

Research Insight

The Development of Corporate Social Responsibility Cross-Sector Networks in South Korea: A Historical Review from an Institutional Theory Perspective

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest
was reported by the author.

Received

18 Nov 2024

Revised

28 Feb 2025

Accepted

24 Mar 2025

ABSTRACT

This study provides a historical review of the development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the relevant cross-sector networks among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental and corporations in South Korea, a state-led market economy. By applying and integrating the institutional theoretical framework, the study shows how CSR in South Korea developed overtime under the complex hybridized influences of the global and local pressures and the emergent network dynamics among the organizations across the civil society, governmental and industry sectors. The review provides a novel insight on how NGOs, though often perceived as the independent agents of CSR development, could develop their roles and networks for CSR in contingency with governmental institutions in a state-led market economy. The review proposes several important strategies for how NGOs in South Korea may develop stronger positions and influence on CSR in their cross-sector networks with governmental organizations and corporations, as well as in their within-sector networks with civil societies. Theoretical implications are discussed to open up an innovative avenue of research for theoretical and methodological advancements in future studies of CSR in Asia and other underexplored nations.

KEYWORDS

corporate social responsibility, institutional theory, South Korea, cross-sector network, state-led market economy

Across the globe and from all sectors of society, demands are increasing for corporations to adopt more sustainable business, social and environmental practices, what is often referred to as corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is defined as the responsibility of a company to go beyond its legal and fiduciary responsibilities to take into account the impact they have on society and the environment and take actions to protect and improve the welfare of society along with

their own interest. Through CSR, companies are expected to be socially accountable to themselves, their stakeholders and the public. The major goal associated with CSR is to achieve the triple bottom line – people, planet and profit (Kraaijenbrink, 2019). Whether these calls for action come from industry associations, governments, international organizations, NGOs, unions, civil society, or the corporations themselves, there is a growing consensus that global sustainability requires collaboration among stakeholder groups, across organizational sectors and national boundaries (C. Kim, 2020).

Even when there is agreement regarding sustainable goals, the frameworks for what is and should be socially responsible behavior and how corporations should form relations with various stakeholders are different, based in part on the differences across the economic, cultural and political institutions of the nations in which they are embedded (Matten & Moon, 2008; Meng & Kim, 2020). Institutional studies suggest that tensions and challenges for practicing CSR emerge particularly in organizations operating in non-Western national institutions, as they seek to practice CSR that is compatible with both national and global contexts (Kang & Moon, 2012; C. Kim et al., 2013). This study addresses the development of CSR and its intersectoral NGO networks in South Korea, a state-led market economy, which is an institutional context that is characterized by strong state interventions in corporate behavior that is far different from Western countries such as the US or Scandinavian countries.

Because most of the literature on NGO roles for CSR has not focused on state-led market economies, literature has rarely examined the influences governmental institutions may have on NGOs' cross-sector relationships for CSR. Rather, most often studies have investigated CSR practices in liberal market economies, such as the US, and coordinated market economies, such as the Scandinavian countries (Brammer et al.,

2012; Matten & Moon, 2008). In a liberal market economy, which is an economic system in which businesses are highly dependent on the private sector and operate relatively independently from the state, NGO relations with corporations tend to form without state intervention. In a coordinated market economy, an economic system in which economic and social governance are coordinated by public systems mandated by the state, both corporations and NGOs are embedded within a public system that regulates socially responsible practices by law. They therefore naturally come into contact with one another without direct governmental mediation.

These studies produced beliefs about the independence of NGOs from the government in communicatively developing pressures for CSR (Allard & Martinez, 2008; Bator & Stohl, 2011; Guay et al., 2004; Syam et al., 2020). What is unclear, however, is the role governments play in the development of these network relations and their implications for CSR. Even in the few studies that do examine state-led economies, such as China, the primary focus is on the government's direct influence on CSR (Hofman et al., 2017; Moon & Shen, 2010). NGOs' relational dynamics with the governmental institutions and their influence upon corporate behavior and CSR are left unexamined, and yet the governmental networks do make a difference in the corporate CSR activities and networks in these economies.

This study therefore integrates an institutional theory perspective to review the history of how CSR and the NGOs' influence on CSR have developed in association with the governmental institution within the sociopolitical context of South Korea, a state-led market economy. This review of South Korean history of CSR development will demonstrate that a complex blend of local and international level institutional arrangements and pressures coexist in the development of NGO networks for CSR in South Korea. In the following sections, the study 1) provides a framework on institutional theory for

CSR; 2) explains how NGOs have developed global roles for CSR within this framework; 3) explains the cross-national divergence of CSR and NGO networks from an institutional perspective; and 4) provides an extensive review of the South Korean history to explicate how CSR practices and networks have developed within this framework. The study then discusses the overall implications and theoretical significance of the analytic review.

Institutional Theory Framework

According to institutional theory, institutions are the formal and informal rules, incentives and norms that engender a stable, recurrent and coherent set of behaviors, interactions and values within a particular social system (Matten & Moon, 2008). Institutions embody a shared framework for actions that are considered to be legitimate (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizational communication, in a macro-level institutional framework, is a process of adopting and acting on a set of norms and social structures in which organizations are embedded (Lammers, 2003; Zucker, 1987). From an institutional perspective, CSR practices influence and are influenced by the global, national, cultural and institutional contexts in which organizations are embedded. Transnational networks that corporations form with global NGOs and stakeholders increase the likelihood that they will conform to global standards for ethical and moral business practices and become increasingly involved in addressing global human rights issues (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Stohl & Stohl, 2017). National level institutional conditions, including regulations, presence of NGOs, social norms and stakeholder communication, together also increase the likelihood that companies will behave responsibly (Campbell, 2006).

