Government-NGO Partnerships for International Development Cooperation: A Case Study of South Korea

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At the HLF-3 in Arica in 2008, developed and developing countries recognized civil society as an independent development actor in its own right, and they agreed to create a legal and institutional environment enabling CSO contributions to development. The Korean government also announced the Plan for the Advancement of ODA in 2010, which contributed to an unprecedented increase in the volume of NGO assistance and called for methods of multi-dimensional cooperation with NGOs. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to analyze the government-NGO partnership for development cooperation in Korea. After reviewing the mechanisms of OECD DAC members’ partnerships with their NGOs and then Korean government-NGO partnerships in a comparative perspective, we conclude that both the Korean government and development NGOs are still facing many challenges for better partnership. For NGOs, these are accountability and sustainability issues, a tendency toward service delivery, proselytizing activities of Christian faith-based organizations, and a lack of capacity. For the government, it is uncertainty about its public commitment, an unclear vision and philosophy regarding ODA, an insufficient civil society partnership program, and a need for clear policy objectives for NGO support programs.

Keywords: Korea, International Development Cooperation, OECD DAC, ODA (Official Development Assistance), Development NGOs, KOICA, Government-NGO Partnership.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international workshop, "U.S.-Korea Dialogue on Strategies for Effective Development Cooperation," co-organized by the Asia Foundation and the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy in Seoul, Korea on October 17, 2011. This paper also builds on materials from "A Study on Government-Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness in Korea," a joint research project commissioned by the KOICA in 2011.
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We will deepen our engagement with CSOs as independent development actors in their own right whose efforts complement those of governments and the private sector. We share an interest in ensuring that CSO contributions to development reach their full potential.

Accra Agenda for Action, Paragraph 20, HLF-4, 2008

I. INTRODUCTION

Since joining the OECD DAC in January 2010, Korea has witnessed a strong surge of interest in cooperative development activity on the part of both government and civil society. Korea hosting the Fourth High Level Forum for Aid Effectiveness (HLF-4) in Busan in November 2011 provided momentum for discussions on how to improve Korean development practices. In 2010, the Prime Minister’s Office announced the Plan for the Advancement of ODA, which included a commitment to increase the volume of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.25% of GNI by 2015 (from 0.9% in 2009) and institute key policy reforms. Among them, strengthening the NGO partnership programs was a top priority. The Plan committed Korea to augmenting government assistance to NGOs for development cooperation by up to 90 billion Korean won by 2015, which is almost 10 times the amount that was allotted in 2010.

Against this backdrop, in 2011, Korean civil society also formed an umbrella organization, the Korean Civil Society Forum for International Development Cooperation (KoFID), and for the first time service-delivery-oriented development NGOs and advocacy NGOs for human rights, environment, and gender equality combined their efforts. Currently, both the government and civil society of Korea are confronting the possibility of a new and enlarged partnership in development cooperation.

Over the past decades, NGOs have become key development actors. Complementing or supplementing governmental and intergovernmental efforts for poverty reduction, NGOs have provided unique contributions to development cooperation. Recent development discourse tends to focus on “development effectiveness” rather than “aid effectiveness,” which indicates that various issues, such as human rights, gender equality, and democracy lie at the core of development.1 Given that civil society has worked for these values for a long time, donors have started to recognize the participation of civil society as an indispensable element for development. At the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2008, developed and developing countries recognized civil society as an independent development actor in its own right, in Paragraph 20 of the Accra Agenda for Action. There, they agreed to create a legal and institutional environment enabling
civil society organization (CSO) contributions to development.2 In addition, most OECD DAC countries recognize civil society as a source of important partners, and they run several partnership programs. NGOs often participate in general policy processes, including policy formation, implementation, and evaluation (Advisory Group on Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness, 2007).

The Korean government also came to be aware of the importance of CSOs, which is evidenced by a series of administrative actions. The government drew up the policy document “General Guidelines for the Improvement of International Cooperation,” and established the Committee for International Development Cooperation in the Prime Minister’s Office in 2009, which claims many civil society activists as members, along with the chairing Prime Minister and other ministers. The ODA Bureau of the Prime Minister’s Office announced the Plan for the Advancement of ODA in 2010, which committed the government to an unprecedented increase in the volume of NGO assistance and called for methods of multidimensional cooperation with NGOs. Furthermore, at the OECD DAC Working Group for Aid Effectiveness Meeting, held in Paris in July 2011, the Korean government emphasized the involvement of various development actors, including civil society, in “A New Global Compact for Development,” based on comprehensive partnership. The importance of CSOs is also noted in the Korean government’s position paper for the HLF-4.

However, Korea still faces various challenges in government-civil society partnerships. On the civil society side, issues of accountability and transparency, a one-sided tendency for service delivery, a large number of faith-based organizations with proselytizing agendas, and a low capacity level have to be dealt with. Although Korean civil society is usually described as one of the most vibrant sectors to lead the democratization movement during 1980s and 1990s (Joo et al. 2006), Korean development NGOs have a relatively short history and a lack of experience in the area of international development. On the government side, because the government has not been well aware of the importance of NGOs as development actors, it has not developed clear policy objectives, a clear vision, nor efficient programs for civil society partnerships.

In addition, academic research has been lagging, in regard not only to international development cooperation, but also to state-civil society relationships within the field. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to analyze the current situation of Korean development NGOs and their partnerships with the government. First, we will explore the theoretical background of the state-civil society relationship and then examine the mechanisms of leading donors’ partnerships with their CSOs. An analysis of Korean government-NGO partnerships will follow. In the concluding section, we will suggest some constraints and challenges that must be dealt with by Korean NGOs and the Korean government.