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Engaging Citizens in Society
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OVERVIEW | SOUTH KOREA

Engaging Citizens in Society

In South Korea, a core principle of social innovation is finding ways to engage citizens at the grassroots level.

BY EUNKYUNG (E. K.) LEE

South Korea, home of global conglomerates such as Samsung and Hyundai Motor, is often portrayed as an icon of economic development and democratic progress. In just half a century, its per capita income jumped from a meager \$100 to more than \$27,000. Seoul, the country's capital, is a metropolis of 10 million people where modern skyscrapers and subways abut traditional Buddhist temples and street markets.

South Korea is also one of just a few countries to succeed in changing its political

landscape from authoritarian to democratic through civil movements, and—equally or perhaps more importantly—to have maintained political stability for decades following that transformation.

The country's notable gains, however, have come with some significant downsides. Consider these social challenges:

- The level of social inequality in South Korea is comparable to that in many advanced nations.
- Fast-track economic development has brought with it serious environmental degradation.
- Driven by an excessively competitive

culture, South Korea has the highest suicide rates among OECD countries, along with a dangerously low birth rate.

- Young people face an unfriendly job market; unemployment is rampant. In many ways, South Korean youth want to live differently than their parents did, but the barriers to do so are great. What's more, intergenerational conflict is worsening.
- The social welfare system in South Korea is weak. That reality, coupled with the destruction of community and social bonds, has been cause for despair among underprivileged citizens.

Clearly, South Korea has great needs. But there's also great potential in the ability of social innovation to meet the country's formidable challenges. Social innovation, done right, can help solve social problems and promote sustainable growth by engaging citizens, promoting and supporting more comprehensive and inclusive policies, and directing business interests toward the gaps in the society's fabric.

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A Granular Look at the Challenges

South Korea is not alone in many of the problems it faces. Rapid state-driven economic development has given rise to a wide gap in wealth distribution, poor labor and human rights practices, and uneven distribution of resources and services between cities and rural areas in other Asian countries as well.

While South Korea shares many problems with its Asian neighbors, some of its challenges are unique. Its economic development has been led in large part by business conglomerates (chaebols) that have strong government support.

Not only is there little evidence of any trickle-down benefits from the chaebols' economic success to small and medium-size businesses; there are indications that the chaebols are actually becoming a significant obstacle to their growth. There are also ongoing concerns about the corrupt relationships between the chaebols and the government, and the chaebols' weak attention to their social responsibilities.

Another social challenge that South Korea faces is education. Its highly competitive educational system puts enormous pressure on students to enter college. Suicide is the leading cause of death among teens.¹ Stress continues as teens become young adults because getting a decent job after graduating from college has become harder due to slow economic growth and a tight job market.

South Korea is also getting older, due to declining birthrates and increasing life-spans. People aged 65 or older made up 13.1 percent of the population in 2015; that level is expected to reach 40.1 percent in 2060. These trends create new challenges, not only to increase welfare spending and create job markets for the elderly, but also to reactivate retiring baby boomers as active contributors to the society.

Another challenge facing South Korea is that many people distrust a political system that no longer seems to represent its citizens. Party politics in South Korea have failed to embrace the voices of existing social groups or support the transformation of civil society.

In addition, a handful of political elites who have been controlling the political arena in South Korea still foster Cold War ideologies and continue to operate a party system based on the regional antagonism between the Yongnam (southeastern South Korea) and Honam (southwestern South Korea) provinces. Distrust and cynicism,

in turn, have led to a steady decline in voting rates.²

Promising Signs of Social Innovation

All of these factors contribute to a challenging environment for social innovators. But the good news is that social innovation has a toehold in South Korea, and the movement is growing. At its core, social innovation in South Korea is based on a commitment to full-fledged citizen participation. Through such participation, increasing numbers of people become strong economic players and increase their involvement in the country's decision-making processes regarding policy. Many people firmly believe that through these types of changes, South Korea's current (and destructive) path of fast-track economic development can be redirected toward a path of sustainable economic growth.

