deficits breach prescribed limits (a "structural deficit" of more than 0.5 percent of GDP—reflecting the impact of the business cycle).

- The European Stability Mechanism (ESM) will be implemented a year earlier and run for some time in parallel with the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF). EU leaders increased to a total of €500 billion the financial power that can be deployed to support the weaker countries of the euro zone.

- The members of the EU will consider whether to provide funding of €200 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to help countries deal with a liquidity squeeze.

- In future debt restructurings, private-sector bondholders will be treated according to the practice of the IMF, with no automatic haircuts. All government bonds will require collective-action clauses to facilitate restructurings.

The summit was predictably vague on the subject of imbalances within the euro zone, although the politicians expressed a wish for more coordination in the future.

With the U.K. opposed to an overall EU treaty change, the other EU leaders (all the euro zone countries, along with most other EU members outside the euro zone) aim to use an intragovernment treaty to implement these changes by March 2012. It remains to be seen if such a "treaty within the treaty" will be feasible in legal terms. Even more important, it is not yet certain that the individual governments will commit to the rules as decided at the summit. We may well see some pushback and efforts to soften those rules in the coming months. And even if the new rules are fully implemented, previous experience with the commitments made under the 1992 Maastricht Treaty does not necessarily give cause for optimism that they will be followed.

Before the summit, the European Central Bank (ECB) announced new measures to support European banks. It lowered the core refinancing rate to 1 percent; offered two new long-term refinancing operations that will last for three years; widened the range of acceptable collateral; and, for the first time, made loans to small and medium-size enterprises acceptable. The ECB also made clear that it does not plan to engage in a broad-scale program to buy up the debt of countries like Spain and Italy. Rather, it sees the responsibility for dealing with the debt crisis as lying with the individual governments of the euro zone. In other words, the ECB does not wish to act as a lender of last resort—the absence of which is one of the underlying causes of the continuing weakness of the combined EU response.

In our view, these are steps in the right direction but they are not sufficient, because they do not address the core issues of the debt overhang and diverging

competitiveness. The plan that emerged from the summit is unlikely to be enough to stabilize financial markets. With the U.K. opting out and the uncertainty about legal enforcement, there is valid reason to question the plan's credibility.

Any true solution of the crisis must, at a minimum, accomplish four things: buy time for fundamental reforms by introducing interest relief for the weaker countries of the euro zone, improve relative unit-labor-cost competitiveness, restructure excess debt, and establish a fiscal union. Overall, European leaders, while taking some steps in the right direction, again have not gone far enough.

- *Interest Relief.* First, the financial markets need a credible commitment from the ECB to "ring fence" any member of the euro zone. It has become clear that only the ECB's "big bazooka" (using the unlimited purchase of the debt of troubled countries to keep interest rates down) has the firepower and the credibility to keep interest rates below critical thresholds. The EFSF lacks the firepower to take on the refinancing needs of Spain and Italy over the next two years. Starting the ESM a year earlier and running it in parallel with the EFSF will increase the funds available, as will the potential provision of additional funding for the IMF. But even then, the available funds will not be sufficient to cover the weaker countries long enough to allow for fundamental reforms.

  Even if the ECB stepped in, it could only buy time: in a "benign" scenario of only 4 percent interest on Spanish or Italian government debt, the debt-to-GDP ratio would continue to grow, from 60 percent in Spain and 119 percent in Italy today to 65 percent and 131 percent, respectively, in 2015. Any attempt to stabilize debt levels would lead to the vicious circle already described.

- *Diverging Competitiveness.* The summit did not address the issue of diverging competitiveness and the resulting trade imbalances within the euro zone. The countries of the periphery (as well as France) have to regain competitiveness by lowering their unit-labor costs and introducing more flexibility into the labor markets. Gold-plated pensions (particularly in the public sector) and rigid job-security laws make progress here very unlikely.

  In the case of Spain, unit labor costs would have to be reduced by more than 25 percent to restore competitiveness. In a system of fixed exchange rates, this can only be achieved by significantly increasing productivity (by requiring more working hours per week or making capital investments) and/or lowering salaries. Lower incomes would make it more difficult to service and reduce the high levels of debt (less revenue from taxes with which to pay back government debt and lower personal incomes with which to fuel growth or pay off private debt). Falling incomes, reduced tax revenues, and austerity programs would reduce growth and further reduce debt sustainability—leading to higher risk premiums in the capital markets.

