



# Pursuing alpha across emerging market debt





- Emerging market debt (EMD) offers institutional investors an important source of risk-adjusted return, with competitive performance and low correlations versus developed markets (DM).
- There are a variety of emerging markets (EM) with rapidly developing economies, infrastructure and capital markets. The investment risks of EM countries are in different stages of convergence with their DM counterparts, and their debt can be of comparable quality.
- As offerings in emerging markets have surged, EM sovereigns, corporates and local currency each offer varying potential for attractive total return based on each country's economic and political profile.
- Strategies should offer expertise in all three, with the flexibility to tactically adjust allocations to each depending on local opportunities and specific portfolio considerations.

#### Overview: The emerging market debt opportunity

We believe EMD is avoided by some institutional investors because its risk factors are misperceived. EMD has long offered competitive volatility with DM debt. Corporate default rates in EM have been comparable or better than DM for over a decade, and EMD correlations provide effective diversification.

#### EMD returns have low correlations across benchmarks and to local currency

	JPMorgan Corporate EMBI	JPMorgan EMBI Global Diversified
U.S. Investment Grade	0.82	0.82
U.S. High Yield	0.94	0.87
EUR Investment Grade	0.71	0.75
EUR High Yield	0.94	0.83
Bloomberg US Treasury 5-7 Year Index	-0.38	-0.24
MSCI World Index	0.64	0.65
5&P 500 Index	0.56	0.54
J.P. Morgan GBI EM (Local Currency)	0.29	0.44

Sources: JPM, Federated Hermes, Bloomberg as of 12/31/2003 to 12/31/2021

Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

Correlation indicates the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two random variables. The value will range between -1 and 1. A value of 1 indicates a perfect positive dependency and -1 indicates a perfect negative dependency between the two investments. A correlation value of 0 indicates that no relationship between the two investments exists and they are said to be independent of each other.

U.S. Investment Grade (IG) - J.P. Morgan US Liquid Index (JULI) measures the performance of the investment-grade dollar-denominated U.S. and Europe corporate bond market and includes EM corporates.

U.S. High Yield (HY) - J.P. Morgan Domestic High Yield Index is designed to mirror the investable universe of the U.S. dollar domestic high-yield corporate debt market. EUR Investment Grade - J.P. Morgan MAGGIE is a euro aggregate index that tracks the euro-denominated government bond, corporate and Pfandbriefe markets. EUR High Yield - J.P. Morgan Euro HY Summary Market Index.

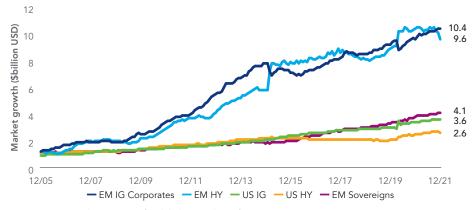


#### EM default rates are comparable with those in the U.S.



Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

#### Growth in emerging markets is driving issuance in corporates



Sources: ICE Data Indices, LLC., BofA Global Research as of 12/31/2021 Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

#### Emerging markets IG corporates offer competitive spreads



- EM IG Corporates - US IG

Sources: ICE Data Indices, LLC., BofA Global Research Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

Faster-expanding EM countries have used debt to help fund their GDP growth, which has long surpassed developed markets, and EMD now makes up more than 25% of the global bond universe. The superior growth trajectory of EM translates into the increasing depth of local capital markets and an attractive total return potential for the asset class, specifically sovereigns and corporates, at times denominated in local currency.

The individual attractiveness of EMD sovereigns, corporates and local currency varies by country. While EMD issued in non-local or "hard currency" (USD for example) still represents the vast majority of foreign investment, most of the cumulative growth in issuance has been in local currency sovereigns and corporates. The benchmarked EMD universe is now more than \$10 trillion, about 75% of which is local currency sovereigns. Tactical investing in local currency EMD can provide distinct alpha via foreign exchange as well as improve portfolio returns during U.S. inflationary periods.

