

EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH KOREA: A SPECIAL FOCUS ON VILLAGE COMMUNITY

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Abstract: South Korea is one of outstanding country that has made great success on economic growth. However, they have been faced on matter from unbalanced development. The reason why they have been encountered that problem goes way back to the 1950s. After Korean War in 1950s, South Korean government had started to focus on economic development; as if it could be the best method to escape urgent poverty and overcome social problem. While they ignored the imbalance between economic growth and sustainability, almost every resource was poured out superficial socio-economic development. Moreover, from 1960s to mid-1980s, they were under dictatorship and suffered undemocratic regime. People, who had been repressed under these circumstances, finally rose up against the regime in late 1980s, and then it helped them to become democratic. Nevertheless, inequalities, poverty gap and immature citizenship have remained unsolved. Being encountered with the financial crisis in mid 1990s, almost every social policy was insufficient in treating it. While South Korea has had great success in economic development, its social safety network was not well equipped to respond such a serious problem. This issue was also closely associated with the policy based on the growth-first ideology of government-led development, which was far from inclusive. Consequently, most communities are characterized by serious imbalances, which become major constraints on sustainable development. In these circumstances, the existing conglomerate-centered economic system that puts priority on

growth is dimming after being hit by a bomb of low growth. They need of a new system, what is called as 'alternative development strategies'.

While they seek to create new system, "village community" gets important initiatives about alternative way to promote sustainable development. Especially, because it is based on social economy, which lies in its stable management and continuous growth, thus attracting more attention in a low-growth era, it is regarded as method of promoting the rights and benefits of its members. Nowadays, "village community" rapidly spreads over the whole country.

This study explores case study of village community in Seoul in order to investigate the true meaning of urban community for sustainable development. In this context, the present paper has three objectives. First, features of "village community" is analyzed, especially focus on socio-economic situation surrounding it. Second, it compares "village community" with the social development, which seeks to harmonize social and economic processes for vulnerable populations. Finally, using case studies, I try to illustrate how "village community" is initiated social change at local and community level and generated community development for better social services.

Keywords: community, social development, sustainable development, village community

INTRODUCTION

South Korea has enjoyed significant success in terms of economic growth, and is counted as among the developed nations. However, the country is faced with unbalanced development. This problem is rooted on circumstances in the 1950s. After the Korean War in the 1950s, the South Korean government started to focus on economic development, applying methods regarded as the best means to escape pressing poverty and overcome social problems. Almost all resources were poured into superficial socioeconomic development, whereas the imbalance between economic growth and sustainability was ignored. Moreover, from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, the country was under dictatorial rule and suffered from the autocratic regime. People who had been repressed under these circumstances finally rose up against the regime in the late 1980s, and this phenomenon helped the country regain democracy. Nevertheless, inequalities, poverty, and immature citizenship remained unsolved. During the financial crisis in the mid-1990s, almost every social policy was insufficient to address unbalanced development. Although South Korea had enjoyed great success in economic development, its social safety network was not well equipped to respond to such a serious problem. This issue was also closely associated with the policy based on the growth-first ideology of government-led development, which was far from inclusive. Consequently, most communities were characterized by serious imbalances, which became major constraints on sustainable development. In these circumstances, the brilliance of the conglomerate-centered economic system that prioritized growth was dimming after yielding only low growth. Presently, the country is in need of a new system through enactment of “alternative development strategies.”

In creating this new system, the “village community movement” (VCM) provides important initiatives on alternative ways to promote sustainable development. “Creating a village community” has become a theme or slogan. To promote the restoration of neighborhood communities, the government of Seoul City has launched the Seoul Village Community Committee. As it is based on social economy, which relies on stable management and continuous growth and thereby attracts more attention in a low-growth era, it is regarded as a method of promoting the rights and benefits of its members. Within this perspective, this paper explores the characteristics of the VCM in South Korea, including major issues and implications.

DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND OF VCM

The background of VCM can be explained by examining the socioeconomic features of South Korea. South Korea has experienced various kinds of

social issues: Japan colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, the Korean War, movements for democracy in the 1980s, and the global economic crisis in the 1990s. Under these circumstances, unresolved issues have remained since the 1950s. After the Korean War, the government aimed to regenerate economic development, but through methods that deviated from sustainable development. In the name of development, all kinds of social programs were compelled to give way to economic policies. A residual, selective perspective was a mainstream of South Korean social welfare, which eventually produced deep-seated discrimination among people. Moreover, outcomes of economic development were not distributed equally, and issues of exploitation of labor, poverty, and gender discrimination were the unintended consequences of the unbalanced development. In addition, because of its focus on superficial economic growth without social justice, the government overlooked the true nature of the problem [5].