  The social cost of such an internal devaluation would be high and few people would accept it. A recent article in *The Economist* compared the implied adjustments for the periphery of Europe with developments during the 1930s leading to the Great Depression.[9] Back then, adherence to the constraints of the gold

standard prevented an adjustment, and Germany had to achieve an internal devaluation to regain competitiveness. Although very few expect a repetition of the tragedy of the 1930s, it is obvious that a strategy of saving our way out of the crisis will not only fail but will run the risk of triggering significant tensions in Europe.

- *The Debt Overhang.* The summit made it clear that the governments of the periphery are expected to introduce austerity programs in order to balance their budgets and reduce their debt levels. Because many countries suffer from too much government debt and elevated private-sector debt (as shown in Exhibit 2), it is obvious that any attempt to deleverage both simultaneously will lead to a deep and long recession, as described above. We continue to believe that some kind of debt restructuring—and not only of public debt—is necessary to lay the foundation for future growth.

- *Establishment of a Fiscal Union.* At the summit, European leaders moved toward closer fiscal coordination to ensure the euro zone's future. A fiscal union would ultimately allow for the issue of joint Eurobonds and so enable the periphery to shelter behind the stronger north. This may be one cornerstone for a long-term solution to the euro zone's problems, but it does not address the issues of diverging competitiveness and the debt overhang. Capital markets would rightly question whether the countries of the periphery would accept losing control of their budgets and of key political decisions.

  Political tensions can be expected if Brussels—or even worse, Berlin—is to decide on retirement ages and pension levels. But one can also question the willingness of Germany and other countries of the north to continually fund the south. Will the German electorate accept higher taxes to support the countries of the south? And more important, will the capital markets? Some observers took the failed auction of ten-year German bonds in late November as an early-warning signal. And indeed, the German economy is not as healthy as is generally assumed. With government debt at 87 percent of GDP and interest rates of 3 percent, Germany needs nominal growth of 3 percent just to keep debt levels stable (assuming no primary surplus)—no easy task given the negative impact of demographics on future growth. The additional costs of rescue operations within the euro zone could cause the day of reckoning to arrive sooner than is generally expected.

In summary, the existing initiatives fall short. The new agreements essentially put in place some additional improvements to the existing stability and growth pact, which has not been successful to date. The politicians did not increase the size of the ring fence—the "big bazooka" necessary to avoid the viral spread of the sovereign-debt risk; there was no progress on debt mutualization through the issuance of common Eurobonds; there was no forceful monetary easing plan for the ECB; there were no tough calls made on how to address the problems of diverging competitiveness; and no strategy was articulated for reigniting growth in the euro zone—the absence of this last element perhaps not so surprising given that this is all about containment. Whatever our readers' views on the stance adopted by the U.K., we can't help but believe that the leaders of the other countries were thankful for the

distraction provided by the U.K.'s position, which diverted attention from the lack of sufficient substantive progress on some of the most pressing issues.

The euro zone needs a comprehensive plan to deliver a combination of higher inflation (to reduce real debt and address diverging unit-labor costs), deleveraging in the periphery, and higher consumption in the northern countries. Employees in Italy, Spain, and Portugal—and also in France—would have to accept wage increases below the rate of inflation, while employees in Germany and the Netherlands would enjoy real-wage increases. Politicians in the north would also need to lower taxes and introduce stimulus programs to support domestic consumption. In addition, any successful strategy would need to include a restructuring of excess debt (partial defaults). Some observers believe that Germany would be unwilling to pursue such a strategy given fears of higher inflation and the moral hazard of overly indebted countries benefiting from broader cost sharing within the euro zone. We are more optimistic. We believe that Germany will—after long resistance—support such a strategy as the only way the euro zone can survive in its current form. The only real alternative, the breakup, would have major negative repercussions.

What If… ?

