

Negative Impact of E-Governance to NGOs:
The Case of Korean Council of YMCAs

Jai Chang Park

Professor, Sookmyung Women's University

Korea

1. Introduction

E-governance has become a part of our daily lives. It is no longer confined to the networks between government and citizens (B2C). It has developed into other spheres of our society. It is particularly so when we refer e-governance to any collaborations to enhance public interests by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), that have the ability to transform government's relations with citizens, business and other arms of government.

Among the collaborative partners of e-governance, NGOs have shown an exponential growth in their numbers and magnitude in policy process in these days all across the world. Korea is not an exception from such a trend. After the advent of "87 regime"¹, Korea has observed a rapid and flourishing development of NGOs in their number, diversity and voice to governing process. NGOs in Korea have grown up even as one of the major political sources of hegemonic power steering policy directions and mobilizing citizens' supports.

There is, however, little research on NGOs' use of ICTs in general and impact of e-governance to NGOs in particular. We know from studies of firms that the introduction of new technologies can substantially impact on organization's internal and external relations (Orlikowski et al, 1995). The internal structure of NGOs could reflect the collaborative and less hierarchical organizational forms observed in firms that have introduced ICTs to their interactions with government (Kahn, 2000; Stark, 2000). It also can be argued that NGOs would undergo organizational changes and allow themselves to more flexibly address the competing demands placed upon them and better exploit ambiguity.

This paper aims at exploring what are the real impacts of ICTs to NGOs engaged in e-governance. There has been an assumption or normative expectation that the use of ICTs can stimulate innovative capacity within and among NGOs. This innovative capacity, however, could lead NGOs into new forms of hybrids that do not easily map onto conventional images of NGOs. This brings with it the risk that NGOs will encounter problems of accountability that undermine rather than enhance their responsiveness to social change.

¹ July revolt by citizens in 1987 against then government's intention to change constitution in order to enable indirect election of the president is counted as a historical milestone in the process of democratization of Korean politics. And the successive governance from that time on is called as 87 regimes in comparison with the previous ones.

Therefore, we need to understand the changes and possibilities that ICTs really bring to the work of NGOs and how they affect the mission of NGOs. It becomes very important to find a way to work out how to adapt to the changes while maintaining the integrity of furthering the NGOs' objectives. We need to address and meet the changing expectations of the people with whom the NGOs work everyday.

2. Role of NGOs in Information Society

The advent of information society has direct bearing upon the social and institutional environments in which NGOs operate. Being able to take advantages of ICTs in such a circumstance, NGOs expand dramatically their web of social interaction, increase its density, and promote new connections among diverse and dispersed social actors. They could solicit "wider participation" of citizens by locating people with far more ease than before who share same values and objectives with them, providing accessibility for those who are disabled, living in remote areas, and thus discouraged to join in policy process, and distributing information tailored for the interests of individual needs and aspirations.

Increased participation serves as a source of political legitimacy for NGOs to identify social issues, raise dissident voices, develop alternatives and thus advocate and represent the interests of people. Such a role is particularly demanding since political agents could not aggregate, transmit, and represent the interests of principles with such accuracy and speed that they were expected to be due to increased turbulence of information flow and bureaucratic structure of government. NGOs could thus be considered as an alternative conduit for citizens to deliver their messages to government. They become essential to the vibrant functioning of a democracy.

NGOs also become able to compete professionally and subject matter expertise with government officials since the monopoly or dominance of information by government could not be maintained any further in information society. Demarcation line between government and civil society becomes blurred and a tension to hold a sort of equilibrium between them takes place. NGOs become able to functionally complement or replace administrative agents, whose authority owes much to their professionalism and accumulation of information, relying much on "deeper participation" of citizens. Magnitude of NGOs as a gatekeeper or a third party judge has upgraded.

NGOs in information society described in literature as like the above are not only to set priority of policy agendas but also to evaluate and interpret policy alternatives from objective and scientific standpoint. Along the line of understanding NGOs as such

proponents or promoters of policy alternatives, there is an assumption to equate NGOs with citizens as if they were same identity. It is true that NGOs are associated on the base of voluntary participation of citizens, however, they are not citizen themselves. Between NGOs and citizens, there are almost same working mechanisms that we see in e-governance between government and NGOs and those between government and citizens as well. Associations imply an existence of internal working structure meanwhile individual citizens are isolated from each other and free from such working mechanism.

