

Pandemic Governance:

THE COLLABORATION DYNAMICS OF GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY DURING COVID-19 IN SOUTH KOREA



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Authors:

Bok Gyo Jeong, Kean University
Sung-Ju Kim, North Carolina State University

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1. Executive Summary

South Korea, a nation that confronted the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, adopted a multifaceted strategy against the outbreak. The South Korean approach, distinguished by its collaborative governance between the government and civil society, is considered unique for not resorting to nationwide lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and the closure of public transportation.

This study explores the collaboration between government and civil society in South Korea's response to COVID-19, employing a two-step data collection process. Initially, an extensive review of prior studies was conducted to identify key stakeholders from both public and nonprofit sectors. Subsequently, from July to October 2023, 16 in-depth interviews, conducted both in-person and virtually, involved representatives from these identified groups, including government officials and various nonprofit organizations.

Key takeaways from the South Korean experience include:

- **Balanced governance:** The COVID-19 response in South Korea was characterized by a synergy between centralized leadership, cross-ministry coordination, and localized decision-making.
- **Integrated administrative and civil society facets:** The collaboration harnessed both administrative and civil society elements of the pandemic response, founded upon a prior collaborative system in local government.
- **Active consultations with civil society:** The policy process incorporated expert opinions and involved active consultations with a diverse spectrum of civil society, professional health associations, and citizen forums.
- **Strengthened public trust and participatory democracy ethos:** The government's approach capitalized on the strengthened public trust and participatory democracy ethos that had emerged, ensuring that the response to the pandemic was inclusive, community-driven, and reflective of the collective will and expertise of a wide spectrum of society.



South Korea's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, distinguished by its collaborative governance between the government and civil society, is considered unique for not resorting to nationwide lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and the closure of public transportation.

- **Human rights sensitivity and civil society intervention:** Civil society emphasized the significance of human rights issues and advocated for minorities' rights. In addition, concerns were raised about the potential invasion of privacy resulting from the rigorous implementation of contact-tracing policies.

- **Empowered inclusivity:** Civil society organizations played a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and ensuring information access.

- **Differentiated collaboration:** Diverse types of civil society organizations engaged in differentiated collaboration with the government, showcasing varied roles and approaches.

- **Monitoring and assessment functions:** Government actors emphasized the crucial role of civil society in providing data to assess the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives.

- **Evolved dynamics of government-civil society collaboration:** While civil society's expertise was substantially mobilized for consultative roles in the early stage of the pandemic, both central and local governments increasingly assumed leadership in response strategies. Consequently, the role of civil society in the decision-making process evolved into a primarily advisory one during later stages.

Overall, South Korea's response to COVID-19 exemplifies effective collaboration between government leadership and active civil society engagement. The unique characteristics of this collaboration, encompassing balanced governance, inclusivity, and harnessing expertise, contributed to a comprehensive and dynamic strategy in responding to the pandemic.

2. Introduction

With the WHO Emergency Committee officially pronouncing a global health crisis in January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a profound and transformative global phenomenon. As of February 2024, more than 774 million people had been infected, with over 7 million deaths worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d). The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruptions to social systems, challenging governments' crisis management capabilities, public health systems, physical infrastructure, institutions, cultural norms, and people's habits and behaviors (Maher & Hoang, 2020; Grizzle et al., 2020; Shadmi et al., 2020; Shin & Lee, 2020). In particular, the pandemic significantly underscored the need for public health preparedness, global cooperation, responsive health-care systems, and accurate and transparent information dissemination (Fauci & Folkers, 2023; Hassan et al., 2023).

All countries around the world employed a range of strategies to fight COVID-19, from highly restrictive responses to less invasive measures. South Korea's response to the outbreak, the "3T strategy (Test - Trace - Treat)," garnered international acclaim due its comprehensive, effective nature. To summarize briefly, the essential elements of the South Korean model included proactive and widespread testing and thorough contact tracing from the outset, allowing for rapid identification and isolation of cases (KDCA, 2022), utilizing innovative testing (e.g., drive-through and walk-through testing centers) (Choi, 2023), and employing technology around contact tracing and public alerts to monitor the spread and inform citizens about risk areas (Lim & Sohn, 2023). Transparency in government communication played a crucial role in building public trust, ensuring widespread compliance with health guidelines (NMC, 2022).

As a result of South Korea's unique strategy, the country managed the outbreak effectively without enforcing major national restrictions, such as a stay-at-home policy, nationwide lockdown at the expense of the economy, or herd immunity models at the expense of vulnerable people's lives (Lee et al., 2020; Moon, 2020). A critical aspect of the South Korean model was a high level of civil society engagement and public cooperation



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(Jeong & Kim, 2021). The South Korean government actively collaborated with the civil society sector in its shaping of public health policies, dissemination of accurate information, mobilization of resources and volunteers, and creation of innovative responses (Cai et al., 2021; Jeong & Kim, 2021).

This study investigates how South Korea involved civil society¹ in its response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Based on an exhaustive review of nationwide information to address various actors and agencies, we identified essential players in both the public and civil society sectors that were integral in formulating and implementing policies to combat the outbreak. We then conducted interviews with officials in charge of the pandemic response in central and local governments. Interviews were also carried out with selected civil society organizations that played a crucial role in collaborating with government agencies during both the policy initiation and implementation phases.

The insights gleaned from the South Korean case offer valuable perspectives on effective governance models for managing future pandemics in a manner which respects and promotes rights and civic freedoms.

1 In this report, the term civil society encompasses a diverse range of organizations, including civil society organizations, service-providing nonprofits, intermediate support organizations, and social economy entities like social enterprises and village communities. This comprehensive approach seeks to cover the entirety of the extensive third sector involved in the pandemic response.

3. Methodology

This study conducted two steps of data collection. First, we conducted an exhaustive review of prior studies on South Korea's response to COVID-19. This comprehensive analysis facilitated the identification of pivotal stakeholders in both the public and civil society sectors. Research findings were then able to draw from an array of key actors in the COVID-19 response, including the central government, local government bodies, and key civil society organizations, comprising advocacy-oriented nonprofit alliances, human service agencies, social worker's associations, government-financed support organizations, and social economy organizations.

Based on the identified essential stakeholders, the authors conducted a series of in-person and virtual interviews from July 2023 to October 2023. Interviewees were carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive representation of diverse perspectives and experiences, from both government and civil society.²

Based on our sources, the report explores collaboration between government and civil society from both service-related and non-service-related perspectives. Service-related responses entailed joint efforts of government and civil society to address social, community, and individual needs. This encompassed initiatives like economic support, stimulus fund programs, mental health support, and various social services aimed at maintaining stability and resilience during the COVID-19 outbreak. Non-service-related responses focused on areas such as quarantine policy, health-related policies, and advocacy activities, such as promoting privacy rights and the voices of vulnerable groups.

² Specifically, interviewees included one key individual from the central government and another from a major local government (Seoul metropolitan City government). Concurrently, the authors conducted 14 additional interviews with various civil society organizations in South Korea to obtain a broad spectrum of views of civil society engagement in addressing the COVID-19 outbreak in South Korea. These interviews featured 2 representatives from major alliances of civil society organizations, 4 from human service organizations (including 3 in social work agencies and 1 in mental health services), 2 from associations of social service organizations, 3 government-funded support organizations (a local cooperative support center, a social economy-focused local government support center, and a social service provision support center), and 3 social economy organizations (comprising 1 worker cooperative and 2 social cooperatives).

