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**Research Report**

## Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability in Korea: Toward Participatory Policy Governance

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## Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability in Korea: Toward Participatory Policy Governance\*

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“Cases of policy decision-making processes that fail to fully recognize the foreseeable problems facing younger and future generations indicate that current policy governance is vulnerable in terms of intergenerational equity and sustainability. Hence, it is vital to design an effective policy governance system for resolving intergenerational problems; one in which policymakers can consider the long-term impact of their decisions not only on different living generations but also on future generations. To fulfill this task, a participatory policy governance system has been proposed as a way of promoting the input from different generations, and on behalf of future generations in policy decision-making processes in the legislative and administrative sectors. Creating a civic culture for future responsibility at the community level should be also emphasized. Institutionalizing the participatory policy governance system and the culture for future responsibility could help to alleviate increasing generational conflict in Korea during the coming era of slow growth and aging population.”

### I. Issue

The recent debate over Brexit provides a vivid example of intergenerational conflict, as it contains a sharp divide between the younger generation, who voted to remain in

\* Based on Kim (2015), chapter 11.

the European Union, and the older generation, who opted out. As a result of Brexit's passage, dismay prevails among many young Britons, who believe that their future has been determined by the older generation, even though younger people will have to bear the consequences of this decision for a much longer time period. Brexit is indeed representative of the generational divide in decision-making processes on policies with long-term repercussions.

**Generational conflicts are increasingly likely to grow stronger in the policy decision-making process as well as in voting.**

In Korea, the generational gap in public opinion is demonstrated through the voting patterns of respective age groups in major political elections (Kim, 2015, chapter 3). The current socioeconomic climate, characterized by slow growth and an aging population, could increasingly bring such intergenerational issues to the fore, particularly with regard to the development and establishment of policies that will have significant and long-lasting impact.

To assess the structure, coordination, delivery, and evaluation of policy governance within the realms of resolving intergenerational problems in the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea), the appropriate questions should be raised and discussed in the context of intergenerational equity and sustainability. One suggestion is to analyze whether all the foreseen long-term issues and impact on different present and future generations were properly taken into account at the stages of policy agenda setting and decision-making.

In addition to conducting scientific and objective policy analysis, focus should also be placed on securing a long-term perspective within the policy decision-making process. This can be difficult because, in Korea's political environment, politicians tend to be primarily interested in gaining reelection and the president serves only one five-year term.

**Indeed, some policy cases even failed to take into account of the fully expected problems and are simply centered on present generations.**

As examples of failures to consider the long-term perspectives within the decision-making process, including concerns for sustainability and intergenerational equity, Kim (2015, pp. 507–517) presents several policy cases, such as the basic pension, raising the retirement age, and installation of the Gyeongju radioactive nuclear waste treatment facility.

Specifically, the adoption of the basic pension presents problems related to long-term sustainability and intergenerational equity, since an aging society will require increasingly larger pension expenditures while the working-age population, the source of tax revenues to fund public pensions, continues to decline. Moreover, the policy implementation timeline decision to prolong the retirement age pushed the younger generation into a situation known as the 'employment cliff,' as the law was established without thorough consideration of the temporary surge in the children generation of the baby boomer generation which in turn intensified the employment competition with the baby boomer generation (see Kim 2015, Chapter 11). As for the Gyeongju radioactive nuclear waste treatment facility, critical decisions on its location and the use of funds in return lacked sincere consideration of the environmental consequences that future generations may have to face, again with the result that current generations might benefit while future

generations pay the price. These cases illustrate the current predicaments of Korea's policy governance and demonstrate what happens when the central government, National Assembly, and local governments make policy decisions without contemplating expected population projections or sustainability and intergenerational equity issues.

