

The Role of Local Municipal Government In Urban Environmental Management

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(International Relations, M.A. 2003)

Today, cities in Asia are facing particularly demanding environmental challenges. The economic development of the Asian countries, the important role the cities play in the national economies and the rapid rate of urbanization have made these cities theater of all kinds of environmental problems. Usually the countries have national environmental strategies, laws, and institutions and implementation mechanisms. However, since the cities are experiencing a conglomeration of problems specific to their own, a closer examination and measures taken thereafter at the municipal level will be necessary to achieve efficiency in urban environmental management. The role of local municipal government, therefore, is a very pertinent issue. I would like to place it in the context of Asian developing countries as it would render the discussion more concrete and relevant.

The Role of the Local Municipal Government in Its Context

We cannot discuss local municipal government's role without its national context. The employment of technology is very important in combating environmental problems, but the political determination and institutional capacity of the governments play a vital role in urban environmental management as well. Although studies have shown that countries that invest early in environmental improvement experienced virtually no trade-off in slower growth yet countries that postpone this investment incurred sizable cumulative damage costs and high levels of environmental investment for the foreseeable future,¹ the conventional "wisdom" still makes the governments face a priority competition of economic growth, natural resource utilization, employment, social stability versus environmental preservation and improvement. The concept of sustainable development is good but the strategic shift to this mode is still costly, in the short run at least, in view of its economic, social, political, technological requirements and consequences. However, there is an increasing awareness of the urgency of the environmental problems among the governments in the Asian developing countries. But again, on the practical level, the relevant regulatory structures are sometimes cumbersome and inappropriate. Also, the fact that some governments are not representative enough has caused the misalignment of interest and cost in environmental issues.²

The root of externality and moral hazard issues is institutional so the problems cannot be solved simply with some new measures and their implementation.

Here I assume that the local governments are subordinate to the central government and there are national laws and regulations. But virtually all laws, regulations, measures and initiatives about urban environment depend on “better local practice”. These in turn depend on competent city and sub-city government. In reality, in these countries, most governments at the local municipal level lack the trained personnel, financial base and autonomy to provide necessary infrastructure and services. The local governments are weak and constrained, but their tasks are more daunting than those of their European and American counterparts.³ On the other hand, if the local governments enjoy some flexibility and autonomy with authority to make local laws and regulations, they can still have a certain degree of power to exercise if they choose to, even though they have to operate in the frames set up by the central government, which are probably not that satisfactory in this case. Therefore, fundamentally, the financial resources at the discretion of the local governments to meet their responsibilities in urban environmental management are essential. Without the money or the authority to use the money, talking about the local municipal government’s role will be superfluous.

The Role of Local Municipal Government in Urban Environmental Management

With all the foregoing said, insofar as what the local municipal government can do, there are still active roles they should/can play in urban environment management.

1. Active enforcement of national and local environmental legislature

Although Japan is a developed country, its experience in this aspect is still transferable to Asian developing countries. Japan’s Basic Environmental Law requires national standards but gives prefecture governors the authority to engage in a wide range of activities related to local pollution control policy and practice. In fact, the local municipal governments have been taking the lead in preparing regional pollution control management plans, introduced local effluent and emission standards more stringent than those at the national level. They have environmental organization parallel to that at the national level. This decentralization of responsibility, as a key feature of Japan’s overall environmental policy, has enabled the local governments to come to the front line and directly deal with specific environmental incidents.⁴

2. Communication and coordination among various players

Although the political map and the map of environmental impact almost never match, local municipal governments have a better grasp of the local picture than the central government. Local municipal

governments are thus more capable of tailoring its policies and measures to the local situations, taking both environment and growth into consideration. Compared to the central government, the municipal governments have more direct involvement in the local industries, who impact the environment and who also want to maintain business operations under their very jurisdiction. Therefore, the local governments have more bargaining power in the direction where the industries go. As a probable result, not only legally-binding agreements but also voluntary agreements will be in effect to protect and improve the environment. However, it should be noted that the local government's role in balancing the interests of industries and residents do not need to be repressive. Rather, the local municipal government may well promote more environment-friendly business which also means more business opportunities to the industries. Therefore, this public-private partnership shall create win-win situation in the fashion of sustainable development. Policy instruments that change behavior, relieve conflicts, and encourage cooperative arrangements such as market-based incentives usually do the trick better than coercive measures.⁵ Besides, since science and research are vital in environmental studies and NGOs are also important in related activities, municipal governments can serve as a medium of communication between them and the industries and residents. The local governments gain insight from such communications for their policy-making and implementation. In addition, the local municipal governments can also channel such communication to the central government so that the national policy and legislature will be more accurate and applicable. Of course, how effective this can be depends upon the institutional and cultural context of the country as well as the communication mechanism.