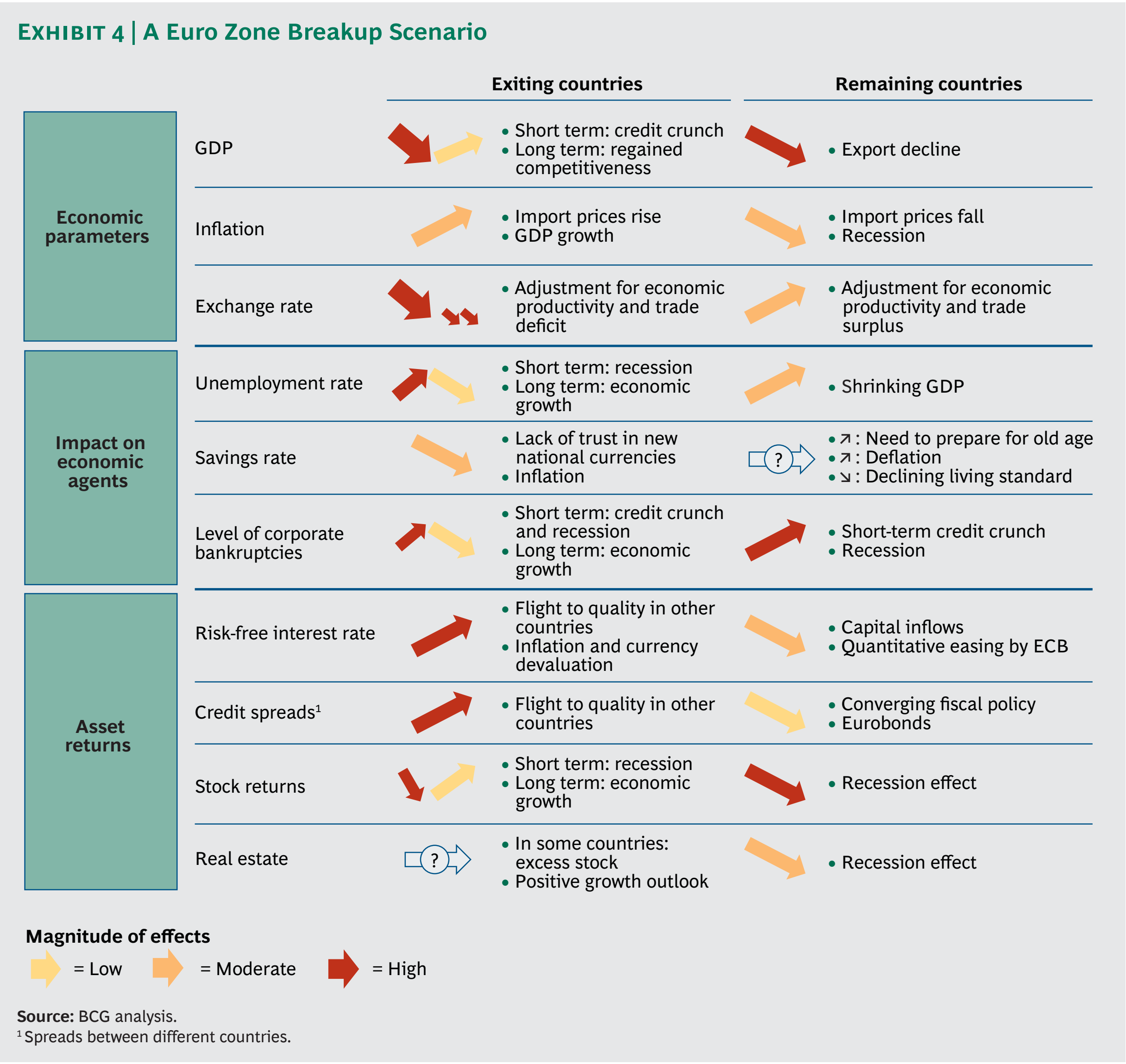
For some commentators, it is not a question of whether the euro zone will break up but of how and when it will break up. There is undoubtedly an increased risk of at least some (potentially disorderly) fracture in the euro zone. And some governments are rumored to be preparing just in case—by, for example, securing sufficient capacity to print new supplies of money. Not surprisingly, we have engaged with many clients to discuss this scenario and prepare for it. A country leaving the euro zone would need to do the following:[10]