An important school of thought that has developed within institutional theory is that

organizations across the globe are under constant pressure to move towards homogeneity to conform to the globally accepted standards, norms and regulations, also referred to as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations converge in their behavior, values and structure under the influence of globalization and increasing cross-boundary interdependence (Cheney et al., 2004; Zucker, 1987). Three isomorphic mechanisms are theorized to be at work in the developing resemblance of structures and practices among different organizational units when they are exposed to similar environmental conditions – *coercive*, *mimetic* and *normative* mechanisms. Under *coercive* mechanisms, organizations develop similar practices through political influence, regulatory demands, and organizational need to maintain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). *Mimetic* processes involve adopting successful models set by others in the network, and the standard responses to uncertainty. Lastly, *normative* processes involve professionalization through collective struggle to establish a cognitive basis for legitimate practice. The pressures are created by professional institutions, such as universities or training institutions or government recognition and credentials granted to corporations which signal legitimacy.

Scholars of CSR have argued that CSR is becoming a globally convergent practice under the logic of isomorphism (Matten & Moon, 2008). Organizations are increasingly moving towards universal adoption of CSR, driven by a “network of contacts among organizations or their agents” (Galaskiewicz & Burt, 1991, p. 88). From an institutional perspective, CSR is not merely a strategic practice devised at the level of a single organization, but rather a collective practice that engages various entities across the globe. The state, corporations, NGOs, civil societies, the public and stakeholders are part of an evolving CSR network. Global firms have increasingly developed the consensus that CSR is a much-needed component of their global business.

NGO Networks

Of the many actors driving CSR convergence, global NGOs play important roles in encouraging the convergence of CSR values and practices internationally, most particularly in linking universal human rights with CSR (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In response to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that set the standards for human rights across nations, NGOs took on important roles as information brokers and knowledge managers that bridged structural holes in global organizational networks (Stohl & Stohl, 2005). In response to issues of human rights violations, global NGOs urged international responses and at the same time pressured nation states and the public to respond through boycotts and embargos. With such global influence on human rights, NGOs have played a critical role in creating pressures on multinational corporations (MNCs) to enhance social responsibility by taking political action (Wong, 2012). NGOs actively engage in collaborations with corporations to exchange and complement each other's strengths and resources for a common objective (Bator & Stohl, 2013). They also collaborate with consumers to mobilize consumer boycotts (Adams & Zutshi, 2004) and work with investment communities to pressure socially responsible investment (Guay et al., 2004). Their embeddedness within government institutions and corporations can also significantly open up opportunities for corporations to engage in global CSR practices (Allard & Martinez, 2008). For example, in Sweden, the government often provides guidance on how to practice CSR and open opportunities for NGOs to engage in CSR collaborations with corporations (Fontana, 2018).

Overall, NGOs are an integral part of the institutional networks that shape CSR practices (Doh & Guay, 2006). It is the large transnational network formed by the connections among the nation states, governmental institutions, corporations and civil societies that develops

a global consensus and norms for sustainable and responsible practices for the society, under coercive, mimetic and normative pressures.

CSR across Different National Institutions

Despite the pressures to converge upon a universal practice of CSR, recent work by globalization scholars suggests that CSR development may be far more complex than a simple process of convergence towards global isomorphism. Coercive, mimetic and normative pressures are created not only at the global level, but also at the national institutional level, and these global and national institutional factors "interact in intricate ways to create complex and dynamic pressures for CSR practices" (C. Kim et al., 2013, p. 2581). An institutional perspective on CSR suggests that national institutional arrangements, such as political, financial, labor and education systems, drive *divergence* in CSR practices (Matten & Moon, 2008). Divergent CSR is defined as CSR infrastructure that "will either not be absorbed, or alternatively will be tailored to each developing country's particular historical, cultural, economic and political context, thus potentially reflecting in new hybridized expressions" (Jamali & Neville, 2011, p. 602). One of the causes of divergence is the different types of economic systems across different nations, such as liberal market economies (e.g. US, UK), coordinated market economies (e.g. Germany, Japan) and state-led market economies (e.g. China, South Korea, France) (Kang & Moon, 2012).

While national institutional systems and arrangements, such as political, financial, labor and education systems, work together through macro institutions for convergence in CSR, they also cause divergence in CSR practices, in terms of the forms in which they are practiced, as well as the types of networks and relationships organizations form for CSR purposes. For example, companies in the US, which operate in liberal markets, practice CSR at their own discretion (Matten &

Moon, 2008). To gain competitive advantage in this context, companies engage in active explicit articulation of their CSR practices, as well as focus on developing strong networks with their investors and shareholders. On the other hand, under the influence of a stronger state, public training systems and labor policies, companies in Germany are mandated to engage in social activity and thus find less need to voluntarily and explicitly articulate CSR practices as part of competitive strategies. Companies find a greater need to form strong networks with the public sector than those in the US.

