

RESEARCH BRIEF

Limitations of Youth Participation in the Policymaking Process in South Korea

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One of the salient human rights is the right to participation. By expressing their opinions, sharing ideas, and being involved in decision-makings, people become free from arbitrary control by others and pursue the best for themselves. Since late 1970s, the global society has increasingly recognized participation as a principal aspect of rights and development of the child as well. Currently, many countries have domestic measures to promote youth participation.

Republic of Korea has recently established a system of youth participation as part of the democratization process. While youth representatives are performing meaningful roles in the policymaking process, several key weaknesses are delaying further success of youth participation.

The obstacles to youth participation identified in this paper arise from fairly common factors, which can be found in any society, especially in countries in the transitional period of democratic development. Hence, a study on the limitations of youth participation system in South Korea would serve as a meaningful datum for other countries that plan to design their own systems.

This paper seeks to determine the limitations of youth participation in South Korea. Furthermore,

by discussing youth participation systems in other countries, it intends to explore possible solutions and future directions of youth participation in South Korea.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) designated 1985 as International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace, emphasizing the “profound importance of the direct participation of youths in shaping the future of humanity” (United Nations, 1979, par. 2). In 1989, the UNGA unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and recognized the right to be heard as a pivotal aspect of rights of the youth (United Nations, 1989). The World Programmes of Action for Youth of 1996 and 2000 included participation of young people as a priority area (United Nations, 1996).

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UNICEF guide produced for the implementation of Article 12 of the CRC, highlights key aspects of youth participation, including listening to the voice of minority children, informing children about decisions affecting them, and guaranteeing proper and safe environment to develop and express their opinions.

Hart defined participation as “the process of

sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community" (1992, p.5). He stressed that participation is the fundamental right of citizenship and the basis of democracy. In this context, youth participation means the process of engaging young people in decision-makings, which affect their lives and communities. For effective participation, young people should be free to express and share their ideas with sufficient knowledge of the discussed issues and the meaning of their participation. Also, adults should respect their rights and abilities.

Youth participation benefits both young people and the society. Just as adults are, young people are also acknowledged of their dignity when they are respected as members of their societies. Also, participation is a way to understand social mechanisms. The process of sharing ideas and negotiating with others help young people accept rules of their societies in dealing with various issues, learn to express their questions toward the society in a productive way, and understand responsibilities to respect others' rights (Kim, 1997; Lansdown, 2011).

Youth participation results in mature and democratic exercise of citizenship in the future and better policy outcomes. As Hart claimed, only through practice and "prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved" can children acquire confidence and competence in democratic citizenship (1992, p. 5). At the same time, only young people themselves can accurately represent the wants and needs of their generation and evaluate the existing youth policies. In fact, children are the best indicators of whether rights of the child are fully protected in the society (Lansdown, 2011).

Methods

In Korea, children's participatory right first received official attention in 1991 when the government ratified the CRC. Currently, youth participation in the policymaking process of Korea is realized mainly through the Juvenile

Special Meeting in the national level and youth participation committees. The Meeting was officially launched in 2005, aiming at the improvement of youth policies and the promotion of rights of the youth.

The Meeting is an annually held national conference of youth representatives, and is affiliated to a relevant government Ministry. As of 2012, the Meeting consisted of 17 regional youth participation committees. Members of the committees are selected each year by public officials of local governments. Each committee has one advisor.

The research was conducted through analyses of existing data and academic researches, interviews with current members of the committees, and based on my two-year experience in the youth participation committee of Gyeonggi Provincial Government.

The following four questions are the standards for assessing the limitations of youth participation.

>Who can actually participate?

>What can the participants discuss?

> How influential is the participation?

> Is the surrounding environment supportive to participation?

The questions address necessary conditions for true participation. In this sense, these standards are the determinants of success and legitimacy of youth participation.

Results

Until 2011, more than 70% of the proposals on youth participation have been either completed or carried out into actions. The high acceptance rate can be regarded as an effort of the South Korean government to listen to its young people. Through participation, young people could make themselves heard and form new networks. Youth representatives felt that their ideas were respected through the process of making policy proposals by themselves, hosting events to support their causes, and being answered by the government (Choi, 2006). Another major achievement for

youth representatives was that they could meet new people. Many youth representatives, who had to spend most of their time studying, mentioned that forming new social networks and sharing common interests were the biggest gains from youth participation activities (Choi, 2006).

Amidst the high rate of acceptance and implementation of youth participation activities and projects in South Korea, various constraints have been observed.

1. Representativeness

Non-discriminatory participation enables decision-makers to listen to what the general public, not a privileged group, wants and needs. When people can exercise their equal right to participate without undue restrictions, the final decision becomes truly legitimate.

However, youth participation committees in Korea lack representativeness. Firstly, youth representatives are selected by public officials. Although some local committees allow youth representatives to participate in the interview process, the influence of youth interviewers is weak. That the Meeting only represents opinions of selected youth representatives, not the general young population, further challenges the representativeness of the suggestions made by its members (Oh, 2007).

Secondly, most members of the committees are at the age of 16 to 18. While the legal age eligibility is 9 to 24, elementary school, middle school, and college students are significantly less represented than high school students.

Thirdly, marginalized youths are severely underrepresented. Besides the nominal encouragement of working or physically challenged youths' participation, there are no concrete efforts to help marginalized youths to be involved in participation activities. In addition, suggestions from school teachers and advisors of youth organizations/facilities are the two most common ways of getting involved in youth participation activities. In the current situation, non-student juveniles or those who have less access to local facilities are less likely to be

informed about youth participation.