## II . Intergenerational Problems and Sustainability: Policy Governance Context and Constraints

Although systematic reform is vital in structuring policy governance to enable sustainability and intergenerational equity, efforts to improve civic virtue and mutual understanding of the interested parties among different generations should be emphasized. To do so, the legislative branch of the national and local governments should consider enhancing the representation of different generations as a way to increase dialogue and communication across age groups. Furthermore, a public forum should be established in which different generations can share ideas and insights and voice their opinions. To examine the perceptions and understandings of these two approaches (i.e., multi-generational representation and public forums) by different age groups, this paper briefly summarizes the survey results of the KDI Generation Study 2015 (hereafter KGS 2015).<sup>1)</sup>

### 1. Institutional mechanism for empowering future generations

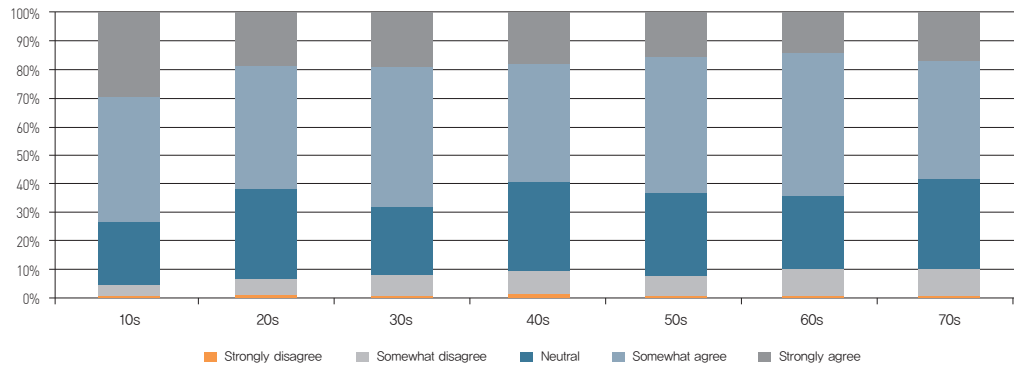
Of the 3,500 respondents of the KGS 2015, who ranged in age from 15 to 79, the majority answered positively when asked about the need for an institutional mechanism that can improve the political influence of the shrinking younger population. Respondents who chose 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat agree' accounted for 63.4% of the sample, whereas only 8.1% expressed disagreement.

As shown in [Figure 1], the percentages of agreement by different age cohorts (in order from highest to lowest) were as follows: teens, 73.2%; thirties, 68%; sixties, 64%; fifties, 62.8%, twenties, 61.6%; forties, 58.4%; seventies, 57.6%. Interestingly, there was less agreement from the twenties and forties cohorts than from those in their fifties and sixties. In truth, many of those in their twenties seem indifferent to politics despite having the right to vote, as evidenced by their low voting rates, and their interest in increasing political influence lags behind that of teenagers. Also notable is that the forties cohort remained conservative, much like their elders in their seventies.

**Most respondents in all age groups agree on the need for an institutional mechanism that could strengthen younger people's political influence.**

1) KGS 2015 surveyed 3,500 Koreans aged 15 to 79 across Korea (excluding Jeju Island) in age groups of 500 each, ranging from teens to people in their seventies. The twenties to seventies cohorts were contacted directly and interviewed at home; those in their teens were surveyed online. See Kim (2015), Appendix 1 for further details.

**[Figure 1] Perceived Need for an Institutional Mechanism to Enhance the Political Influence of Younger Generations**



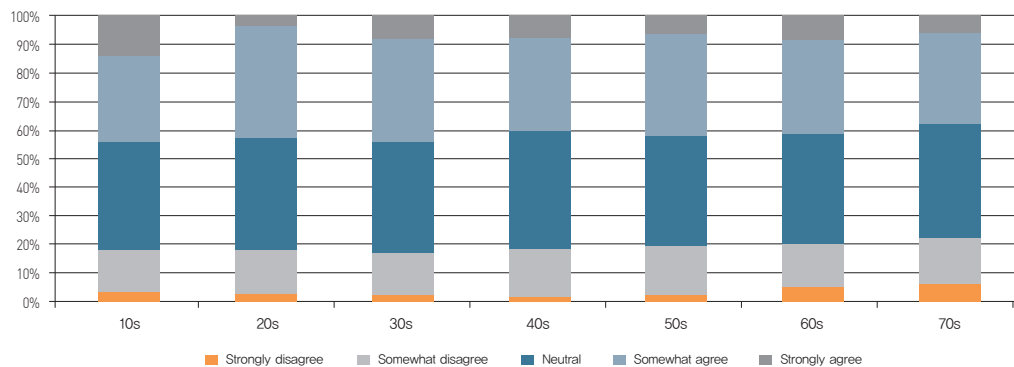
## 2. Willingness to participate in intergenerational communication and discussion

Positive responses to the willingness for intergenerational communication and discussion outnumber the negative responses, while 20s remain laid-back.