Citizen participation in local issues existed long before the concept of social innovation was introduced. The difference now is that this participation is taking new forms; it is more independently organized, and focused on explicit and sustained results. The agricultural movement, for example, has evolved into regional self-help cooperative movements. These cooperatives have grown into grassroots citizen networks and are now playing a key role in the regional community. Examples can be found in Wonju and Hongsung. Wonju, a medium-size city, has tried to build a self-reliant economy centering around the local social economic network based on various cooperatives. Hongsung is a rural area that has set up an independent economy by being the first to introduce an environmentally friendly agricultural system.

And some citizens' local engagement efforts in urban areas are now focused on reviving communities. Grassroots projects aimed at revitalizing communities in Seoul, Suwon, Ansan, and Incheon have linked up with innovative government policies at the municipal, township, and district levels, promoting citizen participation, citizen governance, and balanced regional development.

Community village movements that organically emerged in the 1990s to promote environmental sustainability, social welfare, and well-being among progressive city residents have evolved into the village community project of Seoul City and other cities. Many of these residents-led village communities have become a base to promote urban revitalization as well as residents' participation in local administrative and policymaking.

Young People Lead the Way

Clearly, the potential of the rising generation to effect change is a bright spot on South Korea's horizon. Broadly speaking, these young people have little respect for authority, do not like to form organizations, and are very individualistic. However, they also can easily carry out various online-based activities, having grown up in one of the world's leading information technology powerhouses, and can proactively lead and disseminate public opinion in online communities.

As a result, young people are stirring up a fresh new wind among the traditional South Korean civil society organizations, which have typically been led by a strong elite individual, backed by a well-organized structure, political parties, and the media. The younger generation, by contrast, works with new media, utilizes new platforms for dialogue and knowledge sharing in rapidly expanding online communities, and makes full use of technology tools. Most important, young people are extremely flexible in terms of putting together activities across sectors, organizations, and businesses to achieve their goals.

Young social innovators in the private sector—including community businesses, self-help companies, and cooperatives—are armed with a challenging spirit and the desire to achieve their aspirations as social innovation entrepreneurs. Their goal is to build a strong basis for social innovation throughout the social economic ecosystem.

Local Government Support

Local governments, in particular, deserve recognition for their efforts to create and implement diverse social innovation policies. These policies are based on the idea that social innovation is an effective means by which to maintain transparent administration, motivate community independence, and encourage local citizens to participate in the decisions and activities that will shape their futures.

Several local governments either have officially declared social innovation as the basis of their policies or have let their actions convey their intentions by quietly implementing policies that encourage local people's participation and communication. One example is the Seoul Metropolitan Government, which pronounced social innovation as its policy base and has been implementing tangible social innovation policies, such as Sharing City, Seoul Youth Hub, and the Seoul Senior Support Center. (See "Innovating Local Government" on page 18.)

Other local governments, including Wanju-Gun, are also promoting socially innovative concepts and strategies. For example, they are setting up offices to oversee social innovation programs and work on legislation. They are securing funds, from either government budgets or social financing, to support social innovation, and are establishing intermediary organizations and networks to facilitate collaboration between governments and companies. Some local governments are also supporting their local social innovators by adopting social innovation projects to foster local self-reliance, leading to the revitalization of local economies and communities.

Building a Better Future

In a matter of decades, South Korea has gone through rapid changes and development, from a premodern to a modern society, from a dictatorship to a democracy, and from an

aid-recipient country to a donor country. These changes were largely positive, but they came with significant unwanted and negative side effects. That fallout—coupled with a slowing economy, an aging population, and a falling birthrate—has put South Korean society at a crossroads. A promising future is not a given; it is up to the country's leaders and citizens to find and follow the right course. Creating a better future depends on well-designed social change efforts, anchored by social innovation. ■

NOTES

- 1 Elise Hu, "The All-Work, No-Play Culture of South Korean Education," NPR, April 15, 2015.
- 2 The voting rate of the 13th general election, the first election held after the 1987 nationwide democracy movement, was 75.8 percent. However, the voting rate fell sharply to 46.1 percent in the 2008 18th general election, and was 54.1 percent in 2012 and 58.0 percent in 2016.

