The IMF has made a concerted effort to engage more actively with civil society organizations in recent years. This is part of a broader effort to be more transparent and accountable to the broader public in our member countries.

So, an emphasis on change at the 2010 IMF-World Bank Annual Meetings provided the perfect opportunity to break new ground in our relationship with civil society.

More civil society representatives came to the meetings than ever before, and those that came participated in a wider range of events. Many of those events took on a different flavor: one more conducive to a meaningful exchange of views.

So who came?

Representatives from around 400 civil society organizations (CSOs) from over 62 countries attended the Annual Meetings. They came from all regions, representing big umbrella groups from Europe and the US, as well as smaller local level entities. The CSOs also had diverse interests. Some were focused on Fund-specific policies in low-income countries, while many others advocated for specific issues, including youth, gender, labor and governance.

As part of the Fund and Bank’s approach to make the annual meetings more accessible, fellowships were offered to around 40 civil society representatives from more than 30 emerging and low-income countries.

Listening and learning

With so many influential voices here, we were intent on hearing what they had to say.

By working together and hearing the views of a wider range of stakeholders, the IMF can be better placed to tackle the breadth and enormity of the challenges in today’s global economy. As one of the civil society fellows, Joseph Ibekwe of Nigeria, said—the IMF can “work with civil society to make a difference.”

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We wanted to facilitate a more productive dialogue. Not just during the Annual Meetings, but for the future too. We wanted to provide events that would facilitate a better understanding of each others’ roles and interests, and that would continue to raise the quality of our discussions and help us work together in our member countries.

As we had done before, the central event was a Civil Society Policy Forum, involved 50 sessions organized by CSOs reflecting the diversity of their interests.

But, it is important to highlight some of the things we did differently.

- We opened the doors for civil society to take part in a wider range of formal and informal meetings, including this year’s expanded Program of Seminars, as well as meetings with the IMF’s country teams (helping civil society to put a face to the name). And, for the first time, many CSOs were invited to attend the opening plenary session of the Annual Meetings, traditionally an officials-only forum.

- This year, the Townhall meeting with IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn and World Bank President Robert Zoellick had a more interactive format. Gone were the long formal opening speeches. Instead, the discussion was chaired by civil society representatives and focused on more time for conversation about core IMF and World Bank issues.
• But, perhaps the real ground-breaker was a new capacity building event targeted at CSOs. Senior staff briefed CSOs on key aspects of the Fund’s policies and programs, including fiscal, monetary, and program design issues. Arranged at the request of CSOs, it was an opportunity for those here to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of macroeconomic policy, and what the IMF does.

Two-way street

One thing was very clear. Civil society is thirsty for information. They want to know more about what we do, why we do it, and how. In that regard, part of our aim was to improve discussion and access to information, so we can focus more on matters of mutual interest.

But this is also a two-way street. There is a lot at the IMF we can learn from CSOs, from their experiences and their views on issues and conditions ‘on the ground’. And we have to start by listening.

• Civil society representatives offered valuable insights and raised tricky issues. We heard from them on a range of issues, many of which are also at the forefront of our mind—unemployment and poverty reduction in the wake of the global economic crisis; financial sector taxation; IMF voice and representation; and on the need to engage with CSOs in reforming the IMF, in our work in program countries, and at the local level.

• We also need to build the tools internally to raise awareness or build a deeper appreciation of the role that civil society can play, especially in the local context, in our member countries. This is something on which we’ll be focusing on early next year.

Our relationship with civil society has evolved dramatically over the past decade. These changes during the Annual Meetings were another step and, as we continue, we hope to hear from you.

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