A complete solution of this problem might require a long-term measure, which can be found in youth participation system of the Philippines. Since 1991, youths at the age of 15 to 17 could vote for youth representatives of their barangays (villages). Candidates conduct street campaigns and appeal themselves directly to the peers (Na, 2002). Such election process would encourage the representatives to pay more attention to the ideas of their peers, thereby enhancing representativeness and promoting innovative proposals.

An online communication between young people and the government in Queensland of Australia provides an excellent example. In Queensland, young people can discuss regional issues with government ministers through a website. The issues discussed are regularly reported to the Cabinet (Education Services Australia, n.d.). The online youth participation system would be an easy access to youths lacking time, information, and confidence.

2. Contents of Agenda

Another important factor that determines the legitimacy of the final decision is the contents of agendas. The freedom to choose what to discuss is necessary to correctly represent the public's opinions to decision-makers.

Although there are no official regulations, certain topics and proposals are tacitly not allowed to be discussed and unlikely to be accepted. Issues related to education are not consulted with students, and proposals about greater participation of youths in government or school are in most cases not accepted. The implementation status shows that proposals for greater participation of youths have relatively low rate of implementation than proposals for protection and welfare, such as those related to increasing cultural opportunities, vocational education, and prevention of sexual crimes (Choi, 2010). From 2005 to 2009, the acceptance rate of such proposals was only 45.8% while the overall acceptance rate is 71.2%. It should be noted that only completed and currently being implemented proposals were counted,

because proposals that are partially implemented or still waiting for approval as a plan are too insubstantial to fulfill the intention of the original proposals.

Lack of awareness about students' rights and abilities, combined with the structure of provincial governments, places another limitation on the contents of agendas. In a province, the government and the education office are run separately. Because education systems are under the control of local education offices while youth committees are usually under the Governor, the head of the provincial government, suggestions made by youth representatives are not delivered to education offices. At the same time, decision makers have regarded students' opinions as too immature and inappropriate to be considered in enactment processes for big education policy changes. These situations discourage youth representatives from discussing education issues.

In order to make innovative and effective policy suggestions, youth representatives should have freedom to discuss agendas they deem necessary to address. This is especially important regarding educational policies because the opinions of students, as the very people who are affected by the advantages and disadvantages of education policies, must be heeded.

3. *Level of Communication*

For participation to be truly fruitful, the idea must be shared with actual power-holders such as the President, Governors, and legislators. Otherwise, valuable suggestions may be filtered out through bureaucratic steps before arriving to decision-makers. By the same token, unfiltered opinions of youths can be best delivered only when decision-makers directly consult with people affected by youth policies.

The Meeting was originally meant to be presided by the President. However, the President was never present in the Meeting after its test-operation session in 2004. Even then, the President and other government representatives were reported to seem "reluctantly showing up and just evaluating our [youth representatives']

opinions" (Choi, 2006, p. 96). Interviews with youth representatives from regions across the country indicated that meetings with regional actual decision-makers are either not held or unproductive in most cases.

To make the meetings meaningful, sincere attention of decision-makers is needed. Attention of high-ranked public officials would not only help reflection of young people's opinions to a greater extent but would also improve the cooperation level among government departments in implementing policies. Although the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in Korea currently attends the Meeting, her role is no more than a VIP audience. For ideal youth participation, regular meetings with decision-makers in national local government and the President are needed.

4. *Activeness in Participation*

Once proper structures are equipped, creating a supportive environment is indispensable. Because the majority of young people are legal minors or students, cooperativeness of family and school greatly influences youth representatives' activities.

Currently, one of the biggest obstacles is the burden arising from excessively competitive education system. Because the general society encourages too much academic competition, parents and teachers regard youth participation activities as hindrances to students' future. In 2006, youth representatives answered that oppositions from parents and teachers were major difficulties (Choi, 2006). Such oppositions frequently result in cursory and passive participation, and are sometimes strong enough to cause withdrawal of the members.

Another problem resides in the advisors of youth committees. The advisors are in a crucial position of providing needed information and offering counseling to youth representatives on youth participation activities. However, most city committee advisors have no expertise in youth field and their main tasks are not of managing youth committees. The proposal in 2005 to assign more experts in youth fields was not accepted.

Unless advisors are freed from heavy workloads and receive better training in managing youth committees, many committees cannot play active roles in regional policymaking processes.

Conclusion

Youth participation in Korea has timely developed with the global change in the notion of the rights of the youth. Official structures were developed in a relatively short period of time and noticeable achievements were made.

However, the four major flaws have made the further success of Korea's youth participation opaque. Members of youth committees are those considered to be mature and sensible enough by public officials, not those supported by their peers. Issues closely related to young people, such as education, are not discussed with the youths, and further empowerment of the youth tends to be discouraged. Actual decision-makers still do not recognize the importance of youth participation. The abnormal academic burden laid upon students makes youth participation seem as an obstacle to students' future. In some cases, the lack of expertise and understanding of committee advisors hinder activeness of youth committees. In this respect, youth participation in Korea has not fully developed compared with international standards.

The underlying factors of these problems are the general public awareness that youths are still vulnerable and immature, inadequate contemplation of decision-makers on the nature and the importance of youth participation, and the chronic problem in the education system. While the solutions should be devised for a long period of time, several governmental measures can be taken as underpinnings.

Firstly, policies to encourage participation of marginalized and non-member youths should be designed. Secondly, the law should clarify the power and the right of youth participation committees to consult with relevant decision-makers about youth policies and the freedom in

choosing agendas. Finally, government should put more effort into increasing public awareness and cooperation among government departments for youth participation.

Guiding today's young people to be healthy citizens who properly exercise their rights and take responsibilities is an investment for our future. The current limitations in a transitional democratic development stage should be overcome, and the example of Korea would serve as a good case study for other countries aiming for promotion of youth participation.

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