

**WORKING TITLE:** Can Conflict Resolution Help to Enhance Civil Society's Potential as a Space for Democratic Learning? (A Case Study of South Korean NGOs) by Donna Chung

**PAPER ABSTRACT:**

When a country transitions to democracy, a wide variety of conflict-ridden social issues emerge in civil society space. Some social conflicts surface as a part of the consolidation process, while others emerge after they have been long suppressed, or even fostered, by previous regimes. All of sudden, citizens in new democracies are faced with the challenge of constructively managing various divisive, contentious issues which affect their daily lives. However, citizens whose lives were long dictated by heavy-handed states have felt inadequate in terms of constructively managing conflict-ridden social issues when working together with those who hold opposing points of view (Shonholtz, 1997).

Similarly, civil society practitioners, many of whom had participated actively in oppositional movements under the authoritarian regime, experience difficulty in constructively handling conflicts in public space. Equating compromise with "unprincipled acquiescence to an enemy" due to their experience with the authoritarian regime, these civil society activists are more accustomed to utilise confrontational, antagonistic strategies when it comes to handling conflicts over contentious social issues (Shapiro, 1999). In the absence of cultural, institutional, psychological foundations for conflict management, NGO practitioners (as well as ordinary citizens) handle divisive social issues poorly by demonising others with different perspectives, instead of searching for a common ground through problem-solving, negotiation and dialogue processes (Shapiro, 1999).

Democracy as a political system constructively regulates multiple social interests of diverse groups expressed within institutional boundaries (Ury, 1999). Civil society, as a supporting structure to democratic governments, is considered to play an essential role in this 'conflict-mediating' effort because it provides citizens with an opportunity to develop habits and attitudes beneficial to democracy including cooperation, dialogues, tolerance, respect for others and non-violent conflict resolution (Diamond, 1994; Finkel, 2003). Thus, the lack of NGO practitioners' capacity for constructive engagement with conflicts limits civil society's potential as a space for democratic learning.

In the last fifteen years, conflict resolution, a collaborative, problem-solving approach to social conflicts, was introduced to new democracies in an attempt to develop civil society's capacity for conflict management (Mayer, 2000). Conflict resolution provides people with an opportunity to advocate effectively for their own interests in a non-violent, constructive manner through systematic educational efforts, skills trainings, dialogue initiatives, and mediation practices (Mayer, 2000). It empowers people to address, manage, and transform difficulties and antagonism into a source of positive social change and, thus, change people's negative psychological responses to conflicts (Bush and Folger, 1994). In this view, conflict resolution in new democracies' civil society provides citizens as well NGO practitioners with the skills and opportunities to practice how to express and resolve differences in a safe and constructive environment (Shonholtz, 1997).

This proposed paper is a part of dissertation which investigates civil society's conflict resolution practices in South Korea, a new democracy. Conflict resolution was first introduced to the country ten years ago by a non-governmental organisations based in the States, and recently has gained a great deal of attention and interests from the country's civil society

practitioners. This paper intends to explore to what extent and how conflict resolution practices have benefited to enhance the democratic learning aspect of South Korean civil society. Since the country's transition, it has been criticised for its failure to foster civil skills and virtues due to its antagonistic ways of managing conflicts and differences (Shin, 1999).

Over the last six months, the author of this paper have conducted a series of qualitative interviews with NGO practitioners who work for 30 civil society organisations and integrate conflict resolution practices into their work. The interviewees were identified and contacted after the 2005 preliminary field research which purpose was to map NGOs participating in 'conflict resolution skills training programmes' or 'peace and conflict resolution working groups'. This paper will present the following findings: what types of NGOs have integrated conflict resolution practices into their work (i.e. environment group, women's rights group, etc.); what have motivated them to adopt conflict resolution practices; what types of conflict resolution practices NGO practitioners have experienced and used for their work (i.e. skills training, policy dialogue, etc.); what values 'the field of conflict resolution' have added to enhance the quality of their (organisations') work; and what obstacles they have faced to apply conflict resolution practices to their work.

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