The financial crisis in the late 1990s brought to the fore all kinds of problems that the government had ignored. Although South Korea has enjoyed great success in economic development, the imbalance between the poor and the rich and that between the rural and the urban still remain widely. In addition, social policies based on the growth-first ideology of government-led development failed to address these problems. The existing socioeconomic system centered on conglomerates has reached its limits, building only a superficial economy that has lost its functions of creating jobs and providing stable employment. It cannot support sustainable development.

To solve these problems, the main approach the government has adopted since the late twentieth century is community-driven development, or VCM, which is anchored on the promotion of social economy, community business, and cooperatives based on local resources toward the endogenous development of specific areas.

However, VCM is not a new community development model. A huge movement, called as “Saemaul Undong” (SMU), was initiated by President Park Chung Hee in South Korea in the early 1970s. The aim of SMU and related programs was to help the rural sector catch up with the urban sector by spreading improvements in living standards to rural communities. This initiative was important to balance economic growth among sectors, to slow the exodus of migrants to the cities, to solve a growing food supply problem, and to respond to rising political opposition among the rural population, whose support gained through land reform had begun to erode [8]. However, its goals and purpose were far

from being sustainable. Indeed, SMU was not a neighborhood-based movement. Rather, it was regulated by compulsory policies. In sum, SMU was based on powerful pressure by the government, whereas VCM was grounded by voluntary citizen participation.

The traditional meaning of village community is described as a socio-geographic unit with two dimensions, namely, a unit of patterned interaction and a functional spatial unit meeting. Often, it is regarded as having the same meaning as "community." VCM stresses participation, whereas community emphasizes locality.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, some of the elected mayors in major metropolises and local governments have attempted to reform citizen participation through remarkable livable community design projects. For example, about 500 neighborhood groups are currently supported by the Seoul City government's VCM program initiated by Mayor Park Won-soon, a former progressive civic activist.

In this context, the village was recognized as a new framework for rebuilding the entire country. The aim of VCM is to develop local capacity throughout citizen participation. It stresses on autonomous decision making and strengthening of local networks. It primarily seeks to facilitate community participation. This purpose is not confined to efforts to improve individual needs and/or living conditions, but encompasses the issues of the village and sustainable development. In other words, VCM is a form of community building that is based on participatory, bottom-up, multi-sector approaches.

VCM AS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The reason for VCM's design in South Korea is deeply related with sustainable development. As mentioned earlier, South Korea has suffered from an imbalance between economic growth and distribution. Although South Koreans succeeded in toppling the rule of a military government and regaining democratization after massive uprising at the grassroots level, they did not have sufficient experience in civil participation and exercise of social rights. Furthermore, faced with the global economic crisis in the mid-1990s, the country was weakened by passive involvement of the state in welfare financing and provision [2]. In other words, the lack of social services and the immaturity of civil society provided a trigger for the discourse on sustainability.

Under these circumstances, grassroots social movement, or VCM, began to spring in South Korea, and it was clearly different from earlier ones as it focused on social capital and social value and sought to harmonize between individual needs and

community issues. It could be described as a method to escape socioeconomic crises after the government finally recognized the importance of sustainable development and started to develop strategies for it.

VCM aims to involve local people to solve common issues, including childcare, job creation from local economies, and social services for residents. VCM does not use a "top-down" approach, which is based on government-sponsored initiatives, but on shared perspectives that intend to harmonize economic and social goals. VCM is based on a system of interaction and inter-relation to forms the concept of "social life." Hence, every approach is directed at fundamental or basic elements of "social life," namely, "culture, social structure, and social process" [7]. Considering these aspects, VCM might be explained, on the one hand, by various theories, as it always focuses on sustainability; on the other hand, VCM could be mainly explained by social development theory. Social development involves developing the fundamental elements of social life. It entails systematic and planned efforts to develop a 'good' society. Moreover, the primary goal of social development is citizen inclusion. To achieve its purpose, social development uses participatory approaches, in which local people control their own issues and affairs. Social development draws on diverse normative theories, including statism, populist communitarianism, and market individualism [4]. Although these theories form various roots of social development, the goal of social development is to integrate economic and social policies within a dynamic development process to achieve social welfare objectives. Social development emphasizes on social investment and social capital for all kinds of policies. Moreover, it can use social and human capital to ensure the welfare of people and encourage community participation [1].

In this perspective, the role of VCM in dealing with social problems, such as poverty, is harmonized with the social development approach.

