

# THE DYNAMICS OF SOUTH KOREA'S COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT: A LEGACY OF *SAEMAUL UNDONG*

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## Prologue

**B**y dismantling authoritarian regimes through democratic struggle and electing progressive presidents from among civilian, non-military candidates, Korean society has moved further forward in democratisation. This process has been accompanied by the rise of a civil society. Paradoxically, however, it has been diagnosed as a society that is more fragmented where the division of political ideas between “progressives” and “conservatives” has gradually and markedly sharpened. The former have been formed by democratic movement groups or reforming forces formed during the 1980s. The latter were represented by “modernisation forces” that have enjoyed economic and political benefits brought about by industrialisation under authoritarian regimes (Lee, S.J., 2004).

The resources for social polarisation seem to be found in the emergence of political forces defending both ideas. Firstly, political forces with progressive ideas have appeared and they have competed with the old political elite supporting modernisation forces. The second factor is the growth of civil society through an increase of NGOs classified as “advocacy organisations.” The fact that Korean political parties have not been recognised as political organisations that effectively represent public interest has contributed to the growth of NGOs (Kim, S., 2006).

Other factors have strengthened socio-economic polarisation is the implementation of neo-liberal reforms to the economy since the 1997 financial crisis. The income gap between rich people and poor people has increased alongside these reforms. The Gini coefficient, which details wealth distribution,

indicates rising inequality. It increased from 0.292 in 2000 to 0.325 in 2008 (Yoo, 2009). According to a report by Merrill Lynch, the rate of increase in millionaires in SK was the third highest among Asian countries in 2003, behind Hong Kong and India. The number of people with relatively high incomes also increased three-fold between 1999 and June 2003 (Lim and Jang, 2006). This means that the neo-liberal reforms following the financial crisis have resulted in growing inequality of income between social classes, that is, the wealth of the rich class has increased with financial and real assets, while inequality within the working class has also increased due to the soaring number of casual workers caused by the spread of labour flexibility.

This paper examines how community empowerment in South Korea (SK) has been constructed by social change and state policies. I consider state policies and the activities of organisations as these relate to community work and the problems these policies and activities inflict upon community empowerment practice (CEP). Before describing the legacy of Saemaul Undong (SU) in its new implementation, I overviewed the history of community work in SK.

#### **Analytical Framework**

The concept of community has been defined from several aspects which can be summarised by three approaches: geography, identity, and interests (Dominelli, 2006). For example, community is defined as the people living in one locality; a group of people having cultural, religious, ethnic, blood and other characteristics in common; and a group created on the basis of shared pursuits. Furthermore, the concept of community conflates broadly two aspects: community as "fact" and community as "value" (Shaw, 2004). In Raymond Williams' terms (1985), the community includes two aspects: community as expression of "existing social relations" and community as an expression of "alternative social relations." Consequently, community can be defined as a living location where people or groups based on locality, identity or interests are trying to change existing social relations into alternative social relations capable of achieving communal good by mutuality and reciprocity.

In traditional Korean society, the main traits of communities were built on geographical location based on a neighbourhood unit and identity based on family ties. When Korean people establish human relationships, they put more priority on blood relationships than place (Jung, 2007). Accordingly, communities consisted of persons defined by the same given name. The boundary

of traditional communities was drawn by a collection of settlements in which the families shared the same second name. These communities are called "blood communities" (*Hyel Yeon Gong Dong Che*), where groups with the same given name act in a friendly way and help one another, and have strong reciprocal relationships.

With the progress of industrialisation and urbanisation which started from the 1960s in SK, blood (*Hyel Yeon*) communities located in rural areas began to weaken, but they were not destroyed and they have remained in a few rural places. The significant factor in this destruction was regarded as the influence of the SU. So (2007) points out that the SU transformed itself away from the actualisation of communal values created by traditional community-centred blood ties into the embodiment of values by community-centred locality relationships which the state supported by giving them material resources. Involving administrative agents in supportive activities could prevent blood communities from intervening in the SU and enable people to become involved in the movement based on locality rather than family blood networks.