Companies from state-led market economies, such as South Korea, also tend to be strongly guided by the state regulations and guidelines and thus prioritize national development and act as “pseudo-public institution,” or organizations with public duties (Kang & Moon, 2012, p. 94). Not only are the privately owned conglomerate firms in South Korea rooted in a history of relying on state-controlled banks for financing, but they also work indirectly with the state, working and strategizing in tandem with the national agendas, especially when the state has a stake in the company (Kang & Moon, 2012). The legacy of state-led coordination of the country’s capitalism and market liberalization continues to affect corporate decisions to this day in labor, governance and training (Sial & Doucette, 2020; Song, 2023). The companies’ involvement in CSR therefore is generally characterized by strong relationships with governmental organizations and the state. Clearly, corporate behaviors and networks for CSR vary significantly across nations, depending on the economic, historical and cultural institutional arrangements within each country.

National NGO roles

Within such a framework of CSR divergence, there exist some complexities in understanding the roles and relations of NGOs within different national contexts. The national level conditions

and constraints create uncertainties about the roles of civil society and nonprofit sector for CSR. For example, in China, where the state has a dominant control over CSR practices by developing relevant policies and mandates, NGOs are found to have relatively minimal roles for CSR (Hofman et al., 2017; Moon & Shen, 2010). NGOs cannot have the same amount of influence on corporations as governmental organizations do and hence their links to corporations have little effect. In developing countries, civil society generally lacks knowledge about CSR and the public institutions at the national level lack social accountability (Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2010). Jamali and Keshishian (2009) found that for this reason, NGOs engage less in collaborations with corporations in developing countries, and even if they do, CSR collaborations tend to lack depth as compared to those in developed countries. This raises the possibility that NGOs’ normative roles in some non-Western national contexts may be different from those of global NGOs operating in the West. It may not be part of the norm in certain cultures for NGOs to take on powerful roles related to CSR and instead NGOs may need to seek different agencies to gain legitimacy and power upon corporate behavior. The section below explores the South Korean case of CSR development, considering the sociopolitical and economic background of the country, to address how local NGOs have developed their roles, relationships and agencies for CSR through their relations with the governmental institutions. The review of literature and relevant data was conducted while adhering to all ethical standards.

A Historical Review of the Development of CSR and NGO-Government-Corporate Relations in South Korea

This study looks at the South Korean case, a state-led market economy that has rarely been explored in literature of CSR from an institutional lens. In a state-led market economy, organizations,

including companies and NGOs, are strongly influenced by governmental institutions and state interventions (Hofman et al., 2017; Kang & Moon, 2012). Likewise, CSR practices in South Korea are historically grounded in strong corporate connections with the government and often are driven by pressures to abide by government policies. The coercive, normative and mimetic pressures for CSR in South Korea thus are fundamentally grounded in the governmental institutions. Therefore, the main question addressed in this study is: in an economic system where government interventions are relatively strong, how have NGOs developed their roles and networks for CSR in relation to the governmental institutions?

The following sections provide a review of modern history of the economic development, NGOs/civil society, governmental institutions, and corporations in South Korea in relation to the emergence of CSR within the institutional framework. This review sheds light on how CSR and its networks in South Korea developed throughout the political and economic transitions of the country, during post-Japanese colonialism, an authoritarian regime, and the periods of democratization in the midst of globalization. The implications of this unique history are discussed with regards to the development of NGO-government-corporate relations for CSR in South Korea.

The Emergence of State-Capitalism

South Korea has an economy that is distinct insofar as the state has had strong control over market liberalization ever since the very beginning of its industrialization and modernization. When 35 years of Japanese colonial rule in Korea came to an end in 1945, Korea was divided into the US controlled South Korea and the Soviet Union controlled North Korea. The South Korean government was led by Syngman Rhee, the first dictator of the country. He led modernization efforts in the country by opening up to Western

influence until 1960 (Yang, 2016). Then in the years from 1960 to 1987, there was a period of rapid development of state-capitalism characterized by the rise of national capitalism under state authority (Im, 1987). During this period, the leader, President Chung Hee Park, strengthened the state-authoritarian regime by introducing the Yushin (Revitalizing Reform) regime, which amended the Constitution to allow a third term for himself as the president (Cho, 2000). Under his dictatorship, and even for about a decade after his assassination in 1979, with the absence of a strong civil society, the state drove rapid modernization and economic development until 1987.

As part of its core initiatives for rapid modernization during this period in 1961-1987, the South Korean government took absolute control over the financial system and all banks, so as to dominate and monitor the entire process of developing financial assets for the country's economic activities (Lim & Jang, 2007; Yang, 2016). By controlling the financial capital of the country, the government, in large part, served as the foundation for the coercive and normative institutions that facilitated the development of corporations and their decisions. These corporations are known as *Chaebols*, the "rich-clans." They are large conglomerate firms founded and based in South Korea and are operated on the basis of strong family ownership systems (Chang, 1988; Kuk, 1988; Sial & Doucette, 2020). State support was critical for the *Chaebols*' businesses at this time. First, they did not have enough capital and assets to make large investments to expand their businesses. Second, they could not engage in trading, as the national market was too small to manufacture export products and compete in the global market. The government had originally invested only in the chemical industry, but in 1973, Park declared the government's commitment to sustainable state support, funding and tax benefits to six select industries: steel, machine, ship-manufacturing, electronics,

nonferrous metal and petrochemical (Yang, 2016). This served as a critical opportunity for the Chaebols to expand their business across multiple different industry sectors and develop their power over the economy and market.

