

REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Implementing the SDGs

Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ)

In South Korea, an institutional arrangements for sustainable development were established in 2000 in the form of the Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development (PCSD), following which the Framework Act on Sustainable Development was passed as a fundamental law in 2007 and came into force in 2008. From 2000 to 2008, the PCSD acted as a presidential advisory body, and the Government and National Assembly worked together on national strategies for sustainable development implementation. However, by 2010, the Framework Act on Sustainable Development had been revised and put under the Framework Act on Low Carbon and Green Growth, and the Committee on Sustainable Development (CSD) fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Environment. As a result, subsequent five-year sustainable development plans were concentrated on the area of the environment, no longer reflecting the general state of the nation.

South Korean society is currently experiencing rising economic inequality, against which Government policy has done nothing to stop. The current regime and the ruling party are distancing themselves from the implementation of the SDGs that relate to economic inequality and democracy, and instead they are exerting all their efforts on easing regulations for corporations and on terrorism prevention. New Laws make it easy for chaebol (mega corporations in Korea that consist of family executives giving profits to one another) to accumulate wealth, while weakening fundamental consumer rights and protections. The new Anti-terrorism Act, adopted in March 2016 includes provisions threatening democracy, largely through the expansion of

the authority of the National Intelligence Service.¹

In order to remedy these problems, South Korean advocacy groups including our organization, Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice: CCEJ, proposed representative goals of Korean society to each political party before the 20th National Assembly Election on 13 April 2016, which may have been a factor in the inclusion of SDG-related policies in the election manifestos of all three opposition parties. As collectively these parties won markedly more National Assembly seats than the ruling party, there may be a chance to put the national level implementation of the SDGs on the table with Assembly members in the near future.

One problem is that while the SDGs were announced to the public through the post- 2015 campaign, most people in society are not very interested—possibly due to the large number of goals and targets as well as unfamiliar subject matter. Various other civil society networks such as GCAP Korea, the Korean Civil Society Forum on Development Cooperation (KoFID), and the Korean Council for Overseas Cooperation (KCOC) hosted seminars, forums, and session to raise SDGs issues with the Assembly, the Government and the public to raise issues but it did not go well.

Even so, perhaps the biggest obstacle to implementing the 2030 Agenda continues to be the Government's lack of willingness. While civil society had anticipated that the Government would initiate a fuller discussion of its

¹ The Anti-terrorism act was first proposed in 2001, following the attacks of 9/11, but failed to reach a vote due to opposition from NGOs as well as opposition parties.

SDG implementation strategy after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, it has delayed this discussion until after the follow-up measures and evaluation system is agreed at the ECOSOC High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2016.

Moreover, while various principal bodies including civil organizations, academia, and Korean mission international organizations are engaged in discussions regarding SDGs, there is no overarching governance that can bring all the voices together. This means groups focused on different goals much separately communicate with relevant branches of the Government.

Also, Korean civil society organizations (CSOs) asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to share the national report for HLPF before they submit it to UN so it can be discussed and reflect CSO opinions. To date the Ministry has shared only a one-page summary of whole report two days before the meeting scheduled to discuss it. As a result we boycotted the meeting until they share more complete contents.

Korean civic societies have finally had a meeting with governments (MoFA, Ministry of Environment, Statistics Korea, and Office for Government Policy Coordination) on 1st July. Korean CSOs could read the draft of “Voluntary National Review” four days before the meeting and started prepare a position paper. In the meeting, Korean CSOs delivered opinions and corrected some error in the report. And On 5th July, Korean CSOs sent out a press release.

National implementation

The Ministry of Environment released the Third Sustainable Development Fundamental Planning document in January 2016, designed to adapt the global goals and targets to national conditions. This contains environmental, social, economic, and international goals and 14 strategies and implementation tasks. It specifies the government departments for strategies and implementation tasks, placing a total of 27 government bodies in charge. It also identified indicators that can measure achievement of targets under each of the goals every five years. Every two years, the jurisdiction department must submit evaluation of results and the

SDG committee should inspect performance results. The National Statistical Office is now in the process of identifying appropriate indicators for different goals and targets for Korea, but to date, nothing has been publicized.

The fact that each different government department is in charge of national implementation, make it systematically difficult for civic society to deal with all the departments in charge. To address this problem, CCEJ hosted discussion panels for SDGs national implementation on each of the three pillars of sustainable development—plus an additional essential element: peace. With the participation of experts in each area, we interpreted the SDGs in the context of Korean society and selected targets for each goal in order to apply them nationally. We created an 80-page memorandum² on the results and delivered it to relevant government departments. In early September of 2015, we held a conference with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Employment and Labor, Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, the Ministry of Environment, and the Korea Land and Housing Corporation to discuss the subjects in the memorandum.

As Agenda 21 was chosen at the Earth Summit on Environment and Development in 1992, a regional Agenda 21 was established in 1996 and advanced to the current “Local Sustainability Alliance of Korea”. Each local autonomous entity and local NGOs are developing regional discussion within the frame of this Local Sustainability Alliance, but the overall governance for monitoring and evaluating this process has not been established.

While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister’s office are making progress in discussions focusing on the role of the international community, the Government is at an early stage in terms of the process of national implementation itself. It is difficult to picture what kind of governance will be established

² Available at:

https://ccej.or.kr/index.php?mid=board_1_1&page=9&document_srl=1138858

for the inclusion of NGOs, the National Assembly and various other stakeholders, including the private sector.

The Korean International Cooperation Agency is working with corporations to diversify ways of cooperation that correspond to achieving the SDGs: these efforts include providing appropriate technology and volunteer staff. At the same time, however, Korean corporations do not welcome SDG 13 on climate change, SDG 14 on marine resources, and SDG 15 on ecosystem protection.

Looking back at the achievements of civic society so far, advocacy movements over the years have reshaped current policies. Nonetheless, there has not been any coordinated civil society movement regarding the 2030 Agenda at national level. As mentioned, although national implementation proposals were discussed with the Government through a conference hosted by CCEJ, it is difficult to confirm that those proposals were applied to the official plan. The involvement of NGO representatives in the SDG committee is restricted to environmental organizations. Due to the absence of an NGO governance structure for the whole SDG agenda, it is difficult to identify the follow-up process.

Ultimately, however, achieving the SDGs requires the cooperation of households, businesses, civil society and the Government. Moving forward, civil society organizations should not only continue advocacy activities towards the Government, but also communicate with businesses on how they can help implement SDGs. In particular:

- Korean civil society organizations should hold advocacy activities and continuous discussions for establishing structures to monitor implementation and follow up on each of the SDGs.
- We must play a role in communicating the importance of the SDGs to the public by connecting the 17 seemingly remote goals to current national issues in the country.
- As it is difficult for anyone organization to cover all the substantive issues in the SDGs, NGOs should cooperate to take charge of different SDGs among different organizations, monitor national implementation, and actively share opinions.