The characteristics of community in SK can be examined through the history of community work. What do we mean by community work? Like the concept of community, community work has been used as an umbrella term to describe a wide range of activities that change according to the social context. Generally, however, it has been defined as activities to help meet the needs of those who have been disadvantaged or oppressed in communities (Mayo, 2002; Popple, 2002b; Stepney and Popple, 2008).

Models of and perspectives on community work have been broken down by the way community workers practise their activities and the values they use in conducting community development. Rothman (1970) suggested four models of community work: community care providing services to people in need by using therapeutic skills; community organisation focusing on improving the coordination between welfare agencies; community development to promote self-help through projects that provide resources to communities; and community action that stresses the mobilization of people to change existing social relations.

In order to extend a synthesised practice of community work, a group of scholars have defined community work as the practice of extending and deepening democracy by the way they frame the notion of participation and citizenship (Craig, 2004; Popple, 2004; Taylor, 2004; Shaw, 2004). Their definition of community work is similar to that of community development defined in

the *Budapest Declaration* at a conference convened in 2004 by international community development organisations.

Community work is seen as a significant practice contributing to community empowerment. I use the concept of community work as a way to enhance community empowerment in this paper. Thus, community work is a practice involving skills, a knowledge base, and strong values, whereas the concept of community practice can be used to emphasise the practical activity of community work. But community work is interchangeable with community practice or community social work.

### Historical antecedents of community work in SK

I will now give a brief outline of South Korean community work history. The roles, tasks and activities that South Korean community empowerment workers engaged in or what skills and knowledge they were expected to have were many and these varied over time. They are summarised as follows.

**Table 1: Community Development Workers: Roles, Tasks, Activities, Skills and Knowledge**

Year	Who community development workers are	Community development workers' roles, tasks, activities, skills and knowledge
1900s - 1940s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christian missionaries</li> <li>• Community-based opinion leaders controlled by Japanese colonialists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities to help poor people</li> <li>• Activities facilitating subordination of communities to Japanese imperialists' demands</li> <li>• Roles and skills to turn communities into military bases to conquer China</li> </ul>

1950s - 1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders of religious organisations</li> <li>• Local public servants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities to help refugees</li> <li>• Skills/knowledge for charitable activities and community caring</li> <li>• Foreign aid agencies' knowledge; ignorance of Korean native people</li> </ul>
1970s - 1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saemaul Undong leaders selected by local people or local public servants</li> <li>• Leaders of local public and private sectors</li> <li>• Volunteers: university students, clerics and WNGO workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities to improve living conditions</li> <li>• Task and skills to develop self-help communities, that is, those needing "economic development for the community"</li> <li>• Legitimise and support authoritarian regime</li> <li>• Activities to procure poor urban and rural peoples' residence rights and to help them</li> </ul>
1980s - 1990s	Qualified social workers, and WNGO's staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As enablers, techicist practices for helping, caring for, and organising poor people</li> <li>• As advocates, transformational practices for implementing government housing policy through mobilizing poor people</li> <li>• "Traditional professionalism" based on the ideas of regarding community workers as professionals superior to people who require their help</li> <li>• Traditional Korean community work</li> </ul>

2000 present	- Qualified social workers, WNGOs' practitioners, and leaders of public and private sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills and knowledge to implement self-sufficiency projects effectively through creating jobs for poor and underemployed people</li> <li>• As partners of local governance, skills to improve communications between participants, knowledge of how to operate local governance, and values to promote egalitarian relationships between stakeholders</li> <li>• Praxis (knowledge and action) for providing effective delivery services for service users according to devolution policy</li> <li>• Tasks to empower communities effectively by "power with" with service users, moving away from "traditional professionalism" to "new professionalism" based on regarding community workers as professionals who promote the values of solidarity and partnership</li> </ul>
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Source: Yang, Man-jae (2011)

