

**David Cohen**, Senior Adviser to Experience Corps and Civic Ventures; President of Global Integrity, and a co-founder of the Advocacy Institute.

**Moderator: Caby Verzosa, the World Bank**

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**Caby Verzosa:** You have decades of experience of working with civil society. What do you think is a missing element as far as implementing governance reforms or major reforms in developing countries?

**David Cohen:** Most important thing is recognizing that civil society organizations are essential to both enacting and implementing governance reforms, whether they deal with questions of transparency or questions of ethical behavior, or overcoming institutionally imbedded corruption. Until government officials recognize that the support from civil society is key to making the reforms happen and to sustaining them over a period of time, it's not going to happen. It can happen only with the recognition that critical elements of the society are necessary allies in helping government achieve these reforms.

**Caby:** What concepts or approaches have you yourself used in the programs that you have been involved with in getting civil society acknowledged or engaged in major reform efforts?

**David:** The most important thing is that there should be relationships between civil society organizations and government officials, public formal relationships. Meaning that government officials should be willing to meet and listen to, particularly listen to what civil society organizations have to say, because their feet are very much on the ground and they have a very sharp listening ear and a clear line of vision so they can be helpful to government officials in governing effectively and accountably.

**Caby:** This is a very important idea, but who takes the first step?

**David:** The first step is often taken by civil society organizations when they have to protest not being listened to. So protest is a very important element in this and it means that the civil society organizations want to get the ear and attention of government officials. You move from protest to dealing with the substance at that point. The key element is having transparency, in other words, the right to know. Most countries in this world have adopted the principle of the right to know, or the right to information. How then do you set up the institutional structures? How do you begin to develop the norm and the culture of nonsecrecy so access to government information is readily available, but equally important is that organizations should not have to pry information from the government? So we're looking at changes of attitude and behavior, which in the end could be very beneficial to citizens and civil society organizations in fact working with government in this formal relationship.

**Caby:** If there were a smart governance reform manager who wanted to avoid the protest stage, what kind of advice would you give him or her in terms of seeking ways to get civil society engaged early on?

**David:** I would give her/him the advice to first of all be willing to meet with civil society organizations and even be willing to meet with them outside of the government offices. So there is often what could be called public space, it's not the organization of the civil society organizations.

**Caby:** A neutral arena

**David:** Neutral arena, neutral territory, in which there can be a frank discussion. And it's important for the civil society organizations to listen as well. It's not just petitioning and demanding. It's listening. So that's what makes a relationship when each group listens to the other and tries to understand what the other is saying.

**Caby:** What makes an effective process of engagement? I mean if these two groups are not commonly used to talking to each other, and you bring them together, how does a smart reform manager then figure out the process by which this conversation takes place in this neutral arena?

**David:** The manager will need help and so will the civil society organization, and that's why it's important to have neutral organizations that can be gatherers, that can be conveners, where these kinds of questions get discussed. This is relatively a new concept of having the right to know and having it institutionally protected and having a culture of openness and moving away from secrecy. So you need the creation of these spaces which can be brought together by people from a university, from a think tank, from various institutions. And where the media is independent and honorable and not corrupt, the media can be a convener for these kinds of things.