CASE STUDY | SOUTH KOREA

Innovating Local Government

Under Mayor Park Won-soon, the city of Seoul has become a leader in fostering social innovation.

BY WONJAE LEE

Let's say you commute to and from work on the bus. The bus line is near your office, and the trip takes about an hour. It should be convenient, but it's not; you often work late hours, and the bus stops running before midnight. What can you do? You can write a letter to city government, suggesting that the bus lines run later into the night. You can stage a protest in front of the bus company demanding that the operation hours be extended. You can submit a proposal to the city government, suggesting that it provide some subsidy to cover the cost of gas if you organize a carpool with your neighbors.

As you consider these alternatives, you know that you must take into consideration the fact that you will be interacting with a local government, notorious for being slow, ineffective, and nonresponsive. So you think—maybe you'll give up on the idea of reaching out to the government. Maybe you'll just buy a car, drive yourself, and be done with it.

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Unless, that is, you are living in Seoul, South Korea. As a Seoulite, if you have a complaint or a suggestion, you can send a tweet to the mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon. After that, you might get a very quick tweet in return, and that response might be followed in short order by fruitful action.

That's exactly what happened when a person, using Twitter, contacted the mayor about his frustrating commute. His tweet: "By the time I get off work, there are no bus lines running. I do not have a car. I wish there would be a bus service operating in the late hours as well." (The actual tweet in Korean had fewer characters.) He received a reply almost immediately. And the Night Owl Bus service—a direct result of his communication—launched eight months later.

That's because Seoul—the country's capital and home to 20 percent of South Korea's population—actively welcomes input from residents and has been experimenting with ways to encourage citizen engagement and to ensure that when citizens raise an issue,

the city is poised to work efficiently and collaboratively toward a solution.

Park Won-soon, mayor of the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG), believes that administrative functions should be used not only to govern but also to foster collaborative innovation. And the people of Seoul—citizens and government staff members alike—believe in him because his approach is rooted in a strong, personal track record of success. In addition to holding office, Park is the founder of a social enterprise called The Beautiful Store, an NGO called The Beautiful Foundation, and a social innovation think tank called The Hope Institute. Park, in short, is a champion of social innovation.

Night Owl Bus and a Citizen's Suggestion

What happened, exactly, when the Seoul resident tweeted Mayor Park? The process of moving from tweet to transportation is an example of what social innovation in Korea is all about. It started with purposeful *listening*. The SMG had a system in place through which citizens could voice their opinions, and their comments would quickly be relayed to people and departments within the government who had the authority and bandwidth to respond.

Thus, the SMG, on seeing the tweet, quickly began to analyze the situation. The government's transportation leaders knew straightaway that it would be too costly to extend the operating hours of all the bus lines operating in Seoul. So they sought to identify the areas where late-night bus service would matter the most. And here, they relied on the power of *collaboration*. Looking for the data that could best inform their decisions, the SMG team tapped the private sector and found the answers it sought through the mobile telecommunication companies that served Seoul. Mobile phone usage provided a clear picture of people's movements late at night.

The city was then ready for *action*, and here is where Park's influence proved crucial. Many a good suggestion goes through all the necessary analysis, yet fails to be executed due to lack of political support. Ultimately, the SMG was able to respond to the Night Owl Bus inquiry swiftly and effectively because it had both an efficient administrative system that supported innovation and the support of a strong political leader.

The Seoul resident sent his original tweet in January 2013. Before the end of February, the city had launched a pilot project. By the end of April, two pilot bus lines were running. And by August, the city launched additional