Policy-making Process in Korea and its New Development: Public Participation

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Public Participation in Korean Policy-making Process

Academic discussions about the participatory governance in Korea have started recently since the country felt keenly the necessity to find ways to resolve social conflicts after a series of serious conflicts (e.g., Lah, 2004; Ha, et al., 2006).

Before the late 1980s, the policy-making process in Korea was limited to inner government circle that included only related ministries and offices, and sometimes the Bluehouse depending on the importance of the issue. The strong-government tradition and political system effectively excluded the participation of well-established political entities such as the National Assembly and political parties, not to mention the feeble NGOs or the public, from the policy-making process. Public opinions expressed by the interest groups and civil movement groups had been restricted. People had been only viewed as the object to supervise and control (Kim, 1992; Ahn, 1994). There was little chance for NGOs to formally participate in the policy process. The government bureaucracy de facto monopolized the policy-making rights in the very stable environment.

Since the participatory government was established and stabilized throughout the 1990s, there have been many efforts to reform the policy-making process in the 2000s. As a result, many have taken concrete institutional form. The Presidential Committee on Government Innovation & Decentralization (2007) points out three such forms. The first is the revitalization of policy community. Korean government runs more than four hundreds of policy communities including various kinds of government committees and on/off line news letter and briefing systems. Policy community is the various conference groups that collect opinions and build broad consensus among government, interest groups, experts, and related parties in each stage of policy-making process.
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However, the use of policy forums is not yet full-fledged. The representativeness and accountability of committee members and managerial skills need more attention. The online policy community has its own problem. Because of the unilateral PR activities of government offices, authentic public deliberation is infeasible in the government-prepared online community.

The second effort is the extension of public information disclosure and increased accessibility. Although public information disclosure act has come into effect since 1998 and various forms of info-sharing are being used (Kim, et al., 2004), there is still room for improvement. Information disclosure method is now more of on-demand style and needs to transform to the more proactive disclosure system. Government is currently encouraging all administrative organizations to join this voluntary disclosure and full access policy.

The last is the cooperative relationship between central and local governments. In Korea, provincial assembly was established in 1991 and the residents elected local government heads and provincial assembly members directly since 1995. However, the central government still regards local autonomous entities as the subordinate organizations. For that reason, central government is recently trying to reduce the supervision and control of central government and take the role of post-control supervision only on the assumption that the decentralized function properly works.

Although the government operates participatory systems to promote participation, it will take some time until the bureaucracy-centered and closed decision-making pattern disappears. Pluralistic decision making culture is new to Korean government. Even though the political and social environments are changing fast and the civil society has become powerful than ever before, the existing decision-making pattern is still inertial and relies mostly on government bureaucracy. In short, Korean political power and authority is concentrated in the government. Based on the strong presidential system, no one else but the president and bureaucracy are in the core of policy-making process. National assembly checks the president and government, but the power pendulum is not as balanced as it should be. Likewise, the influence of interest groups and NGOs has significantly increased, but it is still a long way to go. The crash of the existing policy-making culture and the new social consciousness structure caused a lot of conflicts between government and civil society. Even though many participatory systems are being implemented, public participation is still limited. Since the opportunities to make adequate social discourse are missing in the policy process, oftentimes the policy programs lack legitimate viewpoints from the public and the related stakeholders.

Policy-making process may be divided into coordinative function and communicative function according