



# FROM STUNT TO SUBSTANCE

An assessment of IMF engagement with civil society

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is doling out billions of dollars, influencing economies around the world through its finance, and through the policies it expects governments to implement in return for the funds. But who has a say in those decisions?

This paper presents case study research from Pakistan, Tunisia, Egypt, Ecuador, Argentina, Zambia and Ghana to assess the extent and meaningfulness of IMF engagement with civil society. With findings on power, motivations, impact, and the importance of civic space considerations, the paper makes the case for significantly improved engagement, and recommends how to do so systematically, meaningfully and safely.

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This paper is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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Cover photo: Members of Civil Society and youth leaders take part in the IMF Orientation and Capacity Building event during on Monday, October 3 during the 2016 IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings in Washington, D.C. The CSO fellows heard talks from IMF officials as well as taking part in an IMF Executive Board Directors Roundtable meeting. Credit: Ryan Rayburn/IMF Photo via Flickr; CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

# SUMMARY

The International Monetary Fund (IMF or 'the Fund') has far-reaching impacts at global as well as national level. When countries are under financial distress and turn to the IMF, its financial support – and even more so, the numerous macroeconomic reforms that the Fund requires in return for such financing, known as 'conditionality' – has significant effects on the future of those countries and their people. Too often, IMF loan programs come with austerity-packed conditionality that seeks to rebalance the government's books at the expense of exacerbating inequalities. The final sign-off on loan programs rests with the IMF Executive Board, on which, it is worth noting, the richest and most powerful shareholders are disproportionately represented.<sup>1</sup> But before those decisions are made, IMF staff spend months and sometimes years on missions to firm up loan packages, and most importantly, their conditions, with the borrower governments. In recent decades, these missions have begun to reach out to civil society organizations (CSOs) who represent interests which are distinct from those of governments and the private sector. However, despite the importance of engaging civil society for the sake of enhanced accountability and designing more transparent, better informed and less risky loan programs, the extent, meaningfulness and impact of this engagement have remained questionable.

This paper presents case study research from around the world on IMF engagement with CSOs at the national level. Through desk research and interviews conducted in six countries – Argentina, Ecuador, Tunisia, Zambia, Pakistan and Egypt – complemented by an existing seventh case study and additional desk research in Ghana, the paper attempts to dig deeper into IMF-CSO interactions and draw lessons and recommendations for the IMF on how to achieve meaningful engagement with civil society. It is not intended to make general findings or recommendations on overall IMF-CSO engagement, but focuses specifically on the national level, especially in the context of IMF loan negotiations. The study aims to understand and improve the enabling conditions for meaningful participation by citizens and CSOs to share their expertise and have their views heard and incorporated into IMF loan programs, which have profound consequences for the socio-economic trajectories of their countries.

Critically, in a negotiation space dominated by almost pre-determined interests – the IMF's interest is to be repaid, and the government's interest is to balance the budget and often to get re-elected – it is vital that the voices of other stakeholders are integrated into the discussion, particularly the voices of those who represent ordinary people whose lives are deeply impacted by the policies implemented in the context of an IMF supported program. This includes parliamentarians, for example, as well as civil society. The ultimate objective is to ensure that people's needs and rights are considered within IMF programs: that these programs at a minimum do not exacerbate inequality and poverty, and at best help to reduce them. Meaningful engagement with civil society would contribute to more inclusive, transparent, democratic and accountable decision making in IMF

programs and economic policies more generally in-country, and it is even more important that the IMF makes robust and thoughtful efforts in contexts where democratic governance is weak and civic space is restricted.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. IMF-CSO ENGAGEMENT IS CHARACTERIZED BY AN IMBALANCE OF POWER

The biggest overall finding is that the IMF's engagement with CSOs is marred by an imbalance of power skewed towards the Fund. This is enabled mainly by the mechanisms of engagement, the lack of a mandated requirement for civil society engagement, the selection of who is included or excluded in engagement, as well as the perceived or real differences in technical economic capacity between the IMF and national CSOs.

The setting in which national-level engagement typically takes place is characterized by informality and confidentiality. These 'off-the-record' interactions obscure who the IMF has or hasn't spoken to. They also prevent CSOs from sharing information to enhance transparency, or sharing lessons learned in the process of strengthening CSOs' ability to organize or influence their governments and policy decisions. Importantly, it means that CSOs have a difficult time holding the IMF accountable to any commitment it might make, including if and how it takes CSO feedback into account. As most engagement is unstructured and conducted at the will of individual IMF staff, there can be large differences in the nature of engagement within and across countries as staff change.

The organisations and groups that the IMF includes and prioritizes in engagement is of vital importance to the institution's claims about civil society engagement. In addition to CSOs (which vary in nature across countries) advocating for economic and social justice among other issues, the IMF engages with multiple entities that, while in some definitions could constitute civil society, often represent private sector interests. These include professional associations, chambers of commerce and financial institutions. The parameters placed around acceptable subjects for dialogue were also thought by some study participants to be encouraging CSOs to take a 'softer line' in return for a seat at the table, suggesting that those with more rejectionist views or radically different economic approaches are less likely to be able to engage directly with the IMF. While it remains unknown exactly which CSOs the IMF speaks to in any given country, including the case study countries, the CSOs interviewed for this study were mostly advocates for economic and social justice **and human**

**rights** issues, small and medium-sized think tanks, or individual specialist economists. Only three countries had confirmed incidences of trade unions being engaged either directly or indirectly.

In these engagements, IMF staff approach meetings from extremely technical aspects of the economic policies under consideration and not adapted to civil society as a target group to enable their participation. Given the IMF's vantage point, they inevitably have more terminology, more technical might and more information than their CSO counterparts. This is further accentuated because many CSOs have modest staffing and resources, and often focus on a myriad of issues. There are often irreconcilable ideological rifts, and CSOs are often engaging with the IMF on issue areas that most IMF staff are not knowledgeable about, including gender impacts, human rights and climate change. In effect, the different parties may end up speaking different languages and – given the power imbalances in the relationship – it falls on CSOs to adopt and speak the Fund's language where they can or risk not being taken seriously.

## **2. SIGNIFICANT GAP BETWEEN THE IMF'S AND CSOS' EXPECTATIONS/MOTIVATIONS**

Another key finding is that there is a stark gap between CSOs' expectations and motivations and those of the IMF, that might seem difficult to bridge. CSOs engaging with the IMF often hope to help shape IMF programs and their associated economic policies, and also to push for more government transparency and accountability. The IMF on the other hand seems to be engaging with CSOs primarily as a way to diversify its social and economic understanding of the country, and to gauge public perceptions of and potential adverse reactions to a prospective IMF-supported program. This mismatch of the two parties' motivations and expectations results in inherent tensions, producing a situation where ultimately neither is satisfied with the exchange. The outcome is often a sense of disenchantment among CSO representatives, who come to have low expectations of these engagements.

## **3. ENGAGEMENT IS SHAPED BY THE DEGREE OF OPENNESS OF CIVIC SPACE**

The study also found, unsurprisingly, that the political context and degree to which civic space is open shapes the engagement; it also affects the ability of CSOs and movements to disrupt discussions between the Fund and the government.

National governments, who are the Fund's primary constituency, can directly or indirectly impede the IMF's engagement with CSOs. This could be through actively attempting to limit civic space by censoring media campaigns, violently repressing protest movements, and in some cases punishing activists and their family members in retaliation for engaging with the IMF and/or criticizing the government. The near-universal unpopularity of the IMF's programs meant that the risk of public discontent drawing a repressive response of some sort was seen in all country case studies.

Civic space was a key determinant of the extent to which CSOs were able to leverage pressure or constitute a disruptive force in the relationship between the IMF and the national government. In countries where civic space allows such activity, the IMF was seen to have more meaningful engagement with CSOs and to be more responsive to their concerns. IMF recognition of the importance of open civic space for effective engagement with CSOs at the national level is neither overt nor formalized. While it did recognize the inherent risks facing CSOs that engage with it in restricted or closed civic space contexts, and seemed to maintain flexibility in facilitating engagement, it does not appear to fully understand the intensity of this risk.

## **4. MEANINGFULNESS OF IMF-CSO ENGAGEMENT VARIES AND THERE IS LIMITED EVIDENCE OF IMPACT**

Different CSOs, including those operating within the same country, expressed conflicting views regarding whether the IMF's engagements with them were meaningful. Some reported that IMF staff genuinely seemed to want to understand their country's social and economic context. Others had the impression that their conversations with the IMF only satisfied a formality, rather than being part of a sincere effort to understand civil society concerns or consider recommendations.

Finally, the research found only patchy evidence that CSO engagement was perceived as or was actually having a tangible impact in shaping IMF programs. A stand-out exception was the case of Ghana, in which several economic conditionalities were thought to have been influenced by the CSOs who engaged in discussions. The unique characteristic of that engagement was a well-coordinated group of CSOs, combined with an open finance ministry and a mission chief who welcomed tripartite discussion (involving the IMF, the government and CSOs) before and after the IMF program was approved.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## IMPLEMENT NEW IMF POLICY ON ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

- The IMF should have an Executive Board approved policy and associated guidance note which is widely consulted on with civil society, and which requires IMF staff to engage and consult in meaningful ways with civil society. While the IMF has the current 2015 guidelines for engagement with civil society, this is far from sufficient in scope and in mandate. The new policy should include a clear definition of civil society and articulate mechanisms for how to engage in different contexts and adapted to the purpose of the mission (Article IV consultations, loan discussions and negotiations, etc.). The IMF should differentiate between private sector commercial bodies and CSOs, given the former's particular interests and their generally privileged access and position.
- Mission chiefs should be required to meet with a wide range of stakeholders from civil society during each mission to the country while negotiating loan programs and during review missions of existing programs. This should include women's rights organizations; organizations working on economic, fiscal justice and anti-corruption issues to name a few; and worker representatives, including care workers. As the IMF identifies and builds its work on 'macro-critical' issues such as inequality, climate change, gender and anti-corruption, it should increasingly engage with CSOs with expertise on those issues.

## IMPROVE MEANINGFULNESS AND IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT

- IMF engagement with CSOs, especially around loan programs and Article IV consultations, should be predictable, structured and planned to allow CSOs enough time to schedule and prepare for meetings with the Fund's staff and be clear about the purpose of these meetings. The IMF should publish a mission calendar (Article IV or loan discussions) for each country at least two months before the mission. The publicly available calendar would also allow CSOs who are not in the IMF's database or are not usually included to request participation. This should not necessarily substitute meetings requested by specific groups of CSOs to the mission, which could be needed for specific reasons. In the same manner, there is a need for IMF resident representatives to have predictable and regular meetings with civil society throughout the year.
- The IMF should incorporate CSO inputs as a systematic section in Article IVs and loan documents to explicitly demonstrate the views of CSOs and how these have been responded to. This should be done in a way that



takes into account civic space constraints and risks, through anonymizing the names of individuals or organizations who provided input unless they otherwise consent.

- The IMF should be more transparent with the media and civil society on its negotiations with governments. It should disclose proposed policy reforms well ahead of finalizing them with governments and in advance of meetings with civil society.
- The IMF should systematically develop and disclose social/distributional impact assessments of policy proposals in advance to inform its discussions with civil society.
- The IMF should build its own capacity and understanding of social and human rights issues and hire staff members with a more diverse range of expertise and ideological backgrounds, to support more meaningful engagement with civil society.
- The IMF should ensure that corrective mechanisms for loan programs are in place by creating a feedback mechanism, where various stakeholders including civil society can input, built into the six-month loan review period. It should commit to course correction when IMF policy conditionality is found to be resulting in negative social and human rights impacts.
- In addition to meeting with civil society bilaterally, the IMF should encourage the government to meet with civil society on IMF-related operations. It should also encourage tripartite meetings, where civil society (including unions), the government and the IMF can sit at the same table to discuss policies and recommendations for reforms.

## FACTOR IN CIVIC SPACE

- The IMF should conduct civic space and political capture risk assessments before engaging with countries.<sup>2</sup> This would enable it to assess whether a prospective loan program would contribute to enabling civic space restrictions or closure and political capture, and design measures to mitigate the risks both in the program and in the forms of engagement.
- The degree of civic space openness should shape the engagement mechanism, including how formal and how 'on the record' it is, obtaining the consent of CSOs, including taking the necessary security measures to ensure their safety. There should consistently be clarity and commitment on what will happen with the information discussed in meetings.
- The IMF should include issues related to civic space in dialogue with borrower governments, including discussing the importance of open civic space to quality engagement with stakeholders and the success of loan programs.
- The IMF should develop a public position on retaliation against civil society as a result of engagement with the Fund. This should articulate that the IMF does not tolerate any action by governments or other parties – including threats, intimidation, harassment, violence or obstruction of

the ability to participate or work– against those who engage with the IMF or voice their opinion regarding IMF activities or IMF-backed policies. This should be accompanied by a policy and guidance note on how IMF staff should respond in such instances.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

This research examines the IMF's engagement with civil society organizations (CSOs) around the world, focusing on the 'engagement ecosystem', which includes aspects such as the motivations, capacities, preparedness and expectations of both CSOs and the IMF when engaging on loan programs at national level as well as civic space. The intention is to gather practical lessons from IMF-CSO engagement in order to advance more meaningful and impactful engagement which is reflected in IMF loan programs and its policy advice to countries.

The research explores the engagement ecosystem through experiences drawn from select countries which have undergone IMF programs during the last 10 years and/or are in ongoing negotiations for a new program. Given the extent of IMF-supported programs at the time of writing (over 60 countries), these case studies aim to provide illustrative examples of CSO engagement only, rather than making comprehensive claims regarding the universal approaches or practices of the IMF or CSOs. The lessons learnt from these case studies are intended to provide actionable findings.

The analysis of the case studies provides findings and recommendations based on common trends, while also accounting for different national contexts and political dynamics. The findings are sourced from an extensive conceptual and case study desk review; in-depth interviews with academics, advocacy bodies and regionally representative CSOs; case study interviews with CSOs engaged with IMF advocacy in six selected countries (in addition to an existing seventh case study); and interviews with IMF staff.

