Colchester Sovereign Engagement Framework

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At Colchester we believe that traditional sovereign credit analyses should be supplemented with a systematic integration of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors to properly assess all developed and developing markets. Our holistic engagement process forms an integral part of our investment valuation framework. We believe that sovereign engagement, if done effectively, should be recognised as being mutually beneficial to both issuers and investors. Enhanced and clear policies can improve a country's business environment, which in turn reduces country investment risk, funding costs, supports economic growth and should ensure more sustainable debt paths.

Investment Process

Colchester Global Investors is a sovereign-only fixed income asset manager and a signatory to the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI). ESG factors have been an integral part of Colchester's investment process for developed and emerging economies since the inception of the firm. We have sought to engage with sovereigns helping to inform, promote and potentially drive best practices delivering better social and economic outcomes. We assign countries a proprietary Financial Stability Score (FSS) that combines an assessment of their overall balance sheet strength and ESG factors (Chart 1). Findings during our engagement work feed holistically into the FSS. Bond and currency scores range from +4 to –4 and a country may be excluded from the investment universe if its ranking falls below –4. We believe that countries with stronger governance, healthier and more educated workforces, and higher environmental standards tend to produce better economic outcomes. Typically, this leads to more stable debt and currency paths, and ultimately better risk-adjusted returns. Our Investment Management Committee (IMC) meets formally once a month to ratify inflation forecasts, bond and currency FSS which encompass ESG and engagement issues, and the investment valuations ultimately used in constructing our portfolios.

For more detail on ESG factors please see our ESG Policy.

Chart 1

DEBT AND EXTERNAL SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS

- **Macroeconomic analysis:**
  e.g. Real economy and composition
- **Fiscal position:**
  e.g. Revenue/expenditure composition and elasticity
- **Debt (gross and net):**
  e.g. Incl. contingent liabilities, ownership and financing structure
- **External position:**
  e.g. Balance of payments composition, external debt (public/private)

ESG FACTORS

- **Governance:**
  e.g. Institutional strength, business environment, control of corruption, government effectiveness
- **Social:**
  e.g. Human development, demographics
- **Environmental:**
  e.g. Disaster risks management, resource governance and sustainability

FINANCIAL STABILITY SCORE

↓

ENGAGEMENT

↓

VALUATIONS ADJUSTED

Engaging With Sovereigns

There are clear differences when it comes to engagement with sovereign issuers compared to other asset classes such as equities or fixed income credit. One frequently voiced concern over sovereign engagement is that voting rights for sovereigns lie with their citizens and therefore sovereign engagement is not feasible. Whilst it is true that sovereign issuers' responsibilities lie with their citizens, there are clear misconceptions, which cause barriers around this topic. Therefore, we at Colchester together with the PRI and other leading practitioners, have worked on a report which demonstrates what the current practices and channels for sovereign engagement are, and how some of these barriers can be overcome.

These barriers haven't deterred Colchester from its engagement efforts over the years. On the contrary, Colchester has engaged with multiple country stakeholders since the inception of the firm to assess risk and valuations. Equally, our engagement process fosters a two-way process whereby issuers can also address balance sheet issues and ESG factors. We believe that our objective unbiased opinions and sharing of global experiences with government and other entities throughout the years, has been positively received by those sovereigns we have engaged with. Such activities support and promote Colchester's commitment to Principle 2 of the six Principles for Responsible Investment. Specifically:

Principle 2: We will be active owners and incorporate ESG issues into our ownership policies and practices.

Colchester's Investment Team discusses ESG issues with our clients at regular meetings as well as with issuers during country research trips when possible and where appropriate to do so. In this way, we aim to influence, engage and improve ESG metrics for sovereign debt.

Channels of Engagement

Engagement with all stakeholders can be achieved via collaborative initiatives, roundtables, issuer road shows, one on one meetings, conferences, virtual meetings or country research trips. During such meetings, issues around macroeconomic variables, reform progress, monetary and fiscal policy can be clarified and inform us about a country's progress. Other examples include discussions around funding profiles and the use of the proceeds, which can give us insight into a country's commitment to sustainable policies. Issuances of green, social, sustainability or Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) bonds should align with a country's commitment to its framework. Issuers value our view on their frameworks and it allows them to judge investor appetite for sustainable finance instruments. Within these conversations we like to address ESG engagement topics such as the tracking and monitoring of commitments to sustainability pledges or sustainable development goals. Other examples may include education standards. We will address these where appropriate, as a country could lose out on potential foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, relative to its neighbouring peers, due to lack of skilled labour. This in turn could have significant medium-term implications for tax revenues and longer-term economic growth. Certainly, COVID-19, will lead us to have more questions around lessons learned, health care and the sustainability of funding sources. These will be issues affecting all countries, whether developed or developing. We believe that by sharing our analysis of and views about "best practices" on these topics it should lead to better longer-term outcomes for both the issuer and investors.

Engagements reach well beyond issuer stakeholders and include index providers, business associations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Supranational institutions to name a few. Other effective ways of engagement can be collaborative initiatives, such as with the PRI or regulators. Recently for example, Colchester participated in a regulator's consultation about new environmental risk regulations. All these engagement efforts are important in influencing and shaping positive outcomes. The following table gives a sample of possible stakeholders. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list and can vary from country to country.