### **Saemaul Undong: Community Work Initiated by a Self-help Movement**

SU has been evaluated as the practice of community work having the greatest influence on Korean society. Korean professionals (Jung, 2000; Kim et al., 2000; Choe and Roo, 1996) have regarded SU as the model for community development. The SU emphasised the principles of diligence, self-help, and cooperation as well as seeking to transform the traditional community into a modernised community by organising communities and securing material resources in order that communities could address their own problems, especially those on low incomes in rural communities that bore the brunt of the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. A modernised community means a community with an infrastructure able to increase incomes through housing improvements such as

replacing a straw-thatched house with a new one made of brick, extending roads and reorganising farmland. Creating a modernised community was regarded as the task of community development workers of SU (So, 2007).

Thus, according to Rothman's (1970) models of community work, SU would be deemed a model of community development. In addition, SU has been accepted as a significant model of local governance to be referenced in implementing the policy of community development in SK until now (So, 2007), and evaluated as the current progressive form of community development. Current developments have been achieved by communities acting under the 1999 *Act of Supporting Organisations of SU*, by which the central government and local authorities can provide subsidiary payments for running the organisations of the movement (Hwang, 2006).

From 1962, Korea implemented an economic development policy that prioritised industrialisation through export-led action. As a result, an increasing development gap between urban and rural regions produced social polarisation between urban and rural populations. Additionally, the world economic recession caused by the oil crisis of the 1960s exposed the problems of a Korean economic policy based on export-led growth. To address the stagnation of export trade, the government needed an economic growth policy that increased national domestic demands by invigorating investment in the public sector. This investment was directed towards SU as a driver of local development (Korean Rural Economic Institute, 1979).

President Park seized power through a military coup in 1961. The absence of legitimacy for his regime created social disturbances. These increased with the economic recession at the end of the 1960s. To cope with the social instability that resulted from the absence of legitimacy and to gain a political base in rural regions in the presidential election of 1971, the Park government launched the SU (Korean *Saemaul Undong* Centre, 1998).

Both the President and bureaucrats took the lead in the movement by offering material resources to communities, in a top-down way; local leaders and residents choose to become involved in the movement to build better communities, in a bottom-up way. Furthermore, this contributed to the transformation from "undeveloped rural communities" to "modernised self-sufficient rural communities" by securing voluntary participation and improving living conditions and the productive bases of rural villages. But by bolstering a pan-administrative organisation and using it as a means to justify Park's

authoritarian regime, it actually started gradually to displace “community as self-help” based on autonomous or self-deliberating residents. As a result, the SU became “community as policy” (Shaw, 2004) and addressed the objectives of the government as specified by bureaucrats and their political leaders.

From the late 1970s, SU sought to build an environmentally friendly society by initiating a movement for the protection of the natural environment. Moreover, as a means of ending the attempts of manufacturing labourers to raise their wages, the Factory SU launched a programme to create harmony between employers and employees. After the assassination of President Park in 1979, the movement continued without changing its basic principles, acting as a tool of mobilisation to buttress the national development policies of succeeding governments until the end of the 1980s.

### ***Saemaul Undong and Its Legacy***

From 2000, community work was activated once again much as the SU of the 1970s had been because the policies and practices affecting community development were conducted in a similar manner. This tendency may be defined as the “rediscovery of community.” As SU was initiated as a means to cope with the economic crisis of 1970, so the burgeoning of projects supporting self-sufficiency in communities could be seen as the enlargement of community work to address the aftermath of the economic recession of 1997.

