



Critical junctures and path dependence in urban planning and housing policy: A review of greenbelts and New Towns in Korea's Seoul metropolitan area[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study reviews greenbelt and New Town policy in Korea's Seoul Metropolitan Area as a case study by developing the step-wise critical juncture and path dependence repetition model originating in the historical institutionalism. The country is considered to be in a developmental state with significant power, and the capital region has been regarded as politically crucial, so the theory is more appropriately applied to the two policies' changes rather than a gradual institutional developmental model. The results found that decisions on the two policies at the presidential level at critical junctures during times of political change were sustained and reinforced until the next juncture, following the path-dependent tendency across regimes and their political orientation. Because the New Town policy has dominated greenbelt policy since the most recent (third) critical juncture in 1997, the latter is vulnerable despite important environmental issues and a reversal is not expected to occur in the near future.

1. Introduction

Since 2017, the Korean government has been trying to develop new housing complexes, new towns in substance, by releasing Seoul Metropolitan Area's (SMA) over 45-year old greenbelts.¹ A generalised theory cannot explain why it has repeatedly reinforced similar policies over the past two decades regardless of each regime's political orientation, ignoring environmental factors that have emerged as a reason for establishing greenbelts for sustainable development. Critical policies can be changed only at specific moments (Kingdon, 1995) and policy paths are formed by decisions at past critical situations (Pierson, 2000). The patterns of policy changes can be understood by considering history.

This study adapts historical institutionalism's concepts of critical juncture and path dependence for the urban-planning and housing-policy context to explain the SMA's policy changes. Historical

institutionalism puts forth a step-wise institutional development pattern with path dependence and critical junctures in which the outcome of a historical event or decision at a certain period reinforces social trends or policies for a relatively long time (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). Although urban planning and housing policy are representative of state institutional systems, the relevant studies have rarely discussed them. However, the concepts could be a useful means of understanding the origins of the present institutional system, judged as unique or sometimes irrational, and explaining the reinforcement of the system.

The changes in the greenbelt and the New Town² programs in the SMA since 1970 are reviewed using historical institutionalism's research framework. Changes and/or developments in the urban planning and housing policy system of a country may be gradual or step-wise. Not only was the Korean government, which has experienced rapid economic and democratic developments along with extensive

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¹ The Korean greenbelts (also referred to as 'green belts') are legally called 'development restriction areas' and were designated between 1971 and 1976 in the SMA. They were sacred and inviolable until 1997 and covered about 13% of the SMA's area (Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs, 2011: 207).

² 'Korean New Town' (also 'new town', or 'Shin-do-si' in Korean) is an official name of new residential developments in the SMA, but not a legal name. The Korean government started to build them in 1989 when it announced five New Towns to calm rapidly increasing housing prices in Seoul and distinguished them from other new developments by using the term, 'New Town'.

urbanisation and suburbanisation since the 1960s, not stable enough to wait for gradual change, but also has the strong authority described as a developmental state³ dramatically changed the policies of the SMA at certain moments. Such a pattern of policy modification cannot be explained by the gradual institutional developmental model, but can be well explained by the term ‘critical juncture’, which describes sudden changes at a certain point. The tendency of path dependence, in which the legacy of a policy is reinforced for a relatively long time beyond an individual regime or political party, is also crucial and is explained by this study.

The history reviewed in this research shows that in critical junctures there has been a strong political motive for the Korean government or president to drastically change the policies, and that thereafter policies reinforced trends through path dependence despite the regime change. This pattern informed recent policies in the SMA, such that the Korean government has built new apartment complexes in the region’s greenbelts, predicting possible decisions in the new future. Such confirmation is expected to be a useful logical framework for understanding and explaining changes in urban planning and housing policy in countries with similar planning systems.

This study’s literature review examines the arguments about the greenbelt and the New Town policies in the SMA. There has been a lack of discussion of the two policies together and a lack of explanation of their historical changes. The Korean government has simultaneously held both policies for the same region, but most studies have chosen only one of them as their subject. This article examines, then, discussions of critical juncture and path dependence in the context of urban planning and housing policies to date, which demonstrates the limited attention given to the two concepts. It develops a research framework for the step-wise critical juncture and path dependence repetition model, presenting four criteria to judge the institutional development pattern from an urban-study perspective for the first time. By reviewing the institutional settings of the Seoul Metropolitan Area, this study shows that the two concepts are applicable to greenbelts and New Town policies. It clarifies review of the two policies’ changes and their reinforcements. The theory of critical junctures and path dependence describes the pattern of policy alternation between the two types of policies beginning in 1970.

