Citizen Participation as a New Mode of Governance for Seoul

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Shorty after my election as mayor of Seoul in October 2011, I pursued a new form of governing (“collective governance”) that brought together citizens and the city’s administrators to engage in public policy making. Seoul’s residents now play an active role in shaping city policies that have impacts on their own quality of life. They are no longer mere “consumers” of policy, at the receiving end. Recent research by Sounman Hong provides empirical and theoretical support for this initiative.

Hong’s article, “Citizen Participation in Budgeting: A Trade-Off between Knowledge and Inclusiveness?,” examines citizen participation in budgeting as practiced in Seoul. Critics often complain that citizens who participate in policy making may lack sufficient knowledge to offer useful and thorough assessments of the policy issues at hand or to make informed decisions. Hong found, however, that greater citizen participation not only embodies the intrinsic values of democracy but also improves the quality of deliberation, with the potential consequence of policies that are better tailored to constituents’ needs. This evidence suggests that it is indeed possible to fulfill the democratic aspiration of opening the door of government to the people while maintaining an efficient policy-making process.

The findings reported by Hong thus support the participatory governance policies currently being pursued in Seoul. Citizens participate in the entire policy-making process: they propose, select, and monitor the spending of a preallocated 50 billion South Korean won (KRW, about US$45 million) every year. The full process is open for any citizen to join through a website (http://yesan.seoul.go.kr). In the last three-year period, citizens proposed 3,395 items, amounting to 2,257 billion KRW, of which 707 items were approved, leading to 150 billion KRW in spending.

Hong’s research also has implications for ongoing innovations in city administration beyond participatory budgeting. To enable citizens to actively take part in the city’s policy-making process, Seoul has initiated a number of innovations in city administration, including the On-Site Office of the Mayor initiative, in which citizens express their views in their own sometimes neglected neighborhoods; one online platform (http://opengov.seoul.go.kr) that provides citizens with access to official city government documents and allows them to submit their opinions; and another online platform (http://eungdapso.seoul.go.kr) where citizens can easily post ideas and civil servants can respond swiftly and effectively. All of these innovations are based on the assumption that the more citizens are involved in the city’s policy processes, the more the resulting policies will improve their lives. Hong’s research provides some support for the validity of this critical assumption.

Seoul has strived to improve communication and collaboration with citizens based on the philosophy that “the citizens are the mayors of Seoul.” Going one step further, Hong’s research suggests that if collective governance is properly designed and operated, citizens may even become the benevolent social planners of the future Seoul. Seoul has been and will remain a staunch supporter of citizen participation in city policy making, seeking to foster an ever brighter future for its citizens.