

Webinar on “Critical Role of the Local Government in Tackling COVID-19: Example of the Seoul Metropolitan Government” (4 May 2020) Question & Answer

A. Disclosure of Information

1. *What way works better for disclosure of information?*

- Transparency is one of Seoul’s 5 main underlying principles. Based on this principle, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (hereafter, referred to as SMG) is utilizing online platforms in order to publicly release information. SMG continues to update COVID-19 related information on its official website¹ available on desktop and mobile devices. The website keeps citizens updated on COVID-19 situations reports and past itineraries of confirmed patients as well as Seoul’s disinfection policy, support services, social campaigns, relevant news, and etc. Along with the website, the past whereabouts of confirmed patients are also informed via pre-existing emergency text alert system. Established before the COVID-19 outbreak, this text system is a communication tool used to provide citizens with information on various types of natural disaster, crisis, air pollution, etc. In order to expedite disclosure of information, since 2017, local governments can directly send out emergency texts without intervention by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety. Utilizing such online and mobile platforms to disclose information has allowed quick and accurate delivery of information in an easily accessible manner.

2. *What legal framework does Korea have that facilitates information disclosure?*

- In order to mitigate privacy concerns when it comes to public release of past itineraries of COVID-19 patients, SMG complies with strict code of information disclosure stipulated in the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act and the Enforcement Rule of the same Act. Under Article 34-2 of the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act, the Ministry of Health and Welfare is authorized to promptly disclose the following information of confirmed patients in case of disease outbreak:

Article 34-2 (Disclosure of Information during Infectious Disease Emergency)

(1) When an infectious disease harmful to citizens' health is spreading, the Minister of Health and Welfare shall promptly disclose information with which citizens are required to be acquainted for preventing the infectious disease, **such as the movement paths, transportation means, medical treatment institutions, and contacts of patients of the infectious disease**: *Provided*, That any relevant party with respect to whom there exist any matters inconsistent with the facts among the disclosed matters or who has any opinion on the disclosed matters, may file an objection with the Minister of Health and Welfare.
(The rest is omitted)

¹ <http://english.seoul.go.kr/covid/daily-updates/>

Article 27-3 of the Enforcement Rule stipulates the scope of information disclosure and procedures as follows:

Article 27-3 (Disclosure of Information and Procedures during Infectious Disease Emergency)

- (1) Where the head of a disaster management agency establishes and operates a disaster forecast or alert system referred to in Article 38-2 of the Framework Act on the Management of Disaster and Safety, the Minister of Health and Welfare shall disclose the movement paths, transportation means, medical treatment institutions, and contacts of patients of the infectious disease to the public pursuant to Article 34-2 of the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act by posting to the information and communications network or by publishing government publications.
(The rest is omitted)

Moreover, personal information that contains apparent identity of certain individual -a patient's name, age and sex-, is not publicized to respect privacy and minimize any possible negative impact (i.e. stigmatization and malicious comments online).

3. *I would like to know how much of a challenge misinformation has been in managing the epidemic.*

- False information deliberately misinforms readers about medical advice proved by scientists and hinders effective response to public health, creating confusion and distrust among the public. As part of mitigating measures to the new challenge, SMG developed a fact-checking online platform led by an ad hoc task force team with the aim of easing public fears by thoroughly verifying misinformation. The team filters out false information and announces fact-checked COVID-19 related information on the separate website. Furthermore, through the online platform, citizens can easily access to public advice on maintaining good mental health during a crisis as well as tailored information for specific groups (i.e. confirmed patients, close contact of confirmed patients, etc.). This service enables citizens to critically evaluate online contents and contributes to positive impact to the community, such as enhanced public support and trust.

B. Social Distancing

1. *Bangladesh is a highly dense country and poor people especially the urban poor had to share a room for many people in the household and also have to share common bathrooms, in such situation how can distancing can be maintained? Korea also did not shut down its activities which was not the case for many countries, in such cases, how effectively countries can maintain safety to run factories and economic activities?*

- Good personal hygiene as well as social distancing is key to protecting citizens and local community from COVID-19 infection. While encouraging citizens to keep physical distance from others, SMG also advised citizens to pay special attention to hygiene measures, such as wearing face masks and using hand sanitizers, in crowded or enclosed places (i.e. bars, hospitals, etc). In addition, in order to ease public fear on infection, SMG has launched the “CLEAN ZONE” certification to give a “seal of approval” on the disinfection and safety of public as well as private facilities, such as subway stations, bus stops, department stores, accommodation businesses, etc. The certification is given to 1) facilities where disinfection has been completed after a confirmed patient’s visit and 2) multifunctional public spaces where decontamination is conducted on a regular basis. Moreover, in order to ensure safety in factories, SMG officials have visited manufacturing factories in the city to check up whether 2m (6ft) distancing is followed by workers, hand sanitizers are provided, and masks are worn.

