

Please cite this paper as:

Antolín, P. *et al.* (2011), "The Role of Guarantees in Defined Contribution Pensions", *OECD Working Papers on Finance, Insurance and Private Pensions*, No. 11, OECD Publishing, Paris.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kg52k5b0v9s-en>



OECD Working Papers on Finance,  
Insurance and Private Pensions No. 11

## The Role of Guarantees in Defined Contribution Pensions

Pablo Antolín, Stéphanie Payet, Edward  
R. Whitehouse, Juan Yermo

JEL Classification: G12, G23, J26

## **OECD WORKING PAPERS ON FINANCE, INSURANCE AND PRIVATE PENSIONS**

OECD Working Papers on Finance, Insurance and Private Pensions provide timely analysis and background on industry developments, structural issues, and public policy in the financial sector, including insurance and private pensions. Topics include risk management, governance, investments, benefit protection, and financial education. These studies are prepared for dissemination in order to stimulate wider discussion and further analysis and obtain feedback from interested audiences.

The papers are generally available only in their original language English or French with a summary in the other if available.

---

**OECD WORKING PAPERS ON FINANCE,  
INSURANCE AND PRIVATE PENSIONS**  
are published on [www.oecd.org/daf/fin/wp](http://www.oecd.org/daf/fin/wp)

---

© OECD 2011

Applications for permission to reproduce or translate all or part of this material should be made to:  
OECD Publishing, [rights@oecd.org](mailto:rights@oecd.org) or by fax 33 1 45 24 99 30.

## Abstract/Résumé

### THE ROLE OF GUARANTEES IN DEFINED CONTRIBUTION PENSIONS

*Abstract:* This paper examines the role of guarantees in DC pension plans, in particular minimum investment return guarantees during the accumulation phase. The main goal is to assess the cost and benefits of different return guarantees. The report uses a stochastic financial market model where guarantee claims are calculated as a financial derivative in a financial market framework (like e.g. the valuation of a put option). In this context, the report highlights the value of capital guarantees that protect the nominal value of contributions in DC pension plans. However, such guarantees can only be introduced relatively easily in the very specific context considered in this report. Allowing plan members vary contribution periods or investment strategies, or change providers, would raise major challenges for an effective and efficient implementation of return guarantees in a DC context. This would increase the complexity and cost of administering the guarantee.

*JEL codes:* G12, G23, J26

*Keywords:* Guarantees, minimum return guarantees, accumulation phase, pensions, defined contribution, put options

### LE ROLE DE GARANTIES DANS LES PLANS DE RETRAITE A COTISATIONS DEFINIES

*Résumé:* Ce papier examine le rôle des garanties dans les plans de retraite à cotisations définies, en particulier les garanties de rendement minimum sur l'investissement pendant la phase d'accumulation. Le rapport utilise un modèle de marché financier stochastique dans lequel les demandes de garantie sont calculées en tant que dérivés financiers dans un contexte de marché financier (comme par exemple la valorisation d'une option put). Dans ce contexte, le rapport souligne la valeur de la garantie du capital, qui protège la valeur nominale des cotisations aux plans de retraite à cotisations définies. Toutefois, ces garanties ne peuvent être introduites relativement facilement que dans le contexte spécifique de ce rapport. Si les adhérents des plans à cotisations définies sont autorisés à modifier les périodes de cotisation ou les stratégies d'investissement, ou à changer de prestataire, cela poserait des défis importants pour une implémentation efficace et efficiente des garanties sur les rendements. Cela augmenterait la complexité et le coût d'administration des garanties.

*Codes JEL :* G12, G23, J26

*Mots clés :* Garanties, garanties de rendement minimums, la phase d'accumulation, pensions, plans de retraite à cotisations définies

## THE ROLE OF GUARANTEES IN DEFINED CONTRIBUTION PENSIONS

By Pablo Antolín, Stéphanie Payet, Edward Whitehouse and Juan Yermo\*

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| THE ROLE OF GUARANTEES IN DEFINED CONTRIBUTION PENSION .....                        | 4  |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....   | 5  |
| 1. Introduction .....   | 7  |
| 2. Guarantees in pension systems.....   | 8  |
| 2.1. Public pension automatic stabilisers and old-age safety nets .....             | 9  |
| 2.2. Investment return guarantees.....  | 11 |
| 3. Costs and benefits of minimum return guarantees in DC pension plans.....         | 13 |
| 3.1. Types of guarantees considered .....   | 14 |
| 3.2. What is the cost of different guarantees? .....                                | 17 |
| 3.3. What is the impact of different guarantees on retirement income outcomes?..... | 21 |
| 3.4. Summary of cost-benefit analysis of return guarantees .....                    | 23 |
| 4. Practical challenges of minimum return guarantees in DC plans .....              | 24 |
| 4.1. Are return guarantees and individual choice compatible? .....                  | 24 |
| 4.2 Who should provide the guarantee and how should providers be regulated? .....   | 25 |
| 5. Conclusion and policy recommendations .....                                      | 27 |
| ANNEX: FORMAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF GUARANTEES ANALYSED.            | 29 |

---

\* Mr. Antolin, Ms. Payet, Mr Whitehouse and Mr. Yermo are principal economist, statistical assistant and principal administrators, respectively, at the OECD, Department of Financial Affairs. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial contributions of Allianz Global Investors. Comments from David Blake, Sandra Blome, Nadine Gatzert, Kai-Marjep Kosik, André Laboul, Brigitte Miksa, Peter Schwark, Gerhard Scheuenstuhl, and delegates to the OECD Working Party on Private Pensions are gratefully acknowledged. The views expressed are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not reflect those of their organisations or the governments of OECD Member countries. The authors are solely responsible for any errors.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines the role of guarantees in defined contribution (DC) pension plans, in particular minimum investment return guarantees during the accumulation phase. The main goal is to assess the cost and benefits of different return guarantees in DC pension plans. The rationale for such guarantees depends critically on the overall design of the pension system and, in particular, whether there are already strong benefit guarantees embedded in public pensions, old-age safety nets, occupational defined benefit (DB) pensions, and some insurance products that may be bought during the working life, such as deferred annuities. Such form of protection is more comprehensive and valuable than that offered by minimum return guarantees, as they guarantee a minimum level of income throughout retirement.

By contrast, minimum return guarantees only ensure that the amount of the accumulated savings at retirement does not fall below a certain value. The actual pension benefit received after retirement will vary depending on the type of pay-out product chosen and market conditions at that time. However, even if there are benefit guarantees in the public pension system, their level may be low or they may protect the bulk of retirement income only for a small segment of the population (usually the less well-off). Deferred annuities – which are not considered in detail in this report - present a different set of challenges, such as managing longevity risk and investor apathy to transferring the ownership of their savings to insurance companies.

DC return guarantees can strengthen and complement the risk-reducing properties of life-cycle investment strategies, protecting retirement income against major investment losses. By enhancing people's appreciation of and confidence in DC pension arrangements, return guarantees can also boost the coverage of and contributions to these arrangements. However, as guarantees have to be paid for, they reduce the expected value of retirement income from DC plans.

The report analyses the cost and benefits of different types of minimum return guarantees as calculated using a stochastic financial market model. The guarantee claims are calculated as a financial derivative in a financial market framework (like e.g. the valuation of a put option). This pricing model abstracts from administrative costs as well as solvency rules and related regulations. In real life, fees would therefore be higher than the ones calculated in this model.

In this context, the report highlights the value of capital guarantees that protect the nominal value of contributions in DC pension plans. They are in theory relatively cheap to provide (they may cost less than ten basis points of the net assets accumulated), and address one of the main concerns about DC plans among the general population; people are often deterred to save in DC plans because they feel they can lose even part of the money they put in. Implementing capital guarantees means that the money people contribute to DC pension plans is guaranteed and they will always receive at retirement at least the money they put in. This makes funded pensions at least as attractive as keeping retirement savings “under the mattress”.

However, such guarantees can only be introduced relatively easily in the very specific context considered in this report: a DC pension plan with a fixed contribution period (as often found in mandatory pension systems) with a pre-set investment strategy (as in the life-cycle funds considered in this report). Relaxing either of these features would raise major challenges for an effective and efficient implementation of return guarantees in a DC context. If plan members can vary contribution periods or investment strategies the cost of the guarantee would also need to be recalculated. This would increase the complexity and cost of administering the guarantee as well as possibly creating confusion among members.

Another problem with return guarantees in DC systems is that they can hamper member's mobility across providers or fund managers, a key feature of DC systems. If the DC provider also guarantees the minimum return, switching provider would normally be accompanied by the cancellation of the existing

provider's guarantee. Any shortfall in the market value of the accumulated savings relative to the existing plan's guarantee value would then be materialised. This problem can be solved in three main ways: making the guarantee ongoing – which makes it very expensive –, having a guarantee underwriter that is independent from the DC plan provider, or introducing a compensation mechanism between providers.

The main recommendations distilled from the analysis contained in this report are as follows:

- From the member's perspective, minimum return guarantees in DC pension plans are least valuable in countries where the PAYG-financed public pension already provides a high level of retirement income and where there are public, old-age safety nets that compensate workers – especially low income ones - from a low investment return on their funded pension contributions. Conversely, guarantees are most useful where the DC pension plan provides a large part of the overall retirement income and when membership of such plans is mandatory;
- The choice of guarantee depends on a trade-off between the desired level of downside protection and the target (expected) value of the pension. Capital guarantees on the value of savings accumulated at retirement offer an attractive cost-benefit trade-off for DC pension plan members. They are - at least in theory - relatively cheap to provide and are valued highly by plan members. Guarantees offering higher minimum returns and ongoing guarantees are generally much more expensive to meet and would therefore reduce substantially the expected value of savings at retirement. For instance, an annual minimum return guarantee of 0 percent (annual capital guarantee) would cost six times more than the capital guarantee applied only at retirement.
- The cost of the guarantee is also higher the shorter is the contribution period and the riskier is the investment strategy. Halving the contribution period to 20 years would quadruple the cost of the capital guarantee applied at retirement. Similarly, reducing the allocation to equities from 80 percent to 50 percent would halve the cost.
- In practice, the cost of the guarantee will also depend on a variety of factors, including the evolution of capital markets, the type of competition in the provision of guarantees and the regulation applied to the guarantee providers. To the extent that there are different commercial guarantee providers (e.g. insurers, banks, investment managers), it is important to create an equivalent solvency or capital adequacy framework to ensure that providers are setting aside adequate reserves to meet the guarantee. In particular, there is a need for adequate capital requirements for asset management companies that provide guarantees, ensuring a similar level of protection as the solvency regime in place for other providers of capital guarantees, such as life insurers.
- There are different ways of charging for the guarantee. For plan members, the most appealing may be to have the guarantee cost deducted from the value of assets at retirement, rather than on annual basis from the contributions or assets accumulated. However, the guarantee provider needs to set aside capital to meet the guarantee and would therefore require some up-front payments. A balance between these two objectives may be struck by having part of the guarantee cost covered by up-front fees and part from a “haircut” on the potential surplus above the guaranteed value at retirement. However, for the sake of transparency if there are competing providers, it would be important to regulate the fee structure to ensure that members can compare them easily.
- Policymakers should also consider various challenges relating to the introduction of guarantees. One of the basic features of DC plans is the possibility for individuals to choose provider. If one allows switching between providers, it may be necessary to introduce a compensation mechanism, which needs to be carefully designed to ensure transparency and fairness.

# THE ROLE OF GUARANTEES IN DEFINED CONTRIBUTION PENSIONS

## 1. Introduction

The financial and economic crisis has highlighted the uncertainty of retirement income derived from defined contribution (DC) pension plans. Indeed, some people with DC pension plans saw their accumulated pension saving dwindle as they were heavily exposed to risky assets. DC plans are becoming more prevalent in OECD countries as a means to finance retirement. They are already the main source to finance retirement in many OECD countries where they are part of the mandatory pension system (e.g. Australia, Chile, Mexico, and the Slovak Republic), and they are rapidly expanding in other countries where they are still voluntary as a result of new policy measures to facilitate access to these plans (e.g. Canada, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom). As a result, several ideas are being put forward to alleviate the impact of market risk on DC pension plans. Two main proposals being considered are the establishment of default life cycle investment strategies and the introduction of minimum return guarantees.

