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Presentation

“The Political Dimension of Sustainability – Why do Policies in S. Korea Fail to Adapt to Foreseeable Risks?”

Society has long reaped the benefits of the rapid and seemingly unstoppable progress of innovation. In the past few decades, people have started to think seriously about the negative consequences of this progress - such as greenhouse gas emissions and climate change - and have engaged in much study, debate, and argument on sustainability. But lost in this debate is the question of whether the political dimensions of sustainability are being sufficiently addressed.

Several scholars claim that we are currently missing the capacity to assess “sustainability holistically” on economic, social, political, and environmental levels - and therefore is essential that we develop ways to account for it. On economic and environmental levels, many researchers and scientists continue to explore ways to measure the economic costs of climate change for instance. Unlike the economic dimension which is more suitable for quantitative measurements, creating an assessment tool for the political sphere can be challenging. Thus, while the majority of discussions on sustainability centered on the economics side of things (the financial effects on people or the degradation of existing natural resources), it seems many societies and governments overlook the importance of assessing the how policies and regulations perform, and its feed-back loop.

For example, a series of heart-breaking events in South Korea revealed severe weaknesses in the regulatory system. In April 2014, the sinking of *Sewol* Ferry took the lives of more than 300 people, including more than 200 high school students. Loosely tied excess cargo tipping the ship off balance caused the disaster while the captain and his crew abandoned the ship when there were people trapped inside. Post-accident investigations reveal that the ferry company consistently allowed excess cargo, with no restrictions from the government. Had the government periodically monitored the regulations, the ferry company strictly banned excess cargo, and the captain and his crew acted promptly according to the procedures, the accident could have been avoided completely. This unfortunate reality became clearer when the outbreak of MERS hit South Korea this summer killing dozens, affecting the lives of thousands, all while the government was busy papering the situation over. During the initial two weeks, the government did not disseminate essential information when individuals with symptoms had not been quarantined, accelerating the spread of the virus. These events exemplify the South Korean government’s negligence on the importance of adaptive regulations, simply responding to fatal disasters after the fact. Similar incidents took the lives of thousands not only in the Korean peninsula but worldwide.

In sum, this paper seeks to justify a greater attention to adaptive regulations for foreseeable risks in innovation, and attempts to outlay possible barriers to why adaptive regulations are particularly challenging to impose under current conditions, using the South Korean context as a case study. The focus then will be on exploring a case in which the S. Korean government and relevant agencies demonstrated evidences of a learning process, enabling a transformative and adaptive policy making process. If found insufficient, the paper will explore alternative learning processes evident in cases elsewhere in the world, thereby providing the platform to observe, identify, and analyze surrounding factors and stakeholders that facilitated the adaptive learning process to engender adaptive policies and proactive regulatory schemes.

Presenter

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