The study examined specific elements of the engagement ecosystem, including the different types of formal and informal engagement mechanisms available to all parties; IMF and CSO motivations for and expectations of engagement; IMF and CSO understandings of the end results; practices and policies affecting inclusion in or exclusion from engagement; the impact of the status of civic space on IMF-CSO engagement; and the impacts of CSO engagement with the IMF in terms of shaping loan programs.

These elements were explored through a methodological framework that categorized countries based on the openness of civic space, as well as taking into account diversity in the geographical coverage. Given the nature of CSO engagement with the IMF – i.e. through advocacy and action that contests the government's role in negotiations – the extent to which civic space is open is a key determinant of civil society's ability to engage meaningfully with the IMF and apply pressure for more equitable outcomes and fewer austerity measures in IMF-supported programs.

# 2 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

## COUNTRY CASE STUDY SELECTION

Our country selection was based on a number of different criteria:

**Geographical representation:** Based on the understanding that political economies and civil societies vary across regions, we wanted to ensure diversity in geography and select case studies from the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America.

**Existing network:** To secure interviews, this study relied significantly on Oxfam's network, and there was a preference for countries where Oxfam had country teams or knowledge of CSOs who might follow the IMF to work through and with.

**Civic space status:** CSOs' capacities for action in response to IMF loans are heavily reliant on the openness of civic space in each country. To assess how this factor influenced IMF engagement with CSOs, Triangle's methodology incorporated the CIVICUS Monitor for Tracking Civic Space, which rates civic space status according to five categories: closed, repressed, obstructed, narrowed and open.<sup>3</sup> The report's sampling frame drew case studies from countries with different civic space classifications. This distribution sought to elucidate common trends relating to CSO engagement across different civic space contexts.

**Recent IMF loan negotiations:** Given the interest in examining CSO engagement with the IMF in the context of loan negotiations specifically, and wanting the experiences to be relatively recent for the sake of relevance, the sampling only included countries with relatively recent or ongoing loan negotiations.

Based on the above, the countries selected for new case study work were Tunisia, Egypt, Zambia, Pakistan, Ecuador and Argentina. Ghana was included in the analysis based on existing case study work, noting that study discussed CSO-IMF engagement that took place around 2015 and the context and engagement may well have changed by now. Given this limitation, the experiences of Ghana were brought in to supplement analysis rather than forming a core part of the analysis.

Based on preliminary findings from the adaptive desk review, academic and thematic specialist interviews, and recommendations from key informants, the report's methodological framework addresses:

- The IMF-CSO-government 'engagement ecosystem', rather than solely the results of CSO engagement with the IMF regarding loan programs,

including the motivations, capacities, preparedness and expectations of both CSOs and the IMF when engaging on conditional loans.

- Current or the most recent negotiations process for conditionality-based loan programs, rather than conditionality-free emergency loans. These include IMF loans under the General Resources Account (GRA), such as the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA), and the Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust (PRGT) for low-income countries, such as the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and the Standby Credit Facility (SCF) loans.
- Analysis of the IMF's selective openness to discussions around recommended policies or conditionalities in its loan programs.
- The potential for institutionalization of CSO engagement within the IMF, and a specific understanding of which organizations the IMF considers to be valid and/or priority CSOs.
- The impact of civic space openness on the IMF's approach and receptiveness to CSO engagement, as well as the extent to which IMF engagement potentially contributes to the closing or opening of civic space. The study also explores any adverse effects of IMF-CSO engagement in countries where civic space is relatively closed.

## ADAPTIVE DESK REVIEW

The study began with desk research to understand critical information gaps relating to methodological considerations and to guide updates to the methodological approach and associated tools/working guides. The analysis team used this review – covering all publicly available documents related to IMF-CSO engagement, corporate reports from the IMF, academic sources and development agencies as well as other relevant secondary documentation – to assess potential case studies alongside Oxfam's suggested case study framework based on CIVICUS classification, as well as to guide interview lines of inquiry. The team added additional literature as it emerged from the review to inform tools, analysis and final reporting. Once case studies had been selected, a supplementary desk review was conducted and included in the literature review presented in this final report.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for country case studies took place over a ten-week period between early April and the end of June 2022. The core research and analysis team accompanied and guided field researchers (depending on language requirements), collected new secondary literature and amended interview guides. Interviews were conducted via secure VoIP software and transcribed before moving to the data analysis phase.

## SAMPLING

Snowball sampling was employed based on Oxfam and the research team's existing research networks as well as outreach to CSOs that are publicly active in IMF advocacy. This approach was used to identify CSOs (for both regional and country case study interviews) with the most relevant experience of engaging with the IMF. The sampling method also built on initial contacts within Oxfam's network of advocates working on austerity and inequality, as well as background research by the research team. Researchers sought to interview four CSOs per country and at least one IMF representative per country. The IMF was officially approached with requests for interviews on May 25, 2022; however, by the close of data collection in early July, only four interviews had been conducted with IMF staff, representing three countries (Zambia, Tunisia and Egypt) and one headquarters staff member from the communications department.

## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS)

KIIs involved semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders who were able to provide valuable insights into the IMF's process of engaging with CSOs.

A total of 35 KIIs were conducted. These captured the experiences and perspectives of a) regional CSO advocacy bodies or independent academics representing more than one country in campaigning with the IMF (nine interviews); b) economic and social advocacy organizations, as well as individual academics based in case study countries (22 interviews);<sup>4</sup> and c) IMF resident representatives and communications office staff (four interviews).

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

All data collected was coded according to the themes within the engagement ecosystem established at the beginning of the research. The analysis team iteratively reviewed data according to these themes, grouping data under each one before synthesizing the data to generate an overall narrative. Ethical considerations relating to confidentiality and the potential for repression of CSOs in certain countries meant that all personal and organizational data was anonymized.

## LIMITATIONS

Limitations mainly related to the representative nature of data collection, a limitation inherent to qualitative research. The findings reflect the perceptions of institutions and the individuals representing them. Perceptions of the same events can differ markedly, presenting varying levels of overlap or misalignment in different parties' reported experiences.

A key limitation was that interviews and CSO sampling were primarily conducted through Oxfam's direct or indirect network. Non-networked CSOs were contacted in countries where Oxfam's networks were weaker, namely Ecuador, Argentina and Pakistan. Given the opaque and confidential nature of IMF engagement with CSOs, it was difficult to identify which CSOs the IMF had engaged with in these three countries. As a result, interviews were held with CSOs that both had and had not engaged with the IMF (but had attempted to), while in all other countries, all the CSOs interviewed had engaged with the IMF.

The above-mentioned challenges also meant the diversity of organizations interviewed was limited. For example, it did not have views from organizations working at a community level or in rural areas. Nor did the study benefit from the perspectives of women's rights organizations specifically, despite some efforts, which would have enriched the study further.

Further, the scope of the research required limiting the number of interviews to four or five per country, where time permitted; Pakistan was the country where fewest interviews were held. Time limitations meant that some stakeholders were not available for interview, such as the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). Significant previous research on Ghana meant that it was included as a desk review only; however, the research team acknowledges that some circumstances may have changed in Ghana in recent years. IMF staff availability also meant that the research team was only able to interview IMF staff for three of the seven countries reviewed.

# 3 THE IMF AND CSOS: HISTORICALLY UNEASY RELATIONS

While academic coverage of IMF-CSO engagement began in earnest in the late 1990s, critical CSO engagement with the IMF and its policies dates as far back as the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, growing CSO attention to the social and environmental impacts of structural adjustment policies was seen alongside disruptive protest actions against IMF policies in both the Global North and IMF program countries.<sup>6</sup>

One of the earliest instances of CSO lobbying around IMF policies was in 1989, when Global North organizations such as Friends of the Earth US and the Environmental Policy Institute successfully lobbied the United States Congress to pass reforms to the IMF over the adverse social and environmental impacts of conditionality in IMF-supported programs.<sup>7</sup> The IMF also faced pressure from its sister institution the World Bank, which had started to take a more proactive position in response to the concerns of CSOs.<sup>8</sup>

The devastating impacts of the IMF's structural adjustment programs in the 1980s, especially on the African continent, and further increases in protest action against IMF policies throughout the 1990s saw public awareness of the role of the IMF expand from it being a niche interest to being at the forefront of public attention, particularly when protest action occurred in Global North cities.<sup>9</sup> CSO involvement in these protest movements – such as those at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle – grabbed media headlines and put pressure on the IMF to respond to criticism about its role in worsening living conditions in countries under its programs.<sup>10</sup> One significant result influenced by CSO engagement in this period was the launch of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC). This gave debt relief to selected countries and was coupled with the implementation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which required low-income countries to take ownership of their loan programs, including by consulting with stakeholders.<sup>11</sup>

From the outset, CSOs have represented a spectrum of attitudes towards the IMF, ranging from 'abolitionists' to 'reformists' (with the latter often being identified by the Fund as reasonable partners for dialogue), to Washington Consensus<sup>12</sup> think tanks and economists that have only minor policy disagreements with the Fund.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike its sister organization, the World Bank, or other multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, the IMF does not currently have any direct public accountability mechanisms or mandates. The IMF's explicit mandate is 'to promote international monetary cooperation, balanced growth of international trade, and a stable system of



exchange rates'.<sup>14</sup> It is formally accountable only to its member states (which it is assumed should represent their citizens). Decision making ultimately rests with the IMF Board of Directors and Board of Governors, representing member states with disproportionate power being given to the richest economies.<sup>15</sup> The absence of a clear accountability mechanism within the IMF that CSOs can use, as well as the non-mandatory nature of the Fund's engagement with CSOs, has rendered relations and exchanges between the IMF and CSOs uneasy and marred by serious challenges.

# 4 COUNTRY CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

This section provides an overview of the background and context of IMF activity in the seven countries featured in this report: Egypt, Pakistan, Ecuador, Tunisia, Zambia, Argentina and Ghana.

**Table 1: Country Case Study Selection (for detailed country profiles, see Annex 1)**

Level of openness	Country	Notes
Closed or repressed	Egypt	<p>The IMF has repeatedly held up the 2016 Egypt loan program as a success story despite the concerns of CSOs over its social impact, particularly in terms of increasing poverty and inequality. There are also serious concerns about the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding the government’s use of funds, and the non-existent space for CSOs to monitor the government or hold it accountable due to fears of repression and retaliation.</p> <p>Despite public calls from CSOs for the IMF to hold the government more accountable, the IMF withheld more information at the request of the government.</p> <p>In October 2022, the IMF and Egypt reached a staff-level agreement on an Extended Fund Facility Arrangement and was approved by the Board on December 16 of the same year. This would be the country’s third IMF loan program since 2016, when it received IMF support under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and began a series of deep austerity measures.</p> <p>We conducted five interviews with CSOs and one interview with senior IMF staff. The CSO interviews included think tanks, individual academic specialists, regional advocacy bodies, international advocacy bodies and human rights NGOs with a longstanding line of work on Egypt. The accounts of meaningfulness and impact provided by both the IMF and CSOs contrasted greatly. CSOs repeatedly reported a growing sense of apathy towards engagement that they felt was not being incorporated into programming, which they were also taking personal risk to undertake. A common theme emerging from CSOs was the inherent linkages between technical and political aspects of the Egyptian economy, and the difficulty in getting the IMF to recognize this in its conditionalities.</p>
	Pakistan	<p>Ongoing loan program under the EFF: total value \$6bn</p> <p>Pakistan and the IMF reached an agreement on a 39-month EFF arrangement in 2019. The IMF-supported</p>

		<p>program was suspended and disbursement frozen after the start of the pandemic, as the Pakistani government was not ready to implement austerity conditionalities, especially those related to scrapping fuel and energy subsidies. Disbursement only resumed in June 2022 when the government scrapped subsidies and agreed to implement the austerity measures.</p> <p>In March 2022, anti-IMF demonstrations took place in Lahore in response to the significant austerity measures required by the loan program.</p> <p>This research included three interviews with CSOs in Pakistan and none with IMF representatives. The two CSOs that had engaged with the IMF had contrasting perceptions of the meaningfulness of the engagement. One CSO had very pessimistic views of the IMF’s sincerity and reported a public perception that the IMF has undue influence on the political economy of the country. The other CSO, which had longer experience of engagement – specifically around issues related to gender – was guarded about the prospects of having a major impact on the IMF’s policies but did report improvements in its proceduralism and the meaningfulness of engagement in recent years.</p>
<b>Obstructed</b>	Ecuador	<p>Ecuador is currently undergoing an IMF program under the EFF amounting to \$6.5bn. The loan agreement was reached in 2020. This follows a previously agreed loan program that began in 2019, including harsh austerity measures that spurred mass protests the same year. Following these protests and the outbreak of the pandemic, the government decided to withdraw the package and cancel the loan. The current IMF-supported program still contains austerity measures. However, Ecuador is one of the few countries in which the IMF has undertaken a distributional impact assessment of fiscal consolidation under the program.</p> <p>This research included four interviews with CSOs in Ecuador, only two of which had engaged with the IMF. No interviews were conducted with IMF staff. Only one CSO reported semi-positive sentiments about engagement with the IMF, where they felt that engagement following public protests against the 2019 IMF loan had spurred the Fund to be more proactive. Overall, no CSOs reported having seen any tangible impact of their engagement reflected in IMF programming. One CSO also reported reputational and safety risks as a result of critically engaging with the IMF.</p>

	Tunisia	<p>The role of unions in Tunisia is directly impacting IMF negotiations and programming. The IMF has repeatedly encouraged the Tunisian government to reach an agreement with unions, by seeking public buy-in through a ‘social compact’ with stakeholders. This is based on the experience after the revolution, when the IMF-backed program that was designed around austerity measures went off track due to the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) opposing measures related to public sector spending cuts.</p> <p>In October 2022, Tunisia and the IMF reached a staff-level agreement on an Extended Fund Facility Arrangement for \$1.9bn. It was scheduled to be approved by the Board in December of the same year but was postponed to an unspecified date.</p> <p>Tunisia is also moving closer to autocracy and closure of civic space.</p> <p>This research interviewed three CSOs in Tunisia and two senior IMF representatives working in Tunisia. CSO interviews indicated that despite past negative experiences engaging with the IMF, recent engagement had become much more meaningful and showed genuine interest on the part of the IMF. All CSOs reported that significant resistance from trade unions, coupled with prominent public media campaigns, had greatly raised public awareness of and discussion about the implications of an IMF loan.</p>
	Zambia	<p>In December 2021, the Zambian government reached IMF staff-level agreement for a \$1.4bn bailout package following a default on its debt. The country’s total external debt stands at \$14.5bn. Following the formation of a creditor’s committee under the G20 Common Framework to restructure Zambia’s debt, the IMF Executive Board approved the loan program in August 2022. Nevertheless, progress in debt restructuring negotiations has been very slow.</p> <p>This research conducted four CSO interviews in Zambia and one interview with senior IMF staff in-country. CSOs had mixed perceptions of IMF engagement, with some taking a stronger stance against any increase in Zambia’s debt burden, and others seeing an IMF loan as an inevitable and necessary step for the country’s economy. Zambian CSOs have engaged with the IMF in small and loose coalitions. Some have run media campaigns to raise public awareness of the impacts of an IMF loan on the most vulnerable people in society, which gained IMF attention and led to direct engagement with the CSOs.</p>