As the Chaebols developed their dominance over multiple industries, using state banks as their main financial resource, problems emerged in part due to the close relationships they had established with the governmental institutions. These emergent highly interconnected networks among the Chaebol owners and political leaders led to various types of collaboration and collusion (Kuk, 1988). The Chaebols' dependence on the government and their heavy reliance on borrowing capital from state-owned banks not only caused the financial structures of the Chaebols to become debt-dependent, but also it stifled any dissent or disagreement with the government, enabling the political leaders to maintain their authoritarian position. At the same time, the political institutions served to solidify the family ownership governance structures, enabling family inheritance of businesses and supremacy of the owners. In this system, there were and continue to be several types of corrupt practices related to corporate governance including legislative pardoning of the Chaebol owners, illegal tax-exemptions and internal trading amongst subsidiaries (Cho, 2000; Yang, 2016).

In return, the government utilized the Chaebols to drive rapid economic development, strengthen its reputation, and facilitate political campaigns that would protect their authoritarian regimes. Moreover, from these relations developed personal connections among the authorities and leaders of the Chaebols and governmental institutions (D. Kim, 2018). The resulting strong and dense networks among the industry and governmental authorities then served as a backbone of many other institutions including the judiciary systems, the media industry, the public systems and labor systems (S. Park, 2021). The reciprocity of their strengths through constant

exchanges of favor for each other to this day reinforces government-Chaebol networks so that they are unbroken and tenacious.

NGO Development in the Regime of Dictatorship and during Political Transitions

During the emergence of state capitalism within the authoritarian regime in South Korea throughout 1960-1980s, civil society was also under tight control and repression of the state. The legitimacy of civil society and NGOs depended on their submissiveness to the military authority of the state, which made them refrain from engaging in protests against state authorities or the irresponsible activities of the Chaebols. Activist NGOs were prevented from gaining legal status (Cho, 2000). Not surprisingly, many NGOs that legally existed during this period were government-patronized and therefore functioned only within the boundaries set by the government and by no means had any power to monitor government-Chaebol networks. They only acted in accordance with government expectations and regulations (E. Kim, 2009). The government used these pro-government NGOs to protect the authoritarian regime and disseminate political propaganda to Korean citizens (Choi & Yang, 2011). Scholars suggest that most South Korean NGOs merely served as "a one-sided transmission belt, relaying the government's policies to the citizenry at large" (S. Kim, 2010, p. 167).

However, despite authoritarian rule and the closely knit governmental networks, a few radical civil society organizations emerged to develop normative institutional pressures for corporations. These activist NGOs sought to overthrow dictatorship and achieve democracy, even though they were considered by the government as illegal bodies. They constantly raised issues with problems that emerged from the rapid state-led modernization and economic development, pushing for democracy and labor rights in response to Park's dictatorship. Eventually, they created a loosely coupled network that raised

public awareness and resistance to corporate irresponsibility, corruption and Chaebol governance structures. In the mid-1960s, labor movements emerged to address the poor working conditions and wages that often went overlooked and excused by the state. These collective action networks became a normative foundation for the formation of labor unions in the 1970s. Labor unions, although illegal at the time, drew societal attention to labor issues, and the irresponsible behaviors of the Chaebols (Federation of Korean Trade Unions, 2021).

Beginning in the late 1960s, anti-authoritarian and anti-Chaebol sentiment further developed among younger populations, as democratic movements gained popularity among University students. In contrast to some of the NGOs that worked in close alignment with the government agenda, citizen-organized civil society organizations grew rapidly in efforts to overthrow the authoritarian regime and check government power (Cho, 2000; Choi & Yang, 2011; E. Kim, 2009; P. Kim & Moon, 2003). They maintained their commitments to promoting human rights and democracy and “safeguarding against the abusive powers of government and big business” (Choi & Yang, 2011, p. 51).

The normative institutional pressures for anti-dictatorship and anti-corruption started to gain more solid ground during the following era of political democratization in 1987-1997, through NGOs’ consistent drive for democratic movements (Yang, 2016). Following the assassination of the dictator President Park in 1979, and the 1987 Great Democratic Movement that brought down his authoritarian Yushin regime, a “renaissance of Korean NGOs” emerged to empower civil societies (Cho, 2000). During this period, many activist and social movement NGOs were legalized to achieve autonomy, which enabled more diverse NGOs and interest groups to emerge. For example, the mass civil protests for labor rights, which cumulated in 1987, resulted in the establishment of official organizations

for labor rights, such as the National Council of Trade Unions established in 1990, and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions in 1995 (Cho, 2000). Other NGOs that had originally been government-patronized or functioned as government agencies also achieved autonomy. As local governments achieved autonomy from the central government, local NGOs working with provincial governments were able to expand their activities beyond those mandated by the central government (Choi & Yang, 2011).

