



A Look inside the Fund

Liaquat Ahamed

Money and Tough Love

On Tour with the IMF

Visual Editions, London, 2014, 208 pp., \$40.00 (paper).

In *Money and Tough Love*, Liaquat Ahamed describes the professional lives of IMF economists and their international tribe, while also providing a potted history of its founding and development. It's a challenging task because the sensitivity of the IMF's work skews the institution toward discretion.

Money and Tough Love makes the IMF and its work comprehensible and accessible by profiling the quotidian activities and culture of its foot soldiers. Rather than stretching to draw drama out of the days of spreadsheet-wielding policy wonks, Ahamed explains how IMF staff members quietly contribute to the creation of a critical global public good.

In pulling back the veil on life on 19th Street, Ahamed eschews breathless fly-on-the-wall accounts of the financial crisis and fawning profiles of senior management. And as an outsider, he mercifully avoids the ersatz reconstructed conversations and false omniscience of battle-hardened memoirs. His book is less *Stress Test* and more macroeconomic *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

Drawing on visits to headquarters and travel with IMF staff during late 2012, Ahamed's project is timely. After the IMF was written off in 2007 as nearly irrelevant by those who thought we had seen the end of financial crises, it came roaring back to global center stage after Lehman

Brothers collapsed in 2008. Since then, it has been in the headlines on a nearly daily basis in its 70th birthday year.

Increased exposure hasn't brought with it greater understanding of the IMF's work. Ahamed's book helps address this gap.

The monograph is organized around four facets of the IMF's activities: daily life at headquarters in Washington; the whirlwind of the October 2012 IMF–World Bank Annual Meetings in Tokyo; a “mission”—or staff visit—in October 2012 to Ireland, one of the few “advanced” economies to borrow from the IMF in recent years; and a November 2012 mission to Mozambique, a serial IMF borrower and heavily aid-dependent poor country. This mix provides Ahamed with a platform to discuss a broad range of IMF staff activities and their links to the global economy.

Ahamed strikes a balance between acknowledging the prosaic elements of the IMF's work—even when he

admits they bore him—and capturing the sense of purpose most IMF staff members are privileged to experience. In Ahamed's telling, the IMF's nerds sweat the details of the global economy so the rest of us don't have to.

Ahamed provides an insider's view.

If anything, Ahamed could paint the IMF staff with a little more color beyond the near-uniform standard of dark suits and ties. I yearned to see more of the stories and characters that make the IMF a richly textured place to work: to wit, the Sandinista cashier in the IMF bistro dispensing advice on markets, the Finnish mission chief who could hold his liquor better than any ex-Soviet finance minister, and the Iranian Executive Director who helped champion the extension of marriage benefits to

same-sex couples years ahead of most IMF member countries.

Ahamed notes that 150 nationalities are represented among the IMF staff, but his notion of diversity doesn't seem to go further than passports. The improving experiences of various minorities chart the evolution of the institution itself and would have made for some pithy insights into IMF culture and some occasionally tragicomic tales.

At the same time, Ahamed argues that the IMF staff embodies *e pluribus unum* on a global scale: a disciplined team with homogenous views. But he doesn't explain why: they went to the same graduate schools, studied with the same professors, and wrote dissertations on the same things. That doesn't mean they all think the same way, but it does mean they speak the same professional language and can engage deeply on complicated problems.

This sameness produces incredibly heated, if diplomatic, debate behind the IMF's smoked-glass doors. A

typical internal review often takes the form of the "Fund sandwich": it notes a research paper has been beautifully written; goes on to demolish every substantive point made; and finishes with compliments on the econometric technique employed. Where the IMF is distinct from other institutions, such as the World Bank, is that its policy blood-sports stay inside the building: once an argument's settled, the staff presents a united front to the world.

This discipline has meant that, among many banks, only one financial institution has become so central to the global economy that it's known simply as "the Fund." In *Money and Tough Love*, Ahamed provides an insider's view of how the staff works to make the IMF more than the sum of its 2,500 human parts.

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