3. Promotion of public awareness and education

Although the participation of the public has been crucial in Japan in pressuring local officials to strengthen environmental protection measures, in the case of the most of the Asian developing countries, the public awareness of environment issues is still low. This calls for the governments to take actions. National campaign is one way, but publicity and education at the local level usually turn out to be more effective as they address specific issues particular to that region. A higher degree of awareness which leads to people's conscientious efforts to facilitate environment protection, or at least to pollute less, will mean huge cost savings in remedying damages made to the environment. Public support gained through awareness will also make policy implementation easier.

4. Direct provision of municipal environmental services

Garbage collection, solid waste disposal, traffic and housing management, water supply and sanitation, health service, accommodation of the population growth are often direct responsibilities of the local municipal governments, or at least they play important supervisory roles on these issues. High degree of capacity and resources will be necessary to deal with the complexity of all these tasks efficiently.

5. Urban planning

Although how cities develop would often depend upon central government approval in its national strategy, urban planning is one of the important tasks that the local municipal governments must seriously handle. Wisely-devised urban development and renovation plan will save the city a lot of resources and make it run more efficiently and healthily. Bad urban planning will cause much damage to the economy as well as the environment.

As such, local municipal government plays a critical role in urban environment management. The use and careful integration of legal, policy and economic instruments to promote sustainable development through people's participation are important. ⁶ A World Bank report points out that "the formulation of an overall urban environmental management strategy that provides long-term environmental goals and phased targets for meeting the goals, and agreement on issues-oriented strategies and actor-specific action plans for achieving the goals" are one way how the local municipal governments manage their environment. ⁷

Strengthening the role of local municipal government

Generally, there is a widespread need for capacity building at the local level for project implementation, enforcement of legislation and promotion of awareness. In order to achieve this, the issue of local autonomy and financial resources come up again.

Autonomy is a sensitive issue in terms of political institution. However, a certain degree of discretion can still be delegated by the central government to the local governments so that more local responsiveness can be generated. More power to address the local interests can make the city better off. Ulsan City in Korea experienced environmental recovery after it gained autonomy and made such an effort. On the other hand, central government still needs to oversee the whole situation to make sure the various municipalities are not abusing their power. For example, relocation of polluting sources to some other municipalities, rather than actual solutions, does not improve the overall environmental welfare of the whole country.

To have more financial resources at their disposal in tackling the environmental challenges, local municipal government can apply for more allocation of national budget from the central government. Alternatively, local municipal governments can look to various directions to raise funds. Tax and pollution penalty fee are good sources of revenue. Other market-based ways such as public-private partnership can make more funds available as well. Privatization and quasi-privatization of some municipal public service, well implemented, can unburden the government and/ or generate additional revenue.

Equally important are the competence and motivation of the local municipal officials. The empowerment of the local governments to deal with local problems combined with the status and competence of the local officials are considered as a primary determinant of the success in addressing local environmental matters.⁸ Therefore, from both the national and local government levels, constant efforts must be made to make sure that the officials understand the environment issues and are capable to handle them well. Here, the expertise from academia and the field will be important consultation for the governments to make informed decisions. Moreover, as local leaders might have several things on their agenda and they have their own personal incentives as well, mechanism needs to be developed to mobilize the local leaders to give environmental problems due attention. In addition, the mechanism of governance, i.e. to monitor and evaluate how well the local governments work, is also important in making sure that the resources allocated for environment purpose have been utilized purposefully and efficiently.

Final Caveat

A final caveat is that although local municipal governments play a very important role in urban environment management, this does not mean that the central government is not that important anymore. There is a considerable constraint in what the local municipal governments can do, yet environmental problems often cross municipal boundaries or even national boundaries. And also, environmental problems are never strictly environmental in nature; there are always economic, social, political and cultural considerations to take into account. In this sense, the central government needs to evaluate and balance the gains and losses, equality issues etc. in order to come up with an “optimum” solution in line with its national strategy.

Notes

¹ D. O'Connor, Grow Now/Clean Later, or Pursuit of Sustainable Development? (Technical Paper no. 111) (Paris: OECD, 1996), 7.

² J. E. Hardoy, D. Mitlin and D. Satterthwaite, Environmental Problems in Third World Cities (London: Earthscan Publication LTD., 1992), 160-161.

³ Hardoy, Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 162-163.

⁴ W. Cruz, K. Takemoto and J. Warford, eds. Urban and Industrial Management in Developing Countries: Lessons from Japanese Experience (Washington, D. C.: World Bank, 1998) 17-18.

⁵ Carl Bartone, et al., Toward Environmental Strategies for Cities: Policy Considerations for Urban Environmental Management in Developing Countries (Washington, D. C.: World Bank, 1994), abstract page.

⁶ C. Waker, A. Viaro and M. Wolf, 1999. "Partnerships for Urban Environmental Management: the Roles of Urban Authorities, Researchers and Civil society", Environment and Urbanization 11(2): 123.

⁷ Bartone, abstract page.

⁸ Cruz, Takemoto and Warford, 17-18.

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