- Announce and immediately impose capital controls.
- Impose immediate trade controls (because companies would otherwise falsify imports in order to get their money out).
- Impose immediate border controls (to prevent a flight of cash).
- Implement a bank holiday (to stop citizens from withdrawing their money and running before the devaluation) and—although this is somewhat hard to imagine—stamp every euro note in the country, converting it back to the national currency.
- Announce a new exchange rate (presumably not floating at the beginning, given capital and exchange controls) so that trade could continue.
- Decide how to deal with existing outstanding euro-denominated debt, which would probably entail a major government and private-sector debt restructuring (that is, default). This might be easier in the case of government debt, which tends to be governed by domestic law, in contrast to the debt of major corporations, which is normally governed by U.K. law (but we would assume enactment of laws declaring a haircut here, as well).

- Recapitalize the (insolvent) banks to make up for losses from defaults.
- Determine what to do with the nonbank financial sector, the stock and bond markets, and every company account and commercial contract in the country.

Any breakup would lead to significant turbulence in financial markets—just think about the number of credit default swaps outstanding—and a worldwide recession. The OECD has warned that a breakup of the euro zone would lead to "massive wealth destruction, bankruptcies and a collapse in confidence in European integration and cooperation," leading to "a deep depression in both the existing and remaining euro area countries as well as in the world economy."[11] Exhibit 4 describes a breakup scenario and its potential implications.

EXHIBIT 4 | A Euro Zone Breakup Scenario



Source: BCG analysis.
[1] Spreads between different countries.

According to UBS, the economic costs of a breakup would be huge. Depending on whether the country leaving the EU is a "weak" or a "strong" country, the costs would range from €3,500 to €11,500 per inhabitant per year. Besides these implications for the countries of the euro zone, the world economy would be severely affected, with negative implications for the U.S.—amplifying existing recessionary and potentially deflationary pressures—and also for the emerging markets that depend on exports to the West.

The Year(s) Ahead

As they go into 2012, business leaders need to prepare for a difficult year, and perhaps for several difficult years. They should consider at least four scenarios:

- *Successful Muddling Through.* Governments and politicians partly address global imbalances, generate moderate inflation, restructure debt where necessary, and stabilize the euro zone and the financial system. Further recession is avoided; the West experiences a long period of low growth and deleveraging, while emerging markets reorient their economies toward more domestic consumption—and thereby enjoy continued reasonable growth.

- *Recession with Deflationary Pressure ("Japan").* Muddling through could easily fail. The OECD already says that there is a significant risk of recession in 2012. This would increase the pressure on debtors, leading to even lower demand and so to more austerity measures. Such a scenario could replicate the Japanese experience of the last two decades, but this time it would affect 41 percent of world GDP.

- *Significant Inflation.* The longer the economy remains in recession and the more central banks try to support the process of deleveraging with aggressive monetary policies, the higher the inflation risk. So far, monetary easing has indirectly effected inflation (through higher commodity prices). If the economy starts to recover or the public starts to lose trust in money, we could see a sudden spike in inflation. Even relatively moderate inflation of 5 to 10 percent would have significant implications for companies. (See *Why Companies Should Prepare for Inflation,* BCG Focus, November 2010.)

- *Breakup of the Euro Zone.* Given the significant downside risks, company leaders need to address this scenario, too, taking sensible precautionary measures to prepare for such an eventuality.

What Should Companies Do to Prepare?

A CEO recently said to us: "It would be very surprising if any well-run company were not preparing itself for the worst scenarios, however remote those event risks may be." So what exactly does that mean? Let's look at a range of scenarios.

Scenario 1: Japan. If the experience of Japan—which benefited from strong exports in a booming world economy—was repeated, we would face a prolonged recession and a very slow recovery that could take years to rebound. Today, this would require the combined fast-growing but still smaller economies of Asia to take

up the burden. But consumption in the developed world is still four times greater than in the rapidly emerging economies of the east. Economically and socially, we would see the following:

- A continued balance-sheet recession with low (or even zero) interest rates and a massive oversupply of money. In those countries still enjoying trust in financial markets, we would see increasing government debt. Monetary policy loses effectiveness in a deleveraging world—as Japan's longstanding inability to prevent prices from falling shows.
- Falling prices would increase the real burden of all debts, leading to a vicious cycle of deleveraging and economic contraction.
- This, in turn, would cause many businesses, factories, and supporting sectors to close, resulting in rising unemployment and falling living standards.
- Increased social tensions, political radicalization, and protectionism.

