Synergy between State and Rural Society for Development: An Analysis of the Governance System of the Rural Saemaul Undong in Korea

Seok-Jin Eom*

This study aims to examine the governance system of the Rural Saemaul Undong (RSU) from the perspective of state-society relations, by analyzing actors, processes, and formal/informal institutions. The effective and efficient state institutions created an environment in which rural people participated in the RSU programs. The village-level leadership facilitated people's participation in the projects and contributed to forging the norms, trust, and networks among villagers that were required for development. The villagers' participation, in turn, became one of the major driving forces for rural development and strengthened public institutions as a consequence of the RSU.

Key Words: Rural Saemaul Undong, Governance, State-Society Relations, Leadership, Rural Development

*Seok-Jin Eom is Assistant Professor of Graduate School of Public Administration at Seoul National University, Korea. He received his Ph.D. in Public Administration from Seoul National University, Korea. His research focuses on the roles and responsibilities of government in economic development and governance theory. He published several journal articles in these fields such as “Public Accountability: Theoretical Conflict and Debates between Public Administration Theories” (2009) and “An Empirical Study of Local Governance from a Policy Tool Approach” (2008). E-mail: sjum21@snu.ac.kr.

I. Introduction

The Rural Saemaul Undong (hereafter RSU) was a community-based rural development program of the Republic of Korea in the 1970s. Recently, the RSU has received attention from government agencies and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) because it is regarded as a successful example of a poverty-reduction and community-development program (So, 2007; Kim, 2009; Park, 2009; Kwon, 2010). In addition, many developing countries involved in promoting their own rural development programs send their public officials to Korea to study the RSU (Jeong, 2007; KOICA, 2009).

In fact, the RSU has been evaluated as bringing about meaningful improvements in Korea's social development (Whang, 1980; Hwang, 2006; Park, 2009; Kwon, 2010). The RSU led to substantial improvements in rural infrastructure, including the expansion of village roads, building of small bridges and store houses, installation of telephone lines, and so on. Through the RSU, enlarged and extended roads made mechanized farming possible, while the extension of telephone lines and electrification provided timely information and enabled villagers to cope with changing market situations.

Furthermore, the RSU has been evaluated as successfully affecting the attitudes and consciousness of farmers by promoting modern values focusing on three core values — diligence, cooperation, and self-reliance through large-scale training, seminars, and workshops (Park, 2009). The RSU has also been evaluated as contributing to some extent to income generation for rural households and to the decrease in urban-rural income differentials (Hwang, 2006).

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1. Regarding the specific results of this kind of project, refer to Table 4 in section III of this paper.
2. According to the results of a 1978 survey of 821 people in eight villages, respondents replied that gambling had decreased, funerals had been simplified, participation in decision making by villages had increased, drinking had decreased, and the social status of women had improved significantly in most villages during the RSU period (Yu et al, 1980).