CASE STUDY OF VCM: "SUNGMI SAN" VILLAGE COMMUNITY

The paper used both case study and theoretical analysis. The case study focused on one VCM in Seoul: "SungMiSan Maul" (hereafter SungMiSan). It has been in existence since the late 1990s. The village engages people who live in the neighborhood of Seongsan-dong, Seogyo-dong, and Mangwon-dong of Mapo-gu, who have built a community of shared ideals. It is recognized as the best village community in Seoul. For the intensive analysis, in-depth interviews were conducted. The major features of "SungMisan" are listed below:

Sharing Common Values

Community participation is usually rooted in urgent needs, and this phenomenon is observed in the initial attempt to form SungMiSan. That is, the residents first gathered to address childcare concerns. The community took about 20 years to reach this point. In 1994, about 20 dual-income families who could not find suitable childcare decided to join hands to resolve the situation. They all contributed to the opening of a childcare center in Yeonnam-dong, Mapo-gu. A leader in the SungMiSan noted that this marked the birth of Woori Childcare Center, the first cooperative childcare facility in South Korea. The next year, a similar cooperative childcare facility, Nareuneun Childcare Center, was opened in adjacent Seogyo-dong. When these children entered primary school, an after-school center began operations in 1999. Sharing the community-minded childcare philosophy of “raising our children together,” more people boldly relocated to the foot of Mt. SungMiSan to gain access to these unique childcare centers.

After this experience, they recognized the desirable results of community decision making and the importance of sharing common values. When the local government unilaterally pushed urban redevelopment projects in 2001, which was related to the destruction of living spaces, SungMiSan members tried to protect their village from such projects. After two years of fierce opposition, the community was successful in stopping the waterworks project.

This incident served as a trigger to strengthen their solidarity. These experiences resulted in the consolidation of common goals for sustainable community life around two values: the importance of participation and the reactivation of local democratic decision-making procedures.

Generating Social Economy

SungMiSan has also implemented economic activities, which has significantly influenced the social economy. SungMiSan has 20 community businesses, all of which are operated as cooperatives. For example, the elderly care community business, Doore, was established by community members to provide personalized care service for the elderly and create job opportunities in SungMiSan.

Moreover, with the collective purchase of eco-friendly food items, relationships are formed not only among the members of the cooperative but also with the local residents. Within 10 years, this consumer cooperative has reached annual revenues of 5 billion won and membership of more than 5,000 households, while also serving as the center for a variety of local activities [3].

A total of 20 cooperatives provide public goods in and of themselves to respond flexibly and quickly to community needs.

Profit is invested in the community, which can be described as a tangible example of grassroots social investment. It can be evaluated as an effort of creating an active social economy. Various social services offered by community businesses can be classified as those that pertain to the realms of health, education, housing, care, community infrastructure, and eco-friendly living. In short, SungMiSan helps community members create their own social economy. Cooperatives play a key role in providing employment opportunities for the community.

Making Social Capital

As Piselli [7] mentioned, a community is not a “place” but a network of meaningful social relations with friends, relatives, and work colleagues who do not necessarily belong to the same residential unit. SungMiSan is also considered as a network, which generates social capital.

Social capital refers to the internal social and cultural coherence of society, the norms and values that govern interactions among people, and the institutions in which they are embedded [9]. Social capital is generated from networks, norms, and trust. Regarding these features, qualitative data suggest that all kinds of programs of SungMiSan have had a significant impact to develop social capital. They have contributed to building a strong social network based on trust. This kind of social capital is possible because the residents have joined hands to solve the problems of everyday life as neighbors living together. Such a mutually beneficial network in daily life is a manifestation of the definition of a village community.

For example, major elements of SungMiSan’s programs are based on interpersonal relationship. Then, the scope has expanded from making social networks among community members to generating macro social capital. In other words, while engaging in the village community, residents recover their vitality and grasp the tangible meaning of trust. As such, community members have developed tight network relations with one another.

In other words, social relationships in SungMiSan are strengthened by their common experience in community participation. They have relied on neighbors as sources of assistance. The level of trust is relatively high, and open and power-oriented conflict has been almost non-existent since its beginning.

CONCLUSION

Community-based development is appreciated by many individuals and organizations as a tool for sustainable development. The VCM in South Korea discussed above can serve as a reference in formulating useful ways to implement sustainable community development.

In terms of strategy application, the government should take note that community empowerment and local people participation should not be only a superficial discourse but an actual paradigm for all members to follow. The analysis of the case study shows that VCM is formed by the neighbors who get together to discuss common problems and look for ways to solve them. Moreover, generating sustainable community development clearly requires bottom-up participation.

In addition, as the socioeconomic surroundings of VCM are always changing, community members must strive to adapt. In dealing with changes, they have to be sensitive and incorporate the community's norms, which can be a source of strength and help for them.

This paper has shown that VCMs have positive features and implications for sustainable development. Although the paper has adopted a positive position and shown the meaningful outcomes of using the VCM, persisting questions need to be addressed. As this paper only presents an empirical study to describe the major features of VCM and to suggest the possibility of VCM as a strategy for sustainable community development, further studies on the finer points of VCM are needed to confirm such a possibility.

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