4. Development of South Korea's Nonprofit Sector

To understand the dynamics of government and civil society collaboration during the COVID-19 outbreak in South Korea, it is helpful to examine the historical emergence of civil society and its intricate relationship with government. The relationship between civil society and the state in South Korea is complex, influenced by a culture steeped in Confucianism, shifting political power, changing governmental administrations, and a challenging legal structure (Kim and Jung, 2019). Civil society organizations in South Korea have historically assumed diverse roles: they have been cooperative partners for the developmental state (Jeong, 2015), opponents advocating for democracy against authoritarian regimes within social movements, and professional, entrepreneurial contributors to policy-making (Jeong, 2013; Kim, 2006).

South Korean civil society history has been divided into multiple distinct stages: a period of civil society formation from 1945 to 1987, a period of civil society establishment from 1987 to 2008, a period of civil society self-adjustment from 2009 to 2017, and a period of elitism transcendence from 2018 to present (Kim and Jung, 2019). Despite the establishment of modern state structures in 1948, civil society in South Korea faced severe repression and limitations until 1987 under authoritarian and military governments (Kim & Jung, 2019). The Korean government traditionally viewed civil society as an adjunct for implementing public policy and services. Until the late 1960s, only 102 nonprofit organizations were registered in South Korea, most being government-sponsored or quasi-governmental organizations, known as “*gwanbyeon dance*,” operating under strict governmental control (Kim & Jung, 2019).

The civil society establishment period (1987–2008) saw a dramatic shift from authoritarian to democratic governance in the late 1990s, leading to increased independence of civil society from government oversight (Jeong & Kim, 2019). In this era, South Korean nonprofits were institutionalized and diversified, with legal and governmental support. They actively engaged in issues like economic justice, welfare, and women’s rights, becoming key policy influencers (Kim & Jung, 2019). The democratic government’s enactment of the Assistance for Non-profit, Non-governmental Organizations Act of 2000³ legally empowered nonprofits, spurring their involvement in public policy and service provision. Notably, around 56% of South Korean nonprofits were established in the period following this act (Jeong & Kim, 2019). During this period, nonprofits evolved into legitimate governmental partners, while preserving their autonomy and strengthening their capacity in public policy processes (Kim, 2014; Kim & Jung, 2019).

³ The Assistance for Non-profit, Non-governmental Organizations Act of 2000 in South Korea is a legal framework that was established to support and regulate nonprofit organizations within the country. This Act formalizes the legal status of NPO/NGO, outlining guidelines and procedures for their establishment, operation, and dissolution. It was a significant step in the financial and legal status of NPO/NGO in South Korea.

In the third stage (2009–2017), the civil society self-adjustment period, the nonprofit sector expanded in size and scope, facing new regulations and pressures from conservative administrations. The approach of these governments focused on market-based values like self-interest and financial incentives rather than public benefits (Kim & Jung, 2019). However, the Candlelight Revolution from 2016 to 2017 marked a significant turning point, with over 1,500 nonprofits and 17 million people rallying for President Park Geun-Hye's impeachment over bribery and corruption (Bryan, 2019; Dudden, 2017), a motion later upheld by the Constitutional Court.

In the fourth stage (2018–present), referred to as a period of elitism transcendence, the nonprofit sector shifted away from elitism, indicating that civil society's norms or structures are evolving beyond traditional elites or elite-led nonprofit institutions and moving towards individuals and localized communities. Following the Candlelight Revolution, a new wave of civil engagement was characterized by individuals without any affiliation or experience with any specific civil society organizations. Non-traditional elite-activists in civil society (e.g., students, housewives, mothers, and fathers) have led civil engagement on social issues through on and offline networking (Kim & Jung, 2019).

The Candlelight Revolution in particular marked a significant shift in South Korea's political and social dynamics, emphasizing the vital role of civil society in democratic processes and political change, establishing a new norm for active engagement of civil society in matters of governance and social policy (Yun & Min, 2020). As a result, civil society has increasingly engaged with the government, advocating for more effective operations and shaping new governance expectations. The South Korean government continues to encourage active civil society engagement in social and political matters (Kim & Jung, 2019). In addition, citizens have engaged through civil society organizations to shape governance, ensuring that their involvement brings about real changes in the political and social fabric of the country.

When COVID-19 unfolded in South Korea, the government promptly engaged in active consultation with a diverse array of civil society, professional health associations, and citizen forums to formulate and implement effective public health policies against COVID-19 (MNW, 2023; The COVID-19 Eradication Alliance, 2020). The government's approach capitalized on the strengthened public trust and participatory democracy ethos that had emerged, ensuring that the response to the pandemic was inclusive, community-driven, and reflective of the collective will and expertise of a wide spectrum of society. This collaborative model played a crucial role in the country's successful handling of the pandemic.

5. Dynamics of Government-Civil Society Collaboration in South Korea

Before delving into a detailed analysis of the collaboration between the government and civil society in South Korea, we provide a brief overview of the central and local government initiatives responding to various social needs arising from the COVID-19 outbreak, extending beyond quarantine policies.

After reporting the first confirmed case on January 20, 2020, the South Korean government immediately began responding to the crisis. On February 23, 2020, the government officially declared a national pandemic and appointed the Prime Minister to head the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSC), co-chaired by the Minister of Interior and Safety and the Minister of Health and Welfare, providing a government-wide response to the disaster.⁴ This followed amendments of related laws for effective pandemic response.

On February 29, 2020, South Korea first announced social distance measures. Due to the successful implementation of the “3T” strategy in early 2020, the country eased stringent measures on April 20, 2020. However, facing a series of waves caused by various COVID-19 variants, the government adjusted its social distancing framework, expanding from a three-step to a five-step system from June 2020 to July 2021. As the level of stringency fluctuated, measures like mandatory quarantine, travel restrictions, mask mandates, and limits on public gatherings were adjusted accordingly. On April 18, 2022, the South Korean government terminated social distance measures and moved into the post-COVID era.

Beyond quarantine policies, the South Korean government implemented a range of public policies including economic support and stimulus programs, remote work and online education,



Beyond quarantine policies, the South Korean government implemented a range of public policies including economic support and stimulus programs, remote work and online education, mental health support programs, and support for vulnerable populations.

⁴ Located within the Ministry of the Interior and Safety, the CDSC is the highest emergency response organization under the “Disaster and Safety Management Basic Act,” overseeing all aspects of large-scale disasters like COVID-19, including prevention, preparation, response, and recovery. CDSC was created in 2004 to respond to nationwide disasters, following the enactment of the Disaster and Safety Management Basic Act. In 2014, a significant amendment to this Act granted the Prime Minister the authority to exercise the powers of the head of the CDSC. COVID-19 marked the first time the Prime Minister was appointed as the head of the CDSC.

mental health support programs, and support for vulnerable populations. At the central government level, the South Korean government employed seven rounds of emergency relief funds from March 30, 2020 to December 31, 2020, serving as economic support and stimulus programs. The government also offered resources for mental health support and counseling services to assess the public in managing mental health concerns. For example, the National Center for Disaster Trauma (NCDT) formed a comprehensive psychological support team, including both national and local mental health welfare centers, and carried out proactive measures to alleviate the mental distress among the population (Park & Yu, 2020). In addition, working alongside broadcasting and social media firms, the government leveraged Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in numerous ways to improve crisis communication, manage extensive public health initiatives and supply chains, and promote the widespread implementation of preventive actions like social distancing and mask usage (Paek & Hove, 2021).