Therefore, the NGOs, which had been repressed during the military regime, saw a dramatic rise in number between the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the rapid democratization and the emergence of the key NGOs (i.e. Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice (kyongsilyon) and the League of Environmental Movements) that led the new generation of democratic movements (H. Kim, 1997). Subsequently, a new era of civil society began with the establishment of some large legal, civic social movement-organizations, such as the Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) (founded in 1989) and People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (founded in 1994) that addressed issues related to economic justice, and Chaebol corruption (Cho, 2000; E. Kim, 2009). Two others – the Korean Federation of Environmental Movement (KFEM) and Green Korea – emerged as the leading environmental NGOs to ignite environmental civil society movements. Many NGOs that exist today branched out from these organizations during the early 1990s (Choi & Yang, 2011). The Yearbook of International Organization (UIA, 1995) indeed suggests that the number of NGOs increased from 371 in 1977 to 1,034 in 1994. Moreover, the number of interest groups in South Korea had rapidly increased from 1,322 in 1984 to 2,181 in 1994 (Y. Kim, 1997). Each organization also expanded in size and membership drastically into the early 2000s. For instance, KFEM reports that it saw the most enormous growth in membership between 1998 and 2002, when they experienced

a jump in membership from 37,000 in 1998 to 87,000 in 2002. The number of their local and provincial chapters has also increased from 30 to 52 during this period (KFEM, 2003).

Most especially, as the movements for Chaebol reform led by People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy reached their climax during the 1997 financial crisis, social demands increased to restrain and monitor Chaebol-state power. NGOs embarked on largely networked activism and movements for democracy and social justice, and mass radical movements to constrain government-corporate corruption permeated the public and civil society (Seo, 2022). From these movements emerged stronger adversarial networks among civil society organizations, governmental institutions and corporations, forming the basis for the normative institutional pressures for CSR.

The Integration of the South Korean Government and NGOs in the Global Context

One primary way that the state and the NGO networks developed their influence upon CSR development was by becoming embedded and integrated within the global regime and movements for human rights and global sustainability. The global regime for sustainable development had started as early as the 1970s, when the world leaders and state representatives regularly came together to discuss the standards and guidelines for sustainable development (United Nations, 2017). In the early 1990s, South Korean government and the civil society sector (NGOs) started participating in the global conversations regarding human rights, environment, labor and anti-corruption. The government had its first official global presence in the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit and Sustainable Development, where world leaders and state representatives met to discuss and agree upon the integration of the environmental initiatives into their economic decisions. The South Korean government adopted the Rio Agenda 21 following the Earth Summit to

develop the National Action Plan in 1996. The local NGOs also embraced Local Agenda 21 to implement sustainable development plans, which eventually drove active collaborations among the local government, civil society and business by forming the Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development (PCSD) in 2000 (Yoon, 2016). Multiple other international meetings followed where the South Korean government, global businesses and NGO leaders participated in ultimately developing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of UN standards for global businesses to engage in sustainable practices. In 2002, a set of NGOs in South Korea established "Korean People's Network on RIO+10," consisting of 44 citizens' organizations, to deliver and forward the UN standards to the South Korean civil society and civic groups (KFEM, 2003). Governmental organizations, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MCFA), the Ministry of Environment, and the Office for Government Policy Coordination, have also played important roles in integrating the SDGs into the government policies (United Nations, 2017). As such, in compliance with the global network of the government and the NGOs, and the resulting isomorphic pressures to converge, South Korea actively integrated the global standards for sustainability into their national values, policies and guidelines.

Various other changes came about as the South Korean government and NGOs became an integrative part of the global regime for sustainability. First, changes were seen in labor policies and conditions. When the South Korean government joined the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1991 and was elected a member of the ILO Governing Body in 1996, the country was pressured to adopt the ILO conventions to develop standards for improved labor conditions (Hurd, 2014; "The ILO in the Republic of Korea," 2018). This included freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, the

prohibition of forced labor, equality of treatment and nondiscrimination in employment, and the minimum wage. The ILO Committee on Freedom of Association also monitored labor and corporate policies to find and correct any inconsistencies which existed between South Korean labor practices and internationally accepted standards. As a result, labor unionization, which used to be framed as disruptive to the economic and Chaebol development and thus were banned since 1950s (D. Kim & Kim, 2003; Gill, 2000), started becoming legalized across the industries in 1991 (Korea Ministry of Labor, 2000). By 1999, the number of unionized workers increased by about 79,000 (D. Kim & Kim, 2003).

The year 1996, when South Korean government joined the Organizations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), served as a good reference point for South Korea in improving its economy, standards of living and social policies under the mimetic mechanisms (D. Kim & Kim, 2003). That is, the state's integration into the OECD helped the government benchmark the labor standards of the more advanced economies in Europe and North America, thus raising the awareness and motivations in the South Korean industry to become responsible for the workers. Collaborations between the NGOs and the government increased to lend strengths to the civil society in enhancing labor and working conditions (Bidet, 2012). As South Korea developed its position within the OECD and transformed from an aid recipient country to a donor country, South Korea was able to develop a stronger normative institutional pressure upon the industry sector to contribute to global sustainability (Sial & Doucette, 2020). Such global pressures created in the governmental and civil society networks with international organizations helped develop formal and informal institutions for isomorphism that helped develop the foundations for CSR in South Korea.

NGO-Government Relational Dynamics in Post-Transitional Period

Government-NGO Collaborative Relations.

