



# Decentralization and collaborative disaster governance: Evidence from South Korea



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## ABSTRACT

Decentralized disaster governance has been gaining much attention with the rising global urbanization rate and the complex nature of the disasters occurring in densely urbanized areas today. This paper studies the case of South Korea, a highly urbanized country with relatively recent decentralization reforms, in order to analyze the evolution of its disaster management system and to draw out implications from its experience. Specifically, it traces the national-level institutional changes in its disaster management, and then closely examines a hydrofluoric gas leakage in the industrial city of Gumi. The finding is that South Korea simultaneously carried out both centralization and decentralization of disaster management, which are not contradictory but rather complementary. Nevertheless, while the country successfully set up an integrated and comprehensive national-level management system, from which disaster governance can successfully be decentralized to localities, it still requires much more developed and consolidated multilevel (vertical) and broader (horizontal) collaboration, which are the pre-conditions for decentralized disaster governance.

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## 1. Introduction

Given the contemporary mega-trend of rapid urbanization, together with global climate change, both developed and developing countries are highly susceptible to various types of environmental disasters with the potential to bring heavy destruction. The increase in the frequency and severity of disasters is often a direct result of the unsustainable nature of human developmental activities, which are usually combined with a densely concentrated population in urban areas (Smith, 2013; ADB, 2013). To identify possible threats and risks of compound disasters, and to design action strategies, many players and agencies across different levels of government need to be involved (Comfort, 1999; La Porte, 1996). With occasional exceptions, however, government officials and citizens usually have paid little attention to preventive measures or mitigation strategies before a disaster actually strikes. Accordingly, many individuals and localities have remained vulnerable to

disasters (Ainuddin, Aldrich, Routray, Ainuddin, & Achkazai, 2013; Birkland, 2006; Thomalla, 2006).

Against this backdrop, international paradigms for disaster management have begun to shift from post-disaster relief to pre-disaster risk assessment and early warning systems, as indicated in various international efforts such as the Hyogo Framework for Action in 2005. At the same time, empowering local-level resilience to cope with disasters has been emphasized, highlighting local communities' local knowledge and immediate access to impacted sites (Paton & Johnston, 2001; Tobin, 1999). Now, many developed and developing countries are carrying out disaster risk reduction activities in the context of decentralized governance, and a number of studies are underscoring the implications of decentralized governance structure for effective disaster prevention and mitigation.

In this regard, the East Asian region, which is undergoing rapid urbanization and state restructuring processes, demands attention. While a large part of the population in the region still lives in rural areas, hundreds of millions have moved to cities in the past decade, and this trend of large-scale urbanization is expected to continue in the coming decades (World Bank, 2015). The combination of concentrated urban populations and rapidly growing

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cities (often with unplanned development) implies increasing possibilities for greater damage from environmental and man-made disasters.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the countries in the region have made significant progress over the past several decades toward decentralized governance, despite some variations (UCLG, 2008). Under these two circumstances, rapidly urbanizing East Asia provides opportunities for empirical case analyses in disaster management and decentralization that can produce useful knowledge and implications for academic research and practical policymaking.

South Korea (hereafter, “Korea”) constitutes an interesting research case for exploring the development of disaster management systems in the context of rapid urbanization, democratization, and decentralization. According to World Bank data, Korea’s urbanization rate has been explosive in the past thirty years (from 54% in 1980 to 82% in 2014), accompanying its rapid economic growth and industrialization.<sup>2</sup> After decades of central government dominance under the authoritarian regime, Korea democratized in 1987, and the first local election was held in 1995. Since then, civilian presidents have placed decentralization at the top of their reform agendas, and a series of decentralization reforms has been in progress (Bae & Kim, 2013). How has the changing context of decentralization and democratization in Korea transformed the landscape of the disaster management system, which had been handled solely by the central authorities during the authoritarian regime?