Aside from the central government's efforts to assist those in need, local governments expended a variety of social support measures during the pandemic. For instance, Seoul Metropolitan City ("Seoul City"), a major local government in South Korea, implemented over 40 programs during the COVID-19 outbreak. These initiatives included emergency financial aid for individuals and small businesses, rent assistance, daycare support, quarantine assistance programs, and counseling programs (Seoul Welfare Foundation, 2020). For emergency financial aid, the city employed an emergency welfare program, disaster emergency living expense support programs, temporary living support for low-income families, small local business emergency support programs, and interest-reduction refinancing support programs.

Through these programs, the city provided support for living expenses, essential goods for living, and rent fees to people facing crises, those in quarantine, low-income families, meal assistance programs for children from low-income families, and healthcare service providers (Seoul Welfare Foundation, 2020). Furthermore, the city offered employment maintenance support for foreign-invested companies, and daycare services. It also provided aid for vulnerable workers in specialized sectors like freelancers, artists, and those in the travel industry. The city additionally offered targeted social services addressing marginalized groups and particularly COVID-19 vulnerable populations, including support programs for the LGBTQ+ community, foreigners, undocumented immigrants, and women and children.

6. Collaboration of Government and Civil Society Against COVID-19 in South Korea

Collaboration was examined based on civil society’s engagement with both central and local governments during the two pandemic stages⁵ as follows:

Civil Society Engagement with Government During Stage 1

STAGE	CATEGORY	CENTRAL GOVERNMENT	LOCAL GOVERNMENT
Stage 1	Non-service Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having prior experience in infectious disease disasters • Directly providing advice and information delivery to the highest level of administration, such as the presidential office • Participating in the formulation of quarantine policies during the early stages in collaboration with professional health/medical nonprofit associations • Conveying voices and concerns of local communities (e.g., human rights, social equity) to help shape the central government’s COVID-19 response policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively integrating the input and perspectives of marginalized or underrepresented voices into the formulation of local-level COVID-19 policies • Engaging social economy organizations with decision-making bodies focused on safety and economic well-being of cooperative members on the community level
	Service Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing information and delivering requests for developing Economic Support and Stimulation Aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving as the extended arms of social service delivery, such as food provision, home-care, and healthcare services • Providing autonomous services to communities and individuals not covered by government implications • Directly supporting the production of needed services as part of the local supply chain

⁵ The progress of COVID-19 outbreak in South Korea is delineated into two stages: 1) early stage of COVID-19 outbreak (February 2020 – February 2021), and 2) the expansion period and gradual return to normalcy phase (March 2021- March 2022). The details on these two stages are provided in Appendix A.

Civil Society Engagement with Government During Stage 1 (con't)

Stage 2	Non-service Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a weakened advisory role to the highest level of administration, with less reliance on professional groups in the formulation of quarantine policies • Nurturing the Stakeholder Movement, allowing respective clients/vulnerable groups to speak for themselves in the policy process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having an increased role in monitoring and assessing • Building a knowledge repository for lessons
	Service Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing service delivery via Economic Support and Stimulation Aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoring nonprofit services as the pandemic evolved • Providing adapted service, established through COVID-19 pandemic government support programs

6.1. SYNERGY BURGEONING: CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS DURING STAGE 1 (FEBRUARY 2020 - FEBRUARY 2021)

Leveraging past experiences to achieve effective collaboration in the face of COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, South Korea had faced various infectious diseases and human-caused disasters. As a result, both the government and civil society had established response strategies for dealing with disasters. A government agency interviewee emphasized that

In February 2020, the Ministry of Health and Welfare had a comprehensive manual for infectious disease... This manual had been significantly cited and upgraded from the MERS outbreak in 2015 in South Korea... for instance, in the case of infectious diseases, there were criteria for initial overseas occurrence, local transmission, regional community spread, and nationwide spread.

Collaboration with civil society was deemed one of the most essential strategies for responding to infectious disease disasters based on prior experiences. A civil society interviewee further noted that “civil society [organizations] have become aware of the significance of their engagements in shaping government policies in response to the Sewol ferry incident in 2014 in South Korea.”

These and other experiences helped South Korea efficiently handle the early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak. For instance, civil society had already established direct communication channels with the highest levels of government, including the presidential

office, as a result of the Candlelight Revolutions, during which civil society representatives actively engaged with various government offices at higher levels. During the early stages of the pandemic, civil society organizations were consequently able to convey community needs and pandemic circumstances directly to the presidential office.

A representative from civil society underscored, “I had the opportunity to meet various government officials through different channels. I could easily connect with the Blue House, the National Assembly, and the Prime Minister’s Office. I made extensive efforts to maintain ongoing communication.” Interviewees repeatedly highlighted that this direct channel of communication between the higher level of administration officials and civil society enabled South Korea to establish an effective response mode against COVID-19 in the early stages.

Centralized leadership and cross-ministry coordination: Strengthening response mechanisms

Diverging from previous experiences in handling virus-related pandemics in South Korea, the central government activated the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSC) with the Prime Minister taking charge for the first time in history. The CDSC operated as the control tower for the nationwide emergency response, enabling South Korea’s rapid and effective response to the pandemic from its onset. This centralized yet generally inclusive approach marked a significant shift in the nation’s strategy for managing public health crises.

Under the leadership of the CDSC, various ministries within the central government collaborated to develop comprehensive response strategies for the pandemic. Typically, emergency response bodies involve relevant ministries, excluding local governments and citizen organizations. However, in this case, provinces, metropolitan cities, and their officials actively participated. Top officials from various ministries, governors, vice governors, and mayors attended meetings, with almost all ministries represented. Additionally, local government officers from 226 local government units participated in about 691 meetings held during the pandemic, until official termination of the CDSC on May 31, 2023. With the inclusive participation of local governments, the quarantine policies were effectively and synchronously implemented, and messaging about disaster response was disseminated consistently across the nation at the local level.

To facilitate cross-ministry and government agency coordination, the central government amended related laws, enhancing the framework for inter-departmental cooperation.⁶ This legal adjustment was a crucial step in ensuring a unified and effective approach to managing the crisis. In general, the Ministry of Public Administration and Security has legal jurisdiction over natural disaster-related matters in South Ko-

⁶ The ministries that participated in this cross-ministry collaboration included The Ministry of Interior and Safety, The Ministry of Health and Welfare, Ministry of Public Administration and Safety, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, and Central Accident Response Headquarters.

rea, and CDSC is responsible for managing complex emergency situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the amended legal jurisdiction empowered the Prime Minister to take the lead in directing COVID-19 response policies while the Ministry of Interior and Security and the Ministry of Health and Welfare worked in coordination to manage the pandemic response as co-chair of the central government control tower.