2. *Any insights on social distancing measures in public spaces?*

- Guidelines on social distancing provided by SMG advise citizens to postpone or cancel meetings, stay indoors as much as possible and practice social distancing by remaining 2m (6ft) apart from others. As part of social distancing measures, SMG provided guidance on the closure of some facilities where people gather on a daily basis (i.e. religious places, clubs and bars, indoor gyms, tutoring schools, etc.) and encouraged contactless religious activities² and online classes³. In addition, to minimize infection risks at work, companies and institutions, including SMG, implemented an occasional work-from-home policy and adopted flexible working hour system. Such rearrangements allowed workers to continue business without coming to the office and relieved traffic congestion at the same time.

3. *What information dissemination channels were used to conduct the social distancing campaign?*

- As the Korean government had raised Crisis Alert Level to “Serious” in February 23, SMG took a prompt action to implement social distancing measures and announced guidelines accordingly. In order to improve public perceptions of social distancing and foster civil

² In accordance with the social-distancing policy, the Ministry of Science and ICT & Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism provided support for online religious activities to religious communities to fulfill the religious needs of the public while minimizing infection risks. For example, people can attend church online by live streaming or using a radio station.

³ For the continuity in education, online school has been implemented since April 9. Students are able to access class materials via TV channels or online video broadcasting sites.

cooperation, SMG used all possible online and off-line messaging channels, such as web/printed posters, banners, electronic message signs, radio, podcast, etc. For example, a case competition was held for the public to voluntarily develop a strategy for social distancing methods. Other efforts include online viral campaigns, YouTube video publishing and distribution, and public relations activities through search engine websites to disseminate social messages on distancing.

C) Human Rights and Protection of the Vulnerable

1. *What kind of measures are taken by Seoul local government in protecting the elderly? (Long-term care facilities / home care)*

- Seoul city is expanding health care service centers for the elderly in order to mitigate caregiver burden even amid the current crisis. Redeveloping idle sites, the current plan is to newly establish 3 types of care centers: 1) Silver City Care Center, which is a government-assisted housing facility, 2) Day Care Center which provides day and night care assistance, and 3) specialized dementia care facilities. To prevent mass infection at the care facilities in Seoul, a testing team of doctors and nurses conducted COVID-19 testing for the elderly as well as service workers in March 2020. Moreover, Internet of Things (IoT) devices have been set up in one-person households of the elderly. IoT device collects big data by a special sensor that can detect movements, temperature, humidity, and illuminance, and automatically deliver real-time data to social workers and relevant institutions. Service providers can access the data via website and detect any unusual or worrying signs. For example, when there is no movement for a long period of time, the social worker in charge can contact the elderly's home or call 119 for emergency action.

2. *What kind of measures are taken by Seoul local government in ensuring social distancing and quarantine measures for persons with disabilities? Especially for those who need physical-therapeutic and medical support and home-based social care and services of social workers?*

- SMG provides support services 24/7 for quarantined people with disabilities who face increased challenges due to the sudden unavailability of specialized assistance. For instance, social workers for people with disabilities can stay with them in quarantine facilities in Seoul. It is also allowed for the support worker to offer at-home care services to persons with disabilities during situations of isolation and quarantine. Other forms of available services provided by SMG include overnight home care services for people with severe disabilities and emergency alert services⁴ for health and safety accident prevention.

⁴ The emergency alert system is an inclusive mechanism designed to facilitate prompt response in cases of emergency. For example, in case of fire at home, smoke and gas detectors will be activated and alerts will be immediately reported to the local authorities and fire station. Through this system, firemen can be quickly dispatched to homes.