Open or narrowed	Argentina	<p>There is little publicly available evidence of IMF engagement with civil society, but lots of stakeholders with current and legacy knowledge.</p> <p>The IMF’s experience with Argentina has been marked by repeated failures. In 2018, the IMF and Argentina reached an agreement under the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) for a \$57bn loan, deemed the biggest loan package in the history of the IMF. The loan program was considered a failure and posed a serious reputational risk to the Fund’s credibility. The IMF has acknowledged that the loan was made erroneously. In 2022, the IMF and Argentina agreed on a 30-month \$44bn EFF, which contained specific provisions for ‘promoting labor, gender and financial inclusion.’</p> <p>There were no interviews with IMF staff for Argentina. Of four CSO interviews conducted in Argentina, only two had successfully engaged with the IMF. Both reported entering the engagement with limited expectations, which were not exceeded. The CSOs reported a near-universal opposition to the IMF across civil society, given the institution’s record in Argentina, but acknowledged that the latest agreement was ‘not as bad’ as previous agreements in terms of structural adjustments and conditionalities.</p>
	Ghana (secondary literature only)	<p>\$918m three-year Extended Credit Facility in 2015</p> <p>The Economic Governance Platform (a civil society consortium) formed in 2014 to advocate for greater civil society engagement in the design, implementation and monitoring of the ECF.</p> <p>Significant research has already been conducted on Ghanaian CSOs’ engagement with the IMF, and as such this case study is based on a desk review only, using available documentation on the IMF and CSOs’ engagement from 2014. The IMF and Ghana are currently engaged in discussions for a possible IMF-supported program.</p>

# 5 KEY FINDINGS

The section presents the key findings from case study interviews and desk research. Quotes from both CSO and IMF interviews are provided for context and supporting examples.

## 5.1 IMF-CSO ENGAGEMENT IS CHARACTERIZED BY AN IMBALANCE OF POWER

The interviews with the various stakeholders involved in this study revealed that the exchanges between the IMF and CSOs in the different national contexts are characterized by a significant imbalance of power skewed towards the Fund. This is central to understanding the findings of the study and manifests at three different levels: the IMF's control over the space of engagement; the mechanism and forms of the IMF's engagement with CSOs; and the contents of discussions, as set by the Fund.

When discussions begin between the IMF and a government around a potential loan program, the form of the engagement with CSOs is mainly determined by the Fund. National CSOs' interest in engaging with the IMF rises significantly when the government requests IMF support in the form of a loan program. More often than not, CSOs request to meet with the IMF mission to the country, and in some cases the Fund's mission reaches out to CSOs to have discussions with them. Decisions regarding who is present and the format these meetings will take can be central in shaping the power dynamics between the IMF and CSOs.

### 5.1.1 WHO DOES THE IMF INVITE TO THE TABLE?

Decisions on who to include in meetings are crucial and can be a big factor in swaying conversations one way or the other. The IMF's choice of who to engage with and who not to engage with is thus not only of vital importance to the institution's claims about carrying out consultations with CSOs and various stakeholders; it is also a source of power that the Fund has to shape these engagements.

First, it is important to clarify what the IMF considers as constituting civil society, and which type of organizations it prioritizes in its engagements. **The Fund's definition of civil society is a broad one;** it includes non-government organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, labor and professional organizations, business forums **and other groups representing private sector interests, as this research came to understand.**<sup>16</sup> Many might have assumed a narrower definition, more limited to NGOs and community-based organizations engaged in development, environmental, economic and social justice issues – what we refer to in this paper as CSOs – in addition to workers' unions. It is relevant that in practice, due to the

broad definition, the IMF's 'civil society' engagement includes significant engagement with groups representing private sector interests.

The people and organizations to whom the IMF is speaking, and the interests they represent, vary dramatically between country contexts. In all countries surveyed, the IMF's consultations included private sector interest groups such as financial institutions and chambers of commerce (in addition to employers' unions), in the same manner as CSOs. The IMF stated that, as with CSO engagement, this was part of its process of gaining a holistic picture of the economy. A CSO representative in Tunisia commented that IMF consultations with the private sector occurred regularly, both by formal and informal means, unlike its consultations with CSOs. Trade unions also feature on the IMF's list of potential civil society engagements; however, this research saw only inconsistent engagement with trade unions across the country contexts. The result of this broader understanding of civil society is that the IMF could engage with groups representing private sector interests significantly more than with groups representing public interests – all while legitimately claiming regular engagement with civil society. This is certainly the perception that has been created.

The IMF maintains a private database of all the CSOs and individuals it has been in contact with or who have contacted the Fund; however, **due to the opaque and confidential nature of IMF engagement, it was almost impossible to identify which types or how many CSOs the IMF had spoken to in each country.** In many cases, Fund staff would also ask the CSOs they engage with regularly for recommendations and contacts of other organizations who could participate in meetings or consultations. This can help expand the network but could also reinforce homogeneity of types of organizations and views.

*'In reality, the IMF does invite a broader range of people to its meetings, and even then it still tends to be Global North dominated.'*  
(Economic Issues Advocate, Zambia)

It is worth noting here also that CSOs can also face reputational risks from engaging with the IMF. In several countries, such as Pakistan, Argentina and Ecuador, CSO interviewees who chose to engage with the IMF faced a reputational risk among CSO peers who have staunch rejectionist attitudes towards the Fund.

While it remains unknown exactly which CSOs the IMF spoke to in each case study country, the CSOs interviewed were mostly advocates for economic and social justice issues, small and medium-sized think tanks, individual specialist economists, and one gender-focused advocacy organization. In some cases, such as Argentina and Ecuador, the IMF had not engaged with more prominent domestic CSOs, while smaller CSOs had been engaged. Tunisia, Ecuador and Egypt were the only cases where the research indicated that trade unions had been engaged, either directly (as in Tunisia and Egypt) or indirectly through representative CSOs (as in Ecuador). This raises questions on the criteria and the ways through which the IMF reaches out to CSOs.

Women's rights organizations were mentioned in the interviews with IMF staff, though due to the unavailability of information about with whom the IMF engages with exactly, the researchers could not identify specific women's rights organizations the IMF had engaged with in the countries in question. In Egypt, case study interviews revealed that the IMF specifically sought out CSOs targeting gender equality issues. It is also worth noting that the 2015 Guidelines on the IMF Staff Engagement with Civil Society Organizations instructs staff that their approach to engaging CSOs should be as diverse as possible and include 'women's associations' among others.

Based on the authors' own experiences of participating in IMF country meetings (in countries not in this study), Fund staff have sporadically invited and engaged with women's rights organizations. However, as is the case with the IMF's overall engagement with CSOs, it lacks consistency and clear modalities. In this regard, the 2022 IMF Strategy towards Mainstreaming Gender (also referred to as its 'gender strategy')<sup>17</sup> could present a ripe opportunity for deepening and systematizing engagement with women's rights organizations as it is implemented and operationalized in countries.

The strategy lays out some promising steps towards enhancing engagement. This includes expanding outreach through resident representative offices and setting up periodic meetings with academics and experts on gender and macroeconomics, including from CSOs. Nevertheless, this is far from enough. The IMF Gender Strategy mentions CSOs only three times, without any reference to feminist, women's rights groups or organisations working on queer rights. A stronger commitment to strengthen and invest in stakeholder engagement, specifically CSOs, is necessary and crucial.

In the consultation period that the IMF held around the Gender Strategy, a group of civil society organisations, including Oxfam, sent a letter to the IMF outlining, among other things what the strategy should contain in terms of CSO engagement.<sup>18</sup> They demanded a clear commitment to meaningful CSO consultation and participation through the adoption of a clear policy on systematic engagement, a mechanism for independent accountability responsive to community complaints as well as appointing a specific gender CSO liaison. None of these asks were reflected in the Strategy. A 2022 civil society letter<sup>19</sup> rejecting the Gender Strategy signed by more than a hundred organisations including from some of the case study countries is a good reminder to the IMF not just of the importance of serious engagement with women's rights and queer and women-led organizations, but also of fundamentally understanding the gendered impacts of its policies and adapting accordingly.

In other perceptions of who is included or otherwise, one civil society actor in Zambia shared their perception that the IMF favored some CSOs over others and would ask the favored CSOs to serve as local intermediaries to communicate with other CSOs. In Argentina, an interviewee reported that the IMF had consulted smaller CSOs rather than larger, more prominent ones. This could be the result of the lack of policy and any subsequent criteria used by the Fund when reaching out and engaging with CSOs.



Ultimately, Dawson's 2001 account revealing preferential engagement with groups who broadly agree with the Fund's mandate, stating that 'these groups [agreeable think tanks and economists] have generally had ready access to the Fund staff,'<sup>20</sup> seems to still ring true today. Which organizations the IMF is engaging, and the parameters it places around what are deemed acceptable topics and which views are welcome, results in privileged access for some groups and could result in more oppositional CSOs taking a softer line in return for a seat at the table.

*'I usually find the IMF negotiating with big investment bankers with big business associations. They are very well connected... So, I think they have the upper word usually and I've seen it in Jordan, I've seen it in Lebanon, I've seen it in Egypt. In Morocco, maybe less, maybe less in Tunisia as well, but they [IMF engagements with these groups] are existing... And of course, any call for social justice that would harm their interests, which is often the case, they stand very firmly against it...'*

(Middle East and North Africa Regional Advocacy Group)

*'...it's largely left to the resident representatives and to country knowledge of our teams and headquarters [to decide] on what would be the most representative institutions... there is also within our communications department an attempt to be a bit more systematic, and have an approach where we try to see who are the most important stakeholders that we should be engaging with...'*

(IMF, Tunisia)

The IMF's understanding of the diversity of civil society perspectives is thus limited by its engagement mechanisms and the ideological background underpinning its operations. These contextual factors by default lead the IMF to engage with certain types of groups to the exclusion of others, such as those who may have a radically different position to the IMF's economic principles. As will be explained later, ideological rifts between some CSOs and IMF staff can lead to frustration and the breakdown of communication, making the Fund more inclined to engage with organizations that it sees as holding more agreeable positions.

### **5.1.2 'PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS MEETING IS OFF THE RECORD': THE IMPACT OF THE MECHANISMS OF ENGAGEMENT**

A second factor that contributes to skewing the balance of power in favor of the IMF is the conditions that IMF staff set for meeting and discussing policies for a potential loan program. The most common and salient form of IMF engagement with CSOs is through informal, off the record meetings that are largely undocumented, opaque and unaccountable. In a civil society policy forum on IMF governance during the IMF and World Bank Annual Meetings in October 2022, a representative from civil society said that this form of engagement is almost the same as if the meeting with IMF staff had never happened.<sup>21</sup> This is despite the Fund's recognition, as early as 2001, that CSO engagement should be more structured and formalized. These off-the-record meetings mean that it is hard to understand the full extent of

IMF-CSO engagement in program countries or to verify the claims made by either party. It is worth noting that informal and off the record meetings could be preferred by CSOs in restricted or closed civic space contexts due to security or other concerns, but this practice by the Fund does not appear to be tailored to those specific contexts. The way engagement is conducted has implications for resourcing requirements (for both parties), for promoting transparency and accountability, and for facilitating open and inclusive dialogue. Even in formal engagements, there do not appear to be any consistent feedback mechanisms on how IMF staff have utilized the information gathered from engaging with CSOs. In addition, be they formal or informal meetings, it seems that Fund staff often do not share agenda in advance.

The vast majority of in-country engagement is conducted on the individual initiative of IMF staff, leading to wide variations in the extent and mechanisms of engagement. CSO engagement is largely conducted by IMF resident representatives or mission chiefs and their small staffing teams and is not a requirement. Relying on individual initiative means engagement is not systematized in IMF functions and relies on good will and personal relationships between CSOs and the IMF at country and headquarter levels. This creates several problematic issues for the IMF's engagement with CSOs. It is a source of significant inconsistencies, where the degree of CSO engagement and involvement largely relies on the mission chief or resident representative's openness to CSOs, as well as the extent to which they believe CSOs' inputs are valuable and worth listening to. This not only means that the IMF's CSO engagement can vary greatly from one country to another; it can also be inconsistent within the same country, as there is a high degree of rotation of IMF staff. CSOs in one country often have to deal with changing mission chiefs who do not view CSOs in the same way. Suddenly, the IMF's engagement with civil society can change from better to worse, or vice versa.

Twenty-six out of 49 interview responses cited informal rather than formal engagement, mostly of a bilateral (IMF-CSO) nature. Informal engagement means the agendas and outcomes of the meetings are not published, and CSOs typically aren't permitted to discuss details of the meetings externally, limiting opportunities for movement building and sharing lessons learned with other organizations. This also prevents CSOs from publicly holding the IMF to account if any commitment is made during the meetings. Only in Zambia did the IMF indicate a formal process for recording and internally sharing the results of CSO engagement. Lack of formality enables IMF staff to do as they wish with the information and perspectives gathered in meetings, with no accountability thereafter. This is a recipe for breaking an already fragile trust between the IMF and CSOs if it exists to begin with.

Most engagement was of a bilateral nature between the IMF and CSOs. There was, however, evidence of occasional broader and tripartite engagement (joining government representatives and other stakeholders) or attempts toward it in Tunisia, Zambia and Ecuador. In Ghana, the creation of a strong collective CSO platform saw tripartite engagement dominate the process.<sup>22</sup> From the IMF interviewees' perspectives, these joint platforms are preferable and more effective in presenting the views of CSOs.