The WPPP already discussed setting up default investment strategies and recommended to have them organised around life cycle strategies as one of the approaches to mitigate the impact of market risk on retirement income derived from DC pension plans. This paper focuses on another approach highlighted as a strategy to alleviate the impact of market risk on retirement income: introducing investment return guarantees, in particular minimum return guarantees (MRG). Introducing minimum return guarantees could alleviate the impact of market risk on DC pension plan members by setting a floor on the value of the accumulated savings at retirement, either in nominal or real terms. Guarantees could therefore strengthen and complement the risk-reducing properties of life-cycle investment strategies.

The assessment of whether to introduce investment return guarantees in DC plans needs to be done in the context of the overall pension system. If public pensions (and occupational DB plans) already provide sufficient protection, guaranteeing that retirement income will always be above a certain minimum threshold, investment return guarantees may lose some of their purpose. Furthermore, even if public and other DB pensions are low, the value of guarantees in DC plans has to be compared against the cost of providing such guarantees – the fee or insurance premium to be paid for the guarantee. Section 2 discusses first the guarantees embedded in public systems that provide a floor to retirement income. For example, low income workers rely more on state pension for retirement, which generally includes a minimum pension; and, state pension provision itself has built-in automatic stabilisers and old-age safety nets.

However, even in such cases there may still be value in introducing investment return guarantees in DC pension plans. Indeed, one popular fear over funded DC pension plans is that one may end up with a level of savings at retirement that is less than the amount put in contributions. Guaranteeing that investors will at least get back the money they contributed (in nominal terms) makes saving for retirement in DC pension plans more attractive and may help increase coverage. Section 2 discusses secondly the type of guarantees in DC plans that exist in several OECD countries and provides a useful classification of these guarantees.

Based on the analysis contained in a background report,<sup>1</sup> section 3 provides an assessment of the cost of providing minimum return guarantees in DC plans. It also evaluates different approaches to finance the cost of these guarantees. This section first describes the main characteristics of the minimum return guarantees analysed. It also explains the approach taken to determine the cost of different types of

---

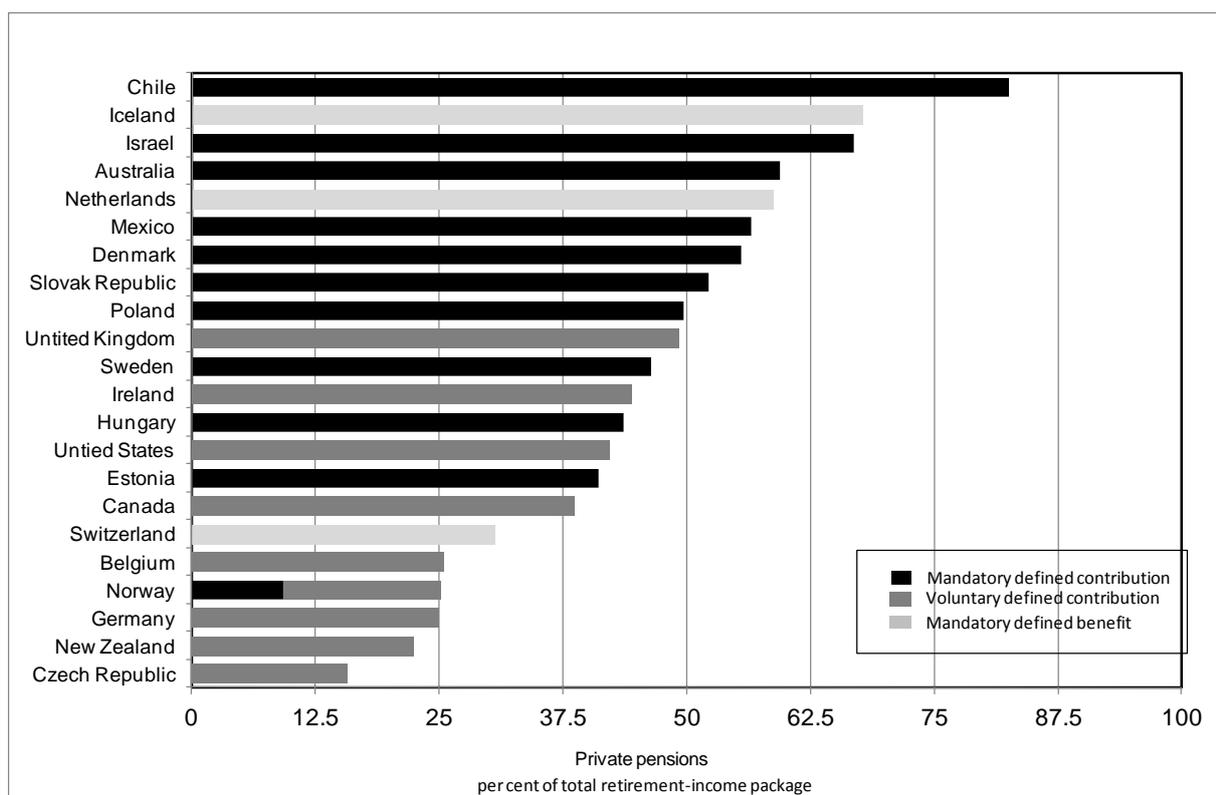
<sup>1</sup> “Assessing the Nature of Investment Guarantees in Defined Contribution Pension Plans”, by Scheuenstuhl, G., Blome, S., Karim, D., Moch, M. and Brandt, S., risklab germany / IFA-UlM, November 2010.

guarantees and to assess their impact on retirement income. Secondly, it compares the price of the different types of guarantees, as measured by the fee that the individual has to pay for them, and assesses the sensitivity of the cost to changes in different parameters. Thirdly, section 3 assesses the impact of the different types of guarantees on different retirement income outcomes. It looks at the lump sum accumulated at retirement and at the distribution of replacement rates. A sensitivity analysis also assesses the impact of model parameters and specific scenarios on the results. Section 4 presents a series of challenges in the practical introduction of minimum return guarantees, such as the possibility of switching provider and investment choice. It also addressed the question of who may provide such guarantees and how such providers should be regulated. The last section concludes with several policy recommendations.

## 2. Guarantees in pension systems

Privately managed, funded pension plans are an increasingly part of retirement income systems. As shown in Figure 1, private pensions will account for over 50% of total pension benefits of workers that start their careers today in countries such as Australia, Chile, Mexico, Poland, Slovak Republic, and the United Kingdom. In these countries, private pensions for new entrants to the labour force are provided predominantly in the form of defined contribution arrangements, where members bear all investment risk during the accumulation stage. As a result, pension benefits are likely to exhibit a great degree of variability both within and across generations, even for workers with similar wage, contribution and longevity profiles [DAF/AS/PEN/WD(2009)3].<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. The role of private pensions in the overall retirement income package by type of provision**



Source: Pensions at a Glance (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Final version published in <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/14/44628862.pdf>

In general, lower income workers tend to be less affected in relative terms by investment risk in defined contribution arrangements because, firstly, they tend to rely more on state pensions for retirement income provision, and secondly, because state pension provision itself often has built-in automatic stabilisers and old-age safety nets that partly compensate for investment losses on individual retirement accounts. On the contrary, middle and higher income workers are generally fully exposed to investment risk in defined contribution plans. However, not all countries (at least outside the OECD) have state pension systems. Moreover, in absolute terms a low or negative investment return may have a more serious impact on low income workers, as it may bring them closer to the poverty line.

One way to reduce the impact of investment risk equally across workers, without differentiating by income levels, is to introduce investment performance guarantees, in particular minimum return guarantees. Such guarantees can come in different forms but their main objective is to provide a floor to the value of savings that an individual will accumulate at retirement for a given contribution record. Deferred, indexed annuities provide an even stronger form of protection than minimum return guarantees as they ensure that the level of retirement income does not fall below a certain value throughout the retirement period. However, the cost of deferred annuities is higher than that of the minimum return guarantee embedded in those products as they also protect against longevity risk.

### ***2.1. Public pension automatic stabilisers and old-age safety nets***

The overall impact of investment risk on retirement income depends on the automatic stabilisers and anti-poverty safety nets built into countries' pension systems. Most countries have provisions that help prevent retirees from falling into poverty in their old age, which may buffer the impact of investment losses on retirement income for some people. Resource-tested benefits and taxes may act as "automatic stabilisers" by reducing the full brunt of the effect of investment risk on retirement income.

Resource-tested schemes in public retirement income programmes interact with the value of private pensions providing an automatic stabiliser for net retirement incomes. Most public retirement-income programmes – basic pensions and earnings-related schemes – will pay the same benefit regardless of the outcome for private pensions --, but not so for many resource-tested schemes. In Australia, Chile and Denmark, for example, most current retirees receive resource-tested benefits. The value of these entitlements increases as private pensions deliver lower returns, protecting much of the incomes of low- and middle-earners. The withdrawal rate of the benefit against other income sources is currently 40% in Australia and 30% in Chile and Denmark. In Australia, for example, each extra dollar of private pensions results in a 40 cent reduction in public pension. Conversely, a dollar less in private pensions results in 60 cents more from the public pension. More than 75% of older people in Australia and around 65% in Denmark receive at least some benefit from resource-tested schemes. In Chile, the scheme introduced in 2008 is being rolled gradually and is expected to cover 60% of older people by 2012. The proportion of older people receiving such resource-tested schemes is also relatively high in Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom (20-35%). Low earners will have their overall pensions protected by resource-tested programmes. In all these cases, public retirement-income programmes act as "automatic stabilisers", meaning that some or most retirees do not bear the full brunt of the effect of the financial crisis on their income in old age.

However, not all resource-tested schemes use incomes from private pensions in calculating entitlements. The value of the guarantee pension in Sweden, for example, currently received by more than half of retirees, depends only on the value of the public, earnings-related scheme (which has a notional-accounts formula). Losses in private pension savings are thus not compensated for Swedish pensioners.

A second automatic stabiliser of net retirement incomes, faced with investment risk, comes through the personal income tax.<sup>3</sup> In most OECD countries, pensions in payment are taxable. An average earner could expect to pay about 30% of his or her pension in tax in Denmark and Sweden. In Belgium, Germany and Norway, the average earner would pay about 20% of retirement income in taxes and this figure is around 15% in Hungary and Poland. If investment returns turn out to be poor, then governments will collect less in taxes on pensions. The result is that individuals' net retirement incomes will fall by less than the decline in pension funds' asset values.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, pensions are not taxable in Hungary and the Slovak Republic which raises the relative position of pensioners relative to workers but eliminates the possibility of using the tax system as an automatic stabiliser of retirement incomes. The compensating effect of the tax system is also very limited in countries such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom where the effect of special credits, allowances and reliefs for pension income or for older people mean that only retirees with very large incomes from voluntary pensions would pay much in income tax.

Putting these two effects – taxes and resource-tested benefits – together, automatic stabilisers have much the largest effect in Denmark, which is arguably the country where investment risk is lowest anyway, because of the minimum investment returns and guaranteed annuity conversion rates offered in such plans. The dampening effect on net retirement incomes is also substantial in Belgium, Poland and Sweden and is large in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The impact of these automatic stabilisers in reducing the variability of retirement income can be evaluated by calculating the pension benefits from the different sources for workers with different wages.<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 shows the projected replacement rates by different percentiles of the distribution of investment returns for workers with a full career, a portfolio of 50% domestic equities and 50% domestic government bonds, and OECD average mortality rates. In Australia, the defined-contribution pension is 2.3 times higher in the best rather than worst scenario for returns. Overall income, including means-tested benefit, varies by a factor of just 1.4. In Denmark, the ratio of total pension in the best and worst cases before taxes is 1.8 compared with 1.5 after taxes are taken into account. It is important to highlight that this difference decreases when considering after tax pensions. The tax system seems to smooth out the impact of market returns on retirement income. As shown in Figure 2, the impact of taxes is also noticeable in Poland, but pensions in Hungary are not taxed and so there is no automatic stabiliser of retirement incomes.