There would be many implications for companies if a Japan-style Lost Decade took hold:

- Many sectors have already experienced falling prices due to increasing labor productivity, competition from emerging-market players, and technological progress. However, more sustained, more widespread, and stronger price declines pose additional challenges because consumers delay spending in anticipation of even greater bargains later, leading to weak consumption and sliding prices.
- Corporate profits would suffer, especially if costs were not reduced in line with falling prices. A deflationary world is one of single-digit earnings growth and meager stock-market returns.
- Liabilities (borrowings) would increase in real terms while the value of assets, including inventories, would decline.
- The problem of excess capacity and supply of all kinds of goods would be aggravated as emerging markets devoted more resources to building up export industries.
- Business and personal bankruptcies could soar as debt burdens became increasingly onerous.
- Less vulnerable firms would not be immune, for example, if critical suppliers went out of business, disrupting the value chain, or if big customers went bankrupt, thereby crystallizing credit risk.
- Possible increased protectionism could disrupt supply chains and impair competition.

In such a scenario, management should emphasize costs and efficiency, while looking for growth opportunities in emerging markets and through innovation:

- *Build a sustainable cost advantage.* When prices go down, a company must ensure that its costs go down as well (relative to competitors, that is). They need to reassess their cost base from scratch. It's not enough to make across-the-board cuts; what is needed is a thorough reengineering of the cost base throughout the entire value chain. Some Japanese companies have been able to slash costs—and therefore prices—by as much as 50 percent.

- *Rigorously manage pricing.* Besides simply lowering costs and prices, companies need to understand the ways in which deflation changes consumer psychology—and be far more sophisticated in setting prices. For example, a company can reduce perceived prices by simultaneously decreasing prices through smaller package sizes, unbundling products and services in order to offer the lowest possible base price, attracting customers with an initial low offer and following up with additional services and features, setting prices to mitigate customer risk or uncertainty, or coupling price increases with an increased number of discounts.

- *Reengineer the pricing function.* At most companies, there is considerable pricing volatility and leakage via discounting. In general, pricing decisions are too decentralized—and salespeople have too much autonomy in cutting special deals. Instead, companies need to manage pricing more centrally, in an integrated, end-to-end fashion, rather than in the siloed manner that is typical today. Consider appointing a chief pricing officer.

- *Focus on innovation.* Fundamental innovations will be the foundation of new industries, which will generate more growth in the future. And even in the toughest times, innovation helps differentiate and attract customers. This was true in the 1930s, in Japan since 1990, and also during the recession of 2009. Companies should therefore relatively overinvest in R&D (an approach supported by many investors today). Companies can also fight price declines by creating new customer needs and serving them with new products and services. Just look at Apple.

- *Look for new growth options beyond the home market.* In order to avoid the "top line cliff" if domestic demand declines on the back of deflation, look for growth options abroad, especially in emerging markets—organically or by acquisition. Of course, so will many of your competitors. The key is to act decisively and aggressively.

- *Make decisive moves that change the game.* In addition to better management of both costs and prices, companies should be considering bold strategic moves to fight deflationary headwinds. Just as the best time to invest in the stock market can be during a downturn, a deflationary environment may be the best time to make aggressive corporate investments. Think about acquiring a struggling competitor in order to consolidate the industry and thereby protect prices and margins in the core business. Alternatively, invest in marketing innovation to maintain current price points.

Scenario 2: Inflation. Many business leaders underestimate the implications of inflation in the belief that deflation would be much worse. In our view—and as the

experience of Japan shows—mild deflation, although unwelcome, can be dealt with relatively easily. Inflation, on the other hand, has a significant impact on profitability and free-cash flow. In addition, most of today's managers have had no experience with inflation. In the following paragraphs, we summarize what we have said previously about responding to inflation.[12]

Senior executives should start now to think through the consequences of inflation for their business, to understand their company's exposure, and to prepare for an inflationary scenario that may materialize sooner than they expect. There are three basic steps.