We note that investing in local currency corporates is challenged because of smaller (though numerous) offerings and high local demand. We generally find more opportunity in sovereign local currency offerings, which are also mostly confined to smaller issuers, but offer better liquidity than local corporates. In general, strategies with lower AUM are better able to allocate to the local currency space.

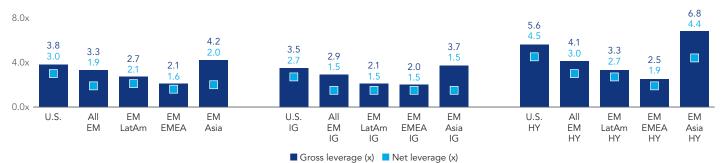
#### Convergence of EM with DM creates opportunity

EM bonds have long been among the top performers in a global debt category that includes U.S. government bonds, U.S. investment grade and DM high yield. However, as the investable EMD market expands, it still requires specialized research that considers each security in terms of sector, country, region, local politics and fiscal policy.

EMD research must be done through the lens of convergence. Convergence is defined as EM per capita output growing to equal that of DM over time. It varies by EM country and region, resulting in EM debt fundamentals, such as leverage, approaching DM debt in quality.

Convergence is demonstrated by relative parity of U.S./EMD leverage

#### U.S. corporate leverage vs. All EM and by EM region



Sources: BofA Global Research, company reports as of 6/30/2021

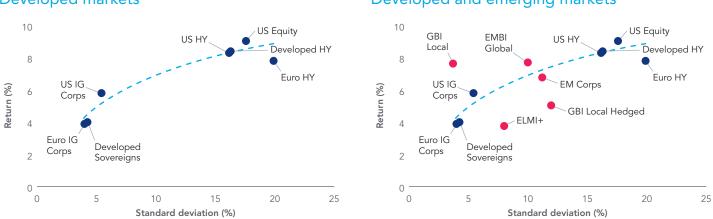
Gross leverage is debt divided by earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA). Net leverage is gross leverage minus cash and equivalents.

However, each issuer is subject to a range of idiosyncratic factors created by their unique position in local markets and beyond. For example, bid/ask spreads, the primary measure of secondary market bond liquidity, will vary widely from country to country based on local currency and economic factors. Another EM variant is that nationally recognized statistical rating organizations (NRSROs) may, in our opinion, overweight local government and regulatory risks in EM corporate bond ratings. We believe a successful EMD strategy requires the ability to look beyond ratings to identify relative value across countries and regions.

#### Using a three-lever strategy to tap market convergence

As emerging market economies converge, country and regional risk profiles evolve. An EMD investment strategy with adjustable exposure to the three levers of sovereign, corporate and local currency bonds can provide institutional investors with the ability to customize allocations to one or all of the three depending on their desired risk-return profile. Each offers its own potential alpha.

However, our overarching view is that local currency bonds will be the biggest beneficiary of convergence. Strategies that focus on non-local currency EMD issuers typically allocate only 3% to 10% to local currency. Higher AUM strategies also may be constrained by the relatively small sizes of individual local currency offerings. Allocations to local currency bonds, which represent about 50% of EM issuance, expand the range of assets to choose from. In general, EMD investment can require long-term investment given the economic cyclicality of local currency performance.



# EMD offerings (at right in red), in particular local issuance, enhance the efficient frontier Developed markets Developed and emerging markets

Sources: JPM, Federated Hermes, Bloomberg as of 12/29/2000-12/31/2021

Past performance is no guarantee of future results. For illustrative purposes only and not representative of any specific investment. This chart is for a selected time period. Results over different periods would have varied and may not have resulted in enhancement to the efficient frontier.