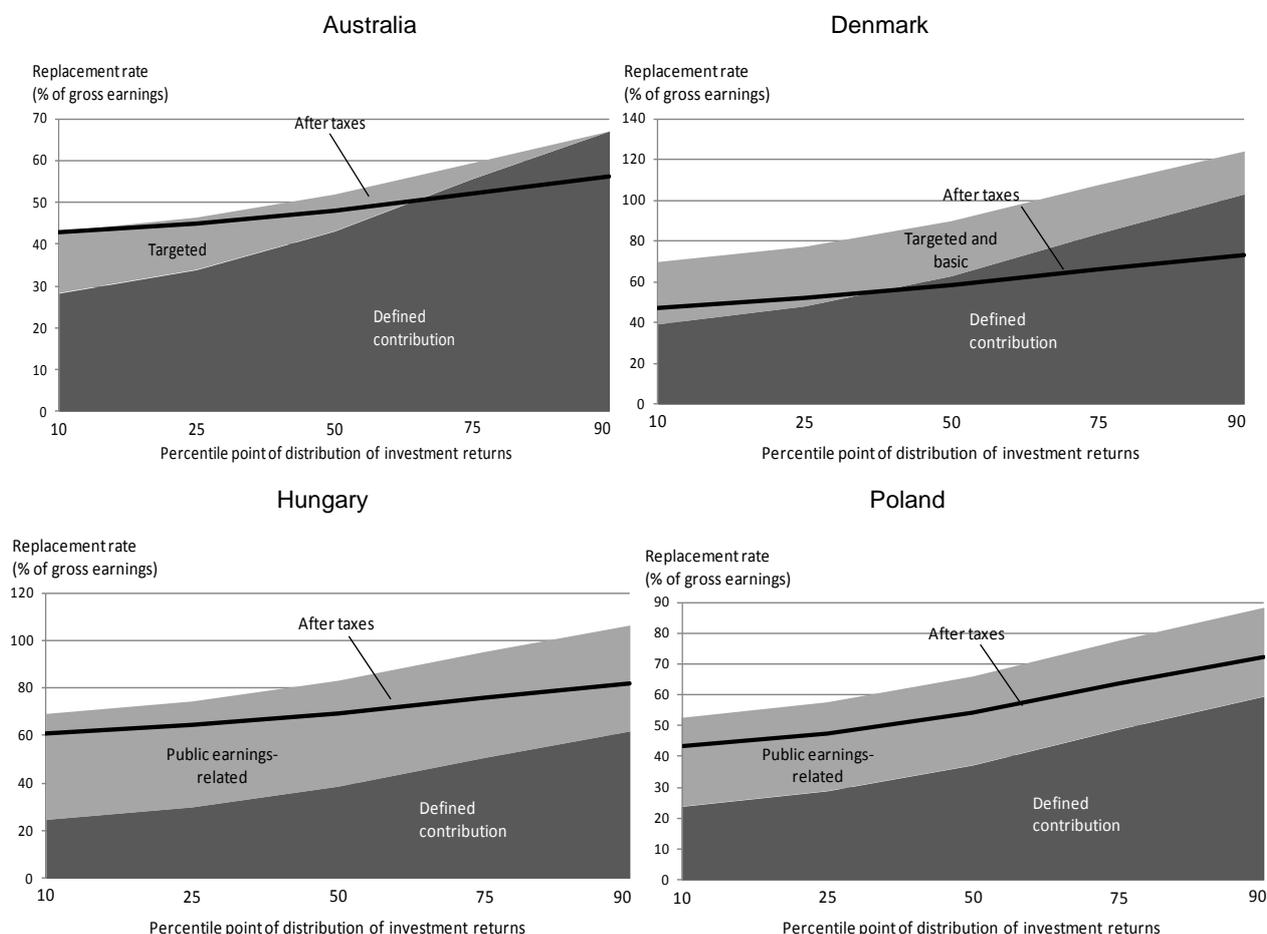
---

<sup>3</sup> See Keenay and Whitehouse (2003a and b) for analysis of the role of the tax system in old-age support. It is important to note also that the stabilising effect of the tax system does not occur in taxation systems under which pension contributions, but not distributions, are taxed (TEE).

<sup>4</sup> Whitehouse *et al.* (2009), Table 4, provides detailed data. This paper also analyses the impact of taxes on net retirement incomes with different investment returns.

<sup>5</sup> For the calculation method, see Whitehouse, E.R., A.C. D'Addio and A.P. Reilly (2009), "Investment Risk and Pensions: Impact on Individual Retirement Incomes and Government Budgets", Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper No. 87, OECD

**Figure 2. Gross pension replacement rate and taxes and contributions paid on pensions with different rates of investment return**



Source: Pensions at a Glance (2011).

## 2.2. Investment return guarantees

Investment return guarantees establish either a floor to the rate of return on pension contributions or a minimum that must be obtained beyond which an additional return may be offered. Guaranteed returns may be mandatory or offered on a voluntary basis by pension plan sponsors and providers. When return guarantees are offered by companies that sponsor DC plans, the plans inherently take on DB-features. This is the case for example of so-called cash balance plans in countries like Japan and the United States. Investment return guarantees also used to be common features in savings products sold by life insurance companies, where the insurer underwrites the guarantee.

The main characteristics of return guarantees are the following:

- Whether it is a fixed or a minimum return.
- Their level, and whether it is set on nominal or real terms
- The period over which they apply
- The extent to which they may be reset during the application period

The level of return guarantees is clearly one of its most important features, as it determines the minimum value of the accumulated savings at retirement. In this regard, one may distinguish between absolute return guarantees – which are set against a pre-specified return (e.g. 2 percent annually), and relative return guarantees – which are set in relation to a market benchmark, a synthetic investment portfolio or the average performance of pension funds in the industry. Only absolute return guarantees pre-determine the minimum value of the accumulated savings. The minimum value of accumulated savings under a relative guarantee will vary with market performance.

Pension legislation in some OECD countries requires DC pension plan providers (or sponsors) to offer an absolute rate of return guarantees:<sup>6</sup>

- In the **Czech Republic**, pension fund managers must guarantee the nominal value of contributions made by plan members every year. Contributions cannot receive a negative rate of return in a single year.
- In **Japan**, since 2001 defined contribution plans must provide at least one capital guaranteed product (guarantee of principal) among their investment alternatives.
- In the **Slovak Republic**, since 2009 pension fund management companies are required to guarantee a zero percent rate of return every six months. They are responsible for making up the difference if they do not achieve the minimum return. If rate of return is exceeded, they can charge a management fee on the investment earnings.
- In **Switzerland**, pension funds (which operate the mandatory system - law BVG/LPP) must currently meet a minimum return threshold of 2 percent, having started at 4 percent when the system was set up in 1985. The minimum return has been changed over the past decade to reflect market conditions. It was cut to 3.25 percent in 2003 and to 2.25 percent in 2004. It was raised to 2.5 percent in 2005 and 2.75 percent in 2008, and then lowered in January 2009 to 2 percent. It is intended that in future the minimum interest rate will become a floating rate linked to the average market yield on seven-year Swiss government debt. The minimum return is applied when calculating a workers' accumulated fund when they switch plans and at retirement. The minimum return can be (and usually is) the actual return credited to members' accounts. The annuity conversion rate is also fixed by law and was lowered recently to 6.4%.

Absolute return guarantees also apply by law in Belgium and Germany but as they are the responsibility of sponsoring employers, the plans are treated as DB under both the law and international accounting standards (IAS19):

- Occupational pension plans in **Belgium** must since January 2004 (as a result of the Vandebroucke Law) provide an annual minimum return of 3.75 percent on employees' contributions and 3.25 percent on their own contributions. This minimum return must be used when calculating the entitlements of workers that change plans. The actual market return must be applied if this is higher than the minimum guaranteed return. The employers that sponsor the plan are by law responsible for this engagement.

---

<sup>6</sup> For a review of these guarantees, see Turner, J. A. and Rajnes, D. M., 2003, "Retirement guarantees in Voluntary Defined Contribution Systems", in *The Pension Challenge*, Olivia S. Mitchell and Kent Smetters, eds., Oxford University Press and Turner, J. A. and Rajnes, D. M., "Pension Rate of Return Guarantees in a Market Meltdown", mimeo, Pension Policy Center and Social Security Administration, paper presented at the CeRP 10th Anniversary Conference (<http://cerp.unito.it/index.php/it/eventi/conferenze/629-conferenza-annuale-cerp>).

- The new **German** pension plans introduced under the Riester reform in 2001 must guarantee a minimum rate of return of 0 per cent in nominal terms, hence ensuring the protection of the nominal capital invested. The minimum return must be met on the accumulated savings at retirement. If a member switches plan provider during the accumulation phase, he or she gets from the new provider a guarantee on the cash value in the account at the time of transfer plus any new contributions. Employers are by law responsible for meeting this guarantee in the case of Riester pensions offered as part of an occupational pension plan. Most Riester pensions, though, are sold directly by pension providers to individuals (personal pension plans). *Pensionskassen* (a type of pension fund) must also guarantee at retirement date the contributions plus interest compounded at a fixed rate, currently set by law to at least 2.25% per annum. Every year, plan members accumulate either this guaranteed minimum return on previous contributions or 90% of the fund's annual return, if higher. The guarantee is ultimately backed by the plan sponsor.

There are also some OECD countries where pension funds must meet a relative return guarantee, defined in relation to the industry average or some market benchmark:

- In **Chile**, pension fund managers must ensure that returns fall within a band that is defined differently depending on the type of fund chosen by the member. For the funds with the lower equity exposure (C, D and E) the band is defined as the greater of 2 percentage points below the weighted-average real rate of return over the previous thirty-six months and 50% of the weighted-average real return. For the funds with the higher equity exposure (A and B), it is defined as the greater of 2 percentage points below the weighted-average real rate of return over the previous thirty-six months and 50% of the weighted-average return. The rate of return regulation has changed various times since the establishment of the system.
- In **Denmark**, ATP, the operator of a nationwide, mandatory DC plan, must provide a minimum return guarantee of member's contributions. However, ATP itself fixes the level of the guarantee. It used to be set in absolute terms, but in 2009 they changed to a relative return guarantee, where the minimum is reset regularly in line with long-term interest rates.
- In **Hungary**, mandatory pension funds must ensure that the investment return is not less than 15 percent less than the yield on Hungarian government bonds.
- In **Poland**, pension fund managers must ensure that returns fall within a band that is defined as the greatest of 4 percentage points below the weighted-average real rate of return over the previous twelve months and 50% of the weighted-average return.
- In **Slovenia**, DC plan providers must meet a minimum return that is defined as 40% of the average annual interest on Slovenian government bonds.

### 3. Costs and benefits of minimum return guarantees in DC pension plans

The objective of this section is to compare structurally the different return guarantees from a cost-benefit perspective. Previous analysis of a similar nature include Pennacchi (1998), Biggs et al (2006), Munnell et al. (2009), Grande and Visco (2010), and McCarthy (2009).<sup>7</sup> All these studies, with the

---

<sup>7</sup> Pennacchi, G. Government Guarantees on Pension Fund Returns, World Bank Social Protection Discussion Paper 9806, April 1998. Biggs, A. Burdick, C. and Smetters, K. "Pricing Personal Account Benefit Guarantees: A Simplified Approach", mimeo, December 2006. Munnell, A.H., Golub-Sass, A., Kopcke, R.A., Webb, A., What does it cost to guarantee returns?, Number 9-4, February 2009, Center for Retirement Research and Grande, G., Visco, I., A public guarantee of a minimum return to defined contribution pension scheme

exception of McCarthy (2009), focus only on the cost of providing guarantees. Pennacchi (1998) and McCarthy (2009) use an analytical solution (Black-Scholes option pricing formula) to calculate the cost of return guarantees. The other three papers, on the other hand, are in line with the methodology used in this section as they are based on a stochastic approach (Monte Carlo simulation).