Formal engagement was referenced in the context of regional fora and headquarters engagement, largely at the Spring and Annual Meetings. In these spaces, CSOs working at the country level perceived such engagement as less meaningful and less accessible.<sup>23</sup> Interviewees in most countries (all excluding Ecuador) did not feel that their engagement at the Spring and Annual Meetings contributed to meaningful outcomes, considering the high cost that participating in these meetings usually entails. Interviews also revealed that resource limitations, especially the financial cost of participation, had impacted attendance at regional and Spring and Annual meetings. The shift to online engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic had somewhat ameliorated these restrictions, and one CSO interviewee in Tunisia noted that this online access to the Spring and Annual Meetings brought a welcome reduction in the high cost of attendance. Global North CSOs and the IMF had more positive views of the Spring and Annual Meetings and other formal engagement fora, such as regional and thematic consultations. This difference in perceptions between country-level and Global North CSOs may reflect the fact the Spring and Annual Meetings cover broader policy and program issues rather than country-specific engagement (and thus different priorities), but it could also reflect their differing capacities to engage (see below).

CSO engagement is facilitated and overseen by the IMF communications department both at country and headquarter levels. Personal contact with key communications individuals via email or WhatsApp is an important mechanism for CSOs to request engagement with the IMF but presents obvious issues in relation to systematization and accessibility for CSOs without these contacts. CSO engagement is largely conducted by IMF resident representatives or mission chiefs and their small staffing teams. The only resourcing issue mentioned by the IMF was that of time. When mission chiefs are in country, they have only 14 days to complete their mission. In all countries, at least one CSO felt that engagement with CSOs was a low priority for the IMF. Furthermore, there is an element of unpredictability to these engagements, as there is no publicly available calendar for IMF country missions that would enable CSOs to prepare in advance or request a meeting before the mission takes place. In many instances, CSOs either find out through a media report that a mission is imminent (or has already taken place) or are contacted by IMF staff inviting them to meet with just a few days' notice. The off-the-record nature of the meetings and the unpredictability also hinders CSOs' ability to coordinate effectively with one another in advance of meetings, should they wish to do so.

The off-the-record, unpredictable and undocumented nature of these engagements reinforces the power imbalance between the IMF and CSOs in these interactions. It also enables the Fund to control the narrative on stakeholder engagement; for example, when they issue a press statement announcing the outcomes of the mission and reaching a staff-level agreement on a program with authorities, and stating that they held consultations with various stakeholders, including CSOs.<sup>24</sup> This power imbalance is further reinforced by the disparity between both parties when preparing for engagement, in terms of both knowledge and logistics. Both

parties reported forms of logistical constraints, whether in relation to time or financial and human resources, as a key barrier to more meaningful engagement.

*'[Consultations with the IMF was] always off the record, always unaccountable, and then every year we had a staff-level meeting. Every other year it was a staff-level meeting with a more technical, broader picture scope, and every other year [it was] on leadership... They were like Chatham House rules but still with no document, and still nothing to release or to have anything [to hold the IMF accountable on] after.'*  
(CSO, Ecuador)

*'A letter was written... which addressed directly the executive directors to call attention to... IMF loan conditionalities and other impacts, effectively crippling the renewables industry and renewable market...'*  
(CSO, Pakistan)

These off the record required terms of engagement also limited CSOs' ability to share lessons learned and to network in their advocacy efforts, form a collective voice or hold the IMF publicly accountable for any commitment it might have made. This was particularly the case when engagement was conducted in a bilateral manner – which comprised the majority of engagement reported by CSOs interviewed, as mentioned above.

### **5.1.3 CSO CAPACITY TO ENGAGE WITH THE IMF**

The impacts of the IMF's choice about who to include in engagements and the off-the-record format of these engagements are compounded by the huge gap in capacity and technical expertise between the IMF and CSOs. One party is an institution that employs an army of the most technical and highly trained economists in the world; the other is a group of national CSOs with limited staff, resources and capacity. This massive gulf is not only a source of tension; it also allows IMF staff to dismiss CSO inputs, as often they are not judged to live up to IMF staff members' technical scrutiny and quality standards. This is especially likely when IMF staff expect to have technical discussions around the policies they are pushing.

Indeed, interviews with IMF staff revealed that they expect **CSOs to bring detailed analyses and discussion of policies or potential policies in the loan programs to meetings**. They also expect the engagement to provide a more holistic and independent analysis of economic trends and projections within the country. This would enable the IMF to assess and monitor the specific points under discussion, according to IMF respondents, while broader thematic or ideological claims could not be addressed by technical teams. This further skews power relations in favor of the IMF, as even when CSOs possess significant technical economic expertise it often pales in comparison to the technical might of the IMF, which comprises thousands of economists from the most elite academic institutions, and crucially, who have access to much more information, data and analysis. This is especially the case at the national level, where engagement is more often with smaller CSOs with modest staffing and resources, which are often stretched over a myriad of issues.

Furthermore, the ideological and cultural backgrounds of the Fund's staff often differ vastly from those of CSO representatives, sometimes creating irreconcilable ideological rifts. This is especially the case when CSOs engage with the IMF through a certain lens, such as a feminist or human rights approach, that the Fund has limited expertise on. The different sides end up speaking different languages unless the CSOs adopt the Fund's technical language, which also compounds the power imbalance. This also occurs when CSOs want to widen the scope of the discussions beyond the purely technical aspects of IMF policies and discuss the broader political economy for example. CSOs in both Zambia and Egypt stated that they found it difficult to engage with the IMF in a solely technical, non-political manner, because they felt corruption and other political issues directly impacted the economic fundamentals being discussed. Similar sentiments were expressed by CSOs in Ecuador and Argentina, while IMF staff also noted this frustration on the part of CSOs.

*'Sometimes they are frustrated that we cannot really deliver exactly what they would like us to do. And this is just because they don't know our own limitations ... we are of course dealing mostly with economic issues.'*  
(IMF, Tunisia)

*'...the beginning of the meeting is a reminder of what is feasible from an institutional point of view. I think often this is not clarified, because we sometimes get into the issues and there's quite a bit of passion in engagement with CSOs. But I feel maybe some CSOs do not see that, because they do not understand our starting point and end point and the process that we go through, so they may feel that we haven't gotten to the place they would like us to be.'*  
(IMF, Egypt)

While most CSOs felt they had the technical capacity to engage with the IMF over program conditions or macroeconomic issues, five interviewees felt they lacked this technical capacity. Capacity challenges were mainly reported by CSOs interviewed which had not previously interacted with the IMF in Pakistan, Ecuador and Zambia, among CSOs and required assistance from more experienced organizations to understand the IMF's terminology. CSOs largely engaged through staff who were economists or specialists dedicated to tracking the impact of IMF loans and reforms on the economy and on the most vulnerable people in their countries.

The most common technical limitation faced by CSOs in their engagement with the IMF was the timing of the IMF's release of information, and, related to this, CSOs' ability to prepare for meetings. Where engagement occurred before the signing of an agreement with the government, the tightly controlled and limited release of information on loan details prior to finalization prevented CSOs from being able to challenge specific policy conditionalities. CSOs also specifically pointed to information regarding debt, poverty and inequality impact assessments as a gap. This is not only a logistical issue but also reflects the asymmetry of access to information between the two parties. While the IMF has access to all relevant data

regarding the country's economic and financial situation, CSOs have little access to information due to confidentiality agreements the IMF has with the government. CSOs therefore usually find themselves having to argue and present their case with limited background information.

*'...we need information... about the issues and the negotiations between the government and the IMF. It is very important because [if] we know beforehand, we [can] prepare our ideas, defend the perspective of a just economic policy and defend the interests that we claim we represent.'*  
(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

In contrast to CSO perspectives, IMF staff considered some CSOs' technical capacity for discussion inadequate, particularly in relation to their understanding of how the IMF works and its mandate. This meant that IMF staff said they often fielded concerns from CSOs on issues that they have no control over. To minimize this knowledge gap, the IMF delivers introductory information sessions twice a year to CSOs interested in understanding the structure of the IMF, its mandate and other core functions. However, this reinforces the previous finding on the power asymmetry between the IMF and CSOs. In addition, CSOs often must go to tremendous effort to acquire the technical knowledge and capacity to meaningfully engage and challenge the IMF. Most of the time, CSOs must familiarize themselves with and master the language and terminology of the Fund in order to engage, while no similar effort is required on the part of the IMF. This disparity puts CSOs at an immediate disadvantage before the engagement even starts.

*'There's sort of a training/capacity building that the IMF used to run... for civil society organizations, just to kind of make them know what the IMF is, how it's structured, etc. ... Once there we struck quite a few good relationships with a couple of the IMF colleagues... we continued those conversations and were able to also have informal engagements with the IMF.'*  
(CSO, Zambia)

Two CSOs in Ecuador and Argentina reported having insufficient staffing to prepare for their engagement with the IMF, even if existing staff were technical experts. CSOs in Egypt, Ecuador and Argentina reported that the IMF's practice of only publishing official documents in English limited some CSOs' ability to analyze IMF materials. The IMF usually only translates press releases into different national languages, but not the loan documents that contain detailed information on conditionalities and analysis of the economic situation. This further impedes the engagement as well as feeding into the power imbalance between the different parties.

*'We have had many problems because the IMF documentation is never translated into Spanish...'*  
(Regional CSO, Ecuador)

## 5.2 A SIGNIFICANT GAP BETWEEN THE IMF'S AND CSOS' MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

CSOs and the IMF have different motivations for engaging with each other, and different expectations of what the other party requires of them. This is common in most exchanges between different parties with different interests, representation and mandates. Nevertheless, for engagements to be fruitful or lead to a satisfactory outcome for both parties, there needs to be a degree of convergence to reach a common conclusion. The interviews conducted in this study indicate that this is not happening. On the contrary, it appears that CSOs and the IMF operate on different planes where their respective motivations and expectations rarely meet, leading to frustration and tensions.

### 5.2.1 MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OR A TEMPERATURE CHECK?

The interviews with the different CSO representatives and IMF staff revealed a stark divergence in the motivations underlying their interest in engaging with each other. Whereas CSOs often seek to influence IMF recommendations and policies in their countries, IMF staff expressed that these meetings allow them to take a 'temperature check' on how the public might perceive the IMF program; they are also motivated to help CSOs better understand the Fund's role in the country. Thus, the IMF has sought to incorporate and give more meaning to CSO engagement by framing it as a way of understanding the country and economy they plan to assist, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to shape prospective loan programs. CSO motivations have remained largely consistent, with resistance to austerity measures and conditionalities that hurt people living in poverty often a fundamental motivating factor (in addition to those aiming to enhance transparency and accountability in their countries). The IMF's effort to engage with CSOs on the other hand does not seem to be motivated by a desire to change some of its bread-and-butter policies in programs.

**CSOs were motivated to engage with the IMF to shape policies and conditionalities in their respective countries, regardless of the individual country context.** Interviews revealed that the manner in which CSOs sought to influence IMF program policies usually aligned with the CSO's specific mission – e.g. social protection, anti-corruption, tax justice or debt justice, among others. Some CSOs recognized the necessity of IMF support for their country and wanted to build a working relationship with the Fund. Other CSOs saw the Fund as an opportunity to push for more financial and budgetary transparency and accountability from their governments. This transparency deficit was especially noted in countries with decreased civic space.

Only one CSO (in Tunisia) mentioned a motivation to connect with other CSOs through IMF-organized meetings and networking events. It is worth noting as an aside that the Global North organizations interviewed for this study saw engagement with the IMF as a space for pushing for broader institutional policy gains at the Fund:

*'Maybe working with the IMF can be a Trojan horse kind of way of working from the inside and trying to twist something internally....'*

(Regional CSO, Argentina)

In four of the seven case studies (Tunisia, Argentina, Zambia, and Ghana), CSOs indicated broader motivations for engaging with the IMF, such as a desire to change the Fund's approach in its loan programs and internal operations, or to reduce the country's dependence on debt. Across all case studies, some civil society actors sought to change the IMF's technical-only and non-political framing of its work and to challenge the traditional economic thinking represented and acted on by the IMF. These attitudes were particularly prominent in Tunisia and Argentina. In Ghana, the Economic Governance Platform (EGP) wanted to use its relationship with the IMF to collaboratively exert pressure on the government for stronger public finance management.

The IMF indicated that its engagement with CSOs was important for attaining a broad spectrum of economic analysis to inform program development. This motivation was coupled with IMF staff perceptions that the IMF needed to do more work on the ground to explain its role in the country to CSOs, including managing CSOs' expectations regarding what the IMF did or did not have influence over. In Zambia, the IMF stated that CSO engagement was one of the primary purposes of its in-country presence.

CSOs felt that the IMF was often motivated by a desire to defend its program and to explain the decisions it made in a one-way manner. CSO interviewees in half of the countries surveyed for this research also suggested that they felt the IMF was engaging with them not only to understand CSO priorities, but also to gauge potential public reaction to program conditionality. Adding to that, the way that the Fund functions and operates in delivering support to countries can disincentivize IMF staff from meaningful engagement that could help shape the prospective loan programs.

In this regard, global economic governance expert Ngaire Woods contends that IMF conditionality relies on a defined template that is 'necessary because it guides staff working in countries all over the world, permitting them to act with the full backing of their institution and to put agreements in place with a minimum of time and resources. Put another way, staff have no incentive to venture beyond what the institution as a whole will take responsibility for. The result is conformity, which is entrenched by the hierarchical way in which each institution is organized.'<sup>25</sup>

This seriously limits the possibility of IMF staff meeting, even partially, CSOs' expectations of engagement with them.