As South Korea became more integrated into the global CSR regime at both the local and global levels, NGO-government relational dynamics started seeing changes, from being characterized by hostile confrontations to being cooperative and supportive counterparts (S. Kim, 2017; P. Kim & Moon, 2003). Under the influence of democratization, the government in the late 1990s increased its support for the development of the civil society sector. The National Assembly in Korea passed the Nonprofits Assistance Act in 1999 to enhance NGO activities and roles. The Ministry of Public Administration and Security also provided financial support and tax reduction to NGOs, producing a drastic increase in the number of NGOs in South Korea (Choi & Yang, 2011). In addition to financial support, the government became more accessible to the NGOs and even enacted some of their proposals into law.

The two consecutive democratic governments from the late 1990s to mid-2000s increasingly promoted partnerships, collaboration, and mutual empowerment between the government and civil society sector (E. Kim, 2009). The increased need for welfare systems after the 1997 financial crisis and the government's past failures to provide welfare services engendered greater demands for collaborative governance characterized by "the civil society-government partnership in welfare service delivery" (S. Kim, 2010, p. 168). In the early 2000s, government initiatives for "participatory government" and "collaborative governance" promoted "collaboration between the state, market and civil society" (S. Kim, 2010, p. 168). The increasing density in the collaborative networks among the governmental institutions and civil societies created greater institutional norms and pressures for cross-sectoral engagement to address a variety of social

welfare issues. As NGOs developed more friendly and collaborative networks with governmental institutions, they emerged as legitimate partners for both the government and the industry for addressing social issues. Such collaborative dynamics expanded into different areas of CSR activities, such as corporate volunteerism, philanthropy and consumer rights, which today are the most highly valued and normative CSR activities in South Korea (C. Kim et al., 2013). In terms of volunteerism, NGOs have been engaged in collaborative projects with the government and the industrial sector to launch nationwide campaigns to institutionalize active citizen and corporate engagement in community volunteering (E. Kim, 2009).

To this date, the government fundamentally “provides the legal and institutional environment for civil society” (E. Kim, 2009, p. 880). NGOs are registered with government agencies, and the tax laws can significantly control how much private donations could be made to NGOs by external entities. Over the years, NGO leaders have also often entered government services and agencies. The changes in the political atmosphere and the increased collaborations among the NGOs, governmental organizations and corporations helped develop the belief that adversarial approaches and radical stances of activist NGOs in the past have now become more outdated. It is believed that the activist NGOs from the earlier democratic movements may be over-politicized to lack credibility and effectiveness and could even appear as radical groups that support a specific political party (E. Kim, 2009).

Government-NGO Adversarial Relations.

At the same time, however, given the history of the state’s power over the non-profit sector during the era of pre-democratization, there remains skepticism regarding NGOs’ cooperative embeddedness within governmental institutions. Those activist NGOs established in the late 1980s continue to refrain from forming

collaborative relationships with the government and corporations. Rather, they maintain their adversarial stances and goals to combat problems related to political corruption and push for strong changes in the institutions (Hwang & Willis, 2020). To address corporate governance issues that arise from corporate-government ties and collusion, activist NGOs believe that it may still be critical that they establish autonomy from the government and strengthen self-regulation (Choi & Yang, 2011; E. Kim, 2009).

There are several approaches that these activist NGOs take to establish autonomy and legitimacy. These include promoting genuine citizen participation and effective grassroots participation to enhance their non-partisan and non-governmental status (E. Kim, 2009). They also believe that forming and engaging with a strong civil society network is critical for maintaining the independence of the civil society sector from government dominance, because such coalitions can help enrich NGO resources and increase citizen participation (Choi & Yang, 2011).

Corporate Adoption of CSR

In the midst of the collaborative and adversarial relational dynamics between the government and NGOs, the Chaebol companies became increasingly exposed to institutional pressures to develop mandated and voluntary CSR related to the workers’ rights and social philanthropy. In response to the prolonged public and civil society resentment towards corporate-government relationships and lack of transparency (Al-Fadhat & Choi, 2023), the Chaebol firms increasingly integrated socially responsible practices into their business strategies to minimize their negative reputations and recover their legitimacy (Lim & Jang, 2006). As part of CSR, many Chaebol corporations developed corporate philanthropy and social-welfare initiatives (Chambers et al., 2003). Corporate philanthropy emerged in various forms, primarily focused on community level philanthropic activities, including

community volunteering, charity and eco-friendly businesses (Witt & Redding, 2012).

Moreover, a significant amount of CSR practices in South Korea in fact has developed based on the government agenda that embodied parts of the UN Global Compact's sustainable development goals for innovation, technology and well-being. During President Lee's government in 2007-2012, the policy agenda set out several key themes for CSR as part of government task, which were "pragmatism" and "modernization." During Park's government in 2012-2017, the key emergent themes were "creative economy," "citizens' well-being," and "culture." Other common themes across these two consecutive governments included improved social-welfare, support for education and development of the IT industry (Government Performance Evaluation Committee, 2017). In alignment with the government tasks during the same period, South Korean companies largely focused on developing philanthropic activities for social well-being and community services, and on developing innovative business strategies and technologies (S. Kim & Shin, 2022). The corporations eventually started joining the UN Global Compact in the early to mid-2000s, within about a decade since South Korea had joined the UN and started to develop their CSR practices in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Global Compact, 2015).