Munnell et al. (2009) also investigate the question of guarantees in the United States from a historical and a prospective context. They calculate how much members' DC accounts would have had to be compensated to meet different levels of guarantees. Based on historical data and an all-US equities portfolio, they find that, no group turning 65 in the 84 years till 2008 would have seen a lifetime return of less than 3.8 percent, assuming they had contributed for 43 years. Hence any guarantee would have to be above this level to have made any difference to the final pension that members would have received from their DC account.

Grande and Visco (2010) consider a compulsory government guarantee of a minimum return to defined contribution pension scheme members. For a life cycle strategy, they calculate the cost of the 0% nominal return guarantee (capital protection) as less than 0.1% of the assets invested, while the guarantee of a return equal to the economy's nominal growth rate would have a cost of 0.93% to 1.20% depending on the period of investment.

McCarthy (2009) values return guarantees from the perspective of a utility-maximising life cycle investor. He finds that rational demand for investment guarantees in retirement accounts is small if guarantees are fairly priced. However, he considers only 5-year rolling return guarantees, which are generally more costly - and hence less appealing - than guarantees calculated over the longer contribution period typical of DC pension plans (twenty to forty years).

The analysis in this section first examines the cost of different types of minimum return guarantees (MRG) for DC pension plans, depending on the guaranteed level (0%, 2% or 4%), the design of the guarantee (floating or fixed minimum return, valid at retirement only or in every period) and the structure of the fees (paid annually or at the end of the accumulation period). The analysis also looks at the cost of different MRG for different contribution periods, 20 and 40 years. In theory, one would expect guarantees to be more expensive the shorter the guaranteed period is.

In addition to the price a guarantee provider would charge the individuals for each guarantee, the analysis also considers two other measures of costs: the total amount of fees paid by the individual throughout the accumulation period and the total cost, which also includes the compound loss of not having invested all contributions as annual fees are paid out of contributions.

Afterwards, the analysis looks at the impact of different types of guarantees on retirement income outcomes. The report assesses the probability that each guarantee would be exercised, the probability that the individual would have been better off with a guaranteed portfolio than with a portfolio not guaranteed, and at the distribution of replacement rates. Sensitivity analyses are also conducted by changing some of the parameters of the model and looking at specific market scenarios.

### ***3.1. Types of guarantees considered***

This section discusses the characteristics of minimum return guarantees in the context of retirement income protection from DC pension plans. It first describes the different types of guarantees analysed, which can be found in different countries or are currently discussed for DC plans. The report distinguishes six kinds of guarantees for which the structure of the fees is identical, i.e. fees are paid and calculated

---

members, Temi di discussione, Number 762, June 2010, Banca d'Italia. McCarthy, D. Shaping returns in DC pension accounts: examining rate-of-return guarantees, mimeo, July 2009.

annually, as a percentage of the accumulated net assets value<sup>8</sup> or as a percentage of every contribution paid. They differ according to the guaranteed level (0% nominal, 0% real, 2% nominal or 4% nominal) and the design of the guarantee (floating or fixed minimum return, valid at retirement only or in every period). For one of the guarantees, two additional structures of fees are analysed. Fees can be calculated as a haircut on the potential surplus, calculated annually or at the end of the accumulation period. The potential surplus in one period is defined as the difference between the amount of assets accumulated in the portfolio until that period and the amount of assets that would have been accumulated for the same period in a portfolio with a return equal to the guaranteed level (if the difference is negative, the surplus is null). Secondly, this section explains the approach used to determine the cost of different guarantees and to assess their impact on retirement income.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the minimum return guarantees analysed.<sup>9</sup> The first column describes the characteristics of a capital guarantee as proposed by German pension funds, in which the lump sum at retirement equals at least the nominal sum of contributions made. The minimum return guarantee of 0% nominal is valid at retirement only. If the lump sum at the end of the accumulation period is above the guaranteed lump sum (in this case, the nominal sum of contributions), the surplus (i.e. the difference between the two lump sums) is fully transferred to the individual. Each year, the individual is charged an annual fee paid out of contributions or of accumulated net assets (the analysis calculates the fee in both cases).

The second guarantee provides a minimum return of 2% nominal. Except for the guaranteed level, this 2% guarantee is comparable in every respect to the capital guarantee: the guarantee is only valid at retirement, the minimum return is fixed throughout the accumulation period, the surplus is fully transferred to the individual and the fee is paid annually. It is similar to what can be found in Switzerland, where the minimum rate of return for mandatory occupational pensions equals 2%.

The third guarantee examined protects the capital from inflation. The lump sum at retirement equals at least the sum of contributions in real terms. This inflation-indexed capital guarantee provides a minimum return of 0% in real terms.

The report also examines a capital guarantee that holds during the whole savings phase and not only at retirement. This ongoing capital guarantee is similar to the capital guarantee above, but requires that at each point of time (i.e. on an annual basis) the accumulated assets equal at least the nominal sum of contributions made until then. This kind of guarantee exists in the Czech Republic.

For the fifth guarantee examined, the guaranteed rate of return is not fixed along the savings phase. This floating guarantee depends on the development of the 1-year interest rate until retirement. The current 1-year interest rate is assigned to each annual contribution made and is valid until retirement so that, at each point of time, there is a different minimum return. This is similar to the ATP system in Denmark, where most of the contributions (80%) are guaranteed based on the rates the ATP can obtain in the market when contributions are paid.

Finally, the report compares three guarantees that provide the same minimum return of 4% nominal, but differ in respect to the structure of the fees. The 4% guarantee with annual fees is comparable to the previous types of guarantees: the individuals are charged an annual fee paid out of contributions or of accumulated net assets. For the two others, the individuals are charged a fee only if the portfolio provides a surplus, i.e. only if the amount of assets accumulated in the portfolio is above the amount of assets that

---

<sup>8</sup> The accumulated net asset value corresponds to the value of assets accumulated, net of the fees paid in previous periods.

<sup>9</sup> A formal description of the guarantees analysed is provided in the annex. More details can be found in the accompanying technical paper.

would have been accumulated in a portfolio with a 4% nominal return. For the 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut, the fee is calculated as a haircut on the annual potential surplus, while for the 4% guarantee with final haircut, the fee is only paid at the end of the accumulation period and corresponds to a haircut on the final potential surplus. For these two guarantees therefore, the surplus is not fully transferred to the individual; instead a haircut is applied to the surplus to calculate the fee.

**Table 1. Description of the minimum return guarantees analysed**

|                    | Capital guarantee | 2% guarantee  | Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | Ongoing capital guarantee | Floating guarantee   | 4% guarantee     |                      |                    |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
|                    |                   |               |                                     |                           |                      | With annual fees | With ongoing haircut | With final haircut |
| Guaranteed level   | Nominal 0%        | Nominal 2%    | Real 0%                             | Nominal 0%                | 1-year interest rate | Nominal 4%       | Nominal 4%           | Nominal 4%         |
| Guarantee applies  | At retirement     | At retirement | At retirement                       | Ongoing                   | At retirement        | At retirement    | At retirement        | At retirement      |
| Fixed vs. floating | Fixed             | Fixed         | Fixed                               | Fixed                     | Floating             | Fixed            | Fixed                | Fixed              |
| Surplus            | All               | All           | All                                 | All                       | All                  | All              | Haircut              | Haircut            |
| Charge             | Annual fee        | Annual fee    | Annual fee                          | Annual fee                | Annual fee           | Annual fee       | Annual haircut       | Final haircut      |

The guarantees in which the fee is charged as a haircut on the potential surplus are not implemented yet in any DC pension plan around the world. However, insurance companies and mutual funds already use this approach to charge fees. It may create a strong incentive for the guarantee provider to achieve high returns as he is paid only if the actual return on the portfolio is higher than the guaranteed level, only if the provider and the asset manager coincide in a same entity and they do not hedge that risk.<sup>10</sup> The approach using the final haircut may be difficult to implement in the context of pension plans as the guarantee provider has to wait until the end of the accumulation period before receiving a payment. Furthermore, solvency capital issues arise with this approach. These issues are however out of the scope of this study, which focuses on the impact of such types of guarantees on retirement income outcomes.

The report first sets a price for each type of guarantee using a stochastic financial market model. In this model, the guarantee provider is neutral, meaning that the present value of the expected future guarantee fees equals the present value of the expected future guarantee claims. The guarantee claims are calculated by valuing the guarantee as a financial derivative in a financial market framework (like e.g. the valuation of a put option). This can be achieved assuming that the guarantee provider hedges himself using a synthetic portfolio.<sup>11</sup> Market-consistent scenarios of a 40 years horizon are generated by an appropriate stochastic financial market model using 10,000 Monte-Carlo simulations of different asset returns and inflation. The model is consistent with market prices of derivatives like equity futures, equity options, or swaptions. The value of the guarantee is the average of the present value of guarantee fees, or claims, over all scenarios. This pricing model abstracts from administrative costs as well as solvency rules and related regulations. In real life, fees would therefore be higher than the ones calculated in this model.

The price of each type of guarantee determined in the financial market model is then used to assess the impact of the different types of guarantees on retirement income. The model assumes that the guarantee provider applies this price to every single individual whatever the realisation of the world.<sup>12</sup> If the price is

<sup>10</sup> When the guarantee provider is not the same than the asset manager, there may not be any incentive for the asset manager to create higher return. Moreover, it may be the case that the guarantee provider hedges capital market fluctuations. In this case, the provider would not have any incentive as higher returns would not translate into higher benefits, they are hedged against losses and gains.

<sup>11</sup> A simple numerical example is provided in the Annex. More details can be found in the accompanying technical paper.

<sup>12</sup> The model assumes a representative individual of a cohort entering the model at age 25 under generic conditions regarding equity returns, interest rates term structure and inflation (e.g. the initial 1-year interest rate equals 3.9%). This means that the initial point at age 25 is identical for every Monte-Carlo simulation. Thereafter, between age 26 and 65, each of the 10,000 simulations has a different realisation of equity returns, interest rates term structure and inflation. The identical starting point may constrain the scenarios and limit the variability of the outcomes. This issue is partly addressed in the sensitivity analysis.

determined so that the guarantee provider is neutral, different realisations of the world and different structures of fees may imply different retirement income outcomes for the individuals. The model therefore produces 10,000 new stochastic simulations of the savings accumulated at retirement given stochastic simulations of investment returns for different asset classes and inflation.

The model assumes a generic capital market model, described in detail in an accompanying technical paper. In particular, the interest rate term structure is upward sloping ranging from 3.5% to 5.5%, the expected inflation is about 2%, the equity risk premium is set at 3% and the equity volatility is about 20%. The lump sum accumulated at retirement is the result of people contributing 10% of wages each year to their DC plan for forty years, with wages growing from an initial wage of 10,000 currency units by 3.782% on average annually, according to a stochastic inflation rate with median 2% and a career-productivity factor depending on the age of the employee.

Contributions to DC plans are invested in a life-cycle investment strategy with a constant exposure to equities of 80% between age 25 and 55 that decreases linearly during the last 10 years to 20%. The model calculates the lump sum obtained in case of a guarantee and in case of no guarantee. The guarantee implies the payment of a fee, which can be deducted, depending on the structure of the fee, either annually from the accumulated net asset value,<sup>13</sup> annually from the potential surplus, or at the end of the accumulation period from the final potential surplus, using the price determined in the financial market model. At retirement, set at age 65, the assets accumulated are used to buy a fixed life annuity.