This reorganization was helpful in streamlining and coordinating the overall response, while the ongoing reliance on and collaboration with civil society (detailed below), along with other checks and balances, prevented the authoritarian outcomes seen in other country contexts.

Collaboration and consultation: The role of experts, government committees, and civil society in the Covid-19 response

In addition to existing mechanisms, the central government made efforts to establish new communication channels with various experts and civil society. For instance, it formed committees such as the Central Clinical Committee for Emerging Disease Control and the Social Distancing Committee. These committees played a crucial role in decision-making discussions concerning quarantine policies and social distancing measures. A central government official noted:

During the early stages of the Moon Jae-in administration, there were significant channels for expert opinions, such as the Central Clinical Committee for Emerging Disease Control. Although it was not a legal entity and established temporarily, it operated as a platform for experts' advice. Another similar body that was extensively utilized during the Moon Jae-in administration was the Social Distancing Committee...involved in making decisions related to social distancing policies. This committee included representatives from various sectors such as experts, medical organizations, consumer groups, and social organizations. When deciding policies related to social distancing measures, these committees served as advisory bodies.

In addition, the central government proactively engaged in early collaboration with health and medical professional nonprofit associations, acknowledging the necessity of seeking expert guidance and real-time information to effectively respond to the emerging threat. By actively engaging health and medical professionals from outside government organizations, the South Korean government was able to develop immediate response strategies.

This collaborative approach in the early stages of the pandemic laid the foundation for a more informed and coordinated response to the evolving situation. One official noted the government's "proactive efforts to understand the disease and seek professional opinions from health and medical experts. We invited health and medical professionals and associations to address the challenges posed by the novel virus effectively at the beginning of the pandemic." A crucial element of the South Korean model was therefore the establishment of active collaboration with health and medical professional as-

sociations, who, rather than merely providing advice, actively contributed to the development of response strategies during the early stages of the pandemic.

Civil society also played a crucial role in shaping COVID-19 response policies, including economic support and stimulus programs, educational initiatives, and various public programs addressing social issues arising from the pandemic. However, the extent of civil society's involvement in these response policies was more limited. For example, a civil society alliance indicated that the central government found it more challenging to engage directly with citizens and civil society on social response policies and was less sure with whom to engage. While civil society continuously conveyed community needs and advocated for vulnerable populations through various communication channels to the central government, we could not find empirical evidence that civil society was able to participate in the decision-making processes related to these public policies designed to aid those affected by COVID-19. Nonetheless, it is evident that civil society served as a significant conduit for transmitting community needs and authentic concerns to policymakers at the central government level.

Emphasis on minority rights: Safeguarding the rights of sexual minorities and immigrants

The *Itaewon* Incident on May 7, 2020, during the second wave of COVID-19 is relevant in the context of government-civil society collaboration, especially regarding human rights advocacy. During this period, the Civil Society Transparency Committee played a crucial role in engaging with the government to address pertinent issues. Discussions centered around concerns related to privacy information, discriminatory practices against sexual minorities, and violations of parental rights.

In May 2020, a COVID-19 patient visited a bar in the Itaewon district of Seoul, resulting in spread of the virus due to non-compliance with quarantine measures. This incident received significant media coverage mainly because the bar was considered “gayba,” a slang term for LGBTQ+ bars in South Korea. A civil society interviewee noted that the incident received disproportionate attention “even though the spreading infections did not involve gay bars or originate from the LGBTQ+”



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community. A civil society organization worked with the government to discourage such terminology and advocate for protecting the LGBTQ+ community from stigma and discrimination.” Civil society organizations working with the city government took steps to address this issue, including discouraging the use of such terminology and advocating for the protection of the LGBTQ+ community from unnecessary stigma and discrimination. This proactive approach opened a space for LGBTQ individuals from Itaewon to voice their concerns within established task forces. By bringing government officials into the dialogue, these task forces became instrumental in addressing the concerns raised by the affected LGBTQ community.

In addition to LGBTQ groups, civil society organizations advocated for the voices of other minorities, including people with disabilities and foreign immigrants, encompassing both undocumented migrants and visitors. In general, foreigners were at higher risk due to limited access to healthcare, language barriers, and a lack of familiarity with the country’s health protocols, compounding their vulnerability in the pandemic situation. A civil society representative remarked

The government initially disseminated COVID-19 information exclusively in Korean, making it inaccessible for foreigners to understand the virus’s spread at the outset of the outbreak... However, civil society encouraged foreign residents to actively contribute their perspectives. In the past, citizen organizations used to take the lead in presenting issues. However, this time, civil society encouraged foreigners to raise their voices to survive these unprecedented times [as part of the Stakeholders’ Rights Movement⁷].

Unintended impact on privacy and human rights due to stringent contact-tracing measuring

As a critical observation, the conflict between transparency and individual privacy became apparent during the implementation of the contract-tracing policy, labeled “3T” strategy in South Korea. The rigorous enforcement of contact-tracing played a key role in the effective execution of quarantine measures, but it also impinged on the privacy and confidentiality of patients and individuals. In particular, the use of GPS monitoring, personal data, and wrist tracking bracelets raised concerns around privacy and civil liberties.

For instance, the concept of attaching tracking bracelets to individuals who were confirmed to have COVID-19 or who violated the self-quarantine policy was reviewed and mentioned in the National Assembly Research Service’s trend report, referencing examples used in other countries (e.g., Hong Kong) (Kim et al., 2020), and subsequently deployed. This initiative faced substantial resistance from civil society organizations,

⁷ The “Stakeholders’ Rights Movement” (known as “당사자운동, Dang-sa-ja Woon-dong” in Korean) refers to an initiative to empower members of minority groups to autonomously advocate and address their issues. This initiative focuses on enabling these stakeholders to represent their interests and manage their concerns directly, rather than relying on civil society organizations or external parties to do so on their behalf.

with critics arguing that it was excessive and inappropriate, likening it to treating patients as criminals (particularly given punishments for violating quarantine, including up to a year in jail and a fine of \$8,200). Amidst these debates, various cautious viewpoints and recommendations were put forward around privacy, dignity, freedom of movement, and other human rights.

As a result of the concerns raised by civil society and the public, the government instituted additional data protections, including automatically deleting data after 14 days. Nevertheless, privacy, data protection, and surveillance concerns have remained relevant and continue to be critical areas in which the expertise of civil society should be heard.

6.2. SYNERGY UNLEASHED: LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS DURING STAGE 1 (FEBRUARY 2020 - FEBRUARY 2021)

Navigating local challenges: Civil society mobilization in response to Covid-19

During Stage I, civil society's in-depth involvement in the development and implementation of quarantine policies was observed at the local government level. When COVID-19 first broke out, local governments struggled to develop comprehensive strategies to respond to the spread of the virus because of a lack of understanding about the virus and its impact on society. Civil society actively contributed by providing additional services (e.g., food delivery, child/family care) based on its own capacity. Civil society also proposed implementation strategies based on early experience supporting local government efforts. An interviewee from a civil society alliance emphasized:

When COVID-19 first broke out, local governments lacked understanding and structure in governance. Civil society organizations tried to solve the problems by mobilizing volunteer centers and other nonprofits without really approaching the response as a governance issue...In Cheonan, a foreign plane arrived with infected passengers, leading to strong public protests. Eventually, civil society stepped in, managed to persuade the public, and created a favorable atmosphere for them to voice their opinions.