As the South Korean state, civil society and corporations became increasingly embedded in the global institutions and networks, the global ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance) standards rapidly became an important topic of discussion in the recent several years. The ESG indices measure the three main dimensions of CSR – Environment, Social and Governance - which many practitioners and scholars have generally explored and adopted to measure CSR performances (Galant & Candez, 2017; Yang & Stohl, 2020). Serving as a global standard and metric for CSR, ESG embodies all isomorphic

mechanisms for convergence upon a global form of CSR (Yang, 2021). In tandem with the pressures from the international market, the government and regulatory bodies have recently been promoting and enforcing ESG standards (coercive mechanisms) upon corporations in South Korea, making it inevitable for corporations to adopt it to avoid legal risks and to gain global competitive advantage (D. Park et al., 2024). ESG also serves as an important social criterion of assessment for investment by many key institutional players and stakeholders, including the banks, investors and shareholders (representing normative and mimetic mechanisms), as various evidence suggests that ESG reputation significantly relates to financial profitability (Nguyen & Oyotode, 2015; D. Kim et al., 2024; Kolisch, 2015). As scholars and practitioners continue to work on improving the ESG indices and programs to address various social issues, there are increasing demands for more collaborations among the government, NGOs, corporations and other third sectors (Cho et al., 2021).

NGO Impact on CSR

Recent evidence indeed suggests that NGOs, whether it is through their collaborative or adversarial networks with the government and corporations, have developed a significant amount of impact on CSR in South Korea, in consistency with the global trend and the regime for sustainable development. According to a sustainability-leaders survey by GlobeScan (2024), Global NGOs have been consistently recognized in the past decade by experts in all sectors and from all parts of the world as the most significant emergent leaders that are advancing sustainable development. Their lead has particularly been found to be evident among those NGOs based in Asia-Pacific and Europe. Other recent studies of global and local NGOs operating in South Korea have indeed found consistent results, suggesting their direct impact

on corporations' CSR/ESG performances. For example, according to a study by Yang (2021), those Chaebol corporations that were more central in their networks with the NGO sector (i.e. have numerous partnerships with NGOs; exchange resources frequently with NGOs; report to constantly engage in communication and interactions with NGOs) were more likely to score higher on the ESG metrics. The frequencies of the corporations' collaborative engagements with NGOs and the government on environmental, community-level, and employee-level CSR practices were significantly and positively related to their correspondent ESG scores. According to one of the testimonies of a South Korean corporate CSR manager reported in the study, NGOs are important resources for corporations in enhancing CSR projects when it comes to "deciding on the locations and human resource management" (p. 99). Often, South Korean corporations "launch [their] projects successfully through these NGOs (p. 99)." Such studies call for more future studies that would explore the specific impacts and influences that NGOs have on CSR development, considering the historical institutional contexts of a nation.

Overall, as this review suggests, the recent CSR or ESG outcomes in South Korea embody the isomorphic mechanisms created within the historical development of the global and local sociopolitical context of South Korea. It is nearly impossible to decipher the direction in which CSR in South Korea is headed without understanding the historical foundations and the complex network dynamics among the governmental, NGO and corporate sectors that stand at the core of the historical CSR development. Further studies should develop a more robust set of framework and network terminologies to explore the specific relational dynamics and mechanisms by which NGOs gain strength in their cross-sector networks to create a positive change in CSR practice.

Implications for NGO Networks in a State-led Market Economy

As shown by the historical development of NGO-government-corporate relations and the resulting institutional pressures for CSR, there is a complex blend of international and local pressures shaping CSR in a state-led economy. Along with such dynamics, different cross-sector relational dynamics emerge among NGOs, the government and corporations. The sections below further explain the implications of this review of history for what we could expect to see in the governmental-NGO-corporate network dynamics in South Korea and how this might shape CSR practices in the nation.

Governmental Impact on NGO-Corporate Networks for CSR

As explained by the modern history of South Korea, the government has long had strong influence on corporate behavior. Ever since corporations were put in charge of the economic development of the country during the authoritarian regime pre-democratization, Chaebol corporations have not only complied with the global standards adopted by the government but have also been strongly guided by the local governmental policies and regulations in determining their CSR practices. In this context, it is important for NGOs to develop cooperative relationships with governmental institutions in order to participate in sustainability initiatives and develop influence on corporate behavior. NGOs that have central positions and strong status within governmental institutions are most likely to be deemed as the most desirable partners with access to knowledge and information about the relevant policies from the perspective of corporations (Yang & Stohl, 2024). The collaborative relationships NGOs establish with the government can increase the likelihood that they will be perceived by corporations as high in importance and having diverse resources

about governmental policies. On the other hand, developing adversarial relations with the government will likely result in developing more adversarial networks with corporations. In other words, the type of relationships NGOs could develop with corporations may be highly dependent on the kinds of relationships they develop with the government in such contexts.