### **3.2. What is the cost of different guarantees?**

This section discusses the cost of the different types of guarantees. Table 2 first shows the price of the guarantee fee according to the kind of guarantee and to the structure of the fees.

The price of the guarantee increases when the guaranteed level increases. When the individual is charged an annual fee, the higher is the guaranteed level, the higher is the price. It applies both when the fee is calculated as a percentage of the accumulated net asset value or as a percentage of every contribution paid. Thus, it is cheaper to guarantee the capital than any other level. To buy this guarantee, the individual has only to pay, each year, 0.06% of the accumulated net asset value or 1.24% of the contributions made. If the individual wants also to protect the capital from inflation, the annual fee increases significantly, from 6 to 24 basis points of the accumulated net asset value. The more expensive guarantees are the 4% guarantee and the floating guarantee. For instance, as much as 26% of the contributions need to be paid each year for the floating guarantee. The price is higher for higher guaranteed level as the guarantee provider has to compensate for higher guarantee claims.

Table 2 also shows that the price of the guarantee also depends on the design of the guarantee. Indeed, the capital guarantee is more expensive when it holds over the whole accumulation phase than when it is only valid at retirement. The price of the fee increases by 33 basis points (as a percentage of the accumulated net asset value) with the ongoing guarantee. Additionally, the floating guarantee is more expensive than the fixed 4% guarantee:<sup>14</sup> there is a difference in the fee of 33 basis points between the two if the fee is deducted from the accumulated net asset value. This is due to the fact that the interest rate term structure has a positive slope in most of the Monte-Carlo simulations of the financial market model and starts at the rate of 3.9% for a 1 year maturity for all simulations. Therefore, the floating guarantee

---

<sup>13</sup> The financial market model analyses two different types of annual fees: an annual payment calculated as a percentage of the accumulated net asset value of all contributions and an annual payment calculated as a percentage of every contribution paid (see the annex). To assess the impact of different types of guarantees, only the first type of payment is used.

<sup>14</sup> The floating guarantee is compared to the 4% guarantee as the initial return under the floating guarantee is equal to 3.9%, which is similar to the fixed 4% return.

eventually guarantees more than 4% on average over the whole accumulation period in most of the simulations, leading to a higher price as compared to a fixed 4% guarantee. The sensitivity analysis below shows that the results change if the interest rate term structure is shifted downwards.

**Table 2. Price of guarantees by type of guarantee and by approach considered to pay the guarantee fee**

|                      | Capital guarantee | 2% guarantee | Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | Ongoing capital guarantee | 4% guarantee with annual fees | Floating guarantee | 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut | 4% guarantee with final haircut |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| % of net asset value | 0.06%             | 0.22%        | 0.24%                               | 0.39%                     | 0.89%                         | 1.22%              | -                                 | -                               |
| % of contributions   | 1.24%             | 4.94%        | 5.58%                               | 18.36%                    | 18.71%                        | 26.09%             | -                                 | -                               |
| % of surplus         | -                 | -            | -                                   | -                         | -                             | -                  | 1.60%                             | -                               |
| % of final surplus   | -                 | -            | -                                   | -                         | -                             | -                  | -                                 | 24.06%                          |

In order to compare the different structures of fees, two standard cost measures are calculated. The first one corresponds to the sum of all guarantee fees paid (indexed to inflation) expressed as a percentage of the lump sum accumulated at 65 obtained in case of no guarantee. The second cost measure corresponds to the percentage loss in the lump sum accumulated at 65 obtained in case of a guarantee as compared to obtained in case of no guarantee.<sup>15</sup> For both cost measures, Table 3 shows the median value of all scenarios.

**Table 3. Median cost of the guarantee by type**

|   | Capital guarantee | 2% guarantee | Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | Ongoing capital guarantee | 4% guarantee with annual fees | Floating guarantee | 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut | 4% guarantee with final haircut |
|---|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Sum of fees paid as a % of the lump sum at 65 in case of no guarantee           | 0.86%             | 3.33%        | 3.67%                               | 6.08%                     | 12.20%                        | 15.96%             | 5.74%                             | 7.67%                           |
| % loss in the lump sum at 65 in case of a guarantee as compared to no guarantee | 1.28%             | 4.98%        | 5.49%                               | 7.14%                     | 18.30%                        | 23.81%             | 6.99%                             | 7.67%                           |

Using the first measure of cost, the cheapest guarantee remains the capital guarantee. The discounted sum of fees paid represents 0.9% of the lump sum at 65 obtained in case of no guarantee. The more expensive guarantee is the floating guarantee: the discounted sum of fees paid represents 16% of the assets accumulated at 65 obtained in case of no guarantee.

For the same level of guarantee, the median total cost depends on the structure of fees. Indeed, when the fee of the 4% guarantee is paid annually, the median total cost is significantly higher and represents 12% of the lump sum obtained in case of no guarantee, as compared to 6% when the fee is paid as a haircut on the potential annual surplus and 8% when the fee is paid as a haircut on the potential final surplus. The guarantee is less expensive on average when the fee is paid in the form of a haircut on the potential surplus because in case the surplus is null, the individual is not charged any fee, and because of the opportunity cost as fees are mostly paid towards the end.<sup>16</sup> However, the dispersion is higher when considering guarantees using a haircut: for instance, the cost at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile is the same when fees are paid

<sup>15</sup> It corresponds therefore to the difference between the lump sum accumulated at 65 obtained in case of no guarantee and the lump sum accumulated at 65 obtained in case of a guarantee, expressed as a percentage of the lump sum accumulated at 65 obtained in case of no guarantee.

<sup>16</sup> This would not have been necessarily the case if the two additional structures of fees (as a haircut on annual or final surplus) had been applied to a lower guaranteed level. For instance, the number of cases in which the surplus is null would be much lower if only the capital were to be guaranteed, leading to higher costs for guarantees using a haircut.

annually and when fees are paid at the end of the accumulation period (17.5% of the lump sum obtained in case of no guarantee).

Both guarantees using a haircut share the same weakness regarding solvency capital issues. The main weakness of the 4% guarantee with final haircut is that the guarantee provider has to wait until the end of the accumulation period before receiving any payment from the pension plan member. He therefore needs to do reserves (the related cost is not included in this study). Charging fees on the potential annual surplus (instead of final surplus) only partially solves this issue, as in more than 25% of the cases the individual does not pay any fee during the first 36 years of the contribution period. The more significant part of the payments is done at the end of the accumulation period, when the surplus is potentially high. This is the reason why the costs associated with both guarantees using a haircut are close to each other, as compared to the cost of the guarantee with annual fees.

When the compound loss on contributions resulting from the annual fee payment is taken into account, the total cost of the guarantees can increase significantly. The second cost measure includes another component, which is the compound loss on contributions as a result of annual fee payments. Indeed, when annual fee payments are required, the part of the contributions that is used to pay the annual fee is not invested and does not produce any return. This implied cost does not exist when the fee is paid at the end of the accumulation period, as a haircut on the potential final surplus. In that case, the full contributions are invested, which allows a higher lump sum at 65 (before the payment of the fee). This is the reason why the 4% guarantee with final haircut has the same median total cost with both measures of cost (7.67% of the lump sum at 65 obtained in case of no guarantee). For the other types of guarantees, in which fees are paid annually, the total cost is higher with the second measure. While the difference between the two costs measures varies between 0.4 and 1.8 percentage points for most guarantees, it is much more important for the 4% guarantee with annual fees (+ 6.1 percentage points) and the floating guarantee (+ 7.8 percentage points). This is because the fees paid represent a higher share of the accumulated net asset value each year for these two guarantees. Therefore, the part of the cost represented by the compound loss on contributions is more important.

#### *Sensitivity analysis*

The sensitivity of the price of the guarantees is assessed by changing model assumptions at the starting point (i.e. at age 25) regarding the volatility term structure, the interest rate term structure and the inflation term structure.<sup>17</sup> In particular, Table 4 shows that a shift of -1% of the interest rate term structure increases significantly the price of all guarantees, except the floating guarantee. Under such assumptions, the price of the floating guarantee is lower than the one of the 4% guarantee with annual fees: the individual is charged 1.24% of the accumulated net asset value each year for the floating guarantee and 1.80% for the 4% guarantee. In addition, Table 4 also shows that a shift of +10% of the volatility term structure makes the capital guarantee even more appealing, as the gap between its price and the price of the other guarantees increases. For instance, the difference between the price of the 2% guarantee and the capital guarantee represents 16 basis points for the baseline model and 24 basis points when the volatility term structure is shifted by +10%.

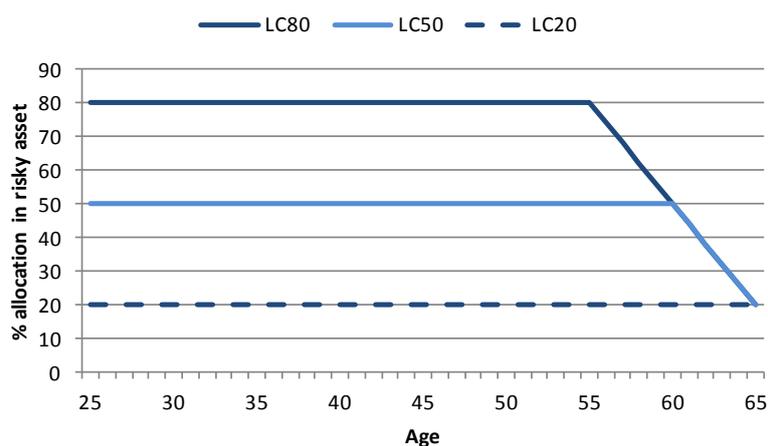
**Table 4. Impact of a shift of the term structures of interest rate and volatility on the price of guarantees**

|   | % of accumulated net asset value |              |                                     |                           |                               |                    | % of annual surplus               | % of final surplus              |
|---|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|   | Capital guarantee                | 2% guarantee | Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | Ongoing capital guarantee | 4% guarantee with annual fees | Floating guarantee | 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut | 4% guarantee with final haircut |
| Baseline  | 0.06%                            | 0.22%        | 0.24%                               | 0.39%                     | 0.89%                         | 1.22%              | 1.60%                             | 24.06%                          |
| Parallel shift of -1% of interest rate term structure | 0.11%                            | 0.42%        | 0.47%                               | 0.54%                     | 1.80%                         | 1.24%              | 3.78%                             | 45.38%                          |
| Parallel shift of +10% of volatility term structure   | 0.11%                            | 0.35%        | 0.38%                               | 0.54%                     | 1.15%                         | 1.70%              | 1.77%                             | 28.04%                          |

<sup>17</sup> The full results of the sensitivity analysis can be found in the accompanying technical paper.

The analysis also shows that the life cycle investment strategy in which assets are invested during the accumulation phase has an impact on the price of guarantees. Three different life cycle investment strategies are analysed, in which the exposure to equities starts with 80%, 50% or 20% respectively (see Figure 1). As shown in Table 5, if the guaranteed portfolio is invested in a strategy with a lower starting exposure to equities, the price of all guarantees is lower, except for the 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut. Additionally, it shows that the ongoing guarantee becomes less expensive than the 2% guarantee and the inflation-indexed capital guarantee when the investment strategy is less exposed to equities.

**Figure 3. Shapes of the different life cycle investment strategies analysed (LC80, LC50, LC20)**



Note: "LC80" represents the life cycle investment strategy that keeps a constant exposure in equities of 80% from age 25 to 55 and decreases thereafter linearly this exposure to 20%. "LC50" represents the life cycle strategy that keeps a constant exposure in equities of 50% from age 25 to 60 and decreases thereafter linearly this exposure to 20%. "LC20" represents an investment strategy with a fixed exposure in equities of 20%.

