Mechanism to Increase Transparency in Administration

OPEN SYSTEM of SEOUL

United Nations
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Seoul Metropolitan Government
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I. Introduction
1. Administrative Transparency and the Fight Against Corruption

The monopoly of information by bureaucrats and fostering secrecy within the administration can lead to the abuse of power as well as frustrating the citizens’ ability to monitor the bureaucratic system. A full disclosure of information on government activities promotes the citizens’ participation in the administrative process and ensures the protection of the people’s right to know how they are being governed. To quote James Madison, one of the founding fathers of the United States, “A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both”. ¹

In this day and age, the access to information is recognized as a basic right and this right is legally guaranteed. Unlike private companies, government services are monopolistic in nature that retain a great deal of discretion in the decision-making process, and an unwillingness to share information by government officials results in an unhealthy imbalance of information between the bureaucrats and the citizens.

Mostly, secrecy on the part of bureaucrats stem from their desire not to expose their shortcomings that might come to light in the event of revealing related information. Max Weber, who was the first to raise the issue of bureaucracy, saw through the tendency of bureaucrats to resort to secrecy. He contended that every bureaucracy seeks to increase the superiority of the professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and intentions secret and hides its knowledge and action from criticism. As a result, ‘offi-
cial secret’ is a label often abused by bureaucrats to protect their power.

Another reason for keeping administrative proceedings under wraps on the part of the bureaucrats lies in the temptation to succumb to graft and corruption. For instance, the tradition of emphasizing the place of birth, blood ties, and school ties in human relations in Korea further deepens the temptation to supersede administrative procedures when special interests or acquaintances are involved. Corruption can lurk behind the curtains of secrecy.

A well-known scholar in the field, Robert Klitgaard, set forth the following formula for corruption to succinctly describe this situation.

\[ \text{Corruption} = \text{Monopoly} + \text{Discretion} - \text{Accountability} \]

The more monopoly and discretion are bestowed on the bureaucrat, the more corruption occurs. The higher the level of accountability, the lower the level of corruption. Rendering transparency to administrative procedures by making information readily available to the public decreases the power of bureaucrats. Also, raising accountability through the efforts of citizen watchdog groups is an effective antidote for corruption.

Just as it is more effective to resort to preventive measures rather than to cure a disease after it breaks out, rooting out corruption by adopting administrative transparency measures is much more effective than trying to patch things over after the corruption occurs. By empowering the people's right to information, transparency in administrative practices serves as a gateway to democracy and curbs excessive power and corruption of bureaucrats.

A closer examination of transparency in the context of administrative activities shows that the concept refers to the increased flow of timely and reliable information regarding the decision-making process and services guaranteed to all citizens. Transparency includes three elements. First, information should be accessible to all on equal terms. Second, information must be relevant. Third, information should be of good quality, reliable, timely, complete, fair, consistent and presented in clear and simple terms.

Among government activities, policy decisions that are closely linked with the interests of affected parties, licensing/authorization procedures and regulatory activities, in particular, are areas susceptible to corruption, which call for transparency. The OPEN (Online Procedures ENhancement for Civil Applications) System of the Seoul Metropolitan Government is a good example of opening up such administrative procedures to the public through a
real time online system, which allows the citizens to monitor the process around the clock.

The Digital Revolution is spreading explosively around the world with widespread usage of computers and the Internet. Internet users numbered a mere 2.6 million in 1990 worldwide. This figure jumped to 385 million in 2000. This trend revolutionized administrative practices by enabling governments to provide speedy quality services and enhance efficiency. The Seoul Metropolitan Government has also taken full advantage of such developments in information technology and reformed its administrative procedures.

2. Anti-corruption Policies of the Seoul Metropolitan Government

The case of Seoul is interesting and instructive. As the nation's capital, the city of Seoul serves as the hub of all aspects of Korean society including politics, economics, education and culture in Korea. Seoul, with a history of more than 600 years as the nation's capital, also played an important role as the driving force behind the nation's rapid economic development in recent years. The city of Seoul covers 605.5 square kilometers or 0.6% of the total area of South Korea's 99,293.8 square kilometers. Seoul also accommodates a population of 10 million or 21% of South Korea's entire population of 47 million.