First, assess the potential impact of inflation on your company's profit-and-loss statement. Whether a company can avoid seeing its profits severely harmed by inflation depends on two factors: the degree to which it can limit price increases by its suppliers and the degree to which it can impose price increases on its customers. It's not enough to know your own exposure to inflation; you must know the exposure of your suppliers and customers as well. So review the design of your company's contracts, estimate the price sensitivity of key customers, and analyze the balance of power in the industry to determine who is likely to be able to impose the costs of inflation on others. The intensity of competition and your competitive position will greatly influence the impact of pricing decisions, so these factors must also be assessed.

Second, estimate the potential impact of inflation on your company's balance sheet. As inflation goes up, the amount of cash needed to meet a company's investment program increases—sometimes significantly. Assess the impact of these changes on the two main components of capital expenditure: net working capital (inventories, payables, and receivables) and future fixed-capital investments.

Third, put organizational structures and processes in place to support effective decision-making in a turbulent, rapidly changing environment. Make sure you have full transparency on what drives your own prices and collect real-time information on the prices of your competitors. Insist on frequent communication between your procurement and sales organizations. Tell your business units to include simulations of different inflation scenarios in their plans and to use inflation-adjusted metrics for management reporting. These measures will provide a clear view of your degree of exposure to inflation and put you in a position to develop a comprehensive inflation-protection plan.

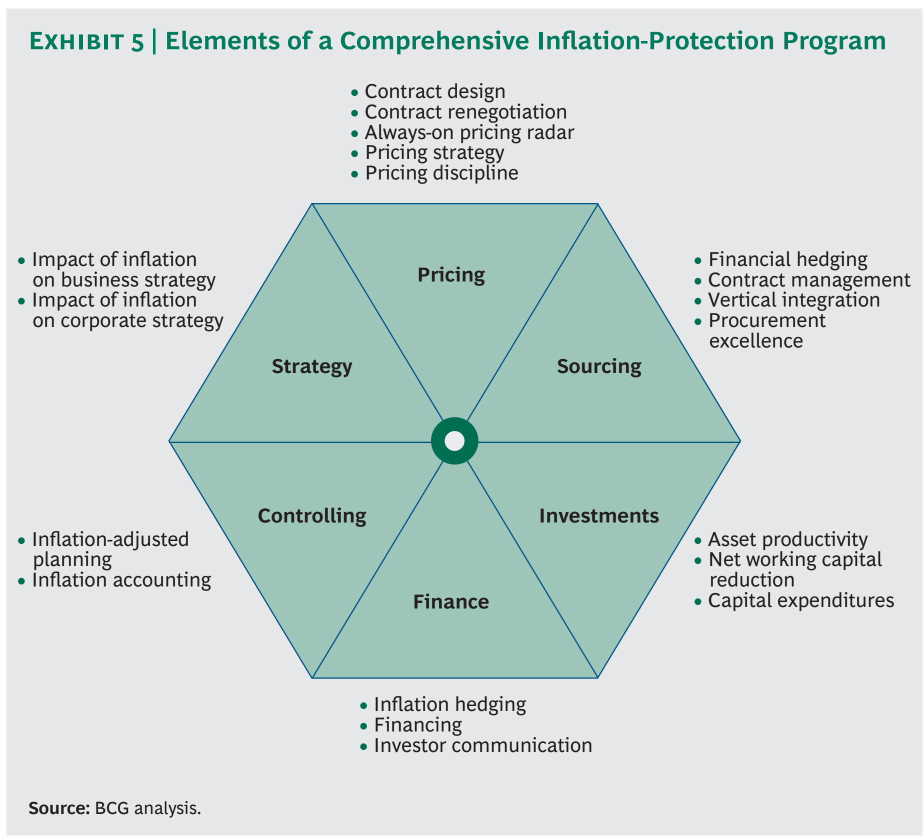
Such a plan needs to be holistic, not fragmented. Establish a cross-functional task force responsible for developing an integrated, companywide anti-inflation program and for establishing an early-warning system to monitor leading indicators. Should the company confront inflation in any of its key markets, the task force will direct and oversee the response.

But don't just set up a near-term inflation-protection system. Instead, create long-term impact by developing an inflation mindset on the part of employees across the organization. Keep in mind that the vast majority of managers and employees today have not experienced a major period of inflation during their

career. As a result, everyone will need to rethink their assumptions and adjust their expectations.