The efficient frontier displays the combined relative return and standard deviation of each of a set of asset classes/categories or portfolios. EMBI Global – J.P. Morgan Emerging Markets Bond Index, Global, EM Corps – J.P. Morgan Corporate Emerging Markets Bond Index, GBI Local – J.P. Morgan GBI-EM Local Unhedged, GBI Local Hedged – J.P. Morgan GBI-EM Local Hedged USD, Euro IG Corps – J.P. Morgan MAGGIE, US IG Corps – J.P. Morgan US Liquid Index (JULI), ELMI+ – J.P. Morgan Emerging Local Markets Plus, Developed Sovereigns – J.P. Morgan EMU Government Bond Index, Developed HY – J.P. Morgan Developed Market HY Summary Market Index, US HY – J.P. Morgan Domestic HY Summary Market Index, Euro HY – J.P. Morgan Euro HY Summary Market Index Value, US Equity - S&P 500 Index. Local currency securities may provide attractive return potential when U.S. interest rates are rising, and dollar-denominated hard assets are most susceptible to price declines. At the same time, a strategy with higher local currency exposure can underperform when the U.S. dollar is strong, relative to strategies with greater USD assets.

We believe that allowing for a larger tactical exposure to local currency denominated EMD, particularly sovereigns, can add to outperformance in most market environments.

#### EMD security selection: Marrying top-down and bottom-up

At Federated Hermes, we believe that fixed-income investing, in general, demands seamless integration of a forward-thinking global macro assessment with bottom-up security selection. To marry the two, the EMD team participates with all Federated Hermes fixed-income teams in committees that meet regularly to assess global positioning around duration management, sector allocation and yield curve strategy and currency management. The EMD team leads currency management, identifying risks and opportunities in foreign exchange (FX).

The global views of the committees are part of the overall top-down analysis factored into selecting individual corporate and sovereign issues as well as whether to buy them in local or hard currency. Top-down analysis of EM countries not only must consider the credibility of central banks, political stability, external accounts and fiscal metrics, but also macro events.

#### Effective local currency bond research considers multiple economic, fiscal and market factors

Each security selection marries bottom-up analysis with top-down considerations. For example, when oil prices are declining, a quasi-sovereign oil company with a healthy balance sheet may be attractively valued in local currency. Both corporate and sovereign issues may cheapen due to macro events, but still have the wherewithal to survive until the underlying economic drivers recover. Assessing resilience of corporate bonds in particular is dependent on rigorous, fundamental analysis of the individual issuer.

Our approach is applied to both new issues and secondary market trades. Additionally, integrated ESG research that includes proprietary models is part of our risk-mitigation, management evaluation, relative valuation, and country of issuance research.

#### Conclusion

Ultimately, we believe EMD is a critical component of any fixed-income allocation through its ability to add diversification through uncorrelated risk-adjusted returns. Relying too heavily on U.S. credit exposes investors solely to U.S. economic risks and reduces the eligible universe by 25%. Even without the negative rates and generally low yields prevalent across developed markets, EMD offers the potential for competitive yields, excess returns and diversification benefits as EM and DM fundamentals converge.

A strategy that allows flexible tactical allocation across the three levers of EMD sovereign, corporate and local currency bonds can provide institutional investors with a customizable risk-return profile as emerging and developed markets converge.

#### Federated Hermes Emerging Market Debt key investment team



Mohammed Elmi, CFA Vice President Portfolio Manager Senior Investment Analyst



Jason DeVito, CFA Vice President Portfolio Manager Senior Investment Analyst



Ihab Salib Senior Vice President Senior Portfolio Manager Head of International Fixed Income Group



### **Case study: Thinking globally to invest locally**



In total terms, U.S.-based investment in EMD is overwhelmingly concentrated in USD-denominated bonds. By contrast, the largest portion of the EMD market is sovereign debt issued in local currency. While currency and FX factors affect debt valuations universally, the decision to invest directly in a given local currency broadens the range of factors that must be considered.