Another example of mobilization by civil society is the engagement of village communities.⁸ The local town offices were supposed to provide masks and hygiene supplies; however, they did not function effectively in some areas. As a result, village communities held discussions and came up with alternative solutions, establishing various initiatives nationwide during the pandemic.

⁸ The term village community refers to the networked residents or local organizations, primarily focused on collaborating to improve the well-being of its members within a geographical community.

Local government–civil society cooperation unit: A cornerstone of government-civil society collaboration in Seoul City

In response to early engagement from civil society, local government authorities initiated collaboration with civil society to develop a COVID-19 response strategy from the outset. For instance, following the declaration of a national health emergency due to COVID-19, the Seoul City government established the Public-Private Cooperative Department (PPCD). This move featured the appointment of both a government official and a representative from a civil society alliance as co-directors, jointly responsible for formulating COVID-19 response strategies for Seoul City. This was the first time in South Korean administrative history that both civil society and public sector representatives were appointed as co-directors of the control tower to curtail a public health disaster. Indeed, the co-directorship was key for Seoul City's strategy. As noted by the government official from the Seoul City office, "civil society began to address the blind spots that the medical professionals and the government failed to see. It helped to develop additional policies for the public."

The Seoul Cooperation Office, the government-civil society collaboration unit, was established in September 2016 to promote and facilitate collaboration between civil society and the Seoul City government in public services. Key institutional developments supporting these efforts include the founding of the Seoul Nonprofit Support Center in 2013, the establishment of the Private Sector Cooperation Division in 2015, and the appointment of the Cooperative Governance Officer in 2016.

In addition, the Seoul City government actively engaged with a diverse range of civil society organizations in the PPCD based on existing institutional arrangements. A range of voices from various organizations highlighted the importance of comprehensive and tailored COVID-19 responses at the local level, considering economic aspects, livelihoods, social welfare, human rights, and other concerns, especially for marginalized populations. An interviewee from the civil society alliance strongly emphasized that



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in the case of a disaster, you need a comprehensive approach that considers economic issues, livelihoods, welfare, human rights, and employment... additionally, governance initiatives extended to areas like welfare and green policies, where committees and task forces were established, involving joint efforts between the government and civil society.

A parallel initiative involved the establishment of a communication network dedicated to responding to COVID-19, which held regular meetings. Civil Society Policy Forums were established with the aim of identifying gaps in the dissemination of accurate epidemic information and policies, thereby ensuring the stability of citizens' lives. The forums played a crucial role in collecting and disseminating voluntary epidemic prevention efforts and campaign cases in civil society, published through an online newsletter entitled "Citizen-Collaborative Epidemic Prevention."

Ensuring consistent messaging: The vital role of the public-private cooperation unit in addressing Covid-19 challenges

Civil society organizations and local authorities underscore that delivering a unified message was essential to curtailing the COVID-19 outbreak. They worked together to ensure consistent messaging to the community. As noted by a member of the civil society alliance,

in the early stages of the pandemic, there was confusion, even within the government, about the guidelines and messages being communicated to citizens... One of the first things I suggested to the city officers when I started working in the Civil Cooperation Division was to standardize the messages coming from the government and unify communication channels.

In terms of collaboration for public service-related policies and implementation, civil society actively served as the extended delivery arm for necessary services while cooperating with local governments. The most common activities included providing personal protective equipment such as masks and essential supplies for quarantine, and directly reaching out to vulnerable areas in need of urgent relief. As one human service agency related, "community development groups took the lead in providing masks, essential supplies, and cleaning supplies. Individuals utilized their own sewing skills in addition to donations received by the groups."

Civil society also operated as an extension of social services, offering vital support such as food aid, home-care services, and programs for youth and family care throughout the pandemic. According to the COVID-19 Eradication Alliance (2020), civil society engaged in service provision across a wide spectrum of communities and individuals, including the public, low-income families, youth, children, immigrants, refugees, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, healthcare professionals, frontline government workers, human rights activists, COVID-19 patients, and small-business owners. Civil society also provided a range of services, including the distribution of essential goods, mental health support, networking assistance, fundraising and donations, advocacy

activities, and various other services addressing social issues during the pandemic (The COVID-19 Eradication Alliance, 2020).

Contributions and activities of public-private social economy organizations

The Public-Private Cooperation Unit in Seoul City played an important role in responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the diverse needs of the community, from providing essential items like masks and sanitizers to coordinating support for vulnerable populations, refugees, and immigrants. The unit also demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness by incorporating emergency measures related to cultural policy forums and supporting the sustainability of non-profit organizations during these challenging times.

ACTIVITY 1

Survey and Support Coordination for Demand of Masks and Health Supplies

In response to the demands for “Kind Masks” (charitable masks for vulnerable groups in South Korea), the Public-Private Cooperation Unit in Seoul City initiated a comprehensive survey and support coordination effort. On April 10, the unit distributed 40,000 masks to vulnerable populations, addressing the needs of those most at-risk. Following this, on April 27, the PPCU provided 80,000 health masks specifically tailored for janitors, recognizing the critical role they play in community safety. As part of the ongoing support strategy, on May 7, the Unit coordinated the distribution of 2,500 hand sanitizers and 3,000 health masks to downtown manufacturing workers, contributing to the broader efforts to ensure the health and safety of essential workers and the community at large. These initiatives underscore the PPCU’s commitment to addressing specific needs within the community, employing a targeted and responsive approach during the challenging circumstances of the pandemic. In addition, mask support efforts were also tailored specifically for refugees and immigrants.

ACTIVITY 2

Village Communities Assumed Responsibility for Assisting their Neighbors

During stage 1 of the COVID-19 response, local governments and village communities emerged as crucial pillars, particularly in the absence of specific guidelines from the National Association of Community Centers. Despite the lack of formal directives, these communities took it upon themselves to support their neighbors in various ways. They engaged in initiatives such as crafting masks, distributing food, and organizing assistance programs tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups, including the elderly and children. This grassroots, community-driven response exemplifies the resilience and solidarity displayed at the local level during the challenging circumstances of the pandemic.

6.3. SYNERGY IN TRANSITION: WANING COLLABORATION BETWEEN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY DURING STAGE 2 (MARCH 2021 - MARCH 2022)

During stage 2 of the pandemic, the South Korean government began to relax social distancing restrictions (despite a surge in COVID-19 cases), given the rapid increase in vaccination rates and prompt response of the public health system. During this stage, the nature of collaboration between the central government and civil society underwent a transition in which the active involvement of experts and civil society was less effective and gradually waned. An interview with a central government representative noted that “from my personal observation...the committee did not effectively function at this stage.” Also, civil society’s involvement in decision-making discussions became more limited as the government had acquired professional knowledge and established effective emergency response systems that were functioning well by stage 2. According to the government official,

the central government took strong leadership at this time, forcefully pushing forward with agenda-setting. Most of the decision-making and execution was driven by the central government. All [committees] serve as decision-making bodies, but both the Social Distancing Committee and the previously mentioned Central Clinical Committee operated as advisory committees at a lower level.

