How can Governments foster citizen engagement and public trust? One answer is Ombudsman Institutions, which can be a key vehicle to amplify citizen voice and make government open and inclusive. On July 2-3, 2014 I attended the Regional Asian Ombudsman Association (AOA) Conference which showcased various approaches that countries are using to increase citizen voice and enhance government accountability. Stressing the importance of the Ombudsman neutrality and impartiality, Peter Tyndall, Ombudsman of Ireland stated that "You [Ombudsman Office] can only become an advocate of citizens after you decide that an official or agency has not complied with the law or has behaved unfairly."

It is recognized that there is a need to move beyond the supply and demand side stakeholders’ dichotomies for the advancement of governance reforms. In order to do so, we must improve collaboration by focusing on the interfaces to connect the two. In this case, Ombudsman Offices - as accountability institutions - can provide a suitable space for the convergence of supply and demand side stakeholders. This could then contribute to what Prof. Jonathan Fox refers to as strategic social accountability mechanisms for advancing governance and development outcomes. Yet, current efforts to engage oversight institutions in pro-accountability state-society coalitions has primarily focused on Supreme Audit-citizen engagement through the work of the International Budget Partnership, UNDESA and INTOSAI, Asociacion Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ Argentina), and the World Bank’s work with SAIs to name but a few.

Civil society organizations make a natural partner of Ombudsman institutions, since their key functions may include the aggregation of citizen interests and voices, mediating their interface with the state and, where necessary, representing them. However, despite some progress CSOs’ engagement with Ombudsman Institutions has remained limited, and needs to be further explored to tap the many opportunities for building synergies and leveraging their respective roles, not to mention resources and capacities (e.g. collecting/using data and reports on grievances pertaining to public services and citizens’ rights, filing complaints, and working jointly to promote the so called ‘co-production of control’).

The above were some of the main entry points identified for CSO-Ombudsman institutions collaboration during the GPSA grantees workshop held last May 2014 at the WB in Washington DC. While many CSO

1 Broadening the Notion of Democratic Accountability: Participatory Innovation in Latin America. E. Peruzzotti, Polity 2012
grantees recognized that they were aware of the mandate and importance of the Ombudsman institution in their respective countries—as they work on accountability issues— their mutual engagement remains limited².

“When Ombudsman Institutions can play an important role as 'communication bridge' between government and citizens.”
- Mr. Lee Sungbo, Chairman of the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC), South Korea.

When it comes to the World Bank, accountability institutions are relevant also in the provision of country support (as highlighted by the World Bank “Demand for Good Governance Companion Note,” August 2011). Ombudsman Institutions can often offer a unique approach to advance collaborative governance - as they rely on dialogue and moral persuasion due to their recommendation powers as well as their mediation role. While recognizing the salience of the investigation powers of the Ombudsman Institution, Ms. Connie Lau, Ombudsman of Hong Kong also discussed the importance of the mediation role by the Ombudsman in cases of minor or no maladministration. While illustrating a specific case in HK, she stated "...the fact that the Department has not done anything wrong may not mean that it cannot do something, still entirely proper, to improve the complainant’s situation. When a Department is subjected to inquiries [through investigation], it is only natural if it adopts a relatively defensive position. But if it is invited to mediate, its representatives know they are still in control of what they can do and may therefore think more positively of the ways to solve the problem faced by the complainant." The case of mediation was also raised by Mr. Lee Sungbo, Chairman of the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC) in Korea when explaining collective complaints, which are more related with mediation of conflicting interests rather than illegal actions of government agencies.

So far, World Bank support to Ombudsman Institutions has not been systematic, despite the fact that Ombudsman’s functions cut across many Bank areas, such as access to information & transparency, citizen engagement, and accountability – including access to justice and work in fragile and post-conflict states where rule of law may be weak. **WB engagement with Ombudsman institutions to tackle governance challenges can open up an important frontier of citizen-led development at the country level. The World Bank should therefore explore institutional support that includes new mechanisms for linking Ombudsman with multiple stakeholders**³. The Bank could also scale up grievance redress mechanisms within Bank projects by leveraging the Ombudsman Institution, which serves as country system for external accountability, while also setting common standards for GRMs across public administration and overseeing their implementation. Unlike the World Bank Inspection Panel which focuses on non-compliance with WB policies, Ms. Isabel Lavadene, formerly with the Ombudsman Office of the Inter-American Development Bank and the Ombudsman Office of Bolivia, during a round table discussion on Ombudsman on March 25, 2014 at the WB wondered about the possibility of establishing an Ombudsman for WB projects to protect community members' rights that might be affected by a Bank operation.

In the recent years, there have been developments within this area as reflected in the approach taken by the Bank to support to the Ethiopian Ombudsman Institute in standardizing the national grievance redress system (Protecting Basic Services III); and in Pakistan through different funding sources that support the Forum of Pakistan Ombudsman, the Federal Tax Ombudsman and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan Province Ombudsmen.

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² During the GPSA grantees workshop civil society organizations were asked: What is your experience with the Ombudsman of your country?
As the World Bank embarks in the process of mainstreaming citizen engagement in Bank operations we are provided a unique opportunity to further explore this area of work. Ombudsman Institutions could become a pivotal avenue to facilitate and advance citizen engagement. Countries are already embracing this vision -- as the reflected in the title of this week’s Conference “Ombudsman and the Citizens’ Lives, their Dynamic Relationship” held in Seoul. Especially given the Bank 2013 strategy -which espouses the importance of partnership with international bodies -cooperation with the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) should be pursued in order to advance to implement this work at scale.