When asked about their willingness to participate if a forum for intergenerational discussion and communication was set up, more than twice as many respondents agreed (41.2%) than disagreed (18.6%). [Figure 2] reveals impressively little difference in the agreement rate across the age cohorts, which ranged from a high 43.6% for respondents in their thirties to 36.8% for those in their seventies. Again, the lowest ‘strongly agree’ response came from the twenties cohort.

Further analysis found that willingness to participate in such a forum was particularly strong among male adults and students and tended to rise along with one’s level of education. However, with other factors controlled, the twenties cohort showed a particularly low interest in participation. It would be useful to investigate further what is causing the disinterest among this segment of the population and to seek ways to encourage them to engage in intergenerational communication and dialogue.

**[Figure 2] Willingness to Participate in Intergenerational Communication and Discussion**



### 3. Constraints in moving toward responsibility for the future

The governmental system of any country responds first to the needs of the present generations through which its political legitimacy is institutionally secured (Seo, 2013, p. 53). In this context, matters of intergenerational equity and sustainability—the core issues of intergenerational conflict—can be seen as a matter of how sufficiently the rights and interests of future generations are taken into account.

Accordingly, alternative systems have been suggested, such as democratic trusteeship and deliberative democracy. Under the democratic trusteeship system (Thompson, 2010) a certain proportion of legislative positions is assigned to trustees representing the interests of future generations. Meanwhile, in deliberative democracy (Ekeli, 2005), young people and adolescents take part directly in policy decision-making processes. Such efforts to embrace future generations through deliberative democracy and participatory governance might be more mature approaches to social harmony than that of Van Parijs (1998), who called for a maximum eligible voting age as a way to prevent politics from becoming too “aged,” especially in the face of population aging.

Korea, however, faces more challenges than ever in its efforts to resolve intergenerational conflicts. First, the generational gap is particularly wide in Korea because of the country’s strong intergenerational heterogeneity in terms of experiences, perceptions, and behavioral patterns. This heterogeneity is the product of a rapidly changing environment that has featured compressed economic growth, rapid increases in education levels, democratization, and ICT utilization (see Kim, 2015, Chapter 2). A larger gap in experiences and perceptions between different age groups in the same contemporary time frame leads to a greater likelihood of miscommunication and conflicts between generations.

Second, it is expected that future generations will be heavily burdened by the significant decline in the working-age population and rising old-age dependency ratio as a result of rapid population aging and severely low birth rates. Korea’s splendid economic growth, which averaged 7.2% per year from 1970 to 2011, was mainly supported by the ‘demographic bonus’ generated by an abundance of human resources; both the labor force and consumption expanded together as the proportion of the working-age population rose. However, the anticipation of a ‘demographic onus’—caused by a decline in working-age providers and a surge in senior dependents—forebodes a future characterized by slow economic growth and heavy burdens on future generations.<sup>2)</sup> In fact, these demographic problems may amplify the generational divide by converting mere cultural friction into a clash of economic interests with respect to employment, pensions, and welfare. Additionally, fiscal conditions are likely to become increasingly burdensome and unsustainable as population aging cuts into the potential growth rate, weakens the tax

Efforts to seek intergenerational equity and sustainability encounter challenges such as deepening generational heterogeneity resulting from rapid changes in Korean history, rapid aging of the population, weak social trust, and poor capacity to resolve conflicts.

2) ‘End of Demographic Bonus, Beginning of Demographic Onus,’ Money Today, June 19, 2014.

revenue base and increases welfare expenditure.<sup>3)</sup>

Third, the high poverty level among the elderly and rampant youth unemployment are now fully entrenched in Korean society, unlike Europe where youth unemployment has not been resolved but post-retirement life is relatively stable thanks to mature pension and welfare systems. As such, the social status of those in their seventies and twenties is perceived as much lower than that of people in their forties; this tendency is more prevalent in Korea than in any other country (Kim, 2015, pp. 81–83). Indeed, Korea is now confronted by two starkly different realities, as 40-somethings enjoy the benefits of a flourishing life while, on the other hand, the elderly live in hardship and a disenchanting youth population feels deprived of opportunities for success. This status quo has caused further complications in determining policy priorities and in establishing political solidarity between different age groups.

