



CITY FOCUS

Seoul

Listen up! The People are Speaking



Mayor Park Won-soon at a public debate about air quality held at Gwanghwamun Plaza.

Over the last few decades, Seoul has shed its previously top-down approach to urban policies to focus more on its citizens. **Remy Guo** explores how the 2018 Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Laureate gave its people more say in developing their city.

A giant red ear sits outside the Seoul City Hall. Coined *Yobosayo*—which plays on a Korean expression for initiating a phone conversation—the artwork invites Seoulites to air their views, ideas or complaints. Beyond listening, it projects the comments over speakers in the city hall, uses sensors to detect the size of the crowd that each message attracts and archives the popular ones.

Installed in 2013, *Yobosayo* mirrors Seoul's efforts to pay more attention to people's voices. Through innovative new ways of citizen engagement, Seoul has shifted away from South Korea's traditional top-down governance.

The capital was a very different place 20 years ago. It expanded rapidly in the post-war economic boom through urbanisation plans led by the government and *chaebols* [large Korean conglomerates]. However, public confidence in the government suffered following political corruption cases and a spate of urban disasters in the 1990s due to lax construction standards. At the same time, South Korea's political transition to modern democracy brought about rising citizen demand for public accountability and civic participation. In response, the government started to step up public engagement on policies and projects.

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In 2011, Mayor Park Won-soon was elected with the campaign promise: “In Seoul, the Citizens are the Mayor”. Under his leadership, Seoul's policies focused on communication and collaboration with citizens. The government not only strengthened tried-and-tested engagement methods, but also stepped into uncharted waters to boost the breadth and depth of citizen involvement.

Strengthening Face-to-Face Communication

First, the government worked to bridge communication gaps with its 10 million citizens. Driven by Mayor Park's belief that “solutions are found at the site of the problem, not in boardrooms or behind desks”, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) worked to bring the city administration closer to the community. Resident dialogues are held in different districts through the On-Site Office of the Mayor initiative, while the Policy Listening Workshops gather citizens and policymakers to discuss pertinent topics.



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Yobosayo records and broadcasts comments from citizens, archiving the ones that people pay more attention to, while recycling others as ambient music.



Mayor Park prioritises people by making time for community events such as the 2017 Seoul Kimchi Festival, where more than 5,000 people bonded over kimchi-making.



01

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Opening Data to Build Trust

To gain trust and improve transparency, the SMG took a bold step with the Open Government 2.0 policy in 2012. It became the first South Korean administrative unit to allow public access to all administrative documents and data not classified as personal or confidential. Municipal documents and quantitative datasets are available on the Open Information Communication Plaza and Seoul Open Data Plaza websites respectively. This information sharing creates opportunities for businesses and researchers to contribute solutions to urban issues.

01 More than 5,000 people visit the Citizens' Hall daily for forums, workshops and other citizen-oriented activities within the Seoul City Hall building.



02

Connecting Online

With Seoul boasting among the world's highest levels of Internet and smartphone penetration, the SMG leveraged social media and online platforms to connect with citizens. The Seoul Social Media Center was set up to coordinate the SMG's 44 social media accounts and address citizens' queries and requests more efficiently. The SMG also launched *Eungdapsso*, an integrated online channel for citizens to submit feedback and complaints. This platform shortened the average feedback handling time from 3.8 days in 2013 to

2.7 days in 2015. Citizens could also vote for policies and proposals on their phones and computers through the mVoting app. This helped policymakers to get a sense of people's opinions on everyday matters.

The SMG even implemented some ideas submitted by citizens through online channels. For instance, the citizen-suggested Night Owl Bus service was introduced to offer affordable late-night transport, in lieu of expensive taxi rides. The service was voted the best public service initiative in 2013.

02 The Eunpyeong-gu Sharing Center came about from a citizen's idea for the Participatory Budgeting System. Residents share tools, services and knowledge with one another using an alternative currency system.

“The Participatory Budgeting System allows the public to decide the use of up to 5% of the city’s budget.”



Planning with the People

Similarly, major policymaking processes in Seoul became more citizen-driven. Examples include the Seoul Plan 2030—the city’s spatial master plan—and the Participatory Budgeting System, which allows the public to decide the use of up to 5% of the city’s budget. For both projects, the SMG set up citizen committees with rigorous processes for participants to voice their opinions, deliberate on issues and build consensus for solutions. Ideas and opinions were solicited from the wider public through smart platforms such as the mVoting system.

These efforts helped the SMG to complete the Seoul Plan 2030 with fewer public objections than previous master plans. Several projects proposed by citizens to address their needs were also funded under the Participatory Budgeting System, including the Eunpyeong-gu Sharing Center, a non-profit organisation and community space for sharing anything from tools to knowledge.

Seoul’s newfound confidence in working with multiple stakeholders also redefined the city’s urban rejuvenation. Moving away from the demolish-and-rebuild process that prevailed until the 2000s, the city worked with stakeholders to retrofit and transform existing structures into people-friendly urban spaces. The SMG conducted more than 200 interviews and other engagements to establish the plans for Makercity Sewoon, a cluster of 1960s commercial superblocks rejuvenated into a creative district, while a Citizens’ Committee comprising residents, businesses and experts informed the proposals for urban park Seoulo 7017.

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While it has not been easy to reflect citizen opinions in policies and projects—with delays sometimes being inevitable—the people-centric approach has been key to Seoul’s recent success. As Mayor Park explained in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*: “We cannot expect to solve all of the complex problems we face using the perspective of just one expert or the skills of just one sector.” With a listening ear close to the ground, an open attitude to new possibilities and an astute leadership that balances visionary governance with citizen empowerment, Seoul has transformed into a city that is simultaneously created for the people, by the people. 

The author would like to thank the Seoul Institute for sharing knowledge on Seoul and its policies.

- 01 The government collaborated with residents, businesses and experts for Seoulo 7017, an elevated urban park transformed from an old expressway.
- 02 A Hanbok [traditional dress] fashion show in the plaza of Makercity Sewoon.