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Enter the new world currency

Let's drop the depressing greenback and go for a more exciting currency, writes *Nury Vittachi*



Photo: Brian Ching

WANTED: Young, ambitious currency. Preferably with easy-to-pronounce name. Prestigious position. Immediate start.

What's the vacancy for? It's for the job of World Currency. For more than half a century, this important position has been held by the venerable U.S. dollar, also known as the buck, the greenback, moolah, dough and the greenspan. But it has been struck down by the Incredible Shrinking Disease. You now need an electron microscope to see one.

How the mighty has fallen. It seems like only yesterday a friend of mine took one U.S. dollar and moved to a small south Asian country. He lived like a king for several years, buying a palace on the beach, a hectare of land and several hectares of women. Then he got tired of slumming it and came home. And he still had change from his dollar.

No more. These days, you flash U.S. dollars at roadside shopkeepers and they leap away as if you have shown them something obscene, like a picture of a North American tourist wearing Speedos. "Rupees/baht/pesos only," they bark, edging backwards. And these are the same guys who used to hang those banknotes in their toilets.

The people who are suffering most are international accountants. In the past, when they did a complex multinational

deal, everything was done in U.S. dollars and the math was easy. But now no one wants greenbacks and accountants have to calculate dinar-rupiah-peso swaps.

Fear not. Active discussions on fixing this problem are going on right now in the offices of the world's top financial experts, a group which bizarrely does not include me (I know you find that hard to believe).

Unfortunately, they are going about it all wrong. They think the next global currency (let's call it "world dollars") should be in larger units than the old one. For example, the European euro, the British pound, the Kuwaiti dinar and the Latvian thingummy are worth up to two greenbacks each. I don't fancy this. If your minimum fee for a project is US\$5,000, it'll drop to just 2,500 world dollars: too depressing.

What they should do is choose something with units smaller than the U.S. dollar. If the Vietnamese dong became the world currency, your standard fee of US\$5,000 would become 80 million world dollars. Wooohoo! Wouldn't you feel GREAT with that fat wad of banknotes in your chinos? Now admittedly, a burger and fries at a fast food shop would have gone up from US\$4 to 64,000 world dollars. But hey! You can afford it.

And the dong isn't even the world's least valued currency. That,

"honour" goes to the Zimbabwean dollar. The market rate at the time of writing is 750 billion Zimbabwean dollars to one U.S. dollar. (Now I know what you are going to say: why don't Zimbabweans just make it easier for everyone by knocking all the zeros off and starting again from small numbers? Because they already did that, the year before last.)

If the Zimbabwean dollar became the world currency, a burger and fries would cost three trillion world dollars. I grant you that may seem expensive. But your minimum fee for each project would have grown to 3.7 thousand trillion world dollars. You must admit: It would feel pretty neat to take a wheel-barrow full of money home from the office every month.

On the downside, international accountants would have to invest in calculators with metre-wide screens: tricky to get in one's pocket.

But that's a small price to pay. I'm going to get my bosses to pay me in Zimbabwean dollars for this column. After all, I don't normally see my name and the word "trillion" on the same pay cheque. I know you find that hard to believe.

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