The five Centre of Supporting Community of Self-Sufficiency (CSCSSs) in 1996 increased to 70 by 2001 and 98 by 2003. There were 91 centres for community self-sufficiency managing 191 self-sufficiency communities in 2003 (Hong, S.M., 2004a). This phenomenon is described as “the boom of self-sufficiency in the communities” (Kim, S.H., 2000). SU primarily followed a top-down intervention led by the bureaucrats, whereas the CSCSSs were operated democratically in a bottom-up form that used Non-Profit Organisation (NPOs), the Community Welfare Centre (CWCs) and Non-Government Organisation (NGOs) funded by the government. According to statistics given by the Ministry for Health Welfare and Family Affairs (MHWFA) in 2003, representative agencies for managing CSCSSs were made up of two thirds of CWCs, one third NGOs and religious organisations. Unlike SU, however, the sufficiency programmes concentrated on poor people and promoted community development by providing welfare services including the opportunity to get a job and cash benefits. Booming self-sufficiency projects meant that community practitioners acquired skills

and knowledge that were able not only to create jobs so that clients received minimum living benefits but also enabled them to be involved in paid work. The self-sufficiency projects were in a programme supported by government funds to empower communities for economic independence, whereas the CEP project was supported by the private welfare agency, the Community Chest in Korea (CCK).

Following the accession to power of Roh Moo-hyun's government in February 2003, policies were implemented that contributed considerably to community work. One of these was the policy that aimed to meet clients' needs and enhance their rights through the formation of a "Local Social Welfare Association" (Cho, 2008). The local welfare association was an organisation where representatives in public and private sectors were based in the community and able to discuss local welfare issues. Its roles are: discussing local welfare issues and deliberating local welfare plans; securing service-delivery systems centred on service users and expanding local welfare resources; and improving the capacity of welfare agencies to address community problems.

According to research (Cho, 2008), social workers working in welfare sectors forming such associations are expected to have the following skills: skills to negotiate differences of understanding about issues; skills to improve communication between participants; knowledge of how to operate local governance structures effectively by holding workshops and fostering a learning organisation; values to promote egalitarian relationships between private and public representatives in setting up plans and agendas and evaluating the outcomes of practice; and a capacity to identify issues that are tailored to local situations and to cope with them rather than depending heavily upon external experts who do not live in the local area.

This local welfare association, however, had different characteristics from a local committee driving SU. The local association was a body discussing key issues like the enhancement of welfare services by targeting vulnerable people rather than lay people. These issues included securing effective welfare delivery systems; finding and developing local welfare resources and addressing current welfare problems.

Another difference is the composition of participants. SU committee was made up of chiefs of the local public sector whereas that of the welfare associations is composed of private and public stakeholders relevant to local social work. The main participants in these associations were public officials

relating to social work, the chief of the CWC, the chief of the public health centre, a local council member, a Welfare NGO (WNGO) leader, an expert in social work and a representative of the service users. Selecting these participants was determined primarily by public officials rather than by consensus between public and private representatives or having the residents make the selections. According to research, 73 per cent of participants responded that public authority fosters and controls the association (Cho, 2008).

Unlike the local committee of the SU, diverse representatives of people and stakeholders including WNGOs were involved in local welfare associations. But the powers for making decisions have remained with public officials. The opportunity for citizens' autonomous participation was seldom offered, and community workers did not push for it (Participatory Government). The new local welfare associations in the Participatory Government (PG) can hardly be regarded as innovative organisations that are able to reform the profession of community work.

### **Epilogue**

The implementation of SU can be summarized with mistakes in the policy of community development. The first one is its failure to set up a sustainable goal by which the movement could keep going because there was no consensus on further goals between residents and the government after the achievement of the goal of becoming "self-independent communities." It was also argued that there was too much intervention in the administrative organisation by the President and the central bureaucrats, which resulted in residents' passivity and dependence on government for resources and activities. Also, community leaders were not qualified enough to have authority over residents in the SU movements because most had not been selected by local people. The SU was regarded as a movement led by "public officials" rather than a grass roots organisation.

Those criticisms provide guidelines for setting up the new implementation of SU. The main characteristics of community work in SK in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century can be summarised as follows. First, there is a proliferation of programmes of community work for poor communities impoverished economically and politically by globalisation. Next, it provides tokenistic welfare institutions to activate community practices at the local level through the policies of welfare that provide low paid jobs for clients. For community practitioners, a lack of

experience and professional community work hinders the empowerment of clients and communities through participation and organisation.

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