

EMERGING MARKET LOCAL DEBT: AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

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Thus far, calendar year 2018 has not been kind to the fixed income arena. Essentially, all of the major asset classes have registered negative returns to some degree, as of this writing. However, there is one exception to the rule: emerging market local debt (EMD).

Needless to say, the general rise in [interest rates](#) throughout the developed world has created a rather unfavorable landscape for the fixed income investor. Here in the U.S., the [Treasury 10-Year yield](#) has risen, at one point, in excess of 50 [basis points \(bps\)](#) year-to-date, the largest increase in the most closely watched government bond markets. In Europe, U.K. sovereign 10-year yields jumped up 46 bps at their high point, with the like-maturity German bund recording a 34-bps gain at its peak. In Canada, the 10-year government yield was up 33 bps.

2018 YTD Fixed Income Total Returns



Source: Bloomberg as of 2/23/18. Past performance is not indicative of future results. You cannot invest directly in an index. Note: 2-Year U.S. Treasury Note is the Citi 2-Year Treasury Benchmark On-the-Run Index. 10-Year U.S. Treasury Note is the Citi 10-Year Treasury Benchmark On-the-Run Index. 10-Year German Bund is the ICE BofAML 7-10 Year German Government Index. Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Bond Index. Investment Grade Corporate is the Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Corporate Bond Index. High Yield Corporate is the Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Corporate High Yield Bond Index. EM Local Debt is the J.P. Morgan Government Bond Index-Emerging Markets Global Diversified Index.

Now, back to the EMD universe. As measured by the [J.P. Morgan GBI-EM Global Diversified Composite Yield to Maturity Index](#), emerging market yields are actually down nearly 10 bps through the latter part of February. This divergence in rate patterns has helped to play an integral role behind the different performance stories. As the reader can clearly see in the accompanying chart, emerging market (EM) local debt is the only asset class that has thus far come in on the plus side of the ledger, year-to-date, posting a return of +4.2% ([J.P. Morgan Government Bond Index – Emerging Markets Global Diversified Index](#)). This is in stark contrast to the negative performances seen throughout the developed sovereign debt markets. For the record, the Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Aggregate Bond Index, better known as the Agg, has come in

at -2.1%.

For investors looking to diversify their fixed income portfolio by utilizing an EM local debt slice, WisdomTree offers a “structured active” approach. Indeed, building upon our fundamental weighted, otherwise known as [smart beta](#), approach, we have created a strategy that offers the potential for higher income, diversification and total return within the EM local debt universe. Rather than relying on a market cap-based approach, our process leans toward the “balance sheets” of EM countries, an important aspect, especially when one considers the concerns that surrounded EM financial stability a few years back. By focusing on factors such as short-term external debt over international reserves, current account over [gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#) and gross government debt over GDP, we are able to boost allocations to countries that are pursuing monetary and fiscal discipline, while reducing weightings to those that are overextended. The “country” universe is then ranked into three tiers, and then equally weighted. The top tier contains the highest allocations, and of this writing, consists of Brazil, Russia and Indonesia.

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that EM local debt was able to post the aforementioned positive return against a backdrop of not only visibly higher UST intermediate and longer-dated yields, but also a perception that now envisions three [Federal Reserve \(Fed\) rate hikes](#) this year, and the possibility of four. In terms of potential risks ahead, certainly a further spike in U.S. rates could ultimately weigh on this asset class, as well as any negative growth surprises in China and/or an escalation in geopolitical events. However, in an environment of “further gradual” rate hikes from the Fed, and a more range-bound pattern for the UST 10-Year yield, we feel EM local debt could still benefit from improving fundamentals. Investors who wish to add this asset class to their fixed income portfolio should consider the [WisdomTree Emerging Markets Local Debt Fund \(ELD\)](#).

Unless otherwise noted, data source is Bloomberg, as of February 23, 2018.

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Diversification does not eliminate the risk of experiencing investment losses.

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You cannot invest directly in an index.

DEFINITIONS

Interest rates : The rate at which interest is paid by a borrower for the use of money.

10- Year Treasury : a debt obligation of the U.S. government with an original maturity of ten years.

Basis point : 1/100th of 1 percent.

JP Morgan EM Global Diversified Composite Yield to Maturity : Represents the yield to maturity of the J.P. Morgan Government Bond Index-Emerging Markets Global Diversified Index.

JP Morgan Government Bond Index – Emerging Markets (GBI-EM) Global Diversified : The JP Morgan GBI EM Global Diversified tracks the performance of local currency debt issued by emerging market governments, whose debt is accessible by most of the international investor base. The index incorporates a constrained market-capitalization methodology in which individual issuer exposures are capped at 10%, (with the excess distributed to smaller issuers) for greater diversification among issuing governments.

Smart Beta : A term for rules-based investment strategies that don't use conventional market-cap weightings.

Gross domestic product (GDP) : The sum total of all goods and services produced across an economy.

Federal Reserve : The Federal Reserve System is the central banking system of the United States.

Rate Hike : refers to an increase in the policy rate set by a central bank. In the U.S., this generally refers to the Federal Funds Target Rate.