With the leadership of the government formulating and implementing economic growth policies and the hard work of its citizens, Korea has been able to achieve remarkable economic success that raised the nation's gross national product (GDP) to rank as the 11th largest in the world, opening the doors to join the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.
(OECD) in 1996. In the process of achieving this rapid economic growth, however, bureaucrats came to wield enormous power. Politics and business often grew close, triggering widespread corruption. In response to the steadily increasing support for decentralization, democracy and the market economy among the people, Korea is combating corruption, severing the once close ties between politics and business, along with deregulation, privatization, limiting the discretion of government officials, eliminating the sources of corruption and imposing severe penal sanctions against corrupt officials.

Among the various levels of governments in Korea, Seoul Metropolitan Government stands as a good example of reforms. Under the leadership of Mayor Goh, Kun who was elected in 1998, new innovative reform measures were devised and executed. The Seoul Metropolitan Government, once characterized as the hotbed of corruption, has decreased corrupt practices and enjoys a good reputation among citizens. Gallup Korea, a private research company, conducted a survey in late 1999 among 8,789 citizens who had contacted the Seoul city government officials for approvals of permits and applications for services during the year. Fifty five percent of the respondents saw a decrease in corruption compared to a year before. Among the 11,525 subjects who participated in a survey from 20 November to 13 December 2000, 48.6% responded to the same effect.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government has designated the campaign against corruption as one of its core objectives, waging a ‘war against corruption’ in 1998. The City adopted a systematic and comprehensive approach, quite different from the past. Past anti-corruption campaigns were ineffective and short-lived, penalizing those involved only at the beginning of a new government administration. This implies that corruption, like cancer cells, requires a more sophisticated and strategic approach for its cure. With this in mind, the Seoul Metropolitan Government established four major approaches to attacking corruption within and introduced innovative measures for their implementation.

First, attack the source of corruption such as eliminating inappropriate regulations, scrapping the Zone Assignment System in order to cut the corrupt link between the civil applicants for permits (licenses) and the official in five vulnerable sectors comprising housing, construction, health, tax, and the fire department.

Second, introduce “Corruption Report to the Mayor” postcards to citizens who had business with the Seoul
Fourth, develop an anti-corruption scheme through public-private partnership that includes the signing of the Integrity Pact, collaborating with citizen's groups, forging a coalition between citizens and the government along with setting up the Citizen Ombudsman system.5)

Among these policies, the system of online disclosure of the civil application process received particularly favourable reviews from Koreans as well as from overseas. The OPEN System, the administration processing information made public on the Internet, was proposed by the current city administration on 25 January 1999 for the purpose of preventing corruption and fulfilling the citizens' right to access information.5)

The OPEN System was selected as an innovative prototype by Transparency International who invited Mayor Goh, Kun to introduce it at the International Anti-Corruption Conference in Durban, South Africa in October 1999. During the OECD High-Level Policy Seminar, held in Paris in May 1999, the system was acknowledged as a powerful tool for eradicating corruption.

The system was recognized by the Korean government as a successful model for an innovative management sys-
Mayor Goh, Kun introduced the system at Cheong Wa Dae (the Blue House) which resulted in the adoption of the system by the central government and other local governments.

The citizens, public administration specialists, and government employees voted the OPEN System as the Most Valuable Policy of Seoul in 1999 and 2000. In its search for administrative policies that show flexibility toward the changes in people's attitude, serve the citizens as their clients as well as successfully break away from old practices, the Joong Ang Daily Newspaper included the OPEN System in its list of 10 best administrative policies in 1999 for its convenience and its effect in preventing corruption.
The Seoul Metropolitan Government was able to successfully implement an innovative policy in a relatively short period of time by combining up-to-date information technology with the existing systematic approach in eliminating corruption. In order to thwart corruption from becoming established in the working environment, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has made efforts to enhance transparency by rooting out the source of corruption. The city government also encourages friendly competition among its employees by introducing a numerical system that measures the integrity of the offices and bureaus of the City Hall and Gu (district) offices. Such efforts are the result of taking full advantage of information technology in order to secure fair and open assessments.