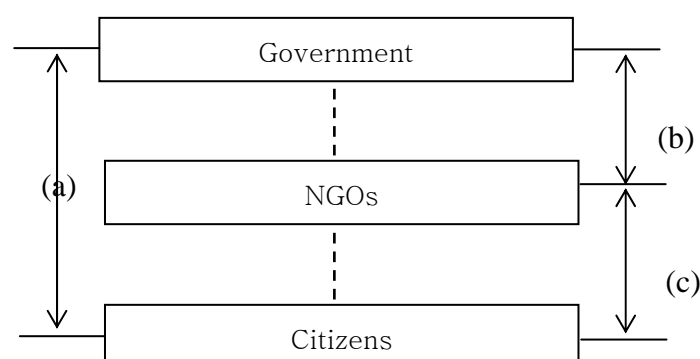
Discussions about issues regarding impact of the advent of information society in general and e-governance in particular to NGOs most start from normative premises about technical properties of ICTs, even at the scholarly and policy level. And they naturally arrive at emphasizing positive impact ignoring negative one. Yet while assumptions about ICTs' social effects provide good rhetorical ammunition for debates, they tend in most cases to outstrip our knowledge of how ICTs are actually influence (O'Mahony and Barley, 1999) the relationship between NGOs and citizens. The social practices that evolve around the use of ICTs tell us more accurate information about their effect than assumptions based on their properties alone (Bijker 1997; Giddens, 1984). It becomes an imperative to correct such a bias by conducting closer research on the working mechanism between NGOs and citizens.

3. E-Governance between NGOs and Citizens

Three different categories of e-governance could be discerned from theoretical schemes dealing with e-governance and interactive collaborations among and between the major components of a society: e-governance between government and citizens (a), e-governance between government and NGOs (b) and e-governance between NGOs and citizens(c). Among these e-governance models, e-governance between NGOs and citizens(c) has seldom been discussed in literature. Without e-governance between NGOs and citizens(c), however, e-governance between government and NGOs (b) could not function as an alternative conduit or a complementary funnel to e-governance between government and citizens (a). Communication and networking between NGOs and citizens are integral to NGOs' basic tasks of aggregating citizens' aspirations and needs, evaluating policy alternatives, transmitting them to government and co-implementing them together with government.

Such a relationship could be outlined as follow.

Three different models of e-governance



In other words, e-governance between government and citizens (a) depends upon what relations NGOs develop with citizens in their confrontations with newly introduced ICTs. ICTs are designed and adopted as a tool for processing information, increasing communication and facilitating networking. If ICTs are seen as such a tool, then NGOs seem organizationally ideal for adapting to them.

The problem with viewing ICTs as a tool, however, is that once new technologies are introduced to solve old problem, the problems themselves change. E-mail may enable an NGO to increase its level of communication, but it may also create such a flood of requests for information that the NGO becomes paralyzed (DiMaggio et al, 2001). The gap between institutional capacity of NGOs and exploding political participation by citizens makes their response so slow that the citizens who clicked on NGOs' internet may turn their way to government and communicate directly with government overpassing e-governance system between NGOs and citizens. There is no sufficient time to respond to rapidly erupting changes and flood of information incoming from citizens to NGOs. It becomes further serious when NGOs are not able to keep abreast with changes in a society in their technological edge and furnished with insufficient staff to work on such incoming requests.

One of the major reasons that have induced citizens to join in e-governance with NGOs has been their trust and reliance on professional knowledge and judgment extended by NGOs. It becomes, however, difficult for NGOs to maintain such a relative supremacy in their support of professionalism and expertise that could hold further reliance of citizens after the advent of information society since wider spread of ICTs enable citizens easily access to various sources of professional information and knowledge and enjoy higher quality of information by reaching directly to professionals and experts and circumventing NGOs via ICTs. And for NGOs, there is no sufficient

time to respond to the requests from citizens as long as they maintain conventional working mechanism. It is a routine way of providing professional expertise for NGOs to consult with subject matter experts at their initial stage of developing policy position, which inevitably requires some time to drag before responding to the citizens' requests.

It is obvious that ICTs accelerate communication, promote networking, and upgrade collaboration among NGOs. Widening gap between NGOs with advanced ICTs and those with outmoded computers and still depend largely on regular mail and faxes, however, makes collaboration far more difficult and uneasy to establish coalition front among NGOs. The main barriers causing such a different institutional adaptability to information society have been relative lack of funding, relevant training, and accessibility to ICTs. The fast pace of change in ICTs has contributed also to such disparity among NGOs.