Fourth, Korea has a weak capacity to resolve conflict and relatively high social discord (Kim Sun-bin, 2014). It also exhibits low social trust, decreased confidence in government, and increased distrust in politicians.

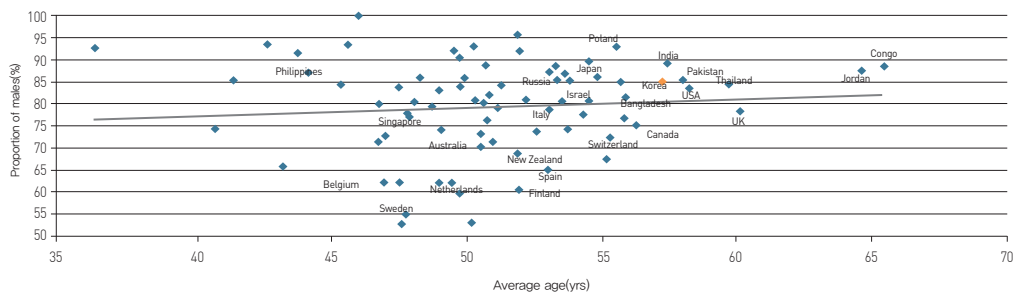
Lastly, security-related uncertainties and ideological conflicts are still ongoing as the standoff between the two Koreas persists. This unique geopolitical condition has generated ideological conflicts that go beyond typical conservative–progressive discourse in a democratic society, thereby fomenting further social conflict.

### **III . Designing Participatory Policy Governance for Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability**

Resolving the conflict between different generations who inhabit a society at the same time is in itself challenging and requires multilateral communication and coordination of interests. Taking into account the rights and interests of unborn generations in the policy decision-making process is even more difficult and cannot be achieved without a structured institutional system. Based on this recognition, this paper seeks to improve policy governance by proposing two approaches to enhanced legislative governance: creating relevant institutions related to the National Assembly, and adoption of participatory governance within the processes of policy development and execution. This study also explores ways to engage in intergenerational equity and sustainability concerns through private organizations and civic movements.

3) See Kim Seong Tai et al (2014) for relevant studies.

[Figure 3] Average Age of Lawmakers and Proportion of Males in Parliamentary Positions around the World



Note: *Global Parliamentary Report* (Published in April 2012, <http://www.ipu.org/gpr/gpr/downloads/index.htm>, accessed on 13:27, Nov. 5, 2015), Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Data on 'age, gender and profession of parliamentarians' calculated by the author.

## 1. Enhancing the representativeness of the legislature

The National Assembly is the voice of “Joe Public,” composed of members who represent their respective electoral districts through general elections and proportional representation. However, it is not representative of different genders and age groups. To assess the degree of age-based and male bias in the National Assembly with respect to global standards, we compared the average age of lawmakers and the proportion of males in parliamentary positions in countries around the world, using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2012). Results are presented in [Figure 3].

As of June 2011, Korea had the eighth-oldest legislature among the 82 surveyed countries,<sup>4)</sup> with an average age of 57.3 years, and ranked 28th in male dominance with 85% of parliamentary positions occupied by men.<sup>5)</sup> Generally, parliaments in Northern Europe consist of younger members and have a higher proportion of females, whereas those in Africa and Southwest Asia are relatively old and male-centered; Korea is clearly closer to the latter.

Granted, the lack of age-group representation and the graying of parliamentary members do not necessarily hinder intergenerational coexistence; raising representatives' awareness with regard to intergenerational equity and sustainability concerns is more important. However, it would also be worthwhile to consider the following efforts to change the legislature and better promote intergenerational coexistence than is observable today.

First, we could achieve a more balanced representation of generational interests by including positions that could explicitly represent and protect the rights and interests of younger and future generations. Through appointing experts from various fields, who would put intergenerational equity and sustainability concerns before the interests

Efforts are needed to appoint representatives of younger and future generations to the National Assembly through the proportional representation system, to establish a permanent committee for future generations, and to lower the voting age.

