

The Rise of Work Integration and Social Enterprise in South Korea

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In the recent years, social enterprise has raised a strong interest in Asia: Several research projects in Japan have been dedicated to this topic for the last 5 years and two important international conferences on social enterprise have been organized in Taiwan in November 2005 and in Hong-Kong in April 2006. In South Korea, work integration has been for a few years integrated in the compulsory duties to benefit the national basic livelihood and a specific law defining the status of social enterprise has then been enacted in 2007.

This contribution proposes to look first at the recent trends observed on the South Korean labor market stressing out that behind good general data –especially a low unemployment rate-, this market presents serious failures that explain the need for work integration policies. With a high proportion of non-salaried jobs and a high proportion of non-regular jobs among the salaried jobs, the Korean labor market has a high level of unsecured jobs that can turn more easily into unemployment, raise work integration problems, and then lead to social exclusion if combined with other welfare problems.

In relation with its issue, the second part presents the organization and main characteristics of the recent work integration policies set up in South Korea: The National Basic Livelihood System introduced a few years ago and its statutory work integration dimension represents the first program of that kind built up so far in South Korea that led recently to the enactment on a law on social enterprise.

Then the third part offers a discussion on the Korean approach of social enterprise in comparison with other experiences of social enterprise that have been developed, mainly in Europe, for the last 20 years and have gained a growing interest in Asia for a few years. It concludes that the Korean work integration scheme certainly provides a useful answer to some people, but remains globally insufficient and imperfect in terms of unemployment and training. Above all it does not bring an appropriate answer to people who are de facto unable to work for psychological or physical reasons although they are not legally considered as unable to work as handicapped persons.

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