In other words, role of NGOs as an intermediate between government and citizens rapidly decreases and thus functional locus of NGOs is challenged seriously. Such a change implies a working mechanism that may take place in the process of government's shrinking into civil society, which have been projected by some futurists in their discussion of changing relations between government and civil society. Even though it has been argued that technical properties of ICTs will eventually bring in auto-administration, there has been a paucity of information about how such a change would be realized. Knowledge about how e-governance between NGOs and citizens gradually degraded and e-governance between government and citizens eventually replaces e-governance between government and NGOs will furnish further understanding on this process of change.

4. Impact of ICTs to Korean Council of YMCAs

Korea is well known with its vibrant NGOs activities among other Asian and Pacific countries. Such a dynamic growth and operation of Korean NGOs owes much to their historical evolution led mainly by civil society organizations(CSOs)' leadership and standing staffers, most of whom once have engaged in student movements against dictatorial regimes in the past. Among such CSOs, there are four major ones, which exercise leadership in setting agendas, advocating against government, formulating public opinion, and thus directing CSOs movements in Korea: People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), Korean Federation for Environmental Movement

(KFEM), Korean Council of YMCAs (YMCA) and Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ).

Among these "big fours, YMCA enjoys longest institutional history, largest volume of standing staffers, membership, and annual budget, and greatest number of local movements. In other words, YMCA is the most established and so bureaucratized one among them. It does not necessarily mean, however, that it has kept technological edge in the adoption and use of ICTs. It is true, however, after the upgrade of internet facilities, YMCA has become more responsive to social issues than before. In the previous days, local movements have enjoyed almost complete autonomy in their initiation and responses to social issues, and thus there seldom has occurred unified confrontation against social problems and difficulties at national level. ICTs have opened up further networking and wider communications. Instead of a one to one relationship among the movements, individual local chapters began to form networks of common interest using email, listserves and chat rooms among themselves. This does not replace meeting face to face, nor does it disintermediate YMCA from its relationship between government and citizens. In fact it has enhanced the work of YMCA. It has become more competent at putting people in contact with each other, facilitating, listening to discussions, summarizing, placing the personal issues in a political and historical context, monitoring and lobbying for change. This is done now online.

But it also threatens to disintermediate the existing lively and timely responses of YMCA to recurring requests of citizens. Conventional way of encountering and responding to social issues at its initial stage in YMCA has been to put an issue on an open and public debate inviting professionals and subject matter experts in a perusal to call attentions from the public and to take account of the professional knowledge and expertise into its work of analyzing impact of social difficulties, evaluating current policies and developing alternatives. It, thereby, could have been able to enjoy a role of leadership in the fields of developing issues, building public opinion, and guiding Korean NGOs front. Citizens' Forum (simin nondan) marked its 400th meeting anniversary last October, which meets regularly at least once or twice a month for the last 20 years to enrich and promote such discussions and exchange of opinions among professional experts and other related parties. This meeting, however, is rapidly declining nowadays in its magnitude in mobilizing public attention, drawing larger attendance of audiences, and soliciting standing staffers to rely more heavily in their daily works of advocacy building, which contrasts to the glory of heydays in 1970s and 1980s.

One of the major reasons of such decline owes much to the wide spread of ICTs in Korea. Meanwhile those who are equipped with ICTs could access directly to professional expertise, research relevant knowledge with much more ease and speed, and develop their own forum to formulate opinions and alternative solutions to social issues, YMCA should go through such conventional procedures to attract expertise and bear on internal bureaucracy less flexible to respond to such rapidly popping issues. KTX café's are excellent examples.

With the historical opening of the express rail (KTX) in April 2004, Korea has joined the league of France, Japan, Germany and Spain and entered into the super high-speed train era, operating at speeds of 300km per hour. Opening of the express rail, which has been referred to as the biggest national policy project since the national foundation, will not only bring about enormous changes to the lives of Koreans by enabling them to reach anywhere in the country within three hours, but it will also have a huge influence on the economic, social and cultural aspects of the country. However, it turned out to be not very much fast, safe, convenient and environmentally friendly, which is almost completely different from what has been insisted by the government. Citizens disappointed with such a poor service began to criticize the government and look for solutions not by reaching to major NGOs this time which have exercised a strong leadership in mobilizing political pressure upon government but by forming anti-KTX café's in cyber space by themselves. In fact major NGOs in general and YMCA in particular had intentions to deal the issue with higher priority but the citizens were not able to wait until these bureaucratized organizations began to respond since they were evaluated to move rather slowly than they were expected to be.