4) The average age of lawmakers across the 82 countries was 50.9 years with a median age of 50.6 years. Those in Malta were the youngest, averaging 36.1 years old, and those in the Congo were the oldest at 65.4 years.

5) In the 82 surveyed countries, the proportion of male lawmakers was 79.1% on average, and the median was 80.6%. Burundi recorded the lowest at 52.6%, and Nauru was the highest at 100%.



of the current electorate, to the National Assembly through a party-list proportional representation system, the short-sighted political populism in the present legislative process could be curtailed.<sup>6)</sup> Another alternative is to allocate a certain number of proportional representative seats based on age, which could rejuvenate the composition of members. But in the latter case, it would be necessary to foster the development of young politicians capable of dealing with intergenerational issues as well as future agendas. In addition, a solid and objective screening process that could thoroughly assess the competency of these young politicians should be established.

**Other efforts include establishing a presidential committee for future generations, creating a system of participatory budgeting that includes young people and adolescents, gathering public opinion through direct democratic methods, and enhancing access to policy information.**

A second option is to set up a permanent committee to represent the rights and interests of future generations in the National Assembly. For instance, the Knesset, the legislative body of the Israeli government, launched the ‘Commission for Future Generations,’ an inter-parliamentary body, to assess the long-term impact on future generations during the legislative process. Interestingly, this Commission was not the product of a public campaign or discussion but of a top-down decision by politicians. The Commission has the right to take part in the legislative process in all fields except defense and diplomacy and to demand any information necessary from any government office, including ministries, government-run enterprises, agencies, and quasi-public corporations.<sup>7)</sup> It is also involved in lawmaking on environmental and child protection issues, and, with consultative support from academic groups, is working to develop and manage an institutional mechanism that could consider the long-term interests of future generations and their legal protection in various fields: natural resources, development, technology, education, health, the national economy, demographics, planning and construction, quality of life, law, and so on.

A third possibility is to lower the voting age. Of course, Korea’s low voting rate among adults in their twenties implies that there is an urgent need to raise voter turnout among the young who have the right to vote. But, if it helps to reflect the opinions of future generations, lowering the voting age through a bipartisan agreement could be pushed ahead.<sup>8)</sup> For instance, lowering the voting age to 18 years from the current 19 would result in the inclusion of a large number of high-school voters, and hence election pledges regarding education may be centered more on the demand side. However, the number of potential beneficiaries would be insufficient to significantly improve the representation of young people’s concerns.

Among the above three alternatives, establishing a permanent committee within the National Assembly might be the most viable option. Although the Israeli model may not

6) The National Assembly Research Service suggested a “future generation representation” that would assign a few seats by proportional representation to people who would represent the benefits of future generations (Kim et al., 2010, p. 170).

7) See Kim (2015), Appendix 2, Section 1 for details on the authority, official status, and scope of activities of the Commission members.

8) As of December 2015, Korea’s voting age was 19 years. The voting age in 32 of the 34 OECD nations—all but Korea and Poland (21 years)—was 18 or younger. According to Statistics Korea, there were 630,184 18-year-olds in 2016, when general elections were held, and there are expected to be 611,709 in 2017 when the presidential elections are scheduled (see ‘Growing Public Opinion about Lowering Voting Age to 18 Years. Where Will 630,000 Votes Go?’ Yonhap News, Dec. 16, 2015).

be fully exemplary since it was established via a top-down approach, such a committee, if promoted through bipartisan cooperation based on social consensus, could serve as a representative body in evaluating laws from the perspective of intergenerational equity.

## **2. Encouraging participation in government policy decision-making processes**

Young people have often been neglected in the Korean policy-making processes. Increasing their participation would be helpful in better reflecting the impact of prospective policies on future generations.

For this reason, a presidential committee to represent future generations should be established. It should consist of presidentially appointed members with guaranteed tenure. In the course of legislative activity or policy development regarding young people or adolescents, this committee would have the authority to mandate gathering opinions from the pertinent segment of the population or to include assessment criteria to evaluate the policy impact on future generations, which the committee would then review.

Another possibility would be to establish deliberative democracy processes through which general public input and insights, including those of the younger generation, would be reflected in policy decision-making. Following the 2011 amendment of the Local Finance Act, Korea witnessed a nationwide spread of the participatory budgeting system, which has recently been expanded (with several local governments taking the lead) to include the adolescent population. These governments run their own teen committees and host briefing sessions and proposal presentations to enhance young people's understanding of participatory budgeting and give them the opportunity to take part in the budgeting process (Kim Soonhee, 2014).