South Korea conducted its presidential election in March 2022, in the latter part of the second stage. This change in leadership ushered in a new direction in the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, towards a “living with COVID-19” approach. The new administration focused more on strengthening global partnerships and engaging in collaborative efforts through international platforms, particularly the United Nations, as opposed to the previous strategy, which centered on domestic collaborations with civil society.

6.4. SYNERGY EVOLVING: MONITORING, ADVOCACY, AND RESUMPTION OF SERVICES BY CIVIL SOCIETY DURING STAGE 2 (MARCH 2021 - MARCH 2022)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea grappled with a range of social issues, particularly around human rights and social justice. During stage 2, civil society played an instrumental role in ensuring transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in the local handling of the health crisis. Civil society organizations diligently worked to maintain open channels of communication and oversight, contributing significantly to management and mitigation strategies at the community level.

In particular, civil society organizations continuously highlighted critical issues related to human rights and social justice in this stage. They advocated for employment rights and individual freedoms, which were significantly impacted by the pandemic. According to a civil society representative,

the Civil Society Policy Committee in Seoul City deals with issues such as employment, human rights violations, individual freedoms, parental rights violations, and even broader issues like societal transformation. This is where issues arising from events like COVID-19 or political controversies were primarily addressed.

By voicing these concerns, civil society ensured that the response to COVID-19 was not just about controlling the virus, but also about safeguarding the fundamental rights and dignity of individuals amidst the crisis. This holistic approach was essential in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, striking a balance between public health imperatives and individual liberties.

Monitoring progress and reinstating services: Civil society's response

During stage 2, civil society in South Korea enhanced its role assessing and documenting the ongoing progress and experiences related to the pandemic. Recognizing the importance of building a comprehensive knowledge repository, these organizations actively engaged in recording both civil and governmental experiences in managing the pandemic. This effort was aimed at capturing valuable lessons learned, challenges, and successful strategies implemented during this unprecedented health crisis. For example, one civil organization “documented the process through which [human right and social justice-related] issues were resolved at the time...what role civil society played and how civil society operated.” By meticulously gathering data, personal accounts, policy outcomes, and community responses, civil society contributed to a rich and diverse repository of information, which served not only as a historical record but also as a crucial resource for future planning and response strategies.

In this phase of local service provision, numerous civil society organizations in South Korea successfully resumed their programs, adapting effectively to the evolving circumstances. With a higher vaccination rate and stringent adherence to quarantine rules and regulations, such as mask-wearing, hand washing, and social distancing, nonprofit organizations in South Korea were able to reinstate most of their public services during this stage. As a representative from a social welfare center noted, the center was

meticulously focused on delivering services to clients while fully adapting to the quarantine regulations and roles... Both our clients and our team were acutely aware of the potential for closure should a confirmed case be detected in the center. This understanding drove all of us, clients and staff alike, to do our utmost in maintaining our center as a clean and safe space. The collective effort and vigilance have been key to our ability to continue operations and provide essential services, even amidst the uncertainties of the pandemic.

7. Implications and Insights

South Korea exhibited remarkable adaptability and resilience during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading numerous global actors to recognize the South Korean model as an exemplar for dealing with future public health crises. However, less coverage has been devoted to South Korea's collaborative approach with civil society, its protection of civic freedoms, and the contribution of good governance to South Korea's successful public health management in general.

This report has investigated the complex dynamics of governance in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the collaboration between government and civil society in South Korea. By conducting extensive interviews with key players responsible for managing the outbreak, this report underscores the following key lessons from South Korea's experience:

Balanced governance: Centralized leadership, cross-ministry coordination, and localized decision-making

South Korea's effective pandemic response was characterized by a combination of centralized leadership, cross-ministry coordination, and localized decision-making. This balanced governance approach, which incorporated the centralized control system and involved close interactions with residents in local communities, played a crucial role in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Transparent disclosure

The transparent and timely disclosure of medical treatment details and information on patients' movements proved instrumental in enabling efficient tracking of the virus, facilitating a more effective response to the ongoing health crisis. This approach generally increased government trustworthiness.

The crucial role of prior collaborative systems in effective governance during the pandemic

The effectiveness of collaborative governance during the pandemic can be attributed, in part, to the pre-existing system established during Seoul City's prior experiences. The ground-



The transparent and timely disclosure of medical treatment details and information on patients' movements proved instrumental in enabling efficient tracking of the virus, facilitating a more effective response to the ongoing health crisis.

work laid by the city's past collaborative initiatives played an important role in fostering effective coordination and cooperation during the pandemic. In particular, the Seoul City government had established the Seoul Cooperation Office under the mayor, creating a channel for robust communication with civil society prior to the pandemic. Upon the pandemic's outbreak, both the central and local government, particularly the Seoul City government, rapidly established an emergency unit in collaboration with civil society.

Integrating administrative and civil society facets of the pandemic response: Civil Society Cooperation Unit

The Public-Private Cooperation Unit in Seoul City, established and organized to jointly oversee both civil and administrative facets of the pandemic response, ensured the efficient integration of civic society's perspectives on the pandemic response, emphasizing a collaborative approach.

Maintaining a balanced distance from government: Independent civil society engagement

Broadly speaking, civil society has prudently maintained a balanced distance from the government. Some organizations collaborated closely with the government, while others maintained a certain distance except in cases that necessitated close cooperation. In contrast to certain civil society groups' cooperation activities directly integrated into the government structure, the Civil Society Countermeasure Committee comprised various organizations operating independently. When required, they initiated communication with the government.

Harnessing expertise: Incorporating expert opinions into policymaking

In navigating the intricacies of pandemic response, civil society played a crucial role feeding expert opinions into policymaking. Notably, during the social distancing phase, emphasis was placed on the insights of healthcare experts, particularly those specializing in infectious diseases. The importance of seeking expertise and cooperation from relevant organizations, especially when experiencing critical shortages of hospital beds and other medical equipment, became evident. In practice, engagement occurred not only at the central level but also through direct outreach to individual experts and organizations. This collaborative approach, such as seeking cooperation from the Korean Medical Association, highlights the contribution of civil society in addressing specific needs and challenges faced during the different phases of the pandemic.

Bridging information gaps: Dissemination of government policies

Rather than duplicating government initiatives, civil society organizations aimed to bridge the information gap for citizens who might not be well-informed. This involved actively collecting news clippings and disseminating crucial government policies, such as quarantine rules, ensuring that citizens were aware of essential information. The

emphasis was not on opposition but on promoting government policies and ensuring citizens were well-informed. However, civil society groups were able to vocalize concerns about evident issues, further emphasizing their commitment to addressing visible problems collaboratively.

Mobilizing civil society: Addressing mask shortages

To address mask shortages, sewing factories and individuals skilled in sewing donated masks, with local organizations and neighborhood volunteers actively involved in production and distribution. This decentralized approach allowed for a well-established division of labor, with organizations who possessed insights into local situations that the administration might not have directly addressed.

Human rights sensitivity and civil society intervention

The issue of human rights became a focal point, particularly in the context of potential censorship concerns in South Korea. While the country received commendation for its robust pandemic response, there were apprehensions about the possibility of indiscriminate censorship. Critics argued that such measures might be perceived as authoritarian or overly controlling, with some expressing disbelief that certain measures implemented in South Korea would be feasible in their respective countries.