*'...instead of having an engagement with CSOs for the sake of having an engagement with CSOs, my view has always been that we should try to have a dialogue on what could be done, what ideas they have, [which] doesn't always mean that we will take this on board in our programs, but at least [we will] have a different kind of interaction...'*

(IMF, Tunisia)

*'Our understanding has been that they [the IMF] would want to understand what the expectations are from the civil society organization, what we think would be important to protect in the event that they accept to provide a program for our government. This is drawn from the bad experiences that the country had when we discussed the last main program, and the civil society organizations are perceived as the actors that might predict public reaction when it comes to such matters.'*

(CSO Collective Body, Zambia)

*'... in terms of expectations, again we have to deal with these misconceptions about how programs are made and how they are discussed with the authorities and so on. And also we have to temper expectations and be realistic on what can be incorporated.'*

(IMF, Tunisia)

*'I think because of pressure, the IMF started meeting with more CSOs and unions separately at their [CSOs'] request, but just at the very end [of the process], and mostly as a formality.'*

(CSO, Ecuador)

## **5.2.2 EXPECTING TO BE DISAPPOINTED**

IMF staff members' tendency to treat these engagements as a temperature check and as a way of moderating CSOs' expectations has been a source of further frustration for CSOs, since it inevitably leads to a 'clash of expectations'. In many cases there is no process initiated by Fund staff to reach an agreement or common understanding with CSOs on how to move forward, what kind of policies could be integrated and what could be amended in a potential loan program. It becomes a process where CSOs push for actual policy change, and IMF staff attempt to fend off their demands by adopting an explanatory approach on how IMF policies work and the process of reaching agreement with governments, focusing on technical discussions rather than 'political' ones. The outcome is often a sense of disenchantment among CSO representatives, who come to have even lower expectations of these engagements.

What the IMF and CSOs expect from engaging with each other is linked to their motivations for engagement and their pre-existing perceptions of the other party. One major area of misaligned expectations is around recognition of the real-world impacts of IMF programming on the most vulnerable people, and the political implications of IMF support. For example, interviews with staff revealed that the IMF still views CSOs challenging fiscal consolidation or questioning the Fund regarding human rights concerns and loan programs, as unproductive. Overall, while most CSOs reported underwhelming results from their engagement with the IMF, some CSOs in Zambia and Ecuador reported that their expectations were

exceeded in terms of the number of meetings and the level of detail in the discussions. This reflects the significant variability in perceptions of engagement across countries and organizations based on contextual factors such as timing, history of engagement and motivations.

**CSOs and the IMF had mismatched expectations as to what can and should be achieved through engagement.** While the IMF reported feeling that CSO expectations can at times be unreasonable, CSOs did not feel their expectations were unrealistic. This mismatch can lead to frustration and breakdown in communication. The IMF cited expectation management as one of its main challenges in engaging with CSOs, particularly for those with little or no prior experience of how the IMF operates. The IMF's focus on macroeconomic stability means it expects CSOs to engage with specific technical points that are within the Fund's mandate. Interviews revealed that the IMF perceived CSO expectations as exceedingly broad and sometimes political, meaning that from their perspective engagement was not as fruitful as it could have been. None of the interviewed CSOs reflected this view, however. CSOs expected to be able to present technical arguments to press the IMF to structure its programming in a way that ensures the most vulnerable people are protected from cuts to social spending, increases in the cost of living or changes to tax regimes. CSOs in all countries also wanted the IMF to recognize the political implications of its policies.

*'...what do we expect, will they change their attitude towards Egypt and Tunisia if they talk to us and we convince them? This will never happen. I think this is an institution, an international institution that reflects the interests of international powers, economic powers, and... the interests of local classes that benefit from the government borrowing from them and paying very high interest...'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

*'We have very low expectations of the meetings, and other members of the organization had participated in the past in these meetings and they said that the official IMF staff are not prepared to answer the difficult questions [and] that probably we were not going to have time to tackle all the issues.'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Argentina)

**CSOs in countries with longer histories of IMF engagement, such as Egypt and Argentina, had lower expectations.** These organizations and individuals sometimes displayed apathy towards the engagement process and felt that meetings with the IMF were only to discuss and voice their concerns about IMF policies, with no expectation that any major obligations or changes would occur as a result. Four CSO interviewees – two in Egypt, one in Pakistan and one in Argentina – felt that the outcomes of the meetings were predetermined, and that they should not expect any action from the IMF to result from the meetings. This view was reinforced by CSO awareness of examples where the IMF's own research sometimes contradicts the policies it implements.<sup>26</sup>

These lowered expectations are also reinforced by the structure of the IMF and how it operates, which further hinders how far engagement can go.

**Both CSOs and IMF staff displayed awareness that the IMF country teams'**

**capacity to incorporate CSO feedback was limited due to the decision-making power vested in the IMF Board and shareholder structure.** The neoliberal ideology entrenched in the IMF's approach, and how this translates into policy, also limits the possibility of including CSOs' inputs that go against neoliberalism's logic and premises. This touches upon long-standing structural and ideological predispositions within the IMF's political orientation and underpinnings. CSOs in Egypt and Argentina reported that IMF staff had indicated agreement with their presented points but admitted that they could not do much, because they were 'obliged' to follow standardized IMF protocols.

*'... Egypt has GDP growth, which gets a lot of praise from the IMF, and they also get a lot of praise for their austerity, like subsidy removal – I pointed out that if you look under the hood, the private sector is shrinking. FDI [foreign direct investment] is anemic outside of oil and gas, poverty has risen, labor force participation is down dramatically for women, purchasing power is low ... And the staffer basically said, 'I can't disagree with anything that you're saying, but our approach will not be the one that you would like probably.'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

## 5.3 ENGAGEMENT IS SHAPED BY THE DEGREE OF OPENNESS OF CIVIC SPACE

The IMF operates in many contexts, regardless of the human rights and civic space status in the countries in question. The Fund has fended off criticism by CSOs regarding its negotiations with authoritarian regimes, under the premise that human rights is not in the institution's mandate, in addition to the claim that the Fund does not interfere in national politics. IMF staff usually suggest that unless the Article of Agreements is amended to include such issues, they cannot address them. Nevertheless, civic space – or the lack of it – significantly shapes CSOs' engagement with the IMF, as well as their ability to influence the course of discussions and negotiations between IMF staff and governments.

### 5.3.1 'THE MORE DISRUPTIVE WE ARE, THE MORE WE ARE LISTENED TO'

CSOs' ability to pressure the IMF to engage meaningfully is highly dependent on their ability to act as a disruptive force in the relationship between the IMF and the national government. In countries where civic space allows such activity, the IMF undertook more meaningful engagement and showed greater responsiveness to CSO concerns. IMF recognition of the importance of open civic space in the engagement ecosystem is, however, neither overt nor formalized, as it claims that it does not interfere in domestic political issues.

**IMF engagement is often more rigorous and serious when non-government actors risk disrupting a program and its implementation.** This finding echoes previous literature on the issue. Belloni and Moschella found that reputational risk was a significant driver in IMF considerations, and that the impact of

[direct] civil society advocacy per se should not be overstated.<sup>27</sup> This does not necessarily mean that civil society advocacy towards the IMF was ineffective, rather that direct talks and lobbying were less effective than public-oriented campaigning that posed more public reputational risk for the IMF. CSO interviews and background literature show a correlation between increased IMF engagement in countries where significant social and political tensions emerged as a result of IMF negotiations.<sup>28</sup> Such cases include Ecuador, where large-scale demonstrations in reaction to the 2019 IMF loan brought the country to a halt for two weeks; Egypt in the post-2011 revolution period before the reinstallation of the military dictatorship; and Tunisia, where the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) was powerful enough to disrupt the formation of an IMF agreement.<sup>29</sup>

**No IMF interviewees reported having specific engagement mechanisms for different civic space contexts.** This presented both challenges and opportunities for CSOs in closed or repressed civic space contexts. In Pakistan, respondents reported risks of state surveillance due to engaging with the IMF. CSO respondents in Egypt reported security concerns even in conducting interviews as part of this research, and significant fears of repression in speaking to the IMF. In this context, informal engagement is thus one of the only ways that CSOs in Egypt could meaningfully engage with the IMF and thus the preferred mechanism for engagement. IMF responses displayed flexibility to conduct engagement in the manner of CSOs' choosing, including using secure online formats for engagement. However, it was not clear that the IMF grasped the extent of the risk to civil society engagement in certain contexts. Alarming, civic space is closing rapidly around the world with 70 percent of countries now categorized as 'closed' or 'repressed' according to CIVICUS.<sup>30</sup> This is a critical context for the IMF to understand and play its part to engage responsibly as well as help protect and promote this space.

### **5.3.2 ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN SHAPING IMF ENGAGEMENT WITH CSOS**

National governments – the member states of the IMF – are the only party the IMF has a mandate to work with to negotiate and develop loan programs. The IMF also positions the national government as the main representative of the public's voice and encourages CSOs to advocate through national government channels. However, the reality for many of the countries that the IMF works in is one of non-representative and authoritarian governments, often captured by the elite and sectors that side-line the interests of ordinary citizens.

**National governments pose an impediment to CSO engagement.** While IMF staff did not report any national government requests for them to refrain from engaging with civil society, indirect government measures limiting CSOs' ability to engage meaningfully, or at all, were noticeable in all countries. These measures differ in extremity – from Egypt's laws controlling CSO funding, which have forced many local and foreign NGOs to close, to prohibitions on and repressive responses (defined at minimum as police violence against protests) to public protest. It is also worth recalling that the IMF Board is comprised of these governments' representatives, who could also be resistant to the formalization or encouragement of CSO

engagement.

*'... if you know how the IMF works, it's usually very secret negotiations with the government, excluding even the Parliament; the government is not all included. I mean a small group of technical staff is included within the government, [but] not even the politicians [are included], all along the negotiation path till they get to an approval...'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

**National governments rarely facilitated or actively encouraged CSO engagement, either with the government or with the IMF.** Other than a seemingly unique case in Ghana (see Box 2), only in Zambia and Ecuador did CSOs report that the government had attempted to convene tripartite meetings between CSOs and the IMF. Interviews in Tunisia also referenced attempts at tripartite meetings that never materialized. In Ecuador, the IMF had formally encouraged the government to open spaces for dialogue with the public and CSOs, in anticipation of an adverse public reaction to the 2019 loan. One Ecuadorian CSO reported that a tripartite meeting was cancelled last minute and was not rescheduled, while in Zambia (where tripartite meetings occurred irregularly), some CSOs felt restricted in what they could say in front of government representatives. That the IMF perceives national governments as the ultimate client or interlocutor when it comes to agreeing loan programs disincentivizes governments from conducting meaningful national consultations on loan programs.

*'... [the government] tried to divide the organizations, and the organizations that opposed the IMF's economic plan were branded as 'communists' and the others as 'progressive' organizations, and in fact it was not due to economic disputes, but it affected the cooperation [between CSOs].'*

(Regional CSO, Ecuador)

Restrictions to CSO engagement with the IMF on loan programs can occur in different ways, especially through limiting civic space. This not only occurs at the level of prohibiting meetings but can also take the form of censoring media campaigns, violently repressing protest movements, and in some cases punishing activists and their family members in retaliation for engaging with the IMF and/or criticizing the government. The near-universal unpopularity of the IMF's programs means that the risk of public discontent drawing a repressive response of some sort was prevalent in all country case studies.

*'We still have a decree that gives a lot of leeway to government to close an organization if they wanted to... We have not seen [this happen] in this government yet... but we are vigilant... there was an example of the feminist movement where you saw repression from the police, and this was not an incendiary protest.'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Ecuador)

*'... previously it [civic space] was terrible. I mean there were situations where part of our group was being arrested. I remember there was actually a training where they were arrested, where they were trying to teach on*

*budget transparency. So the civic space back then was very difficult.*'  
(CSO, Zambia)

Another common way for governments to attempt to restrict the space of civil society is to send government-affiliated CSOs to meetings. Indeed, the IMF also engages with government-organized NGOs (or GONGOs), which tend to present a positive image of the government and relevant issues. These organizations are often highly compromised, lack independence, and serve to divert the conversation away from independent CSO voices.

They can also act as a rubberstamp, enabling the government to confirm that it has consulted with various actors before proposing the reform program to the IMF. Individual academics in Egypt reported attending meetings in which GONGOs presented misleading information to the IMF, and where they felt unable to present their own arguments due to the risk of being reported to the national authorities by GONGO staff. CSOs in Zambia also perceived the government's recruitment of some CSO staff into government positions as a tactic to dilute civil society efforts and bring them on board with the government's stance.

In Egypt, all CSOs identified the closed nature of civic space and potential threats to their security as the main constraint on their capacity to engage with the IMF. The IMF acknowledged these concerns, and while it did not have any specific approaches to mitigate security risks, it was open to engagement through any means to ensure that the CSOs felt secure. As a clear example of this threat, in November 2020, officials of one of the key active CSOs in Egypt were arrested under terrorism charges by the authorities.<sup>31</sup> The CSO in question has been one of the main watchdogs and critics of the IMF-supported program in Egypt. These practices have seriously curtailed Egyptian CSOs' abilities to engage with the IMF, leaving the most substantial engagement on Egypt to regional and international CSOs.

The IMF acknowledges the risks and implications for CSOs engaging with the Fund in more closed civic spaces. IMF staff were universally cognizant of the potential risks to civil society in engaging with them in all contexts, though few reported that they had experienced or were aware of government actions to repress civil society before or after engagement. The informal nature of most IMF engagement enabled flexibility in this regard, by allowing CSOs to engage in a discreet manner.

*'I believe that now the IMF is the country's main command center; everything passes through the IMF... it affects the rule of law, because what the period of reforms has generated is a wave of opposition that is being responded to with authoritarianism, and that is being responded to with instability in the National Assembly... we are always very surprised how it is that there are so many consequences for the economy, for the rule of law, and the IMF always disassociates itself from responsibility.'*  
(Regional CSO, Ecuador)

*'Of course, in a meeting in Washington, it's much easier than in a meeting in Cairo. But still if the government is there, you have this feeling [that affects] whatever you can ask for or demand... So the political situation has an*

*impact, a huge impact, on what can be said, what can be achieved.*  
(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

**CSO and IMF motivations to engage did not vary according to the degree of openness of civic space in the country.** No strong patterns emerged in interviews to suggest that CSOs' motivations to engage with the IMF (and vice versa) changed depending on whether they operated in a closed, obstructed or open environment. Rather, the same range of motivations appeared to exist across all categories of civic space status for both CSOs and the IMF.

#### **Box 1: Argentina**

**Parliamentary approval of IMF agreements can grant CSOs more direct input into government decisions.** Argentina was the only case study country where the government required parliamentary approval to agree to an IMF loan. This enabled CSOs to lobby individual MPs and ministerial staff, which had an eventual influence on the parliamentary vote on the IMF program, where one-third of government MPs did not approve the loan. Large-scale street protests and direct engagement with the IMF also pressured the government to better represent the public interest. The CSO in Argentina with a good deal of experience in IMF negotiations described the eventual loan as 'better than we expected.' There was a sense that this was in part due to the government itself having members who were formerly part of unions and CSOs, and so were more receptive to civil society ideas.