This paper traces the processes of institutional change in Korea’s disaster risk reduction policies since the 1990s, and also explores the case of a hydrofluoric gas leak in a medium-sized industrial city, in order to identify the organizational and contextual factors necessary for effective disaster mitigation. On the one hand, since the launch of the *Basic Law for Disaster and Safety Management* in 2004, Korea has made substantial progress in the institutional framework development for assessing potential risk, improving local resilience, and facilitating early mitigation under a decentralized governance system. On the other hand, there has also been lots of to-ing and fro-ing between the central and local governments behind the scenes of large-scale or controversial disasters, often resulting in jurisdictional disputes and delayed post-disaster management. Overall, the paper argues that Korea’s disaster governance has generally progressed with the national wave of decentralization, but still requires much more developed and consolidated multilevel (vertical) and broader (horizontal) collaboration. We look for evidence from government documents, media coverage, and elite interviews.

## 2. Decentralization and disaster governance: a literature overview

The extant literature has highlighted the importance of local governments when it comes to delivering effective disaster management, as they have better understanding of unique local needs and assets than the higher levels of government, and are the first ones to react to the disasters affecting their localities. In fact, decentralization in general has been acknowledged to have a positive impact on public service delivery (Bardhan, 2002). Considering that disaster management is part of providing public safety services, one can expect a positive relationship between effective

disaster management and decentralization.

Certainly, there are definite benefits of decentralization, which enables the local authority to apply local knowledge to disaster management. First, different regions are prone to different types of disasters. With better understanding of local contexts and vulnerability, the local governments can be more effective in preparing for the types of disasters that tend to occur in the area. Second, local governments have comparative advantage regarding many critical pre-disaster preparation-related issues, such as maintenance of urban infrastructure, disaster-sensitive building and land use regulations, and emergency planning (Skidmore & Toya, 2013; Waugh, 1994). Third, disasters often take place unexpectedly and demand immediate response. Local governments are in the position to arrive first on site with rescue and other mitigation efforts, and they also possess the local knowledge of the particular place and circumstances, which can be greatly beneficial in such emergencies (Hayek, 1984). Finally, situations during complex disasters can rapidly change, hence requiring strategies that can quickly adapt. When decision-makers are at the local level, they are closer to the disaster and are able to utilize local knowledge for more adaptive and successful management (Baker & Refsgaard, 2007).

Yet there are also reasons to question the efficiency and effectiveness of relying primarily on local governments for disaster management. For instance, there is the structural issue of local governments having to perform numerous tasks to meet the variety of local demands for public services, while their resources are rather limited. Disaster management that targets high-risk but low-probability events inevitably fails to become a top priority on the generally under-resourced local government’s agenda (Wolensky & Wolensky, 1990).

The lack of local capacity becomes especially problematic for newly decentralizing or developing countries. Many studies have raised the concern that decentralized local governments of developing countries often lack financial, human, and technical resources required for disaster management activities (e.g., Butt, Nasu, & and Nottage, 2014; Jha & Stanton-Geddes, 2013; Scott & Tarazona, 2011; UNESCAP and UNISDR, 2012). While disaster risk management has been argued to be most effective at the local level, in practice there seems to be a question as to whether the decentralized local actors are indeed able to take effective actions in disaster management (UNESCAP and UNISDR, 2012). The intention here is not to argue against decentralized governance, but to raise the issue that simply setting up a decentralized institution would not be enough, and that strong intergovernmental and inter-organizational collaborations are necessary for effective disaster management.

The necessity for vertical collaboration, especially for mega-disasters, is quite apparent. Even in the U.S. (with its federal system having long supported strong local autonomy), local capacities have been observed to be overwhelmed at the time of mega-disasters, with local governments becoming paralyzed and unable to provide meaningful assistance (Wachtendorf & Kendra, 2005). Analyzing the 2011 mega-tsunami catastrophe in Japan, Aoki (2015) also underscored the role of national government and the importance of vertical collaboration at such times of large-scale emergencies. For the countries with low local capacities, technical and financial assistance from the national government at the time of emergencies is even more necessary, making vertical collaboration especially critical. On top of this, these countries, in their push towards decentralized governance, often exhibit overlapping regulations and unclear allocation of responsibilities between the central, regional, and local levels of government (UNESCAP and UNISDR, 2012). They thus require clearly determined delegation and enforcement coming from the national government in disaster management (Jha & Stanton-Geddes, 2013; Scott & Tarazona, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> According to another World Bank report, 1.6 billion people in the region were affected by various types of disasters, including tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods (Jha & Stanton-Geddes, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Data retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS> on June 9, 2015.

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