Finally, the active use of online media—itsself a form of direct democracy—to gather public opinion and input should be bolstered by taking advantage of the vast dissemination capability of the Internet and smartphones and of young people's high ICT capabilities. Such direct means of gathering public opinion on specific topics will likely expand in the future. In line with this trend, numerous political parties have already launched mobile voting forums for their party members. The range of participants could be broadened to include young people on topics deemed to have significant impact on future generations. Such efforts could also lead to an increase in direct democratic participation in policy decision-making. To make this happen, government's commitment to making public data readily available to citizens could be very useful in facilitating informed participation. Collaborative and objective data analysis by public- and private-sector experts, explicitly considering long-term impacts on future generations, should be beneficial in enhancing policy effectiveness. As the Korean government has been investing in citizen participation programs, younger generations' participation in policy decision-making processes might be easier to accomplish than enhancing the representativeness of the legislature. It would

also offer the benefit of having a more direct impact on policy as opposed to focusing on nonprofit organizations or civic movements. However, there is limited evidence showing any significant impact of citizen participation programs on policy decision making. Accordingly, more research is necessary on how to design and institutionalize citizen participation programs that actually make a difference in government policy decision-making processes.

### 3. Creating a civic culture for future responsibility

**Improving civic awareness and capabilities through civic movements could serve as a basis for pursuing broader participation, deliberation, and consensus building in governance.**

Civic movements at the global level have also responded to the growing concerns for pursuing intergenerational equity and sustainability. Civic movements or campaigns may have weak access to the policy decision-making process, but they can maintain more independence than government-related groups. A prime example is a coalition network of NGOs called the Representation of Future Generations (REFUGE) established in Hungary in 2000. The coalition network established with the purpose of advocating for the rights of future generation and suggested the enactment of the institution called ‘Parliamentary Commissioner (Ombudsman) for the Rights of Future Generations.’

While remaining independent from government, the REFUGE has placed a greater focus on conducting research than on making policy decisions; it has investigated cases of potential damage to the rights of future generations and has worked hard to prevent such events from occurring. Despite getting little response from politicians, it has actively hosted conferences with civic activists and scientists attending and has proposed bills to protect the interests of future generations.<sup>9)</sup>

With regard to decisions on economic policy, many countries have seen politicians driven by strategic political goals make short-sighted decisions that adversely affect future generations. Recognizing this tendency, the Netherlands Central Planning Bureau (CPB) conducts studies on the nation’s long-term agendas, viewed from a neutral perspective, and analyzes political parties’ policy pledges with regard to their impact on the economy’s structural growth, fiscal deficit, balance of payments, labor income share, and the costs and benefits for future generations. This organization is a government advisory branch headed by the Minister of Economic Affairs and hence not truly a private organization, but it is an independent and autonomous body responsible for analyzing the long-term sustainability of government finance and conducting cost-benefit analyses of government-funded projects.<sup>10)</sup>

Korea, too, has seen experts from academic communities engage in activities aimed at protecting future generations. These experts recognize that younger generations

9) See Kim (2015), Appendix 2, Section 2 for more information on the activities of the Representation of Future Generations (REFUGE)

10) See Kim (2015), Appendix 2, Section 3 for further details on the role and activities of the CPB.

will shoulder the burdens arising from low birth rates and population aging, and they acknowledge that future generations have been overlooked in policy decision-making processes and that their rights have not been properly protected. In 2015, the “Committee for Future Generations’ Happiness” was launched, consisting of experts from various fields led by KAIST Graduate School for Future Strategy. It has hosted relevant seminars and presented awards for future generations and the “Future Generations Forum” holds contests to encourage the youth population to develop new ideas.

These campaigns rooted in civil society may function more effectively in providing the public with information on intergenerational equity and sustainability issues and in encouraging participation than in directly influencing political institutions or policies. Although the initial effects of such activities may be short-term and insignificant, eventually they can help to improve the civic culture and the general public’s awareness and capabilities, thereby providing the basis for establishing forms of governance that enable broader participation, deliberation, and consensus. ■

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