## **5.4 MEANINGFULNESS OF IMF-CSO ENGAGEMENT VARIES AND THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE OF IMPACT**

The extent to which IMF-CSO engagement is meaningful is subjective, based on individual and institutional perceptions; however, the willingness to enter into a mutual respectful dialogue and protocols put in place regarding engagement can indicate the sincerity of each party's efforts. Effective protocols – including sufficient notice of meetings, substantive engagement on points of disagreement, follow-up and accountability mechanisms and evidence of incorporating engagement results into loan programs – are important if the IMF is to develop and maintain the willingness and trust of CSOs, and ultimately to ensure the meaningfulness of CSO engagement.

**Different CSOs operating within the same country had conflicting perceptions of whether the IMF's engagements with them were meaningful.** In Zambia and Ecuador, some civil society representatives said they felt that the IMF staff with whom they engaged genuinely seemed to want to understand their country's social and economic context. In these same two countries, however, other CSO representatives had the impression that their conversations with the IMF only satisfied a formality for the Fund, rather than being part of a sincere effort to incorporate civil society concerns into its loan programs.

*'I often just got the impression that they were just sort of gaslighting us... you would meet with them, and they would like always agree to the meeting, always be very polite, but just kind of deny things that were happening; try to sort of minimize them, and then make promises that they never followed up on.'*

(CSO, Ecuador)

*'The other challenge that I think has been observed in this engagement is that mostly [the IMF] is reactive instead of being proactive... I think that's the missing link in the conversation, in terms of getting to influence the decisions as we go on.'*

(CSO, Zambia)

Another factor that could hinder these engagements leading to a tangible impact is the limited time for engagement and minimal time for preparation, especially when engagement starts just before the Fund reaches an agreement with the government, or only after staff-level agreements have already been signed. This phenomenon varied significantly depending on whether there was an IMF resident representative in the country or if only a country mission had engaged with the CSOs. Country missions only have 14 days to conduct negotiations and consultations with all stakeholders in-country, according to the IMF. Resident representatives are typically only appointed to countries where IMF programs have begun operating.

**For many CSOs, meaningfulness also related directly to the IMF's inclusivity**, as this indicated extra effort by the Fund to demonstrate its commitment to considering CSO perspectives and understanding the country context. In Tunisia, for example, the IMF's inclusion of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) in loan discussions reflected for CSOs both the Fund's desire to implement positive change for the public, as well as a sensitivity to and awareness of Tunisian socio-political dynamics. The personalities and initiatives of individual IMF staff representatives also had a substantial influence on CSOs' impressions of the meaningfulness of engagement, for better or worse. A new mission chief or a resident representative who is more willing to listen to CSOs and more sensitive to their concerns can go a long way in making the engagements significantly more meaningful, or at least feel like they are.

*'The IMF is listening, it is actively listening. I've had meetings before where the IMF officials don't really listen, because if it doesn't fit in with what they want or if it doesn't interest them, they don't really listen, and sometimes they don't even bother to respond, to counterargue. This is not at all the case with the meetings that are underway, where the current resident [representative] or the head of missions before him takes care to note down everything, including the arguments that can sometimes be strong against their own approach... even if sometimes they are a bit in a flare-up...'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Tunisia)

Civil society actors who expressed dissatisfaction regarding their experience with the IMF consistently pointed to the lack of transparency and resulting disappointment in the reviews of the IMF-supported program. Some of the discussions with the IMF felt repetitive to CSOs and lacked follow-up. Furthermore, one CSO representative said they wanted to see the



IMF take more responsibility – and be more accountable – for the performance of the loan program and review, rather than crediting the government with the policy design and implementation or blaming them for it. CSO attitudes towards the IMF risked deteriorating due to this perceived insensitivity or inaction.

Overall, IMF staff reported that they felt their engagement with civil society was important to their work and provided meaningful inputs to their understanding of a country's economic position. However, IMF staff did report that mismatched expectations and motivations meant that meetings with some CSOs were not productive.

It is relevant that there is a lack of clarity regarding how much governments themselves, let alone civil society, are shaping programs. Governments and the IMF hide behind one other to avoid taking responsibility for loan programs. Both parties have the capacity to shift responsibility for unpopular reforms onto the other party, in an attempt to deflect public anger. The IMF has formalized government responsibility for loan programs in the concept of 'government ownership' and 'sovereignty', framing the outcomes of negotiations as results of the government's choices. At the same time, there is no denying which party holds greater power in the negotiation and the IMF has a track record of prescribing very similar and unpopular policies in differing country contexts around the world.

*'Obviously the IMF always likes to present [its loan programs] as a home-grown policy that the government is coming up with. But the IMF parameters around it determine what the government can do. It's disingenuous of the IMF to present itself as not a powerful institution, and so they should be accountable as well.'*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Zambia)

### **5.4.1 CSO PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT**

Looking for tangible impacts of CSO engagement on IMF loan programs is a crucial step in assessing how the process is operating. The confidential nature of engagement, however, places major limitations on tracking results and checking the veracity of either party's claims regarding their experiences and intentions. Both parties were asked to provide evidence indicating changes to IMF programming that resulted from their engagement.

**Evidence of CSO impacts on IMF loan programs was rare in countries where interviews were conducted, but individual cases in Ecuador, Zambia and Egypt did reveal some limited impacts on IMF loan programs, while CSO impact in Ghana was significant** (see Box 2). This lack of evidence relates partly to the informality of CSO engagement and to the IMF's mechanisms to ensure confidentiality surrounding engagement and negotiations, which make it hard to track the impact of CSO engagement. However, most CSOs interviewed who had engaged with the IMF did not feel their engagement had any major impact. Fewer than five provided identifiable examples of

direct impacts, which included inputs on fertilizer subsidies in Zambia, report references to military-owned enterprises in Egypt, and elements related to transparency and social spending in Ecuador. While the data collected for this paper had already concluded by the time the 2022 Zambia loan was approved, there is anecdotal evidence of civil society influencing that outcome, while there also exists critique of that engagement.<sup>32</sup>

That said, discussions between IMF staff and CSOs in Tunisia seemed encouraging, but the loan program documents for Tunisia will only be published after Board approval, thus the details of the forthcoming IMF-supported program remain unknown. The impact of CSO engagement on previous loans since the democratic transition in Tunisia are not clear. In Egypt, CSOs referenced seeing elements of their feedback on non-core issues, such as gender and the environment, incorporated into the loan program, but noted these issues did not seem to feature in or influence the conditionality. In Ghana, the coordinated efforts of local and international CSOs created a public profile that was so strong it could not be ignored by the IMF (see Box 2).<sup>33</sup>

*‘For us, it mostly felt like we were being used as a kind of decoration. IMF policies don’t really change no matter what’s happening; most of the changes are kind of cosmetic, just for appearance. We felt that helping launder their image for no discernible interest for us was not the best use of our time or effort. As of now, our engagement with the IMF is usually mediated with people, such as, let’s say [if] Oxfam wants to engage with the IMF, they will contact us...’*

(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

*‘I’ve seen an increasing appreciation and understanding of the relevance of issues related to governance, and developments in social sectors related to, you know, inequality, poverty, gender issues. We are an institution that deals with macro issues... we develop our own expertise to some extent, but then we also want to rely on the views and the expertise of others outside the Fund...’*

(IMF, Egypt)

#### Box 2: Ghana

Of all the case studies, Ghana represented the most successful **example of meaningful engagement between CSOs and the IMF**. This success was due to several factors which collectively amplified the power of Ghanaian civil society with respect to the IMF. These included: the formation of a joint coalition of over 11 CSOs in 2014, known as the Civil Society Platform on the IMF Programme – now the Economic Governance Platform (EGP); structured preparation and capacity building among the coalition prior to and during IMF engagement; the support of Global North actors such as Oxfam in accessing IMF decision makers and political stakeholders at headquarters level; detailed research and published analysis of the issues up for discussion;<sup>34</sup> and public-facing awareness and advocacy campaigns which included experts and stakeholders from different sectors. These combined factors meant the coalition’s goals and concerns could not be ignored.

The Civil Society Platform on the IMF Programme (‘the Platform’) was principally responsible for ensuring the success of civil society negotiations with the IMF.

First, the Platform successfully united the negotiating positions of Ghana's disparate civil society, bolstering its legitimacy in the eyes of the IMF. This was imperfect and the Platform acknowledged, for example, that it did not adequately represent the interests of rural Ghanaian civil society.<sup>35</sup> Second, the Platform used its networks to increase the number of opportunities it had for influencing policy outcomes. In particular, the Oxfam Washington DC office secured meetings between the Platform and the IMF headquarters during the program negotiation process, which enabled the Platform to advocate for the inclusion of its policy recommendations in the final agreement. Analysis by a leading member of the Platform suggests that such engagement at IMF headquarters precipitated further meetings between the Platform and IMF's Ghana country office, through which the Platform was able to further promote its policy agenda.<sup>36</sup>

A key ingredient was the openness of the then Ministry of Finance as well as the IMF mission chief, which paved the way for a productive discussion and meaningful engagement that led to a tangible impact.

Outcomes included improving fiscal discipline, deepening accountability and transparency, and linking stabilization to transformation. Consequently, 15 pro-poor and social protection spending measures were preserved within the terms of a three-year IMF loan.<sup>37</sup>

**Other noticeable impacts of CSO engagement were seen in countries where civil society disrupted loan negotiations or program implementation through civil unrest and protest.** These instances, notably in Tunisia, Ecuador and Argentina, witnessed more thorough IMF engagement with civil society in response, and in the case of Argentina led to the passing of a loan program which contained less harsh measures than civil society had initially expected. This outcome reflects the historical trend that the IMF tends to respond most meaningfully to major disruptive public pressure – as was seen following the public protests of the 1980s and 1990s, which catalyzed discussion of CSO engagement.

*'It's not about whether or not the opinion of civil society is an interest in shaping the policy. It's whether or not the opinion of civil society has consequence to them [the IMF] in terms of the ability to implement a policy. And so having more civic space means building more power.'*  
(Economic Issues Advocate, Egypt)

**The IMF often has higher transparency standards for budgetary spending than some of the member state governments it partners with.** In these contexts, a positive impact from CSO-IMF engagement is that it helps both CSOs and the IMF to push the government to comply with certain levels of transparency. The IMF also sometimes provides CSOs with more information about their country's overall economic circumstances than national governments do.

# 6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The case studies this paper is based on are certainly not exhaustive or representative of all IMF engagements with CSOs over the past years. Nevertheless, they give an idea as to how these engagements are conducted, and their limits. IMF engagements with CSOs are characterized by a clear imbalance of power, skewed towards arguably one of the most important and influential institutions in the global economy, which shapes domestic socio-economic policies in many countries in the Global South. These case studies also reveal a striking rift between the two parties' expectations and their motivations behind these engagements, where IMF and CSOs often effectively speak different languages and rarely reach satisfactory conclusions. The interviews with both IMF staff and CSO representatives demonstrated the IMF's lack of understanding of the needs and wants of CSOs engaging with them. This often leads to CSOs struggling to identify positive impacts from these engagements and questioning their usefulness.

Baseline literature and academics interviewed for this report indicated that the IMF has in the past displayed a conceptual lack of understanding of the link between its work and the resulting impacts on national politics and populations' living standards, due to its focus on macroeconomic reform and its self-framing as a technical institution only.<sup>38</sup> This gap in understanding was observed in the course of this research as a source of misaligned motivations, expectations and perceptions of meaningfulness between the IMF and CSOs.

There is no doubt that the IMF's institutional culture is changing, but its 2015 CSO engagement guidelines are clearly insufficient a tool to ensure institutionalization and systematic or meaningful engagement with CSOs. IMF staff explained that the guidelines were an element of a non-binding communications strategy and are yet to be incorporated in official engagement policy. No CSOs participating in this research reported knowledge of the guidelines, nor did IMF country staff refer to the guidelines. For the IMF to move significantly towards more meaningful and genuine engagement with CSOs, especially at the national level, it can take the following concrete measures:

## 6.1 IMPLEMENT NEW IMF POLICY ON ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

- The IMF should have an Executive Board approved policy and associated guidance note that is widely consulted on with civil society, and which requires IMF staff to engage and consult in meaningful ways with civil society. While the IMF has the current 2015 guidelines for engagement with civil society this is far from sufficient in scope and in mandate.<sup>39</sup> The

new policy should include a clear definition of civil society and articulate mechanisms for how to engage in different contexts and adapted to the purpose of the mission (Article IV consultations, loan discussions and negotiations, etc.). The IMF should differentiate between private sector commercial bodies and CSOs, given the former's particular interests and their generally privileged access and position.

- Mission chiefs should be required to meet with a wide range of stakeholders from civil society during each mission to the country while negotiating loan programs and during review missions of existing programs. This should include women's rights organizations; organizations working on economic, fiscal justice and anti-corruption issues to name a few; and worker representatives, including care workers. As the IMF identifies and builds its work on 'macro-critical' issues such as inequality, climate change, gender and anti-corruption, it should increasingly engage with CSOs with expertise on those issues.

## 6.2 IMPROVE MEANINGFULNESS AND IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT

- IMF engagement with CSOs, especially around loan programs and Article IV consultations, should be predictable, structured and planned to allow CSOs enough time to schedule and prepare for meetings with the Fund's staff and be clear about the purpose of these meetings. The IMF should publish a mission calendar (Article IV or loan discussions) for each country at least two months before the mission. The publicly available calendar would also allow CSOs who are not in the IMF's database or are not usually included to request participation. This should not necessarily substitute meetings requested by specific groups of CSOs to the mission, which could be needed for specific reasons. In the same manner, there is a need for IMF resident representatives to have predictable and regular meetings with civil society throughout the year.
- The IMF should incorporate CSO inputs as a systematic section in Article IVs and loan documents to explicitly demonstrate the views of CSOs and how these have been responded to. This should be done in a way that takes into account civic space constraints and risks, through anonymizing the names of individuals or organizations who provided input unless they otherwise consent.
- The IMF should be more transparent with the media and civil society on its negotiations with governments. It should disclose proposed policy reforms well ahead of finalizing them with governments and in advance of meetings with civil society.
- The IMF should systematically develop and disclose social/distributional impact assessments of policy proposals in advance to inform its discussions with civil society.
- The IMF should build its own capacity and understanding of social and human rights issues and hire staff members with a more diverse range of expertise and ideological backgrounds, to support more meaningful engagement with civil society.