The key issue highlighted was the perceived lack of sensitivity to human rights issues in South Korea's government actions.⁹ Civil society has been hesitant to assign the government a high score for human rights sensitivity in the context of the COVID-19 response, emphasizing the need for South Korea to strike a balance and align with established human rights standards at the administrative level. Nevertheless, NGOs and civil society were able to play a vital role in preventing a shift towards a more authoritarian approach, and emphasizing the need to find a balanced path forward.

Empowering inclusivity: Civil society's impact on information access

Civil society actively contributed to facilitating information access for marginalized groups. A particular focus of their efforts was on circumstances faced by undocumented workers and immigrants. Recognizing the difficulties arising from language barriers and limited resources within these communities, civil society influenced governments to reduce these barriers.

Differentiated collaboration by types of civil society organizations

This study demonstrated civil society's differentiated collaboration with government within its sub-groups. For example, welfare service centers and welfare worker asso-

⁹ Ideally, human rights should set the standard for the nation's regulatory framework, with civil society working to align policies with these standards. However, the reverse often occurs in South Korea, where laws and regulations require improvement based on concerns raised by human rights organizations and civil society after the laws are passed.

ciations actively participate in collaborative efforts with government agencies in the service delivery and public policy implementation stage. In contrast, coalition and advocacy-focused civil society organizations played a proactive role in shaping the public policy agenda, particularly in activities related to human rights advocacy.

Distinctive functions revealed: Village community and civil society organizations

During the pandemic, the village community actively engaged in identifying areas of concern within their community before the local and central governments developed the response to COVID-19. They proposed adequately adapted services for their communities, playing a crucial role in discovering, and addressing blind spots in the needs arising due to COVID-19. For example, when a mask shortage was observed, members of village communities voluntarily produced masks to share with residents in the community. Additionally, they provided food to neighbors in need and developed their own manuals for a more collective and systematic response to the pandemic.

Conversely, civil society organizations concentrated on providing human services and advocating public causes on behalf of citizens, extending their reach beyond the confines of local community boundaries. For example, civil society organizations responded to marginalized groups such as senior citizens during the pandemic, and offered care services to persons with disabilities based on eligibility, irrespective of geographical location. As for public causes, civil society organizations focused on tackling structural issues that exacerbate social equity challenges, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

Assessment function: The role of data

In the initial stage of government-civil society collaboration, focused on advocacy and information sharing, data emerged as a crucial element in evaluating and understanding the impact of collaborative initiatives between the government and civil society. The active involvement of both sectors in documenting their activities not only contributed to transparency but also served as a foundation for assessing the effectiveness of their joint endeavors.

Evolving dynamics of government-civil society collaboration in the Covid-19 response

At the beginning of the pandemic, both local and central governments quickly engaged in collaborative efforts with civil society. However, as the nature of the virus became clearer, the central government and local government increasingly took the lead in response strategies. In the later stage of the pandemic, the role of civil society was somewhat constrained and evolved to a largely advisory role.

8. Conclusion

This report conveys insights regarding roles and collaboration between the central and local governments and civil society in South Korea during different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The South Korean approach is marked by balanced governance, integrating centralized leadership, cross-ministry coordination, and civil society's contribution to the process. Crucial to this approach was active engagement with civil society, including health professionals, human service, advocacy, and other civil society organizations, which bolstered public trust and ensured an inclusive, community-centered response.

This study underlines the dynamic nature of the government-civil society collaboration in South Korea's continuous response to COVID-19, showcasing it as a model of efficient governmental leadership and robust civil society participation in crisis management. That said, there are areas where human rights sensitivity and the protection of individual privacy rights amidst the prevailing focus on public health and the effective implementation of public policy could be bolstered for the future. Nevertheless, South Korea's collaborative governance approach remains a positive example of engagement with civil society for better outcomes in public health responses.



The South Korean approach is marked by balanced governance, integrating centralized leadership, cross-ministry coordination, and civil society's contribution to the process.

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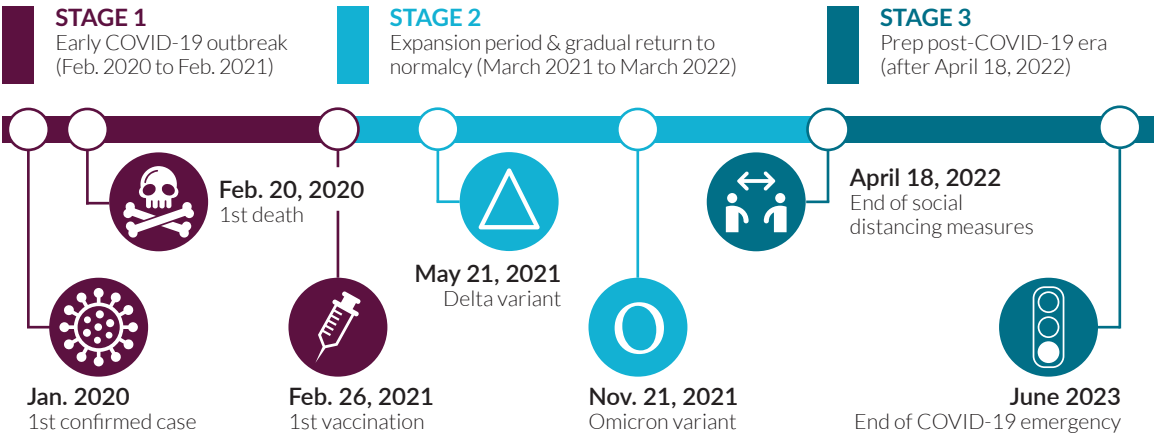
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Appendix: A Chronology of COVID-19 in South Korea

As the world grappled with the rapid spread of the COVID-19, South Korea, like many other countries, was unable to evade the transmission and spread of the virus. After the first confirmed case was reported on January 20, 2020, South Korea experienced unprecedented challenges, with a total of seven waves of COVID-19 over the last three and a half years (Jun, 2023; Choi, 2023).

South Korea experienced a significant number of severe cases and deaths from the virus, leading to changes in the daily lives of citizens and influencing the healthcare system, economic activities, and societal dynamics. As of December 2023, approximately 34.4 million individuals in South Korea had tested positive for the virus, resulting in 35,812 deaths, and an overall fatality rate of 0.10%. About 88% of the total population has received the first vaccine, 87.1% has received the second dose, and 65.7% have received the third dose as of September 2023 (CoronaBoard, 2023). In general, according to Choi (2023), the South Korean COVID-19 statistics indicates that the country has a higher confirmed case rate compared to other major countries (e.g., confirmed case rate: USA, 30.10%; England, 35.81%; France, 56.24%; Australia, 40.01%; Japan, 26.89%; China, 7.01%). However, the fatality rate is significantly lower than these countries (e.g., fatality rate: USA, 1.09%; England, 0.85%; France, 0.42%; Australia, 0.17%; Japan, 0.22%; China, 0.12%). The statistics indicates that South Korea implemented an efficient and proactive approach to COVID-19 testing, demonstrating a robust testing capacity at the pandemic’s onset, accompanied by effective treatments for those diagnosed with the virus, resulting in a lower death rate compared to other countries.¹⁰

Figure 1: Visual Timeline of COVID-19 Progress in South Korea



¹⁰ As shown in Figure 1, this report aims to delineate the evolution of COVID-19 in South Korea, segmenting it into two distinct stages. The phases were identified based on the reports from key governmental bodies and stakeholders regarding the pandemic mitigation, including the Ministry of Health and Welfare [MHW] (MHW, 2023), the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency [KDCA] (KDCA, 2022), and civil society alliances for COVID-19 (The COVID-19 Eradication Alliance, 2020).