3. *Does SMG have any support to tackle COVID 19's social consequence of social distancing like increased domestic violence? How do shelters for victims of domestic violence operate in Seoul and how are quarantine measures applied in shelters?*

- SMG has been providing the same type and level of support services for victims of domestic violence as before COVID-19. (Please note that this was possible because main critical facilities have remained in operation even after the outbreak of COVID-19 as the government did not enforce complete lockdown.) For example, SMG's counseling centers for victims of domestic violence provide legal and psychological counseling on domestic and intimate partner violence and carries out various prevention campaigns. Additionally, Hotline for Women 1366 is a mobile and online hotline through which victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, and sex trafficking can request emergency help and seek protection, such as to temporary shelters. The hotline is open 24 hours a day all year, even after COVID-19.

Reference 1: The Korean National Police Agency's measures to crimes against women⁵

According to the Korean National Police Agency, which is a law enforcement agency, since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Korea, the number of sexual violence reported to the police has increased by 4.9%, while that of domestic violence has decreased by 4.9%, compared to last year. (Please note that Korea did not have a complete lockdown and self-quarantine measures have been imposed to confirmed or suspected patients only.) In response, KNPA is focusing on reinforcing patrol services and facilities in sexual crime-prone neighborhoods, preventing secondary victimization of victims, improving accountability through rigorous investigation and fair adjudication of perpetrators, and victim protection and support.

- There are a total of 11 shelters for domestic violence victims in Seoul. They remained open during COVID-19 crisis and still accept victims in need of support. However, shelters are required to follow the 'Guideline for Social Welfare Organizations During COVID-19' which was issued by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. In keeping with the guideline, shelters have been enforcing careful disinfection and sanitation management, limiting shelter residents' outdoor activities, restricting visitor (including volunteers) access, and making temperature check mandatory for all staff, residents, and visitors.

4. *How did you ensure human-rights lens when formulating response, i.e. some restrictions on fake reports, people movements, etc.?*

- In regards to freedom of movement, Seoul Metropolitan Government has not enforced any type of travel restrictions. Nonetheless, SMG is fully aware of the harms of fake news; they cause fear and social instability through the spread of misinformation. Moreover, fake news on certain classes or groups of people can generate hatred against these groups, often times leading up to a human rights issue. In Korea, distributors of fake news are punished for defamation according to criminal law and Act on Promotion of Information and Communications Network Utilization and Information Protection. Furthermore, staff members who are working or have previously worked in medical services related to COVID-

⁵ For more detailed information on services provided to domestic violence victims, please refer to KNPA Q&A section.

19 – medical examination, hospitalization treatment, etc. – will be punished by the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act if they reveal confidential information from work. Public authorities are no exceptions to the rule as public officials and former authorities will be also be punished according to criminal law when they disclose confidential information obtained from work.

Reference 2: The Korean National Police Agency’s response to fake news⁶

In order to take a 24-hour prompt response to fake news, the Korean National Police Agency established a dedicated ‘Cyber Response Control Center’ under a pre-existing department, the Cyber Investigation Bureau. The Bureau deletes and blocks fake news, conducts fact-checks with relevant departments and actively publicizes verified information. Owing to public announcement of the police’s plans on strict response and media coverage of crackdown, number of fake news cases have now declined.

5. With regards to public disclosure of information, was it provided in accessible formats, especially for persons with disabilities who are among the vulnerable groups in this crisis?

- SMG discloses various government administration information such as authorized documents and meeting reports on the Seoul Information Communication Plaza (opengov.seoul.go.kr). The website, available in both PC and mobile version, can be accessed by all citizens anywhere. Users who are visually impaired can also access this information using a braille display device and the website has been officially certified for its high web accessibility. Web Accessibility Certification Mark is given to websites that provide accessible services – videos with subtitles and sign language, enlarged image files, big clickable links, etc – for groups that lack computer literacy, such as people with disabilities and the elderly. Evaluation of websites is done by an organization officially authorized by the Ministry of Science and ICT.

6. What type of data and statistics was used to identify the target groups and the most vulnerable? What IT and information systems in place informed decisions? How were decisions made?

- In order to identify primary target groups of policies, SMG uses data from the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS)⁷, which provides official statistics on demography, labor, wages, etc. When adopting support policies for a specific target group, SMG holds an internal review over the policy’s legal basis, status of existing support programs, policy necessity, and estimated budget. SMG also consults relevant experts before finalizing which target groups to support. Policies are then implemented and monitored through the Social Security System and Subsidy Management System, which are SMG’s internal systems used to process social welfare programs.

⁶ More information on the Korean police’s response to fake news can be found in KNPA Q&A section.

