

The Importance of Local Governments In Citizen Participation

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For the kind introduction, I want to thank Mr. Miloon Kothari. It is my honor to have the opportunity to attend this important meeting and introduce the civic participation of Gwangju City representing local governments of Asia.

Now we all agree that the role of local governments as a human rights protector is getting more attention along with direct democracy. We now realize that local governments are better exposed to the local population in wide areas of public services through diverse channels for civic participation and dialogue.

By experience, we know that the local level direct democracy is facilitated through nation-wide democratic institutions. In this regard, I am proud that Gwangju citizens sacrificed greatly to begin the long march toward direct democracy of Korea in 1980, and that Korean citizens staged the peaceful candle light rallies to achieve a higher level of direct democracy recently.

Now Korean local governments are broadening and strengthening direct democracy with the support of the new government established after the candle light rallies.

Traditionally the most common ways of citizen participation were by government committee participation or by public hearings. Now we are promoting a democratic governance with the civil society participation beyond the level of simple collaboration or consultation.

Last year Gwangju City declared the year of 2016 as the first year of the 'Good Governance' between civil society and administration. Now I want to talk about how Gwangju City is implementing citizen participation policies based on the principle of collaborative governance.

First, Gwangju City is strengthening direct democracy in policy-making and decision-making processes.

For example, 4 months ago, Gwangju City held a Citizens Assembly. Citizens gathered and discussed more than 100 policies proposed by citizen meetings. Representatives of the city hall, the city council, the board of education, and the five district offices signed agreements to implement the policies adopted at the Assembly. We finally decided to implement 53 out of 100 proposals. The Citizen Assembly will be held regularly as stipulated by city ordinance which will be introduced early next year.

The Citizens Assembly showed a new inclusive model of governance with citizens, civil society, city hall and city councils. In the past we mainly accepted policy issues proposed on civil society organizations.

Second, Gwangju City is strengthening direct democracy with online policy platforms.

In July last year, Gwangju City began an online platform for citizens to propose policies. This platform makes it possible even for the underprivileged to participate in policy planning and implementation processes. We are still learning and expanding for more citizens to use the platform. Gwangju City is planning to sign a policy-sharing agreement with Madrid city, which is successfully operating an online platform called 'Decide Madrid'.

Gwangju City is trying to combine the off-line direct democracy and the on-line policy platform in order to develop our own model of direct democracy with the help of the civil society organizations.

Third, Gwangju City is leading direct democracy through citizen ownership in the level of villages.

Gwangju City is supporting the village community movement. The city supported 112 villages in 2013. We are now supporting about 600 villages. The city hall established a Community Support Team, which has become a model of good governance through which the city government officials closely collaborate with village organizations on planning, budgeting and implementing village projects.

Now I am very happy to see that village residents are expanding their self-determination into diverse areas of life including education of children, environment and welfare.

Fourth, Gwangju City is helping the socially marginalized in policy monitoring and implementation.

City Ordinances require 40% of women members in each of the 110 committees of the City. We also have a separate youth committee, in which we can listen to the needs of young people and discuss, plan and promote policies to solve them. Gwangju City also promotes rights of the disabled people and migrants by mandatory participation of the disabled people in the policy making and implementation processes.

Last year, for example, the citizens proposed 61 proposals in 6 human rights areas such as migrants, irregular workers, and out-of-school youths. In this process, city officials worked together with the stake-holders for more details including budget plans and execution plans. Citizen experts also participated in monitoring the implementation process.

Fifth, Gwangju City is expanding participatory budget system.

Participation in budget execution guarantees the outcome of the citizen participation in the policy making.

Gwangju City began the participatory budget system in 2011. Next year, we are planning to double the participatory budget into 10 million dollars. Citizens already submitted 188 million dollars in 866 items.

Citizens can propose public projects. From this year, we also introduced 'Gwangju Citizen Participation Budget System'. In this system, 100 citizen representatives are participating in 3 stages of reviewing, screening and selecting proposals.

This Participatory Budget System helps to Gwangju City to divert a part of budget planning power of the city administration to citizens and to raise the transparency and fairness of the budgeting process. However, I found that more budget planning power of the central government need to be transferred to the local government in order to expand the participatory budget system.

Sixth, Gwangju City has established democratic institutions to ensure citizen participation.

Gwangju City is creating fertile environments to promote right to participation by making the system more democratic. For example, Gwangju was the first local government of Korea that enacted the Human Rights Ordinance in 2007. Gwangju is leading other Korean local governments by introducing the Human Rights department in 2010, the Gwangju Human Rights Charter in 2012, and the Human Rights Ombudsman in 2013 among others.

This year, we revised the Human Rights Ordinance and newly introduced the Human Rights Impact Assessment System. The new system requires the city officials to examine if there exists any discrimination or human rights violation against the socially

marginalized before implementing major policies. The areas of human rights impact assessment will be selected by the Citizen Human Rights Committee composed of representatives of various human rights areas such as women, migrants, the disabled and so on.

Gwangju City has come a long way, but we are finding that we have a longer way to go in our future. And we have to share and learn from both successes and failures of citizen participation in different levels and areas. We need multi-layered international solidarity including central and local governments and civil societies.

In this regards, I would like to emphasize the importance of international cooperation to expand citizen participation and direct democracy.

In 2011, Gwangju City began the World Human Rights Cities Forum to share human rights policies and to promote the concept of human rights cities globally/ with participation of city officials and civil society organizations. Only a couple of weeks ago, we finished the 7th forum with 1,500 participants from 68 cities and 32 countries.

In the next year's forum, we are planning to launch an Asian Human Rights Cities Network in collaboration with UCLG-CISDP. The network, hopefully, helps to strengthen the international solidarity and enhance the citizens' right to participation including the socially marginalized in the public sphere making the most of practical experiences and expertise of all participating cities.

Last but not least I would like to ask for the special attention to this international solidarity from local governments and civil society in Asia and international organizations including OHCHR.

Again it is my great honor to share with you the experiences of direct democracy of my city.

Thank you for your attention.