The first factor that contributed to such a successful implementation of the program comes from the commitment of the leadership to expel corruption from the city government. Mayor Goh, Kun, highly regarded not only for his
administrative expertise but also for his integrity, was free from outside political pressure that allowed him to concentrate on the task at hand.

Second, the wide support of citizens who backed the city government’s reform measures was crucial to its success. Democracy helped raise the voice of the citizens, which the administration could no longer ignore. The Seoul Metropolitan Government is actively enlisting the support and cooperation of civil society organizations in its anti-corruption drive.

Third, real time communication between the citizens and the city government, aided by the spread of the information technology, is another important element. The usage of the Internet is spreading like wild fire. Late in 2000, more than half of the population reported using the Internet. The number of Internet users is expected to grow even more in 2001. Utilizing the Internet to stimulate communication between the citizens and the city government is growing as the most important tool in curbing corruption. The Seoul Metropolitan Government is actively pushing forward with office automation in order to ensure efficiency of administrative procedures and transparency.

Strong commitment from the top, enhanced citizens’ power, the expansion and effective utilization of information technology played a critical role in the success of the city government’s anti-corruption drive.
4. Organization and the Internet Environment of the Seoul Metropolitan Government

1) The Organization of the Seoul Metropolitan Government

The administrative structure of the Seoul Metropolitan Government consists of one Mayor, three Vice Mayors (two Vice Mayors for Administrative Affairs and one Vice Mayor for Political Affairs), three Offices (Planning & Budget, Environment, and Transportation), five Directors-General, and eight Bureaus, which are further broken down into 63 Divisions.

Under the city administration are 78 subsidiary offices and institutes including the City Officials Training Institute, City Sports Facilities Management Center, Han-River Management Office, Seoul Computer & Information Center, City Hospitals, and Fire Stations. The administrative jurisdiction of Seoul can be divided into 25 autonomous “Gu” or districts and 522 “Dong” or wards as of 1 August 1999.

There are also six city-invested public corporations (Seoul Metropolitan Subway Corporation, Seoul Metropolitan Installation Management Corporation, Kangnam Hospital, Seoul Agricultural & Marine Products Wholesale Market Management Corporation, Seoul Metropolitan Development Corporation, and Seoul Metropolitan Rapid Transit Corporation).

The status of “Gu” was upgraded in 1988, from one of the administrative units subordinate to the city government, to a local autonomous government with the status of a corporate entity, which executes both autonomous administrative functions and those delegated by the City. The chief of a “Gu” has been elected directly by the constituents since June 1995. Each autonomous “Gu” is composed of a Chief, a Vice Chief, Bureaus, Offices, and Divisions, and operates a Community Health Center. Each “Gu” is divided into a number of administrative sub-units called “Dong”, which provide convenient and localized services, closely meeting the needs of the residents’ life.

The Seoul Metropolitan Council, the legislative organ representing about 11 million citizens, currently has 104 members serving a four-year term of office. The Council consists of a Chairman, two Vice Chairmen, Standing Committees, Special Committees, and the Secretariat.

As of 31 December 2000, the number of public officials serving the City of Seoul totals 46,899, with 16,166
employees working for the city government and the remaining 30,733 for autonomous “Gu” districts. This figure does not include the police force, which is controlled by the central government, and teachers and education officials who are governed by the autonomous education office.

Except for a handful of services such as taxi fare adjustments, natural gas consumer price adjustments, and small / mid-sized industry fundraising support operations, almost all permits and approvals (licenses) for application are handled by the autonomous “Gu” districts.

The Organization of Seoul City Following Restructuring
The number of Internet users is growing exponentially in Korea, from 1.6 million in 1997 to 20 million in 2000, a ten-fold increase in only three years. Approximately 42% of the population is using the Internet with a monthly average of 12 hours logged on to the Internet. Such an explosion in Internet usage was partly triggered by the relatively low cost of Internet access through Internet cafes scattered around. The central government's policy to establish an electronic government has been set up to provide a personal computer to every government official. As a result, 78% of all government employees have their own PC's, and 100% for Seoul city government employees. All government agencies now operate homepages. The Local Area Network (LAN) has made office computerization and electronic approval systems possible. The OPEN System is also available through personal computers in 522 Dong offices and 25 ward offices, free of charge to all citizens.