2. Literature review

2.1. Greenbelts and housing supply

Suburban housing developments are the main concern of growth management policy. According to [Mieszkowski and Mills’ \(1993\)](#) natural evolution, economic development and urbanisation increases housing demand, which extends land and housing development from cities into the suburbs. [Gleaser et al., \(2006\)](#) focused on the relationship between housing supply and suburban growth, emphasizing the importance of considering housing supply when trying to understand urban growth.

Their claims have also been supported by history. Following World War II, new towns in England were created to respond to rapidly increasing housing demands ([Fishman, 1982: 85](#)). In the United States, dramatic residential developments outside of established cities during the post-war era accelerated suburbanisation ([Lee and Leigh, 2005](#)). Japan devised new towns in the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan areas to relieve rising housing prices in the mid-twentieth century ([Kahng, 1989: 61–69](#)). The Korean government has created new towns and suburban developments to increase the housing supply since 1960s

³ This study did not specify whether the Korean government is a developmental state or not. As [Lee and Shin \(2010: 1353\)](#) pointed out, it first confirmed that the current Korean government has a very strong developmental state legacy in urban planning and housing policies.

([Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, 2015b](#)). Throughout the history of cities, massive suburban developments have been strongly related to housing supply.

The most powerful means of growth management in modern planning history has been the greenbelt, rooted in the Greater London plan of 1944 which guided development of new towns ([Hall, 1969](#)). Housing supply is a major cause of suburbanisation and should be discussed as a major target of growth management, but these two policies are rarely discussed together in academic research.

Greenbelts and New Towns in the SMA, the subjects of this study, are the most vigorous policy tools in the Capital region. It is reasonable to discuss them together, but difficult to find precedent argument or studies. Most studies have analysed only an individual effect of greenbelts or new towns. [Hannah et al. \(1993\)](#); [Bae and Jun \(2003\)](#), and [Kim and Son \(2005\)](#) have emphasised from the perspective of urban economics that the SMA greenbelt system increased commuting distances and durations and shifted land prices. Others in the planning discipline have stressed that without the SMA’s strong greenbelts, there would have been more intensive sprawl and more serious environmental problems ([Hwang, 1996](#); [Cho, 1999](#); [Jang, 1999](#)). These studies emphasised negative or positive aspects of the greenbelts, or discussed them only intuitively, and considered greenbelts only.

Studies on Korean’s New Towns have focused on analysis of their self-sufficiency and job-housing balance ([Jun, 2000](#); [Jeong and Kim, 2010](#); [Lee, et al., 2015](#)), following the issues raised at the announcement of New Towns in 1989 ([Kahng, 1989](#); [Song, 1989](#)). These studies discuss New Towns only.

Only two articles, written by the same author, that considered greenbelts and New Town development together were identified. [Jun and Hur \(2001\)](#) pointed out that commuting distance increased as the New Towns moved away from Seoul due to greenbelt regulation and described such development as leap-frogging development. [Jun \(2012\)](#) compared the positive and negative effects under the two policies with a more sophisticated analytical model and confirmed that the greenbelt policy had more negative impacts than positive. Although the above studies criticised the spatial structure of the SMA, which causes long-commuting distance and duration, they did not explain the reason why the Korean government created such a situation.

No research has been found to confirm why the Korean government used these two powerful policies, at their discretion, to create such an irrational spatial structure. Not only did the Korean government expand the greenbelt three times in the 1970s, it has also undergone massive new developments in suburbs since the 1980s. The new developments absorbed 80% population growth in the region from 1980 to 2009 ([Go & Choi, 2013: 86](#)). It is, then, necessary to identify the origins of the opposing policies of regulation and supply and which policy dominated the other in each period. The step-wise institutional development model by the historical institutionalists in recent years provides a key clue to understanding the decisions and continuation of these two policies in the SMA.

2.2. Previous discussions on critical junctures and path dependence in urban planning and housing policy

Institutional economics and historical institutionalism have developed critical juncture and path dependence theory,⁴ and slightly different perspectives on the usages of them, while also sharing ideas and influencing each other. In historical institutionalism, [Lipset and Rokkan \(1967\)](#) first used the term critical juncture, researching modern European party systems that have followed the lines of the cleavages of the

⁴ Biologists and palaeontologists [Eldridge and Gould \(1972: 82\)](#) coined the phrase ‘punctuated equilibria’ to describe an evolutionary pattern that is step-wise as opposed to gradual, which Darwinian evolution supported, affecting various social-science fields to explain path dependency and critical juncture.

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