Finally, the inflation protection program should be strategic, not just operational. Inflation can have a significant impact on corporate and business unit strategy. The relative importance of different sources of competitive advantage may shift. By planning for the strategic implications of inflation in its industry, a company is better positioned not only to protect itself from inflation's negative impacts but also to exploit inflation opportunistically in order to strengthen its competitive advantage. Exhibit 5 summarizes the levers companies should pull in preparing for an inflationary scenario.

Exhibit 5 | Elements of a Comprehensive Inflation-Protection Program



Source: BCG analysis.

Clients we support in preparing for a scenario of higher inflation tend to focus on improving their fundamentals, notably through pricing and through efforts to reduce working capital and to allocate it more efficiently. In addition, leading organizations engage with their investors today, explaining their vulnerability to higher inflation and the countermeasures they are considering. Investors have, of course, already included the issue of higher inflation in their assessment of any company.

Scenario 3: Breakup of the Euro Zone. Although we expect governments to find a way to stabilize the euro zone (for a time), the implications of a breakup are so

severe that companies should prepare. We focus on the implications for companies that operate in the euro zone.

Companies within the euro zone need to expect the following:

- Severe, unknown impact of currency turbulence on earnings
- Unclear impact on existing contracts and outstanding credits (will outstanding company debt be redenominated or remain in euros? what will be the law governing the contract if the currency basis changes?)
- Massive disruptions to the supply chain across regions
- Drastic change in competitiveness and decline in exports for strong-currency countries
- Changes in industry pecking orders due to changes in competitiveness among companies
- Significant risk of protectionism
- Greater importance of domestic markets
- Strong divide into strong-euro and weak-euro markets

Obviously, companies would have to adjust many key aspects of how to do business:

- *Finance.* Restructure and recalibrate the entire finance function:
  - Treasury would need to separate "good euros" from "bad euros"
  - Ring-fence cash and debtor pools in good-euro countries
  - Implement multiple currency frontiers in finance systems
- *Marketing and Sales.* Sales offices would need to be ready for vastly more sophisticated order and invoice processing in multiple currencies (review existing contracts for necessary postbreakup adjustments before any breakup of the euro zone).
- *Procurement.* Supply chain management would drastically change: companies would need to revise natural hedging strategies for the former euro zone and consider the effect of revised relative exchange rates on their global procurement strategies.
- *Local Sourcing, Manufacturing, and Distribution.* This may suddenly become financially more attractive compared with the recent trend of exporting such jobs to Asia. All the conventional wisdom around outsourcing and offshoring could be turned on its head.

- *Accounting and Control.* Cost-cutting programs would need to be executed to protect margins against newly introduced tariffs and trade barriers.

- *Organization.* Rethink the entire organizational setup in light of the need to serve a "strong Europe" (Germany, France, the Netherlands) and a "weak Europe."

- *Major Administrative and Support Investments.* These would be required for new treasuries, legal entities, and communication systems and would be hard to finance against a backdrop of market insecurity, looming inflation/deflation, and possible bank runs.

While it will be possible to adapt to inflation or deflation as the situation evolves, the breakup of the euro zone would come as a shock. It could happen as a planned "overnight" event, combined with bank holidays, capital controls, and predefined new exchange rates (which would require robust and totally confidential preparation—and more than a night to implement). Alternatively, it could be disorderly, starting with the surprise exit of one country and leading to a fast chain reaction. Or it could involve simply the exit of one or two marginal countries. Companies should prepare now for all eventualities, including some no-regret moves that can be implemented immediately:

- *Assess regional focus.* The first priority will likely be to reduce dependency on the most burdened peripheral countries (except for the minority of companies whose business model benefits from the crisis).

- *Focus on emerging markets.* Next, move more aggressively into faster-growth emerging-market economies, which will be the global growth engine for years to come. This strategy will become increasingly competitive.

- *Continue to focus on cash and cost flexibility.* This is what distinguished winners from losers during the 2008–2009 downturn.

- *Consider diversification.* Smoothing of earnings across diversified divisions may prove helpful in weathering the massive uncertainty and increasingly volatile outlook in individual markets.