Examples of Issuer Stakeholders:	Examples of Non-Issuer Stakeholders:
• Various governmental departments: Ministry of Finance; National Statistics Office etc. • Central bank officials; • Regulators; • State-owned institutions; • Opposition political parties.	• Supranational organisations such as the IMF, World Bank or OECD; • Large corporate, pension or savings institutions; • Local economists, journalists, think tanks etc.; • Business associations, trade union representatives etc.; • Index providers.

Reporting

We actively monitor our engagement activities to assess both the quality of our interactions and the progress being made with sovereigns toward objectives. Before a country research trip (physical or virtual), those Investment team members involved consider what issues are to be raised and circulate them to the entire team for review and input. This pre-engagement aims to focus on the key issues, typically narrowing in on the areas where we feel improvements or progress may make the biggest impact. All three ESG elements are considered. In the ensuing interaction with the sovereign and other relevant stakeholders, Colchester seeks to raise the specific issues identified by the team. Those engagements typically involve an exchange of ideas and thoughts around the highlighted issues. Not only do we seek information in order to make more informed decisions, but also to share our experiences and opinions of parallel or relevant examples from around the world, and to follow up on what has been achieved to date. Details of engagements, as well as with other relevant parties such as index providers and industry bodies are recorded. We will issue a semi-annual Engagement Report with the first report becoming available in July 2021 covering the first half of the year.

Examples of Engagement

As noted above, Colchester has consistently and regularly engaged with sovereigns throughout our 20-year history with a view to both sharing information and encouraging better social and economic outcomes that are ultimately better for both the citizens of a country and investors. We discuss two such examples below.

Case Study 1: An Eastern European Country

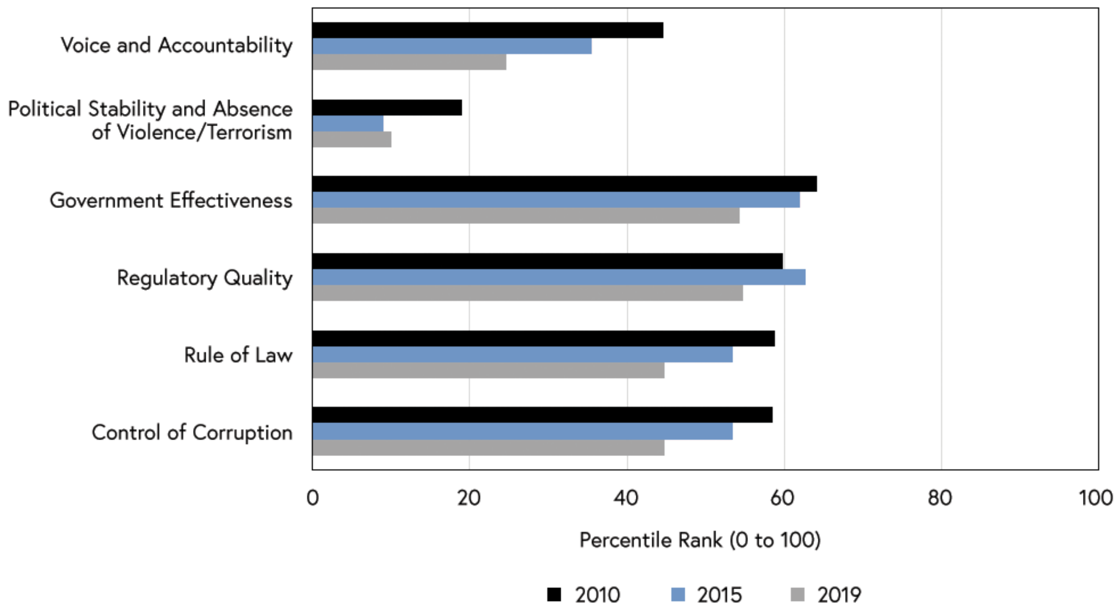
The country's ambitious reforms have led to an impressive economic performance since 2000. Real GDP growth averaged 5.3% p.a. over 2000-2017, and in 2014 the country reached the threshold of becoming an upper-middle income country. Its fiscal position also improved dramatically from a deficit of -8.4% of GDP in 2000 to -2.1% of GDP in 2017. Similarly, the country's net and gross debt positions had halved to around 22% and 28% of GDP respectively by 2017. Even a perpetually exposed external position dependent on short-term portfolio inflows improved, with the current account deficit declining from almost 9% of GDP in 2011 to 3% by 2016.

Despite this solid economic growth and a reasonable balance sheet, Colchester's Investment Team started to become increasingly concerned about the progressive decline in the country's governance standards (Chart 2) over recent years. There was a series of deteriorating indicators including the weakening of institutions, the undermining and quasi-loss of central bank independence, the decline in accountability and a weakening in the rule of law. The Investment Team believed that these deteriorating factors would negatively impact on the longer-term business environment and ultimately long-term economic growth prospects. Following an attempted coup, the subsequent imposition of a state of emergency led to a further erosion of the independence of the judicial system and a gradual move of the executive powers to the President.

