

Transparency: Disclosure and Archive Policies

A necessary condition for public accountability is transparency of information, an area in which the Fund has made considerable progress over the past decade, with many Article IV staff reports, policy papers and summaries of Board meetings now published on the Fund's website. As part of its shift to greater transparency, the Fund began to grant public access to its archives in 1996. Access has been gradually liberalized. Currently, Board documents more than five years old, Board minutes more than 10 years old, and other institutional material more than 20 years old are available to the public, on request. Confidential documents that meet these criteria are automatically declassified. Declassification of the relatively small number of documents classified *strictly confidential* or *secret* requires Management approval.

Views on further liberalization of the Fund's disclosure policy are split. Just under half (48 percent) of Board members and 44 percent of member country authorities surveyed view the current level of public access to Fund documents as "adequate." At the same time, large minorities support moving toward greater disclosure. Forty percent of the authorities and Board members surveyed responded that the range of documents that are made public should be expanded; there were similar levels of support for reducing the amount of time before documents are made available. Over 40 percent of staff also believes the amount of time before documents are made public is excessive.

In any case, much can be done to facilitate public access to available materials, even within existing

rules. For example, the archives page on the Fund's external website could be made more user friendly, and responses to requests in languages other than English could be accepted. The website addresses the needs of "researchers" (rather than members of the public, more broadly) and requests that individuals who seek access, to the archives participate in a "reference interview." While the purpose of this interview is to assist in focusing the request, the language used could be seen as intimidating to some members of the public.

If document requests are relatively straightforward, IMF archivists respond by sending electronic files of publicly available documents. However, publicly available archival material is not routinely placed on the Fund's website due to a perceived conflict between the Fund's publications policy and its archives policy.⁴² This approach has the effect of undermining access to publicly available Fund documents, particularly for those outside of Washington, D.C. The Board should be encouraged to reconcile these two policies and adapt its archives policy to existing technology to realize both the spirit and the letter of the Fund's disclosure policy.

⁴²According to the Fund's Legal Department, neither policy was formulated with the other in mind. Since placement of material on the Fund's website is considered "publication," it is the publications policy that takes precedence, even when the document in question is publicly available. Since publication requires additional approvals, archival materials that are publicly available cannot be routinely placed on the Fund's website.