⁷ KOSIS is the national statistical database, operated by Statistics Korea. Official statistics produced by over 120 statistical agencies covering more than 500 subject areas are available on its website. [Here](#) is the link to KOSIS.

D. Response Coordination

1. Question on coordination mechanism between central government and city?

- In responding to COVID-19, it is imperative that the central government serves as the control tower. There should be a clear division of roles and a systematic communication channel between the central and local government. Local governments should also mutually assist each other in building regional solidarity. In Korea, the central government issues various disinfection and prevention guidelines. After implementing the given guidelines, local government identifies limitations and propose improvement plans for the central government to review and adopt. This virtuous cycle of implementation and feedback allows both government bodies to effectively cooperate. Likewise, SMG and other local governments' active and timely application of the central government's guidelines has contributed to maximal results in fighting COVID-19.

2. How were volunteers utilized in the Seoul comprehensive strategy?

- In cooperation with the Seoul Volunteer Center, central government, and non-governmental organizations, SMG discovered and organized ways to involve volunteers in fighting COVID-19. Main volunteer activities include: provision of masks and hand sanitizers, disinfection of public facilities, campaign on sharing everyday social distancing⁸ stories and thank-you messages on social media, on-site support in partnership with private businesses, care support for the elderly living alone and other vulnerable groups, etc. When confirmed cases spiked, SMG conducted vigorous advertisement to recruit medical staff to volunteer at Drive-Thru testing stations and other forms of testing clinics. Another activity is a friendly greeting campaign carried out by medical volunteers and university students to create a sense of social connection among citizens who may feel vulnerable during the social distancing.

3. COVID19 response required extra resources, how did Seoul manage to provide the required resources for all these measures in such a short time? Is there any suggestion for other local governments to better provide funds quickly without putting at risk other activities of the local government?

- Prompt and effective response to COVID-19 certainly calls for financial resources. SMG is using revised supplementary budget, reserve fund⁹, state subsidy from the National Treasury¹⁰, and

⁸ The 'everyday social distancing' emphasizes the importance of simple daily practices that will protect citizens from COVID-19. For example, it advises the public to wash their hands frequently, greet others with a nod instead of shaking hands, etc.

⁹ Under Article 51 of the 'National Finance Act,' the head of each central government agency can request to spend the reserve fund where a prompt recovery from damage caused by large-scale disaster is necessary. The request must be in the form of a statement that demonstrates grounds for spending, estimated amount, and the basis of estimation and must be submitted to the Minister of Strategy and Finance. Full version of this act can be found [here](#).

¹⁰ Under Article 66 (2) of the 'Framework Act on the Management of Disasters and Safety', financial resources for disaster restoration can be appropriated from subsidies by the National Treasury. Disaster here refers to a

special subsidy tax ¹¹to fund COVID-19 response measures. SMG has also repurposed fund balance ¹² from last year's budget and other elastic fund (Crisis Management Fund, Government Investment and Loan Fund). In addition, SMG has worked closely with various central ministries to secure state subsidy.

4. *As you mentioned, there were clusters of spread from religious congregations/groups. How have you been working with religious groups to prevent the spread? What have been the challenges, and how do you overcome those challenges so far?*

- After mass infection broke out in the religious community, SMG provided disinfection and prevention guidelines to religious institutions and met with religious leaders to ask for full cooperation. Moreover, SMG provided financial support for disinfection to underfunded small and medium-sized religious facilities. SMG also opened up its facilities for religious groups to utilize as space for drive-in church service. Many religious groups followed the guideline and suspended services and ceremonies; for exceptional circumstances that required on-the-spot ceremonies, religious groups had to strictly abide by the disinfection and prevention rules. SMG has been working with the provincial government authorities to conduct site inspection and check whether regulations are followed. There have been minor conflicts with a number of groups that refused inspection and accused the officials for causing a disturbance. However, after detailed explanation and reminder on the necessity of disinfection and prevention measures, religious groups now better comply with the regulations.

E. Other / General

1. *Did you take any additional anticorruption efforts to ensure integrity of emergency procurements and etc.?*

- In compliance with the 'Act on Contracts to which a Local Government is a Party'¹³ and its enforcement ordinance, SMG requests integrity pledges to parties not only in emergency procurement contract, but also in bidding for all goods, services, construction, etc. In order to guarantee transparency and fairness of contract, participants in bidding or other parties to negotiated contracts are required to submit a written integrity pledge to the head of the local government or a contracting officer. As stipulated by Article 6-2 of the act, a written integrity pledge shall include the following matters:

natural disaster or a social accident, the scale of which is prescribed by Presidential Decree. Full version of this act can be found [here](#).