We view local currency investing opportunistically and do not hold local currency debt in every country we invest in. However, we do believe central banks and monetary and fiscal policy coordination are improving steadily, and that in general, local currency will provide attractive spread premium and pricing over the next several years. There is not a specific template or formula for determining when to allocate to local markets. We consider the unique qualities and interactions of a number of factors, not limited to, but generally including the following:

- **Global risk sentiment** In risk-on environments, higher risk assets, such as local markets and FX, tend to outperform.
- **Country outlook** If we are highly constructive on a country, we may be more likely to include local and FX positions in addition to dollar issuances.
- Assessment of the country's central bank initiatives What has been the growth of M1 and M2 (money supply)? Is growth or inflation targeted? How credible has the local central bank been in the past 3 to 5 years in committing to announced objectives?
- Aligned fiscal and monetary policy Generally, if policy is coordinated, we expect stable FX, the local yield curve risk premium to compress, and what is priced in to play out across the curve. If policy is disjointed, we tend to view the local curve as vulnerable because the central bank has to move erratically to balance monetary and fiscal policy.
- **Election/poll results** Outcomes viewed as potential economic disruptors (such as leftist swings) may drive avoidance of local assets.
- **Company** In light of the above factors, how healthy is the company export and foreign direct investment (FDI) profile?
- **Hedging** Depending on alignment of the above factors, we will invest in local currency, and if warranted, we will hold the local bond unhedged and assume the currency risk.

The decision to hold or sell a holding will of course consider all the above plus research and analysis specific to the individual security.

# Local trade example: Peru



#### Analysis

While the most recent national election was more leftist leaning than we would prefer, that has not caused an overshoot in the currency and local markets. More recently, we see a recovery, particularly as the legislature has kept the executive branch in check, and it appears to be moderating. This is a very strong positive and something we look for as a dynamic that mirrors best-in-class developed markets.

Peru's external environment is healthy, led by strong demand for green commodities (used in clean energy). The export sector is also strong. We also see solid local numbers for unemployment rate, real wages, inflation and economic growth rates, debt to GDP and money supply growth.

Our view is that the factors above are driving fundamental strength across the local yield curve, and the local currency is supported by central bank authenticity and fiscal policy, lowering FX risk.

#### Key merits of the trade:

- Local economic factors are strong based on key measures
- Fiscal and current accounts are beating our estimates
- Central bank has been credible in targeting inflation
- Real rates are attractive

# **Federated Hermes**

Federated Hermes is a global leader in active, responsible investing.

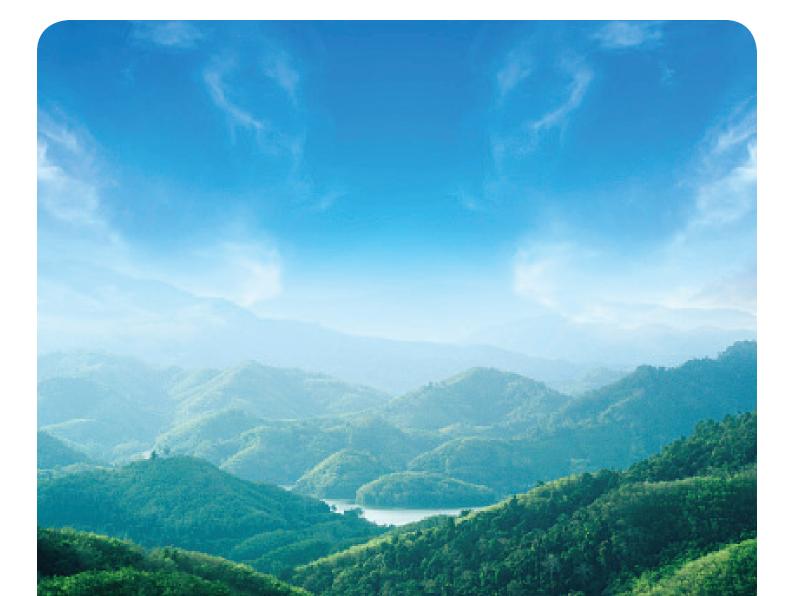
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- **Fixed income:** across regions, sectors and the yield curve
- Liquidity: solutions driven by four decades of experience
- **Private markets:** real estate, infrastructure, private equity and debt
- **Stewardship:** corporate engagement, proxy voting, policy advocacy



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