The Role of Religious Groups in the South Korean Homeless Context

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ABSTRACT

In 1997 South Korean society and people suffered from a great recession. As a result of the recession a number of people in urban areas lost their homes and became homeless.

Most of these homeless people were in Seoul, and by 1998 there were approximately 5000 homeless people in the South Korean capital city.

Faced with emerging problems, private volunteer groups, many of which were religious-especially liberal protestant groups-began supporting these homeless people directly before the government started to support these people. At first these religious groups acted independently from one another and provided support individually, though later these groups began to work together in providing support to the homeless people. Each private group constructed support networks, allotted roles and shared information.

The government, on the other hand, was unable to adequately respond to needs of homeless people as it did not have sufficient knowledge or experience to deal with such a problem suddenly emerging. The government, therefore, decided that the best solution was for it to cooperate with private groups in providing support to the homeless people. Since 1998 the South Korean government has consigned homeless support activities to private groups and this cooperation has been a success. As a result, the number of homeless people in Seoul has decreased markedly. Some religious groups in South Korea have a keen interest in social participation, and traditional liberal churches have especially played a major role in the engagement with social issues and the improvement of society.

In this public-private partnership, religious groups for the most part do not engage in propagation, but work as professional social workers rather than religious actors. Some of these liberal religious groups are also acknowledged as being social welfare actors. These groups are composed of people who have abundant talents, capital, social responsibilities, and concern for marginal groups. As regards homeless issues, the partnership between the government and these religious groups has been a key to solving problems. This paper focuses on the process and results of the partnership.

Key Words: homeless issue, poor people’s movement, public-private partnership, social capital