The deterioration in a range of these indicators prompted us to visit the country and engage with various government institutions, business associations, independent think tanks, journalists, local economists, the IMF, foreign embassy representatives and other non-issuer stakeholders to better understand the situation. Whilst a range of issues were raised and discussed with the various stakeholders we encountered on that visit, we particularly noted the decline in governance and perceived deterioration in the independence of the Central Bank. The latter was of particular concern as the persistent overshooting of the inflation target and use of unconventional monetary policy measures was threatening to ignite a large inflation shock, negatively impacting economic growth and adversely impacting the standard of living of the country's citizens. Higher inflation disproportionally affects the poorer segments of society. Colchester raised these concerns with the authorities and non-issuer stakeholders, highlighting the deterioration in balance sheet, the negative implications for inflation and growth and the likely rise in sovereign funding costs as a result of a rising risk premium.

Our engagement, along with that of other international and local investors, gave voice to a number of these concerns with local stakeholders. Whilst it is difficult to quantify the impact of such interaction with a sovereign entity, the disappointing trajectory discussed above prompted Colchester to revise down our FSS from a -3 to -4 for both bonds and currencies in the second quarter of 2018. This reduced our bond and currency valuation for the country, and accordingly reduced the relative attractiveness of both compared with other countries in the opportunity set.

Chart 2: Country's Worldwide Governance Indicators have deteriorated over time



Source: World Bank as of 2020.
Note: Worldwide Governance Indicators, 0 = weak level of governance; 100 = high level of Governance

Case Study 2: Influencing Debt Issuance

Whilst it may be easy to discount the potential impact of engaging with developed world sovereigns, we believe that some positive contributions can still be made, potentially influencing decisions at the margin. This is perhaps most evident in our interactions with sovereign debt management offices. Colchester has engaged with and encouraged a number of developed sovereign debt management offices to consider the issuance of green bonds. We have shared with them our end investors' concerns, expectations and desires in this space, noting an increasing demand for climate and environment related investments in bonds with defined goals and outcomes. The increasing number of developed sovereigns that have started to issue green bonds is one example of successful engagement by Colchester and others in the industry. Working together the industry has had an impact on the type of bonds issued.

Participation in Collaborative Industry Engagement

In addition to direct engagement with sovereign stakeholders we have been actively involved in many industry initiatives. As a sovereign only bond investor, we believe that Colchester is uniquely placed to drive new initiatives, be a thought leader and make a positive contribution in this arena. We have undertaken several initiatives to improve the industry's understanding and integration of ESG factors within the sovereign bond space. Claudia Gollmeier, Managing Director and Senior Investment Officer, currently chairs the PRI Sovereign Debt Advisory Committee having previously been a member of the PRI Fixed Income Advisory Committee and chair of the PRI Sovereign Working Group. Goals of the PRI Sovereign Debt Advisory Committee include to "identify and share examples of best practice and thought leadership on ESG integration and ESG engagement on sovereign debt."[1]

Claudia is also a member of the UK CFA ESG panel which created the first professional ESG qualification and is a member of the CFA Institute ESG Verification Subcommittee Working Group. More recently, Colchester has become a member of the steering committee of the Emerging Market Investors Alliance (EMIA) on Carbon Transition Initiative. The initial goal is to educate investors on the risks and opportunities related to decarbonisation in emerging markets.

Examples of Collaborative Engagement Initiatives

a) PRI ESG in Credit Ratings Initiative

Colchester supports this ongoing collaboration with the PRI, aimed at credit rating agencies incorporating "material" ESG factors into traditional credit analysis. The PRI has been working with investors and credit rating agencies to form best practices. Colchester contributed the following case study to the initiative.

https://www.unpri.org/credit-ratings/credit-risk-case-study-colchester-global-investors-/4028.article

b) Index Advisory Committees

The Investment Team has seats on various benchmark index committees and engages with others frequently over the suitability of new country inclusions. Recently the team voiced concerns, along with other investors, over the potential inclusion of a new market, due to operational and market accessibility difficulties. These efforts resulted in conditionality being attached to future index inclusion requiring the new market to demonstrate improved operational market accessibility.

1 Sovereign Advisory Debt Committee Terms of Reference, https://d8g8t13e9vf2o.cloudfront.net/Uploads/q/h/l/202001_sovereigndebtadvisorycommitteesdac_tor_942873.pdf

Summary

Engagement together with systematic ESG factor integration forms an integral part of Colchester's investment process. Whilst engagement is more nuanced with respect to sovereigns, if it goes beyond the traditional two dimensions of risk and return, it can have an even more meaningful longer-term impact. We therefore strongly believe that engagement should be utilised across the entire spectrum of developed and developing markets as it is in the best long-term interests of both the sovereign states we invest in and our investors. There are multiple engagement channels available with sovereign issuer and non-issuer stakeholders. Colchester also believes collaborations are important, to lead by example, and engage with sovereign issuers and non-issuer stakeholders to influence and shape positive outcomes for the longer-term.

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