Finally, when the contribution period is shortened from 40 to 20 years, the price of all guarantees increases substantially. The lower is the contribution period the higher are the fees because the individual has less time to recover from potential market crashes in a 20 year period and therefore the probability that the guarantee would be exercised is much higher. Higher costs would also occur in systems where there are frequent payouts (e.g. where payouts are available, with guarantees, upon job changes, a change in investment option or a change in provider) even if contributions continue thereafter. The cost of guarantees may be prohibitive in such systems.

**Table 5. Impact of investment strategies and the length of the contribution period on the price of guarantees**

|                               | % of accumulated net asset value |              |                                     |                           |                               |                    | % of annual surplus               | % of final surplus              |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                               | Capital guarantee                | 2% guarantee | Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | Ongoing capital guarantee | 4% guarantee with annual fees | Floating guarantee | 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut | 4% guarantee with final haircut |
| Contribution period: 40 years |                                  |              |                                     |                           |                               |                    |                                   |                                 |
| LC 80                         | 0.06%                            | 0.22%        | 0.24%                               | 0.39%                     | 0.89%                         | 1.22%              | 1.60%                             | 24.06%                          |
| LC 50                         | 0.03%                            | 0.14%        | 0.15%                               | 0.15%                     | 0.71%                         | 0.90%              | 1.63%                             | 22.02%                          |
| LC 20                         | 0.01%                            | 0.06%        | 0.07%                               | 0.02%                     | 0.49%                         | 0.44%              | 1.57%                             | 18.87%                          |
| Contribution period: 20 years |                                  |              |                                     |                           |                               |                    |                                   |                                 |
| LC 80                         | 0.24%                            | 0.89%        | 0.84%                               | 0.91%                     | 4.04%                         | 3.32%              | 18.95%                            | 83.27%                          |

Note: "LC80" represents the life cycle investment strategy that keeps a constant exposure in equities of 80% from age 25 to 55 and decreases thereafter linearly this exposure to 20%. "LC50" represents the life cycle strategy that keeps a constant exposure in equities of 50% from age 25 to 60 and decreases thereafter linearly this exposure to 20%. "LC20" represents an investment strategy with a fixed exposure in equities of 20%.

The analysis so far has examined the cost of different types of minimum return guarantees for DC pension plans, depending on the guaranteed level (0%, 2% or 4%), the design of the guarantee (floating or fixed minimum return, valid at retirement only or in every period) and the structure of the fees (paid annually or at the end of the accumulation period). The remaining important question to address is to what point these guarantees are useful to protect retirement income from DC pension plans in a world of uncertainty about rates of return on investment and inflation. This issue is taken up in the next section.

### 3.3. What is the impact of different guarantees on retirement income outcomes?

This section looks at the impact of the type of guarantee on retirement income outcomes. Three different outcomes are considered: the probability that a guarantee would be exercised (i.e. the probability that the guarantee provider needs to pay the guaranteed benefit to the individual), the probability that the lump sum accumulated at 65 obtained in case of a guarantee is higher than the one obtained in case of no guarantee, and the replacement rate an individual would get after buying a fixed life annuity with the accumulated assets. The section ends with sensitivity analyses to assess the impact of different volatility, interest rate, and inflation term structures, different investment strategies and different contribution periods on replacement rates.

Individuals paying for a minimum return guarantee are buying an insurance that may be exercised in very few cases. As shown in Table 6, the capital guarantee would be exercised in only 0.5% of the cases, and would provide a higher lump sum accumulated at 65 than in case of no guarantee in only 0.5% of the cases also. Individuals paying for a capital guarantee therefore buy an insurance to protect themselves against extreme negative cases that are rare in which they would lose what they put in their DC pension plans. This applies also for the other guarantees, where the probability that the guarantee would be exercised is higher when the guaranteed level is higher (except for the ongoing capital guarantee that would be exercised in 83% of the cases at least once during the accumulation period). Additionally, the 4% guarantee is less often exercised when the fee is paid as a haircut on the potential surplus (either annual or final) because the cost associated with such structures of fees is lower.

**Table 6. Exercising of the guarantee and cases in which the guarantee provides a higher lump sum**

|                                     | % cases the guarantee is exercised | % cases better off with the guarantee |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Capital guarantee                   | 0.49                               | 0.48                                  |
| 2% guarantee                        | 5.75                               | 4.78                                  |
| Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | 6.48                               | 5.22                                  |
| Ongoing capital guarantee           | 83.45                              | 18.20                                 |
| 4% guarantee with annual fees       | 35.32                              | 21.26                                 |
| Floating guarantee                  | 40.33                              | 21.72                                 |
| 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut   | 23.09                              | 21.26                                 |
| 4% guarantee with final haircut     | 21.26                              | 21.26                                 |

The capital guarantee makes attractive for people to save in private pension systems. Indeed, the distribution of replacement rates by type of guarantee (see Table 7) shows that the median replacement rate and the replacement rate at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile are higher for the capital guarantee as compared to other types of guarantees. Replacement rates provided by the capital guarantee are however lower than the ones obtained in case of no guarantee in most of the cases, as individuals buy an insurance to protect themselves against extreme negative cases. Only the replacement rates at the 0.5<sup>th</sup> percentile are higher in case of a capital guarantee as compared to no guarantee. In those cases, the capital guarantee allows individuals not to lose what they put in their pension plan.

The analysis also shows that paying the fees as a haircut on the potential surplus allows protecting individuals from very low replacement rates without losing too much of the upside potential. These guarantees provide the best replacement rates at the 0.5<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> percentiles. In addition, they provide also high replacement rates at the median and at the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile, which are lower than those observed for low guaranteed level (capital guarantee and 2% guarantee for instance), but higher than those observed for similarly high guaranteed level (4% guarantee with annual fees and floating guarantee).

**Table 7. Probability distribution of replacement rates by type of guarantee**

|                                     | 0.5 <sup>th</sup> percentile | 5 <sup>th</sup> percentile | Median | 95 <sup>th</sup> percentile |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|
| No guarantee                        | 20.5                         | 30.0                       | 68.4   | 184.2                       |
| Capital guarantee                   | 20.8                         | 29.7                       | 67.5   | 181.5                       |
| 2% guarantee                        | 25.5                         | 30.8                       | 65.0   | 173.5                       |
| Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | 27.0                         | 30.9                       | 64.6   | 172.4                       |
| Ongoing capital guarantee           | 22.9                         | 30.8                       | 64.7   | 169.4                       |
| 4% guarantee with annual fees       | 34.2                         | 39.0                       | 56.8   | 145.0                       |
| Floating guarantee                  | 28.5                         | 33.5                       | 56.6   | 140.3                       |
| 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut   | 34.8                         | 40.1                       | 63.2   | 150.7                       |
| 4% guarantee with final haircut     | 34.8                         | 40.3                       | 63.2   | 152.4                       |

#### *Sensitivity analysis*

The report analyses the impact of the different types of guarantees on replacement rates under specific market stress scenarios. Each scenario analysed has a different real rate term structure and inflation level, but for all of them the equity return index is declining (these are therefore cases in which the guarantees may need to be exercised).<sup>18</sup> High inflation favours the guarantee that protects capital from inflation, as in scenarios where inflation is high, the inflation-indexed capital guarantee provides a higher replacement rate than the one provided by the 2% guarantee. Additionally, if the real rate term structure increases or is high during the whole accumulation period, the floating guarantee is the one providing the highest replacement rate.

The analysis also looks at the impact of the life cycle investment strategy in which assets are invested and of the length of the contribution period on retirement income outcomes. Table 8 shows that lower equity allocations decrease the number of cases in which the guarantee would be exercised, for all types of guarantees. Consequently, the number of cases in which the lump sum is higher with a guarantee than without is also lower for all types of guarantees. When the contribution period declines (e.g. from 40 to 20 years), the reverse situation is observed: the number cases in which the guarantee would be exercised increases and there are also more cases in which the individuals are better off with a guarantee than without. Moreover, the comparative advantage of the guarantees using a haircut on replacement rate is less important when the portfolio is less exposed to equities and when the contribution period is shortened. These guarantees still provide a higher protection for worst case scenarios in both situations, but the gap in the replacement rate at the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile with other types of guarantees is lower. For instance, lower equity allocations increase the replacement rates for worst case scenarios for all guarantees, except when the guaranteed level is 4%, because with such high guaranteed level, in all worst case scenarios (5<sup>th</sup> percentile) the guarantee would be exercised, whatever the equity allocation.

<sup>18</sup> For more details on the market stress scenarios, please refer to the accompanying technical paper.

**Table 8. Impact of the investment strategy and of the length of the contribution period on the probability that the guarantee would be exercised and on the replacement rate at the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile**

|                                     | Contribution period: 40 years      |  |                                    |  | Contribution period: 20 years      |  |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
|                                     | LC80                               |  | LC50                               |  | LC80                               |  |
|                                     | % cases the guarantee is exercised | Replacement rate at the 5 <sup>th</sup> percentile | % cases the guarantee is exercised | Replacement rate at the 5 <sup>th</sup> percentile | % cases the guarantee is exercised | Replacement rate at the 5 <sup>th</sup> percentile |
| No guarantee                        | -                                  | 30.0   | -                                  | 34.0   | -                                  | 10.6   |
| Capital guarantee                   | 0.49                               | 29.7   | 0.06                               | 33.8   | 0.99                               | 10.4   |
| 2% guarantee                        | 5.75                               | 30.8   | 2.12                               | 33.3   | 13.81                              | 10.6   |
| Inflation-indexed capital guarantee | 6.48                               | 30.9   | 2.56                               | 33.1   | 14.35                              | 10.7   |
| Ongoing guarantee                   | 83.45                              | 30.8   | 66.25                              | 33.6   | 82.85                              | 10.5   |
| 4% guarantee with annual fees       | 35.32                              | 39.0   | 30.41                              | 39.0   | 86.49                              | 11.7   |
| Floating guarantee                  | 40.33                              | 33.5   | 33.27                              | 34.1   | 76.98                              | 11.0   |
| 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut   | 23.09                              | 40.1   | 19.15                              | 40.2   | 39.93                              | 12.0   |
| 4% guarantee with final haircut     | 21.26                              | 40.3   | 17.21                              | 40.3   | 26.95                              | 12.0   |

Note: "LC80" represents the life cycle investment strategy that keeps a constant exposure in equities of 80% from age 25 to 55 and decreases thereafter linearly this exposure to 20%. "LC50" represents the life cycle strategy that keeps a constant exposure in equities of 50% from age 25 to 60 and decreases thereafter linearly this exposure to 20%.

### 3.4. Summary of cost-benefit analysis of return guarantees

This section has examined the cost of different minimum return guarantees and the impact of these guarantees on retirement income outcomes. The main conclusions from this section are the following:

- *The capital guarantee is the cheapest one to provide but also offers the least protection against investment risk*. Individuals willing to avoid losing the money they put in their DC pension plans (with a fixed life cycle type investment strategy starting with 80 percent of assets in equities) during the whole accumulation period (40 years) would only need to pay a fee equivalent to 6 basis points annually of the accumulated net asset value of the portfolio. As the guaranteed level is low, the probability that the guarantee would be exercised is also low, but in the worst case scenarios (with a probability of 0.5%), it would prevent the individuals from losing part of the money they put into the DC account. Even this low cost, however, represents approximately an additional 1 percent of contributions compared to the case where there are no guarantees. This cost, which can be interpreted as an insurance premium, is equivalent to a reduction in retirement income for the average investor. Higher guarantees are naturally costlier. For instance, the floating rate guarantee has a cost that represents about 16 percent of contributions before the application of the guarantee.
- *The price of the guarantee varies with the contribution period, the investment strategy and initial capital market conditions*. The cost of the guarantee is higher the shorter is the contribution period and the riskier is the investment strategy. Halving the contribution period to 20 years would quadruple the cost of the capital guarantee applied at retirement to 0.24 percent of assets. Reducing the allocation to equities from 80 percent to 50 percent would halve the cost to 0.03 percent of the assets managed in the DC account. These figures are also calculated on the basis of a specific, baseline financial market scenario. Changing the initial capital market conditions (e.g. parallel shifts in the interest rate term structure) would lead to higher cost estimates.
- *The compound loss on contributions can increase significantly the cost of a guarantee*. To guarantee a minimum rate of return on pension assets has a cost for the individual, who is actually buying an insurance against extreme negative scenarios. Traditionally, individuals have to pay an annual fee. These annual payments introduce however an additional cost, corresponding to the compound loss on contributions, as not all contributions are invested and produce returns. This cost can be high, especially for high guaranteed level for which fees are

more important. Changing the structure of the fees, by charging the individuals on the potential surplus at the end of the accumulation period is a way to eliminate this additional cost.