Such dynamics of NGO-government-corporate relations in South Korea has several implications for how practitioners and CSR actors may approach forming networks in an economic context with a stronger state. As international NGOs seek to establish their positions and actions for CSR within such nation as South Korea, they may benefit from forming positive relations or engaging in collaborative initiatives with the governmental institutions first, before seeking corporate alliances. It is important to first establish solid legitimacy within an economy by means of establishing efficient and effective network and social capital. Policymakers of state-led market economies may also need to acknowledge the importance of being open to constant interactions with global and local NGOs when it comes to CSR effort, whether that is collaborative or adversarial. In collaborative contexts, policymakers may need to regard NGOs as important counterparts in securing resources and executing joint projects. Moreover, policymakers should constantly stay informed of the NGO concerns for unethical or socially irresponsible corporate practices, as the NGOs seek to advance policies, regulations and mandates for CSR through adversarial actions.

The Significance of NGOs' Within-sector Networks on Their Cross-Sector Networks

In addition to developing networks with the government, it is also important that the NGOs in South Korea develop strong internal networks within their own sector. During the era of democratization from 1987 to the late 1990s, it became a part of civil society values

and norms to work towards enhancing internal solidarity and resources to strengthen their legitimacy and credibility, so as to liberate civil society from state control and authoritarianism. They developed civil society coalitions to enrich NGO resources and support that would drive more citizen participation (Choi & Yang, 2011). They also sought to promote genuine citizen participation and effective grassroots participation that would enhance their non-partisan and non-governmental status (E. Kim, 2009).

Such internal solidarity and connectedness have important implications for their collaborations with the government and corporations. NGOs' internal resourcefulness and embeddedness within their own sector may help enhance their abilities and opportunities to strengthen their cross-sector collaborations. Indeed, studies have found that those NGOs that are strongly embedded in and forming dense ties with the others in their within-sector networks have a strong impact on sustainability initiatives across sectors beyond their own (Lam et al., 2020). Also, the density of NGOs' within-sector networks could signal their neutrality and autonomy from the government and thus strengthen their positions when engaging with the governmental organizations and corporations (Choi & Yang, 2011; E. Kim, 2009).

Theoretical Implications

The review of the history of CSR and cross-sector network development within the sociopolitical context of South Korea opens up a relatively new avenue of research to further advance and expand the institutional theoretical framework on CSR. The review of South Korean NGO-government-corporate involvement in CSR development suggests that institutional theory may not be confined to only explaining increasing uniformity of CSR across the globe under isomorphism, but also a great deal of divergence that embodies a hybridization of local and global institutional

pressures (Yang & Stohl, 2024). Such hybridity could be explored further by examining the cross-sector network dynamics among different organizational entities and sectors while considering the institutional arrangements and sociopolitical context of a national economy. Future studies may find great worth in applying such framework and network methodologies to uncover the communicative and relational dynamics that develop responsible industrial practices in the East Asian contexts, an area that is far underexplored.

Institutional and Socio-Political Contexts for CSR Networks

The study especially informs how significant it is to consider the socio-political context of a country in uncovering novel insights on various communicative dynamics from an institutional perspective. As suggested by the modern history of CSR development in South Korea, the political scene and the economic development of the country were congruent with the kinds of changes there were in the relationships among the NGOs, government and the industry sector. Such congruence has even been observed in the more recent events. For example, when there was a change in the political scene in South Korea in 2017 with the election of a new president and political party, the government announced more support and collaborative initiatives for the civil society (Jin et al., 2017). This opened up more opportunities for NGOs to seek partnerships and cooperative initiatives with the governmental sector for engaging in sustainable practices with the industry sector. Indeed, unlike those NGOs operating in Western national institutions, NGOs' engagements in CSR activities and networks in a state-led market economy of South Korea were tied to the governmental institutions. As such, taking the institutional lens could help us further interpret the evolution of the organizational network dynamics in different nations, cultures and communities across the globe.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that future studies may consider for advancing the field of CSR and institutional theory. This study relies on a limited set of historical data, sources and literature which may have caused potential shortcomings in the argument and evidence provided in this study. Moreover, the study primarily references studies published in the Western scholarship or integrates Western perspectives, which may have overlooked more enriching data and sources available in South Korean scholarship. Future studies may benefit from reviewing and integrating more comprehensive historical and theoretical sources and data, perhaps through more systematic analytic procedures, to produce a more robust historical review and implications for CSR in South Korea. Moreover, although the study refers to past studies that have produced supporting evidence, it does not provide direct empirical evidence through a systematic methodological approach. Future studies should engage in further empirical investigations that could enrich our understanding of interorganizational, and cross-sector networks grounded in an institutional context. These studies should also explore more diverse nations beyond South Korea to uncover a more robust set of relational dynamics for CSR that consider different institutional arrangements in Asia and the global economy.

Conclusion

Overall, this review of South Korean historical foundations for CSR and the NGO cross-sector network dynamics demonstrates that examining CSR networks using institutional framework helps expand the scope of our understanding of global CSR development. That is, CSR develops and evolves not only under the influence of global isomorphic pressures by international bodies, but also through complex local network

dynamics among the NGOs, the government, and corporations, grounded in the national institutional arrangements. Such findings indicate the importance of compelling global CSR studies to acknowledge and explore the different dynamics of divergences in CSR development in the underexplored, non-Western economies. Further enrichment in the institutional and network frameworks on CSR would help the third-sector CSR actors to develop more robust international and cross-national CSR strategies, for making cohesive and wholistic contributions to global sustainability.

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