Similar cases are observed more frequently nowadays. The long-term stabilization of the National Pension Fund became the overriding concern since the introduction of the National Pension Scheme in 1988 which was initially designed to provide high benefits against low contributions. Accordingly, the centerpiece of the full-scale reform, which was made to extend its mandatory coverage to people in urban area (in April 1999), was a set of measures taken to stabilize the fund. In an effort to stabilize the fund, financial recalculation is advised to be made every 5 years from 2003 to adjust contribution and benefit level appropriately and maintain the long-term balance of Pension Fund. In the process of reforming the pension system, the transparency, specification and profitability of Pension Fund management have been questioned and become a focus of strong social concern. YMCA was concerned about the problems encountered by the recipients of the Pension and tried to launch a reform campaign. Its civil society movement committee was called upon to review the issue. Citizens, however, didn't

wait until YMCA takes an initiation and develops a campaign program. There popped up many anti-Pension café's by themselves in the internet almost instantaneously and run reform campaigns without waiting assistance from major NGOs. Such internet café's requested viewers and participants of chat rooms to join in e-protest against Pension authority and to drive sit-in demonstration in front of the building. If it were in the past, citizens must have tried to reach and rely on major NGOs leadership including YMCA.

Such a change implies that YMCA is now placed in tighter competition with other NGOs and citizens' self help than before. In case of YMCA, it has not been able to invest enough financial resources to develop ICTs and train standing staffers to adapt to such changes. When the whole Korean society has become mainstreamed into ICTs application and civic participation, YMCA as like the other NGOs in Korea has barely traced after such change and hadn't have enough resources to invest for the increase of its staffers' capacity in the effective use of ICTs. Let alone to build the capacity of their volunteers and those with whom they work. Such a reluctance to develop institutional capacity has drawn direct e-democracy. And it should be reminded that such a direct e-democracy where one by one, each individual reacts to an entire arm of government bypassing YMCA's mediation, threatens to ignore the experience, knowledge, institutional memory, grassroots connection, and expertise of YMCA in particular and Korean CSOs in general.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, it is an imperative for the major Korean CSOs in general and YMCA in particular to increase their capacity to work online more effectively in many ways. Such as by being able to select the most efficient method according to the needs and requests of participants, the communication processes and the content. They need to up grade internal and networked work and communication processes which can be used to respond to the online consultations. They need effective online report back mechanisms for internal review of both process and content. They should keep abreast technological edge with other components of the society and reform internal working mechanism by reflecting requests for division of labor and rather flat organizational structure and thereby overcoming bureaucratic nature of conventional working system.

It has been argued that the ICTs build social capital by enhancing the effectiveness of community-level voluntary associations and by establishing powerful organizations watching on the works of government (DiMaggio et al, 2001:319). Such a prevailing

optimism over the role of ICTs owes much, however, to the unilateral perspective reviewing the phenomenon from vantage point of NGOs rather than from that of citizens. When we approach to it from the side of citizens, it becomes very natural to arrive at a self reflection that we need to widen our perspective and to correct our projection over the impact of ICTs to e-governance to such a more balanced view that there is an inclination not to allow room for NGOs to intermediate communications between government and citizens any further and citizens' direct communication capability to government increases far beyond our expectations. We should overcome research bias or disproportionate emphasis on NGOs implicitly treating the nature of ICTs as fixed.

And it should be concerned also that when citizens' direct communication with government circumventing NGOs becomes a rather recurrent and common phenomenon, there could take place a danger of populism dominating government policy formulation process. The normative role of NGOs in policy process is not simply to provide and transmit citizens' opinion without filtering it but to furnish professional expertise and judgment together with information about citizens' preferences and, thereby, to satisfy both premises of value and fact in decision making process. It should be reminded that for a rational decision making it requires not only to prioritize citizens' preferences but also to make professional evaluation on the base of scientific and objective rationality.

The knowledge about shrinking mechanism of NGOs' role as an intermediate between government and citizens implies a lot and could provide a base to enhance understanding about final stage of government disappearance argued by Marx and emergence of self autonomous government projected by Kooiman (2003). Those arguments were in the lack of presenting intervening variables which connect cause and effect in the process of developing their theoretical schemes. The result of this research could be a ground stone to correct such paucity in theoretical constructs of these assertions.

But such a role shrinking of NGOs as an intermediate between government and citizens, however, does not necessarily mean that citizens will completely stop to interact with NGOs. On the contrary, they still continue to communicate and interact with NGOs and such a relationship will continue to exist. NGOs will never lose their institutional trust and legitimacy as an intermediate between government and citizens since NGOs play a role as a gatekeeper evaluating and filtering citizens' opinion and initiating identification of social issues without waiting input by citizens.

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