¹¹ Article 9 (1) 2 of the 'Local Subsidy Act' allows special subsidy tax to be granted where special financial demand arises for the management of disasters or safety control. It is granted by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety. Full version of this act can be found [here](#).

¹² Fund balance is government expenditure subtracted from tax revenue.

¹³ The purpose of this Act is to ensure smooth conclusion of contracts, which are a source of revenues and expenditures. Full version of Act on Contract to which a Local Government is a Party can be found [here](#).

- Matters concerning the prohibition of direct or indirect gratitude, donation, and the provision of money or other valuables and entertainments related to tenders, successful tenders, the conclusion and performance of contracts, supervision, and inspection
- Matters concerning the prohibition of any act that interferes with free competition in tender or any unfair act, such as conference for successful tender of a specific person
- Matters concerning the prohibition of any act that interferes with fair performance of duty, such as soliciting and giving bribe for information related to tender and contract

All public officials involved in the tender and conclusion and performance of contracts for goods, services, construction, etc. are required to abide by all relevant acts and enforcement decree. Officials will not demand or receive unlawful benefits, such as money and valuables, entertainment, employment of family and relatives, and etc. Public officials will sign an integrity pledge by which they will be responsible for any punishments in violation of the law. While there have not been any special anti-corruption measures newly introduced during COVID-19, the above-mentioned act and integrity pledge have been in practice since before the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in 2015.

2. Do you envisage that some social, economic, financial, employment, education, health policies will be changed completely due to this experience and as a lesson learned? Which policies and measures and how?

- The end of the pandemic is not expected to come soon, and it is highly likely that a health crisis similar to COVID-19 will break out again in the future. As such, it is necessary to grapple with the “new normal¹⁴” in politics, society, economy, and all other areas of life, whereby people strike a balance between development and surviving the virus. To transition into the “new normal,” SMG is establishing new preventive measures against epidemics, prioritizing in reviving the economy, addressing social inequality, spearheading innovations in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and jointly working with the global community. All in all, SMG seeks to develop a new city model better positioned for this “Great Transformation” period.

3. Could you please share the approach & methodology to analyze and institutionalize MERS lessons learned? And did SMG have special financing for its strategy toward these specific crises?

- Through the 2015 MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak, SMG learned that spread of infectious disease is inevitable in the absence of a prompt early response system. Based on experiences from fighting MERS in 2015, SMG took the initiative to propose policy measures to the central government from the early days of COVID-19 and also during sudden spikes of cases. Designed upon the MERS experience, SMG’s systematic responses – strict self-quarantine measures, extensive epidemiological investigation, transparent disclosure of information, recreation of general hospitals into COVID-19 clinics, Drive-Thru testing stations – contributed to preventing further spread of the virus. Moreover, SMG is financing COVID-19 response in a similar way as it had done during MERS. SMG is using revised supplementary budget, reserve fund, state subsidy, and special subsidy tax to fund COVID-19 response

¹⁴ The term “new normal” refers to a post-pandemic era where a previously unfamiliar situation has become the norm or the standard due to the long-term impact of the COVID-19.

measures. SMG has also repurposed fund balance from last year's budget and other elastic fund (Crisis Management Fund, Government Investment and Loan Fund). In addition, SMG has worked closely with various central ministries to secure state subsidy.

4. How did the government augment (strengthen and improve) its social and employment policies and measures to cope with the pandemic?

- In order to stabilize employment, SMG rolled out 'Unpaid Leave of Absence Support Fund' to help employed persons who are affected by the unpaid leave of absence amid small businesses experiencing financial hardship. Requirements to receive the relief fund include: 1) working in a small-sized company with less than 50 employees in Seoul City, and 2) the duration of unpaid leave is 5 days or more. Eligible workers can receive total 1,000,000 KRW (813 USD) for two months. Besides, along with the behavioral changes due to COVID-19, it is expected that unusual forms of work and employment prior to the outbreak will become normal and universal and the degree of labor market flexibility will increase. To be prepared for the alteration expected, SMG strives to design an employment protection plan for non-standard workers, including platform workers, part-timers, and freelancers as well as employees who are not qualified to be accepted as a member of a trade union according to the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act ¹⁵.

¹⁵ Full text of the Act can be found [here](#).