Citizen Empowerment: New Hope for Democratic Local Governance

“Citizen Participation in Budgeting: A Trade-Off between Knowledge and Inclusiveness?” by Sounman Hong is an insightful article that discusses the potential benefits and costs of citizen participation in the governmental budgeting process. Specifically, Hong finds that an increase in inclusiveness—the openness of the political system and the degree of members’ participation—is not necessarily detrimental to the efficacy of citizen participation in budgeting. This finding suggests that the benefits of inclusive citizen participation may go beyond the achievement of its normative and intrinsic democratic values.

This article relies on data from the autonomous districts in Seoul. As one of the districts’ elected heads (often called the district mayor), I strongly support Hong’s findings. The article introduces the case of the Seodaemun district as an exemplary model of citizen participation implemented in Seoul’s districts. Since I was elected in 2010, the Seodaemun district office has sought to better serve its citizens by integrating citizens’ voices into actual policy and by providing hands-on solutions to the problems they raise. In order to achieve this mission, we implemented a number of innovative administrative reforms, particularly citizen participation in budgeting.

As Hong correctly points out in the article, when we first introduced citizen participation in budgeting, some expected no more than an empty formality. Some doubted that participating citizens were sufficiently qualified to make informed decisions. Others opined that citizen participation in budgeting would mirror the famed “tragedy of the commons,” in which selfish exploitation of resources by individuals would destroy assets valuable to the entire community. After four years of implementation, citizen participation in budgeting is taking root in many districts as a successful model for healthy, collaborative partnerships between citizens and the governmental bureaucratic process.

Successful citizen participation in policy making, however, is contingent on several conditions. First, success often requires consistent and firm governmental support. The Seodaemun district had to overcome opposition by supporters of the status quo. Second, as also mentioned in the article, variations in the nature of the actual process of citizen participation may significantly determine the degree of success. The specific recommendations provided in this article will be very beneficial to those who implement participatory budgeting in praxis.

The Seodaemun district has introduced a number of experimental governance models to engender a flourishing partnership between citizens and the bureaucratic process, including community support projects, a citizen complaint office, a citizen ombudsman, an online debate system, and offline community resources. Based on these experiences, I can confidently attest to the fact that a citizen participatory governance model requires patience. As noted by Hong, “citizens’ experiences in the policy-making process can serve as a ‘school of democracy’; the experience of participation itself may help participants become more informed citizens.” Our own experience, as well as the article’s findings, suggests that although citizen participation may encounter difficulties in the beginning, it tends to achieve growing public support when citizens believe that public participation is operated transparently and fairly.

In sum, we are delighted to see that the positive benefits of citizen participation have been verified by an empirical analysis, which is a great reward for government offices that have pursued this type of innovation. We in the Seodaemun district office have been firm supporters of citizen participatory governance, and we will continue to do so in the future. As Hong puts it, the Seodaemun district office will keep initiating innovative administrative designs to “pursue the democratic ideal of opening policy making to the citizenry while still maintaining an efficient process.”