STAGE 1:

Early stage of COVID-19 outbreak (February 2020 – February 2021) - Epidemic spreading phase centered around Daegu and Gyeongbuk in South Korea

Prior to the onset of domestic COVID-19 cases in South Korea, the South Korean government held its first crisis evaluation meeting on the novel coronavirus infection in Wuhan, China, based on national crisis management guidelines, on January 8, 2020. The series of initial evaluation meetings assessed patient conditions, risk assessments, measures, and response plans. At this point, the infectious disease disaster crisis stage was deemed at the 'alert' level. On January 20, 2020, South Korea saw its first confirmed COVID-19 case (KDCA, 2022). From that point onwards, the virus rapidly spread within a short amount of time, leading to numerous challenges. These included pressure on healthcare systems, varied adherence to health protocols, heightened social anxieties, conflicts stemming from the pandemic, and mistrust in government policies and response capabilities.

During the first stage (February 2020 – February 2021), South Korea faced a total of three waves: 1st wave (February 2020 – March 2020); 2nd wave (August 2020 – September 2020); and 3rd wave (November 2020 – February 2021) (Choi, 2023). In mid-February 2020, a cluster of 556 confirmed cases emerged, centered around Daegu and Gyeongbuk, marking the onset of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea (KDCA, 2022). 61.3% of the confirmed cases at that time were associated with the worship service that was organized on February 9 in the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu (Kim et al., 2020). The first death due to COVID-19 was reported on February 20, 2020. The South Korean government subsequently elevated the crisis alert level to 'serious.' Beginning from the 1st wave, the South Korean government's proactive approach to contain the spread of COVID-19, called "3T strategy (Test - Trace - Treat)," developed, becoming the foundation of South Korea's infectious disease response. This strategy focused on widespread testing and confirming cases, efficient contact tracing and tracking, and isolating and treating confirmed cases (KDCA, 2022).

The second wave struck South Korea between August and September 2020. Despite effectively managing the outbreak through the widespread implementation of the "3T" strategy, which averted the need for extensive lockdowns like those seen in the United States, the relaxation of social distancing guidelines led to a series of small yet concerning outbreaks (Murray, 2020). The South Korean government relaxed the social distance policy as the daily confirmed case count fell below 50 from May to July 2020. However, a second wave was beginning, spurred on by gatherings at Seoul nightclubs in early June 2020. These gatherings led to close contact involving more than 7,000 people with confirmed infections (Murray, 2020). In response to the cluster identified in Seoul nightclubs, South Korea declared the occurrence of a second wave in and around Seoul and implemented enhanced physical-distancing measures (Seong et al., 2021).

South Korea experienced a third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic from November 20, 2020, to February 21, 2021. Beginning in November 2020, the nation observed a surge in new coronavirus cases, surpassing 600 cases per day. This marked a significant escalation, with daily increases reaching triple digits, representing the most substantial surge in infections within a nine-month period, as reported by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA). In response to this surge, the South Korean government officially declared a “third wave” and concurrently implemented heightened social distancing measures in the capital, Seoul, and surrounding areas (Smith, 2020). Throughout this initial stage, South Korea saw a total of 90,029 confirmed cases, resulting in 1,605 deaths.

STAGE 2:

Expansion period and gradual return to normalcy phase (March 2021 – March 2022)

During this phase, South Korea encountered the emergence of new viral variants, a fourth wave of infections, and prevalent vaccine hesitancy and skepticism.

COVID-19 variants, including Delta and Omicron, emerged in South Korea during this stage. By July 2021, the Delta variant had become predominant in South Korea and caused a fourth wave of infections (KDOC, 2022). The Delta variant was more challenging to mitigate due to higher severity and fatality rates, and a notable impact on the younger population (KDCA, 2022). On July 21, 2021, South Korea reported its highest-ever-daily increase in COVID-19 cases, with 1,896 daily infections (CNBC, 2021) of multiple variants. The emergence of the highly contagious Omicron variant in November 2021 precipitated a swift increase in confirmed cases, constituting 93.8% of infections by the end of March 2023 (MHW, 2023).

During this stage, the South Korean government initiated various strategies to promote and enforce COVID-19 vaccination after authorizing the first vaccine (Oxford-AstraZeneca) on February 10, 2021 (Nham et al., 2022). According to the KDOC (2022) report, the vaccination rate reached 70% in October 2021. However, the government’s efforts escalated social fragmentation and division due to widespread hesitancy and skepticism about the vaccines (Cho et al., 2022). The government nevertheless swiftly administered the Covid-19 vaccines, initially focusing on healthcare workers and vulnerable populations, then expanding to the broader population. As of the end of 2021, 86.3% of the population had received at least one dose of the vaccine, 83.1% had completed their second dose, and 36% had received their third dose (National Medical Center, 2022).

In the face of an unprecedented surge in confirmed cases due to the variants, with the tally crossing 100,000 during the prolonged fourth wave, the government began to pursue a policy of gradual normalization, carefully balancing public health concerns with a return to regular activities. KDOC noted the number of new confirmed COVID-19 cases was consistently staying under 100,000, with the trajectory of case numbers fluctu-

ating between slight rises and falls. In light of these statistical trends and accumulated practical experiences in measuring the pandemic, the South Korean government decided to advance to the next phase of its COVID-19 strategy (MHW, 2023).

In January 2022, the Omicron variant catalyzed the fifth wave of the pandemic, as the Omicron detection rate approached 50 percent and daily caseloads exceeded 7,000 for two consecutive days (Park, 2022). The emergence of Omicron sub-variants BA-2 and BA-5 led to subsequent waves of the pandemic in South Korea, specifically the 6th wave from July 22 to September 22, and the 7th wave spanning December 2022 to January 2023 (Choi, 2023; Seo, 2022). On April 18, 2022, in response to the diminishing intensity of the Omicron variant wave that peaked in March, the South Korean government lifted social distancing measures and other major restrictions while maintaining the indoor mask mandate. This new policy allowed restaurants, cafes, and small businesses to operate without time restrictions, and removed the cap on the number of people allowed in private gatherings.

POST-COVID-19 AND CLOSURE

After April 18, 2022, the South Korean government strategically shifted focus, transitioning from immediate COVID-19 mitigation efforts to preparing for a post-pandemic era. In particular, after the new administration took over in May 2022, the overall trajectory of COVID-19 policy underwent a notable shift, reflecting a reorientation in the government's strategy for pandemic responses.

On May 11, 2023, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared the lifting of most COVID-19 restrictions, transitioning the management of the disease to an endemic approach. On June 1, 2023, South Korea formally ended its COVID-19 emergency status, moving towards a post-pandemic framework (Lee, 2023; Kim, 2023).

ICNL

1126 16th Street NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036 USA

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