- *Curb the financing headwind.* Companies with strong balance sheets might think of ways to help their customers (and even strategic suppliers) to fund themselves.

- *Prepare to attack.* Deploy cash to higher-value uses such as M&A. Pressured privatizations and distressed deals will yield valuable opportunities for the daring. As an article in *The Economist* put it, "If things work out well, eggs will be broken on a scale that promises some industrial omelet-making."[13]

These "checklists" are illustrative; they are neither complete nor appropriate to every situation. It is worth considering in a structured way the fallout from these scenarios.

As Reality Catches Up with Our Writing

Regular readers know that we have tended to take a rather pessimistic view of the economic outlook for the developed economies. We are more optimistic about the emerging markets but do not expect that they will come to the rescue.

In the coming years, we will see upswings and new recessions in a more volatile world. We will see surprising actions by governments and central banks, some with positive and some with negative implications. But the basic theme will not change: what we are witnessing is the great slowdown of the twenty-first century, at least in the West. Athough we do not expect a repeat of the 1930s, there are some features of today's environment that at least echo the past. The downturn follows a credit boom of significant size, hits several countries at the same time, and is amplified by the euro zone mechanism rather than by the gold standard.

Luckily, we can benefit from the lessons of the 1930s and avoid some mistakes. It looks like our great slowdown won't be nearly so pronounced or economically debilitating—but it may be as long. And in the end, we will get a debt restructuring of some kind to allow for a new start.

Our wives have told us not to talk about crisis. But actually we are quite optimistic. It is clear from history that even in the most damaged economies, individuals and companies can thrive.

Notes

1. Jagadeesh Gokhale, "Measuring the Unfunded Obligations of European Countries," National Center for Policy Analysis, Policy Report No. 319, January 2009; available at http://www.ncpa.org/pdfs/st319.pdf.

2. For a detailed explanation of the relationship between domestic deleveraging and trade balance, see *Collateral Damage: In the Eye of the Storm—Ignore Short-Term Indicators, Focus on the Long Haul,* BCG White Paper, May 2010; available at http://www.bcg.com/documents/file45154.pdf.

3. Martin Wolf, "What the world must do to sustain its convalescence," *Financial Times,* February 2, 2010; available at http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c7682f76-1034-11df-841f-00144feab49a.html#axzz1ftDmgpeL.

4. The euro zone plus the U.S. at current exchange rates.

5. Some commentators are more optimistic (see, for example, Martin Feldstein, "Italy can save itself and the euro," *Financial Times,* November 30, 2011). We, however, think that austerity only works in combination with economic growth, and we do not think that Italy's structural-growth issues will be resolved quickly.

6. See Wolfgang Münchau, "Zinssatz – Wachstumsrate = Pleite," *Financial Times Deutschland,* November 23, 2011; *The Debt Monster,* BCG Focus, May 2011; available at http://www.bcg.com/documents/file77296.pdf.

7. Daniel Alpert, Robert Hockett, and Nouriel Roubini, "The Way Forward: Moving from the Post-Bubble, Post-Bust Economy to Renewed Growth and Competitiveness," New America Foundation, October 10, 2011; available at http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_way_forward.

8. For a detailed description, see Jens O. Parsson, *Dying of Money: Lessons of the Great German and American Inflations,* Wellspring Press, 1974, pp. 187–188.

9. "Lessons of the 1930s: There could be trouble ahead," *The Economist,* December 10, 2011; available at http://www.economist.com/node/21541388.

10. Willem Buiter, "A Greek Exit from the Euro Area: A Disaster for Greece, a Crisis for the World," Citigroup Global Markets Global Economics View, September 13, 2011; available at http://www.willembuiter.com/exit.pdf; Willem Buiter and Ebrahim Rahbari, "The future of the euro area: fiscal union, break-up or blundering towards a 'you break it you own it Europe'," Citigroup Global Markets

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11. *OECD Economic Outlook,* Vol. 2011/12—Preliminary Version, Chapter 1, "General Assessment of the Macroeconomic Situation"; available at http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/23/49113623.pdf.

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13. "Business and the euro crisis: Under the volcano," *The Economist,* October 8, 2011; available at http://www.economist.com/node/21531424.

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1/12