- *Changing the structure of the fees may be appropriate for high guaranteed level, but solvency capital issues still need to be addressed before implementing them.* When comparing three structures of fees for a 4% guarantee, the analysis shows that charging fees as a haircut on the potential surplus above the guaranteed level as compared to annually implies lower costs and higher replacement rates. However, using a haircut as designed in this study on the potential annual or final surplus also implies that the guarantee provider receives most or all of the payments at the end of the accumulation period. Related reserving costs have not been taken into account in this analysis and would need to be considered.

#### **4. Practical challenges of minimum return guarantees in DC plans**

The analysis in the previous section was based on a pension system with very specific (and generally restrictive) characteristics. The contribution rate and contribution period are fixed, the life-cycle investment strategy is preset and investors cannot switch pension provider. Under such conditions it is relatively easy to estimate the cost of the guarantee and the benefits in terms of protection from extreme downside investment risk. Such a situation may be most relevant for default funds in mandatory DC systems, where individuals are assigned to a given provider, life cycle strategy and contributions are mandatory up to a certain age.

To the extent that individuals can choose freely between pension providers and investment options and can vary their contribution levels and period, the calculation and operation of minimum return guarantees becomes rather complex if not practically impossible to manage in an efficient manner.

A second practical problem of guarantees is ensuring that the guarantor honours its promises, which requires careful design of capital and solvency regulations and an evaluation of the role of the state vis-à-vis the private sector in meeting what is ultimately a form of catastrophic or “tail-risk” insurance.

##### **4.1. Are return guarantees and individual choice compatible?**

If a provider does not know how the contributions will evolve over time, the guarantee price would need to be set for each contribution. The price will therefore increase over time as contributions made closer to retirement are invested over a shorter time period. While administrative feasible (if burdensome) and theoretically fair, such an age-based profile for the guarantee price may be considered discriminatory towards older plan members.

To the extent that members can switch pension provider, the question arises of whether the guarantee can be transferred to the new provider. In order to do so, some form of compensation mechanism between providers would be necessary, where the accumulated value of the guarantee fee paid by the member is transferred to the new provider. A simple approach would be the sum of the prior fees, with interest. But this ignores the risk factors applicable when the investment is transferred to the new provider: age (or other proxy for distribution) and surplus/deficit at the time of the transfer.

An easier solution that could be applied when a plan member switches provider is to cancel the existing guarantee, as in the German Riester pensions. Members however are then exposed to possible losses if there is a shortfall in the market value of the accumulated savings relative to the existing plan’s guaranteed value.

An alternative solution is used in Slovenia, where the guarantee is triggered when the member switches provider. This eliminates the need for a compensation mechanism and ensures protection of the accumulated savings at the original guaranteed value. However, it creates an incentive for members to

activate the guarantee at times of negative returns by switching provider. Providers would react to such behaviour by raising the cost of the guarantee, which may become prohibitively expensive. Making the guarantee ongoing (as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia) rather than applicable only at retirement would also solve the portability problem, but as was shown earlier would also raise the cost of the guarantee dramatically.

The return guarantees considered in this paper are also conditional on having a preset investment strategy. This allows the provider to calculate the risk of not achieving the minimum return over the contribution period considered. If members were allowed to switch investment strategy, the cost of the guarantee would automatically change. Furthermore, the new cost would be calculated for a guarantee applied over a shorter contribution period, which would raise it in relation to the original period. Allowing free individual choice in the presence of guarantees also introduces a form of moral hazard, as investors may choose riskier investment options in the knowledge that their downside risk is limited. This moral hazard effect, however, can be controlled by adjusting insurance premia upwards to compensate for the riskier investment strategies. Regulators could also set limits on exposures to riskier asset, such as equities, as is the case in countries such as Chile, Estonia, Mexico and Poland. Life cycle funds in the United States (such as target date funds) also have a predetermined maximum exposure to equities throughout the investment period that is established by the product provider.

To the extent that the provider of the guarantee controls to some extent the investment of the pension fund, the guarantor has a clear incentive to reduce as much as possible investment risk.<sup>19</sup> For instance, in Slovakia when the 0% guarantee was introduced after the financial crisis, the pension fund managers moved to more conservative investment strategies, with higher bond and bank deposit allocations. Part of their equity portfolio was sold, crystallising the losses suffered in 2008. Companies that sponsor DC plans with return guarantees also often control the underlying investments. This is for instance the case of cash balance plans in the United States, which are classified as DB for regulatory and accounting purposes. In the occupational pension systems in Belgium and Switzerland, the pension funds also usually control directly the investment strategy. Investment choice in Switzerland is only available in some pension funds and only for contributions above the required minimum.

#### **4.2 Who should provide the guarantee and how should providers be regulated?**

Investment performance guarantees were historically common in the savings products offered by life insurers in many OECD countries. Some of these contracts run for decades and are therefore similar to the type of guarantees considered in this report. Over the last decade, banks have also actively sold mutual funds with principal protection, though contracts rarely run for more than a few years. Hence, in principle, there are two main possible commercial providers for investment return guarantees, banks and insurers. Other possible private providers of such guarantees are pension funds (and hence members, in a mutuality context) and sponsoring employers (as in cash balance plans).

In order to ensure that guarantee providers honour their promises, regulations usually set capital adequacy rules (in the case of banks) and solvency margins (in the case of insurers). One policy concern over the presence of guarantees under these regulatory frameworks is that they can have procyclical effects, requiring larger capital demands in down markets. If guarantees were to be offered by commercial institutions, it is also essential to create a level-playing field between different sectors, ensuring an

---

<sup>19</sup> The question of the optimal investment strategy in the context of a return guarantee has been studied by Pezier, J. and Scheller, J., in “Optimal Investment Strategies and Performance Sharing Rules for Pension Schemes with Minimum Guarantee”, *Journal of Pension Economics and Finance*, Volume 10, January 2011, pp. 119-145. They specifically address the type of guarantees offered by *Pensionskassen* in Germany and find that the annual guarantee requirements lead to inefficient low risk portfolios. They recommend that the guaranteed return is applied to the cumulative performance of the fund at maturity instead of yearly.

equivalence between regulatory requirements and hence a similar degree of robustness of the guarantor in case of market turbulence.<sup>20</sup>

In particular, a policy question arises over what type of capital or solvency framework should be applied to investment management companies that offer such return guarantees. In Germany, for instance, an investment management company that offers a Riester-type pension plan is subject to a (conditional) solvency capital requirement because of the capital guarantee,<sup>21</sup> which is weaker than the upcoming Solvency-II-regulation of capital guarantees sold by insurers. Furthermore, providers of guaranteed mutual funds in Europe are not subject to specific capital requirements concerning these products. Concerns over this situation were raised in the European Commission 2005 Green Paper on the enhancement of the framework for investment funds.<sup>22</sup> Any failure of a company to keep its promise would considerably damage consumer confidence in the whole sector and its reputation. This is why adequate capital requirements for the asset management company providing the guarantee need to be established as is already the case with other providers of capital guarantees.

Two recent papers argue that the government would be the more realistic guarantee provider.<sup>23</sup> To support that argument, both Munnell et al. (2009) and Grande and Visco (2010)<sup>24</sup> first highlight the existence of the counterparty risk over long-term horizons linked to the private provision of minimum return guarantees. Bankruptcies, like the ones observed during the recent financial crisis, severely hamper individuals' confidence that the firm providing the guarantee would still be there for the payoff in 40 years time.

Another argument for direct government involvement is its ability to access hedging products to insure against the possibility of having to cover the guarantee in situations of sharp economic downturns. Credit-worthy governments may indeed issue long-term bonds at advantageous prices, while private insurers do not have access to such products.

Additionally, the pooling of all guarantee claims in a single public fund would allow for better risk-sharing opportunities. This in turn would imply that the fees charged to the individuals to manage the guaranteed portfolios would be lower than the ones a private sector provider would set. A centrally managed guarantee provider would also be consistent with free switching between DC plan providers.

However, public minimum return guarantees may also raise some issues. First, public pension systems already have serious sustainability issues in some countries. If the government guarantee minimum returns in DC pension plans, it will increase again its liabilities, which may not be opportune. Second, a public guarantee would play the role of a safety net against stock market collapse for DC pension plan members. This may favour the risk of opportunistic behaviour by the insured, who may be

---

<sup>20</sup> Guarantees can also be provided by non-commercial pension funds, in which case their solvency is often additionally underwritten by the sponsoring employer and an insolvency protection scheme without the need for further capital adequacy requirements.

<sup>21</sup> A calculation of the regulatory capital charge can be found in Maurer, R. and Schlag, C., Money-Back Guarantees in Individual Pension Accounts: Evidence from the German Pension Reform, Centre for Financial Studies Working Paper, No. 2002/03, June 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Annex, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> The OECD's Committee for Financial Markets has expressed concern about the piling-up of government supported guarantees. See <http://ftalphaville.ft.com/blog/2011/07/01/610741/piling-on-the-government-guarantees/>

<sup>24</sup> Munnell, A.H., Golub-Sass, A., Kopcke, R.A., Webb, A., What does it cost to guarantee returns?, Number 9-4, February 2009, Center for Retirement Research and Grande, G., Visco, I., A public guarantee of a minimum return to defined contribution pension scheme members, Temi di discussione, Number 762, June 2010, Banca d'Italia.

encouraged to over-expose themselves to financial risks. This risk could be mitigated by imposing a ceiling on the share of risky assets in the pension fund's portfolio. However, this would put aside from the public minimum guarantee less risk adverse individuals, while private sector providers could provide different guarantee levels at different prices depending on the individual's risk aversion.

## **5. Conclusion and policy recommendations**

The purpose of DC return guarantees is to provide a floor or minimum income at retirement to prevent people from having inadequate pensions. However, in many OECD countries public pensions' automatic stabilisers and old-age safety nets already provide such a floor. The more generous such protection is, the smaller will be the share of retirement income affected by market risk. Such forms of public protection are also more comprehensive and, in general, more valuable than the one offered by minimum return guarantees, as they guarantee a minimum level of income throughout retirement rather than a minimum value for the accumulated savings at retirement (as is the case for return guarantees).

Therefore, some people may argue that there may not be a need for minimum return guarantees in DC pension plans. Yet, public guarantees generally do not alleviate the impact of market risk for medium to high income individuals, or they do so partially at best. Moreover, in countries where retirement income from DC plans is the main source to finance retirement or where such plans are mandatory, there may be substantial risks also for low income individuals, as even small declines in retirement income from the DC component can lead to severe hardship.

Additionally, minimum return guarantees, in particular the capital guarantee, may help overcome popular fears over saving for retirement in DC pension plans. Surveys highlight that people's negative feelings about saving in DC pension plans often stem from the fear of losing even part of the nominal value of their contributions. Therefore, it may be beneficial to introduce capital guarantees – that guarantee the nominal value of contributions -- to increase the attractiveness of saving for retirement in DC accounts and promote coverage in these plans.