- The IMF should ensure that corrective mechanisms for loan programs are in place by creating a feedback mechanism, where various stakeholders including civil society can input, built into the six-month loan review period. It should commit to course correction when IMF policy conditionality is found to be resulting in negative social and human rights impacts.
- In addition to meeting with civil society bilaterally, the IMF should encourage the government to meet with civil society on IMF-related operations. It should also encourage tripartite meetings, where civil society (including unions), the government and the IMF can sit at the same table to discuss policies and recommendations for reforms.

## 6.3 FACTOR IN CIVIC SPACE

- The IMF should conduct civic space and political capture risk assessments before engaging with countries.<sup>40</sup> This would enable it to assess whether a prospective loan program would contribute to enabling civic space restrictions or closure and political capture, and design measures to mitigate the risks both in the program and in the forms of engagement.
- The degree of civic space openness should shape the engagement mechanism, including how formal and how 'on the record' it is, obtaining the consent of CSOs, including taking the necessary security measures to ensure their safety. There should consistently be clarity and commitment on what will happen with the information discussed in meetings.
- The IMF should include issues related to civic space in dialogue with borrower governments, including discussing the importance of open civic space to quality engagement with stakeholders and the success of loan programs.
- The IMF should develop a public position on retaliation against civil society as a result of engagement with the Fund. This should articulate that the IMF does not tolerate any action by governments or other parties – including threats, intimidation, harassment, violence or obstruction of the ability to participate or work – against those who engage with the IMF or voice their opinion regarding IMF activities or IMF-backed policies. This should be accompanied by a policy and guidance note on how IMF staff should respond in such instances.

# ANNEX 1: DETAILED COUNTRY PROFILES

## EGYPT

### **CIVICUS STATUS: CLOSED<sup>41</sup>**

While Egypt's history of IMF loan programs dates back to the late 1960s, the country's recent history with the IMF may be traced to the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution that was ignited in January 2011. Discussions between the Egyptian government and the IMF on a loan program began in 2012. Fearing the austerity measures proposed and their potential impact on workers, people in poverty and inequality, social movements and CSOs including unions mobilized against the IMF deal and succeeded.<sup>42</sup> However, the Sisi regime that came to power following the coup in 2013 resumed discussions with the IMF while repressing descending voices through the notorious 2013 anti-protest law, reach an agreement with the Fund in 2016 for an SDR of 8.6 billion (\$12bn) under an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) loan program.<sup>43</sup> The EFF, which was disbursed during 2019, was preceded by prior actions, including introducing VAT, and the program contained a number of reforms, including measures to strengthen public finances, fiscal transparency and governance measures, and the publication of the finances of State-Owned Enterprises (SOE).<sup>44</sup> The EFF was conditional on major austerity measures, including targeting deficit reduction by cutting public subsidies; capping public sector wages; liberalizing fuel and electricity prices; and floating the Egyptian pound. Inflation peaked at 34% in 2017.<sup>45</sup> The reform program was heavily criticized by CSOs as poverty increased and social hardship was exacerbated.<sup>46</sup>

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the IMF provided the Egyptian government with \$8bn in loans, consisting of \$2.8bn through the Rapid Financing Instrument in May 2020 and \$5.4bn in the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) approved in June 2020 and extended over the following 12 months.<sup>47</sup> Most recently, the Egyptian government approached the IMF for financial support in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; the IMF responded that this would require deeper structural reforms.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, the IMF Executive Board approved a 46-month \$3bn EFF loan on December 16 2022.<sup>49</sup>

Transparency has remained an issue for the IMF in its engagement with the Egyptian government. In June 2020, eight organizations wrote to the IMF accusing it of a lack of transparency for not publishing the project documents for the SBA.<sup>50</sup> The organizations urged the IMF to approve the loan 'if there are sufficiently rigorous anti-corruption requirements in line with the Framework on Enhanced Governance adopted by the Fund in 2018, as well as its commitments to ensuring its response to Covid-19

consistently includes effective anti-corruption requirements and robust engagement with civil society.’ This came in the context of President Sisi’s 2016 ouster of Hisham Geneina, head of the Central Auditing Agency who was appointed by the ousted president Morsi, after the top auditor said in media statements that government corruption had cost the country about \$76bn in just four years – roughly 5% of Egypt’s GDP every year. Geneina is now serving a five-year prison sentence for ‘spreading false news.’

The IMF’s website states that ‘IMF staff, including the IMF’s Senior Resident Representative office in Cairo, is available to engage with representatives of civil society groups, parliamentarians, academics and youth leaders through information sharing, dialogue, and consultation at both the global and national level.’<sup>51</sup>

## PAKISTAN

### **CIVICUS STATUS: REPRESSED**

Since independence in 1947, civil society in Pakistan has had a chequered history.<sup>52</sup> Pakistani civil society enjoyed relative freedom under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from 1971-1977, but civic space became more restrictive following Bhutto’s ouster by General Zia-ul-Haq, who imposed outright bans on labor unions, student unions and social movements. This was followed by a third military ruler, Pervez Musharraf who was in power from 1999 to 2007 and gave increasing power to the anti-progressive forces and imposed emergency rule.<sup>53</sup> Civic space opened once again under the premiership of Benazir Bhutto, although Nawaz Sharif, who governed on two successive occasions after Bhutto, banned trade unions.

Further restrictions were placed on civic space with the dominance of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in the 2010s. Of particular significance is the November 2013 administrative order issued by the PML-N, which imposes additional registration requirements on international and domestic NGOs.<sup>54</sup> Domestic NGOs are now required to register with the Economic Affairs Division of the Finance Ministry, imposing an extra administrative burden.

The IMF has provided two loan programs to Pakistan since the start of 2010. The first was an SDR 4.39 billion (\$6.4bn) Extended Fund Facility (EFF), arranged on September 4, 2013.<sup>55</sup> The terms of the 2013 EFF imposed a host of reforms on the Pakistani economy, including a range of expanded taxes; granting independence to Pakistan’s central bank; privatizing state-owned enterprises, including the unbundling of the energy sector; higher electricity tariffs; and government deficit reduction.<sup>56</sup> The IMF’s report makes no mention of civil society consultation; rather, popular support for the program is assumed by the ‘strong electoral mandate’ that the PML-N enjoyed at the time of the loan agreement.<sup>57</sup>

The second loan came in the form of a second EFF introduced in July 2019 and was later supplemented with amendments to support Pakistan’s COVID-19 response in 2020. This EFF aimed, in the IMF’s words, to ‘support



Pakistan's policies to help the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, ensure macroeconomic and debt sustainability, and advance structural reforms to lay the foundations for strong, job-rich, and long-lasting growth that benefits all Pakistanis.<sup>58</sup>

There is little evidence either in IMF or media reporting to suggest that the IMF has conducted stakeholder engagement with CSOs in Pakistan in the context of its COVID-19 support mechanisms, principally represented by its EFF. The IMF has stated that 'since the onset of the COVID-19 shock, the [Pakistani] authorities and IMF team have been engaged on discussions to continue with the implementation of the economic reform program supported by the IMF EFF. The discussions revealed that making progress would necessitate a thorough recalibration of the macroeconomic policy mix and the structural reforms calendar, as well as a modification of the EFF's review schedule.'<sup>59</sup>

The IMF suspended disbursements under the 2019 EFF in the first half of 2022, as the government wasn't ready to scrap energy and fuel subsidies – a condition for the Fund to resume disbursement. This loan program has been a source of controversy. In March 2022, student and labor unions held demonstrations in Lahore in protest at the IMF's austerity and privatization agenda.<sup>60</sup> The government later went ahead to fulfil the austerity conditions and the loan disbursement resumed in June 2022.

## ECUADOR

### **CIVICUS STATUS: OBSTRUCTED**

Ecuador's latest IMF loan program began in 2019, when the then-president Moreno requested a \$4.2bn loan under the Extended Financing Facility. This request did not come as the result of an acute economic crisis, but rather due to a long-term budget deficit issue. Ecuador has a fully dollarized economy. Even though local CSOs report suspecting that the Ecuadorian government began talks with the IMF in late 2017, public consultation regarding the loan was deliberately avoided by the government, and there was an official denial that any loan had been agreed to just three months before it was officially announced. Indeed, by the time the loan was announced, several controversial preconditions for the loan had already been met by the government.<sup>61</sup>

The resulting agreement, which began in the first half 2019, resulted in the immediate implementation of austerity measures, including cuts to public sector jobs and subsidy removals, as well as regressive labor laws. Objections to these measures were raised publicly at the time by leading Ecuadorian CSOs.<sup>62</sup> Particularly important was the impact of IMF conditionality on Ecuador's health sector, where 3,680 health workers were dismissed by the Ministry of Public Health in 2019.<sup>63</sup> This measure, as well as further public spending cuts, drastically exacerbated the impact of the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic on Ecuador.<sup>64</sup>

Detailed civil society analysis of the IMF's agreement with Ecuador

highlighted major flaws in the IMF's projections and planned outcomes for the deal, which the IMF admitted would push Ecuador into recession, with a projected a rise in unemployment over the first three years of the program.<sup>65</sup> The CSO analysis (which uses the IMF's own calculations as the basis of its critique) highlighted ongoing contradictions between what IMF research finds, and the eventual outcomes of country programs. This is also despite the IMF acknowledging likely 'social and political opposition' to the program.<sup>66</sup> Civil society groups were among other actors to file lawsuits claiming the program violated Ecuador's constitution, due to the aggressive private sector-oriented reforms and privatizations it required.<sup>67</sup>

In late 2019, the IMF conditionality stipulating the removal of fuel subsidies led to widespread protests and civil unrest in Ecuador, with a large popular mobilization by civil society, particularly Indigenous groups and unions, especially the transportation union.<sup>68</sup> The protests and their negotiators – led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador – were successful in forcing the government to reverse the austerity measures bill that included cuts to fuel subsidies, and the government was forced to renegotiate its program with the IMF. The renegotiation took place after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which Ecuador was very badly affected by, in part because of the cuts to its health sector spending required by IMF programming, as mentioned above. As a result, the government cancelled the program in 2020.<sup>69</sup>

In September 2020, the IMF approved a renegotiated \$6.5bn 27-month program under the EFF to support the stabilization of the economy, expand social protections and strengthen domestic institutions.<sup>70</sup> This included a portion of emergency funding for Ecuador's COVID-19 response.<sup>71</sup> Days prior to this agreement a coalition of Ecuadorian and international CSOs and individuals signed an open letter to the IMF, published in *The Guardian*, calling on the Fund to recognize at the minimum the disastrous impacts its 2019 agreement with Ecuador had had on human rights and healthcare in the country.<sup>72</sup> Transparency International analysis indicates that while the Ecuadorian government had committed to greater transparency in procurement in accordance with its IMF loan program and emergency pandemic loan conditionality, implementation had been weak.<sup>73</sup>

At the time of writing, Ecuador is witnessing a second, stronger wave of public protest from Indigenous and labor organizations against the economic policies of the Lasso government, many of which are linked to conditionalities of the IMF's latest loan. The protests were effective in forcing Lasso to raise fuel subsidies, cancel a decree meant to ease access for oil exploration, revise a mining decree to be more sensitive to Indigenous land rights and work with Indigenous groups on economic development policies.<sup>74</sup>

# TUNISIA

## CIVICUS STATUS: REPRESSED

In the 1990s, the IMF's structural adjustment program in Tunisia resulted in the country being heralded as one of the IMF's 'success stories', even as these policies failed to restore the high rates of savings, investment and growth that the country had witnessed before the 1980 debt crisis.<sup>75</sup> The 1990 package, which saw Tunisia closely adhering to the IMF's prescriptions, did not result in improved rates of growth of exports of goods and services or an improvement in the trade balance, although there were some improvements in the current account balance. Debt as a percentage of GDP did decline but failed to reach the low levels it had witnessed prior to the crisis of 1980. The neoliberal policies advanced in Tunisia during this period significantly contributed to igniting the revolution in December 2010.<sup>76</sup>

Tunisia's more recent engagement with the IMF began after the 2011 revolution, resulting in the approval of a 24-month \$1.7bn Stand-By Arrangement in June 2013.<sup>77</sup> The SBA was contingent on a series of austerity measures, including tax reductions for the corporate sector; tax increases for consumers; pension reform; subsidy reductions; labor market deregulation; public sector salary freezes; and the privatization of public banks.<sup>78</sup> The outcome of these proposed reforms was a series of public protests in 2013, led by Tunisian labor union the UGTT. Additional public protest led to Al-Nahda's resignation from power in October 2013, with a technocratic caretaker government led by Mehdi Jomaa appointed in January 2014. Even in the face of continued public opposition, substantial price increases were implemented.<sup>79</sup>

Yet despite Tunisia's implementation of some IMF reforms, growth has remained sluggish in the ensuing decade. The Tunisian economy has expanded at an average of 0.6%, while inflation has risen around 6% each year. A further \$2.9bn loan approved in May 2016 as an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) has done little to address this.<sup>80</sup> Tunisia has instead relied on substantial funding through external bilateral and private creditors to support its economy.<sup>81</sup> The IMF suspended disbursement of the loan in 2017 due to lack of progress, notably on the public wage bill, which is still a contentious issue.<sup>82</sup> The disbursement eventually resumed. However, the Tunisian government cancelled the loan in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country.<sup>83</sup>

In October 2022, Tunisia and the IMF reached a staff-level agreement on an EFF of \$1.9bn. The IMF Executive Board was expected to approve the loan program in December 2022 but this was postponed to an unspecified date. Although the details of the program remain undisclosed, the press release announcing the agreement said the new program aims to 'phase out generalized wasteful subsidies.'<sup>84</sup> The latest loan agreements come in the context of COVID-19 related stresses to Tunisia's economy, as well as long-term structural issues.