The decision over whether or not to require return guarantees in DC pension plans must therefore be considered in the context of the pension system as a whole. If the public pension system already provides high replacement rates, the value of an additional guarantee for private DC pension plans will be low. On the other hand, in cases where most of the individuals' retirement income comes from DC pension plans (because the public pension system provides low benefits), investment return guarantees become more valuable and the government may have greater fiscal leeway to finance them.

The second key issue to consider is that guarantees have to be paid for, and that this cost reduces the expected value of benefits from DC plans relative to a situation where there are no guarantees. Section 3 shows that the cost of guaranteeing that people will get back at least their contributions is quite affordable as long as the contribution period is sufficiently long. Guarantees above the capital guarantee, on the other hand, can be very expensive. Investors may prefer stronger guarantees such as an inflation guarantee or a minimum real return of 2%. The analysis in section 3 shows that these stronger guarantees may be too costly.

The analysis also highlights that the cost of the guarantee varies with the contribution period and the investment strategy and initial capital market conditions. Consequently, even if the capital guarantee looks affordable in a context of a long contribution period and a fix investment strategy, its cost can increase dramatically for shorter contribution periods and riskier investment strategies.

The analysis also shows that changing the structure of how the cost of these guarantees is paid, may increase the amount of assets accumulated at retirement. The cost of providing minimum return guarantees can be covered through charging a fee on contributions or on assets accumulated independently of how the

portfolio performs. They can also be covered by charging a hair-cut on investment surpluses when the portfolio outperforms. Therefore, haircuts may introduce incentives for providers -- only if the provider and the asset manager coincide in a same entity and they do not hedge that risk -- to perform well as they only get paid when the actual portfolio balance is higher than the value of the portfolio determined by the guarantee (*e.g.* the portfolio balance that would result from assuming a minimum return of 2%). Additionally, a haircut has the advantage that contributions are fully invested (the fee is not deducted from the contribution) and accumulated, and therefore the full contribution earns returns reducing therefore the cost in terms of assets accumulated at retirement.

Unfortunately, the haircut also has a severe drawback. Providers hold a future promise to be paid depending of investment surpluses, which may not materialise. Therefore, a haircut requires providers to set aside capital buffers that may be higher than those required in the case of regular annual fees. This would increase the cost of providing the guarantees, cost that is not considered in the analysis throughout this paper. If such costs were to be included in the assessment of payment structures based on the haircut, they would diminish the attractiveness of haircuts.

Policymakers should also consider various challenges relating to the introduction of guarantees. One of the basic features of DC plans is the possibility for individuals to choose provider. If one allows switching between providers, it may be necessary to introduce a compensation mechanism, which needs to be carefully designed to ensure transparency and fairness. Another challenge relates to the design of the investment strategy and regulations including solvency rules to ensure that providers are adequately provisioning and managing risks to meet the guarantee.

The main recommendation of the report is that regulators and policy makers should assess the potential advantages and costs of introducing capital guarantees, at least in mandatory DC systems where these plans account for a large part of retirement income. Such guarantees protect retirement income against a highly unlikely, but also highly adverse market scenario, complementing the protection offered by the public pension system. They can also increase the attractiveness of saving for retirement in DC pension plans as people will always get back at least what they contributed. Capital guarantees are also relatively cheap to provide, as long as the contribution period is sufficiently long. However, there are some serious implementation challenges that would need to be addressed, such as the compatibility of the guarantee with free choice of investment and provider. Short of making guarantees mandatory, governments could consider requiring that at least one of the investment options offered in DC plans has a minimum guaranteed return, although the possibility of leaving the guaranteed option would raise its cost substantially. Similarly, making the guaranteed investment the default option (for those who do not choose any alternative) is also controversial, as on average it would lead to a lower level of retirement income compared to a similar investment with no guarantee.

Finally, regulatory issues regarding capital requirements for asset management companies providing capital guarantees need to be addressed, both from a consumer protection and a level playing field angle. Unless a consistent regulatory framework for all commercial providers of capital guarantees is implemented, the security level of products including capital guarantees may decline as a result of regulatory arbitrage. Given that guaranteed products are increasingly traded cross-border this issue can best be solved at an international level.

## ANNEX: FORMAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF GUARANTEES ANALYSED

In order to price each guarantee so that the guarantee provider is neutral, it is necessary to find, for each type of guarantee, the guarantee fee such that the present value of the expected future guarantee fees equals the present value of the expected guarantee claims. For the capital guarantee for instance, the lump sum (LS) at retirement (T) equals at least the nominal sum of contributions made. This can be written as:

$$LS^{\text{Capital}}(T) = \max \left[ NAV(T), \sum_{t=1}^T \text{Contributions}(t) \right],$$

where  $NAV(T)$  is the net asset value of all contributions invested into the life cycle strategy.

This can be decomposed into the net asset value of all contributions invested into the life cycle strategy and an additional optional component corresponding to an option contract which pays off if the lump sum at retirement is lower than the sum of all contributions made (the guarantee):

$$LS^{\text{Capital}}(T) = NAV(T) + \max \left[ 0, \sum_{t=1}^T \text{Contributions}(t) - NAV(T) \right]$$

Depending on how the guarantee fee is paid, the calculation of the net asset value differs. This report analyses four different approaches to pay the guarantee fee.

An annual payment calculated as a percentage of the accumulated net asset value of all contributions invested into the life cycle investment strategy

This approach applies to all guarantees except the ones using a haircut. Each year, the net asset value is reduced by the guarantee fee following this formula:

$$\forall t \in [2;T], NAV(t) = [NAV(t-1) \times (1 + \text{Return}(t-1,t)) + \text{Contributions}(t)] \times (1 - G\text{Price}_1\%)$$

An annual payment calculated as a percentage of every contribution paid

This approach applies to the same guarantees as above. Each year, the net asset value is reduced by the guarantee fee following this formula:

$$\forall t \in [2;T], NAV(t) = NAV(t-1) \times (1 + \text{Return}(t-1,t)) + \text{Contributions}(t) \times (1 - G\text{Price}_2\%)$$

An annual payment calculated as a percentage of the potential surplus above the guaranteed benefit

This approach only applies to the 4% guarantee with ongoing haircut. Each year, the net asset value is reduced by the guarantee fee following this formula:

$$\forall t \in [2;T], NAV(t) = NAV_{\text{BH}}(t) - \text{Surplus}(t) \times G\text{Price}_3\%,$$

where  $NAV_{\text{BH}}(t) = NAV(t-1) \times (1 + \text{Return}(t-1,t)) + \text{Contributions}(t)$  is the net asset value before the haircut and  $\text{Surplus}(t) = \max \left[ 0, NAV_{\text{BH}}(t) - \sum_{i=1}^t \text{Contributions}(i) \times (1 + 4\%)^{t-i} \right]$  is the potential surplus.

A single payment calculated as a percentage of the potential surplus above the guaranteed benefit at the end of the accumulation period

This approach only applies to the 4% guarantee with final haircut. The guarantee fee is directly deducted from the lump sum at retirement following this formula:

$$\forall t \in [2;T], \text{NAV}(t) = \text{NAV}_{\text{BH}}(t) = \text{NAV}(t-1) \times (1 + \text{Return}(t-1,t)) + \text{Contributions}(t),$$

$$\text{and } \text{LS}^{\text{Final haircut}}(T) = \text{NAV}(T) - \text{Surplus}(T) \times \text{GPrice}_4\%$$

### Basic example of the idea behind how the fair price of a guarantee is calculated

In order to determine the price of the capital guarantee for instance, it is necessary to find  $\text{GPrice}_1\%$  (or  $\text{GPrice}_2\%$ ) such that the present value of the expected future guarantee fees equals the present value of the expected future guarantee claims, where:

$$\text{LS}^{\text{Capital}}(T) = \text{NAV}(T) + \max \left[ 0, \underbrace{\sum_{t=1}^T \text{Contributions}(t) - \text{NAV}(T)}_{\text{Guarantee claim}} \right]$$

Includes guarantee fees

To value a guarantee at a fair price means valuing the guarantee as a financial derivative in a capital market framework (like e.g. the valuation of a put option). This is illustrated in the simple numerical example below – the accompanying technical paper has a detailed description of the mathematical modelling.

Let assume that the holder of a stock (valued at 100 units:  $S_0$ ) wants to protect his investment and does not want to lose more than 5% of his investment. The objective is to determine the cost of such a protection (i.e. determine the fee). The holder is assumed to pay the fee first and then to invest 100. Additionally it is assumed that, after one year, the stock can take two values with the same probability (120 or 90) and that the investor wants a guaranteed level of 95. This can be achieved by buying an appropriate option:

|                        |   |                       |   |  |
|------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|--|
| Stock                  |   | Option                |   | Stock + option = guaranteed portfolio    |
| $S_{\text{up}} = 120$  |   | $G_{\text{up}} = 0$   |   | $S_{\text{up}} + G_{\text{up}} = 120$    |
| $S_0 = 100$            | + | $G_0 = ?$             | = | $S_{\text{down}} + G_{\text{down}} = 95$ |
| $S_{\text{down}} = 90$ |   | $G_{\text{down}} = 5$ |   |  |

The payoff of the option  $G_0$  can be achieved with a replicating portfolio: a fraction  $\Delta$  of the stock is sold to buy a zero-bond  $B$ .

- If the stock is worth 120 after one year:  $G_{\text{up}} = B - \Delta S_{\text{up}} = B - 120 \times \Delta = 0$  (1)
- If the stock is worth 90 after one year:  $G_{\text{down}} = B - \Delta S_{\text{down}} = B - 90 \times \Delta = 5$  (2)
- The value of the option is the present value of the replicating portfolio. Assuming a discount rate of 3%, this gives:  $\text{fee} = G_0 = B/(1 + 3\%) - \Delta S_0 = B/(1 + 3\%) - 100 \times \Delta$  (3)

This is a system of 3 equations with 3 unknown variables ( $B$ ,  $\Delta$  and fee) with a unique solution:  $B = 20$ ,  $\Delta = 1/6$  and fee = 2.75. The same kind of method (use of a replicating portfolio) can be used for more complex guarantees and more realistic assumptions regarding the fluctuations of the underlying asset classes.

## WORKING PAPERS PUBLISHED TO DATE

The full series is listed below in chronological order. Prior to March 2010, the series was named OECD Working Papers on Insurance and Private Pensions. All working papers can be accessed online at: [www.oecd.org/daf/fin/wp](http://www.oecd.org/daf/fin/wp).

### **2011**

WP10: The Role of Pension Funds in Financing Green Growth Initiatives

WP9: Catastrophe Financing for Governments

WP8: Funding in Public Sector Pension Plans - International Evidence

WP7: Reform on Pension Fund Governance and Management: The 1998 Reform of Korea National Pension Fund

### **2010**

WP6: Options to improve the governance and investment of Japan's Government Pension Investment Fund

WP5: The New IAS 19 Exposure Draft

WP4: The EU Stress Test and Sovereign Debt Exposures

WP3: The Impact of the Financial Crisis on Defined Benefit Plans and the Need for Counter-Cyclical Funding Regulations

WP2: Assessing Default Investment Strategies in Defined Contribution Pension Plans

WP1: Framework for the development of financial literacy baseline surveys: A first international comparative analysis

### **OECD Working Papers on Insurance and Private Pensions**

WP41: Policy Action in Private Occupational Pensions in Japan since the Economic Crisis of the 1990s

WP40: Pension Funds' Risk-management Framework: Regulation and Supervisory Oversight

WP38: Managing investment risk in defined benefit pension funds

### **2009**

WP37: Investment Regulations and Defined Contribution Pensions

WP36: Private Pensions and Policy Responses to the Financial and Economic Crisis

WP35: Defined-contribution (DC) arrangements in Anglo-Saxon Countries

WP34: Evaluating the Design of Private Pension Plans: Costs and Benefits of Risk-Sharing