# ZAMBIA

## CIVICUS STATUS: OBSTRUCTED

In December 2021, the newly elected Zambian government reached a staff-level agreement with the IMF for a \$1.4bn bailout package following a default on its debt. The country's total external debt grew from 18% of GDP in 2010 to 120% and stands at \$14.5bn, or 50% of government revenues.<sup>85</sup> Currently more than three-quarters of Zambia's debt is held by commercial entities (through bonds and other loans) and China.<sup>86</sup>

The Board's approval of the loan was pending, subject to formation of a creditor's committee under the G20 Common Framework to restructure Zambia's debt.<sup>87</sup> Following the formation of a creditor's committee, the IMF Executive Board approved the loan program in August 2022. Nevertheless, progress in debt restructuring negotiations has been very slow.

Statements by umbrella CSOs indicate that Zambian civil society view the IMF loan program positively on the basis that it will restore investor confidence in the country.<sup>88</sup> Similar groups have also publicly expressed their desire for the government to be more transparent about its negotiating position and the economic analysis it is employing.<sup>89</sup> An alliance of civil society groups has been vocal about internal government mismanagement that led to Zambia's debt problems, and the need to protect social protection programs.<sup>90</sup>

There has been an opening of civic space in Zambia under the new government, and CSOs – which represent both pro-<sup>91</sup> and anti-IMF positions<sup>92</sup> – have been actively engaged in public media campaigns regarding the potential risks and benefits of a loan program. Those in the anti-IMF loan camp are arguing for more aggressive debt write offs and restructuring, while those in the pro-IMF loan camp see the loan as necessary to make Zambia's debt sustainable and improve its credit rating. IMF publications since 2020 have consistently reported meeting with civil society stakeholders as part of its engagement in response to Zambia's request for assistance.<sup>93</sup>

# ARGENTINA

## CIVICUS STATUS: NARROWED

In 2018, the then-president Mauricio Macri obtained a \$57.1bn Stand-By Arrangement (SBA). The loan, controversial at the time, has become an albatross around Argentina's neck, and independent analyses by the IMF have admitted that the SBA was unsuccessful in delivering on its objectives.<sup>94</sup>

In March 2022, an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) worth \$45bn was introduced to allow Argentina to refinance payment to the Fund while the program remains on track as Argentina completes the quarterly reviews. The EFF is still subject to approval by the IMF Executive Board. The program is intended to address high inflation; improve public finances (emphasizing progressivity, efficiency, compliance) and expenditure policies on untargeted energy subsidies; improve the balance of payments by supporting reserve accumulation and net exports; and enhance growth and resilience by mobilizing domestic savings, strengthening governance and transparency, and promoting labor, gender and financial inclusion.<sup>95</sup>

Argentine law requiring the IMF package to receive parliamentary approval enables a broader spectrum of voices to contribute to dialogue around the loan, including those of civil society groups who can access members of Parliament. Both the IMF and the Argentinian government are highly sensitive to the reputational risks if the latest loan also fails to achieve its objectives.<sup>96</sup> The general public has been vocal and often engaged in mass protests against the IMF loan and its conditionalities.<sup>97</sup>

## GHANA

### **CIVICUS STATUS: NARROWED<sup>98</sup>**

Ghanaian civil society's experience of lobbying the IMF over an upcoming loan program has been held up both by international civil society and the IMF as an exemplary case study on engagement motivations, expectations, mechanisms and outcomes.<sup>99</sup>

Ghana's recent history with the IMF dates to 2014, when the Ghanaian government approached the IMF for its sixteenth loan program. In April 2015, the IMF approved a three-year Extended Credit Facility (ECF) (2015-2017) amounting to \$918m.<sup>100</sup> In the period prior to the approval of the ECF, 11 Ghanaian CSOs formed the Civil Society Platform, now the Economic Governance Platform (EGP), in order to advocate for greater civil society inclusion in the design, implementation and monitoring of the IMF program.<sup>101</sup> The EGP now has 13 members and has engaged in civil society dialogue sessions hosted by the IMF.<sup>102</sup>

Since 2014, five national civil society forums have been organized by the Platform, giving both CSOs and ordinary citizens the opportunity to share their views on the management of the economy and provide on-the-ground feedback to strengthen program implementation. The forums bring together participants from CSOs, think tanks, academia, media, government agencies, the IMF, other development partners with an interest in public finance and economy-wide issues and the public.<sup>103</sup>

The Platform has often used academic expertise to prepare position papers and independent economic assessments, and key resource persons to help explain the implications of macro figures to participants. At the end of each forum a communiqué is produced, capturing the overarching themes and calling for action by the IMF (at both country and headquarters levels), the

Government of Ghana and Ghanaian negotiating teams.<sup>104</sup>

Oxfam support has helped to create dialogue opportunities with senior IMF officials on the need to engage with Ghanaian CSOs as input to the IMF program negotiation process. In February 2015, Oxfam and the Platform's representatives met the IMF Executive Directors from the US, Germany, France, the UK, Japan and China in Washington DC to request their support for inclusion of the Platform's policy recommendations in the final agreement. The Platform also organized a fiscal accountability capacity-building workshop on tracking public expenditure and resource flows through the various strata of government, and on determining how much of the allocated public resources reach their intended destination effectively and efficiently.<sup>105</sup>

The approved IMF program granted many of the Platform's requests, including provisions on improving fiscal discipline; deepening accountability and transparency; linking stabilization to transformation; and safeguarding 15 pro-poor and social protection spending measures.<sup>106</sup>

The Managing Director of the IMF, Christine Lagarde, recognized the useful feedback from the Platform on the IMF program in Ghana, and stated that the initiative would serve as a model for IMF-citizen engagement across the globe. Despite ambitions to end its debt burden through implementing the last IMF program, Ghana has recently requested another loan from the IMF and is engaged in discussions regarding a possible IMF-supported program.<sup>107</sup>

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On IMF governance, see Bretton Woods Project. (2020). IMF and World Bank decision-making and governance. <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2020/04/imf-and-world-bank-decision-making-and-governance-2/>

<sup>2</sup> CSOs have developed such tools. See Oxfam's Civic Space Monitoring tool: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/civic-space-monitoring-tool-understanding-what-is-happening-in-civic-space-at-a-620874/>; and Oxfam's methodology for analysing political capture: The Capture Phenomenon: Unmasking power. [https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/426027/Oxfam-Website/oi-informes/Capture\\_Methodology\\_2018-en.pdf](https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/426027/Oxfam-Website/oi-informes/Capture_Methodology_2018-en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See CIVICUS monitor at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

<sup>4</sup> 'Economic' CSOs include trade unions and other workers' rights groups, while 'social' CSOs comprise organizations addressing issues including fiscal justice, inequality and poverty alleviation, gender-based discrimination, etc.

<sup>5</sup> T.C. Dawson and G. Bhatt. (2001). The IMF and Civil Society: Striking A Balance. International Monetary Fund, Volume 2001: Issue 002. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4572>

<sup>6</sup> B. Momani. (2010). IMF Rhetoric on Reducing Poverty and Inequality. Ch.3 in R. Wilkinson and J. Clapp (eds). Global Governance, Poverty & Inequality. London: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> T.C. Dawson and G. Bhatt. (2001). The IMF and Civil Society: Striking A Balance. Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> B. Momani. (2010). IMF Rhetoric on Reducing Poverty and Inequality. Op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> N. Woods. (2006). The Globalizers: The IMF, The World Bank, and Their Borrowers. New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>10</sup> T.C. Dawson and G. Bhatt. (2001). The IMF and Civil Society: Striking A Balance. Op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> B. Momani. (2010). IMF Rhetoric on Reducing Poverty and Inequality. Op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> The Washington consensus is a set of ten economic policy prescriptions that were implemented by the IMF and the World Bank in crisis-ridden countries mainly in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. These were mainly free market promoting policies, such as privatization, liberalization, and deregulation that led to undermining the welfare state, including public services, social protection to name a few. It is termed as such since it is an agreement between Washington DC based institutions, specifically the IMF, World Bank and the United States Department of the Treasury. For more, see: S. Babb and A. Kentikelenis. (2021). Markets Everywhere: The Washington Consensus and the Sociology of Global Institutional Change. *Annual Review of Sociology* 47:521-541. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-soc-090220-025543>

<sup>13</sup> T.C. Dawson and G. Bhatt. (2001). The IMF and Civil Society: Striking A Balance. Op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> IMF. The IMF and the Poor.

<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/pam/pam52/preface.htm>

<sup>15</sup> IMF. IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors.

<https://www.imf.org/en/About/executive-board/members-quotas>

<sup>16</sup> The IMF's 2015 Guidelines on IMF Staff Engagement with Civil Society Organizations states: 'Civil Society Organizations can include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business forums, faith-based organizations, labor and professional organizations, local community groups, philanthropic and charitable organizations, gender and women's associations, social movements (including representatives of the informal sector and rural areas), academics, research centers and think tanks. CSOs can be concerned with a country, a region, or have a global operation.'

<sup>17</sup> IMF. (2022). IMF Strategy Towards Mainstreaming Gender.

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2022/07/28/IMF-Strategy-Toward-Mainstreaming-Gender-521344>

<sup>18</sup> Global Alliance for Tax Justice (2022, Mar 2). Joint Civil Society Position on IMF Gender Strategy. <https://globaltaxjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2022-03-02-GATJ-Joins-Civil-Society-Position-on-IMFs-Gender-Strategy-EN-PDF-1.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Campaign of Campaigns. (2022, Oct 13). Reject IMF's Gender Strategy.

<https://campaignofcampaigns.com/index.php/en/contenidos-estaticos/356-feminists-strongly-reject-the-international-monetary-fund-imf-gender-strategy>

<sup>20</sup> T.C. Dawson and G. Bhatt. (2001). The IMF and Civil Society: Striking A Balance. Op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Session title: 'Establishing an IMF Independent Accountability Mechanism', held on October 13, 2022. <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Partners/civil-society?playlistVideoid=6314529567112>

- <sup>22</sup> Oxfam. (2019). Oxfam in Ghana: Improved fiscal governance through active citizenship. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/oxfam-in-ghana-improved-fiscal-governance-through-active-citizenship-620645/>
- <sup>23</sup> The IMF conducts official Civil Society Policy Forums (CSPFs) as part of its Spring and Annual Meetings (conducted alongside the World Bank). Conducted virtually and streamed on the IMF's website, the CSPFs have been attended by a range of CSOs, including those who have been publicly critical of the IMF's position.
- <sup>24</sup> This press statement by the IMF mission to Lebanon mentions discussions with CSOs from Lebanon. While it is not disclosed who the mission met with, sources reveal that prominent actors advocating for social justice or those with a critical perspective on the IMF have not met with the mission; rather it has engaged with a handful organizations who have established relations with the IMF. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/02/11/pr2233-lebanon-imf-staff-concludes-virtual-mission>
- <sup>25</sup> N. Woods. (2006). The Globalizers: The IMF, The World Bank, and Their Borrowers. Op. cit.
- <sup>26</sup> One prominent example is J. Ostry, P. Loungani and D. Furceri. (2016). Neoliberalism: Oversold? Finance and Development. IMF. Vol. 53, No. 2. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2016/06/ostry.htm>
- <sup>27</sup> R. Belloni and M. Moschella. (2013). The IMF and civil society. Int Polit 50, 532–552. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2013.14>
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Reuters News. (2022, March 25). Tunisia's powerful UGTT union tells IMF it rejects reform proposals. <https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/north-africa/tunisias-powerful-ugtt-union-tells-imf-it-rejects-reform-proposals-tuiywm2b>
- <sup>30</sup> CIVICUS (2022). <https://monitor.civicus.org/quickfacts/>
- <sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2020, Nov 16). Egypt: Leading Rights Group Official Arrested. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/16/egypt-leading-rights-group-official-arrested>
- <sup>32</sup> Chelwa, Grieve (2022). IMF deal: Cry My Beloved Zambia <https://www.cadtm.org/IMF-Deal-Cry-My-Beloved-Zambia>
- <sup>33</sup> Oxfam. (2019). Oxfam in Ghana: Improved fiscal governance through active citizenship. Op. cit.
- <sup>34</sup> Based on the account of IMF staff interviewed.
- <sup>35</sup> GhanaWeb. (2014, Oct 29). Civil Society Platform on IMF Bailout Launched. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/ghanahomepage/newsarchive/artikel.php?id=332495>
- <sup>36</sup> G.K. Aloryito. (2019). Linking Participation and Economic Advancement. Ghana Civil Society Platform on the IMF Programme: Case Study. Brighton: IDS. [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14533/Ghana\\_Civil\\_Society\\_Platform\\_Final.pdf](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14533/Ghana_Civil_Society_Platform_Final.pdf)
- <sup>37</sup> GhanaWeb. (2014, Oct 29). Civil Society Platform on IMF Bailout Launched. Op. cit.
- <sup>38</sup> See, for example, B. Momani. (2010). IMF Rhetoric on Reducing Poverty and Inequality. Op. cit.
- <sup>39</sup> 2015 Guidelines on the IMF Staff Engagement with Civil Society Organizations (IMF) [https://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/consult/2015/civilsociety/pdf/CSOs\\_Guidelines.pdf](https://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/consult/2015/civilsociety/pdf/CSOs_Guidelines.pdf)
- <sup>40</sup> CSOs have developed such tools. See Oxfam's Civic Space Monitoring tool: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/civic-space-monitoring-tool-understanding-what-is-happening-in-civic-space-at-a-620874/>; and Oxfam's methodology for analysing political capture: The Capture Phenomenon: Unmasking power. [https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/426027/Oxfam-Website/oi-informes/Capture\\_Methodology\\_2018-en.pdf](https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/426027/Oxfam-Website/oi-informes/Capture_Methodology_2018-en.pdf)
- <sup>41</sup> IMF. Frequently Asked Questions on Egypt and the IMF. Accessed April 28, 2022 at <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/EGY/Egypt-qandas#Q1>; CIVICUS. CIVICUS - Tracking Conditions for Citizen Action'. Accessed April 28, 2022 at <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/egypt>
- <sup>42</sup> M. El Badrawi and A. Corkery. (2017). Egypt's new IMF deal comes with a huge price tag for human rights. Bretton Woods Project. <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2017/02/egypts-new-imf-deal-comes-huge-price-tag-human-rights/>
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