



The Dilemma of Cheonggyecheon Restoration in Seoul

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ABSTRACT

DESCRIPTION

The Cheonggyecheon restoration project has been a big hit in Seoul, Republic of Korea. However, the conflict management process used during the restoration project was not as successful as the project itself. The project provides lessons and warnings for future projects. This case analyses how the restoration of Cheonggyecheon was successful despite the public confrontation it created. In particular, it focuses on the government's strategies to foster public collaboration.

Learning objective:

To learn conflict management skills.

Subjects covered:

Conflict management; Urban development; Stream restoration

Setting:

- Metropolitan Seoul
- Event year: 2003

DISCLAIMER

This learning case is a reproduction of the chapter 'The huge success of the Cheonggyecheon restoration project: What's left?', from the book entitled *Citizen participation: Innovative and alternative modes for engaging citizens: Cases from the United States and South Korea*. The original material has been used for the purpose of disseminating accumulated knowledge on managerial strategies of the stream restoration project in Seoul.

INTRODUCTION

Cheonggyecheon is a stream that flows through downtown Seoul. The stream was originally, a seasonally flowing brook but was developed into a stream with fourteen waterways in 1412, the beginning of the Chosun Dynasty. In the early 1900s, the government began covering the stream for military, sanitary, and flood control purposes. In the mid-1970s, officials built the elevated highway, which carried approximately 168,000 vehicles a day. The area around Cheonggyecheon has traditionally been a commercial area full of industrial facilities and small shops. After the highway was constructed, the area developed a reputation as an unpleasant urban commercial district with old buildings, narrow streets, severe traffic conditions, and illegal street vendors.

In 2002, the new mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung-bak proposed restoring Cheonggyecheon. He believed that restoring the stream could offer benefits to the city in several ways, including providing opportunities for development, revitalizing the downtown economy, and nurturing a “breathing place” for the entire city. He envisioned the Cheonggyecheon restoration project (CRP) drastically shifting the city’s urban policy paradigm from development to sustainability. The idea was well-received by the public (see Table 1).

Table 1. Citizen attitude on the CRP (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2005, p. 24)

For			Against		
Like Very Much	Like	Total	Don't Like	Don't Like Very Much	Total
146 (29.2%)	227 (45.4%)	373 (74.6%)	88 (17.6%)	29 (5.8%)	117 (23.4%)

After careful political consideration and multi-faceted research studies, the Seoul Metropolitan Government pushed forward with the project. The CRP was geared towards removing the roads that covered the stream and the adjacent elevated highway. The project was not considered to be technically challenging. The biggest dilemma ahead was how to deal with the local merchants’ opposition.

THE BIRTH OF CHEONGGYECHEON RESTORATION PROJECT

Due to Cheonggyecheon’s historical relevance, the restoration project was not seen as just another urban planning project; it became a symbolic task and the entire nation was eager to revive its historical and natural heritage. Seoul would become a friendlier city to both the



environment and the people when the project was completed. Yet, the initiation and implementation of the project caused conflicts by, for example, increasing local traffics and affecting local markets during the reconstruction. As such, the project illustrates the possible conflicts that can arise between the government and local merchants.

When the CRP was announced, the media praised the idea. It was thought that the project would have many tangible benefits for the city. It would create “green” areas amidst the city’s grey. The 5.84km-long stream would bring back life into the city’s otherwise development-oriented business district. The whole city, not just the business district, would likely enjoy the refreshing environment.

The restoration delivered on these benefits and more. The CRP also restored the country’s history by removing the elements of Cheonggyecheon built by the Japanese colonial government decades ago. It also helped to restore and revitalize cultural programme (festivals) in the area; by attracting more businesses and more shoppers into Cheonggyecheon area, the city officials also hoped to begin correcting economic imbalances between the northern and southern part of the city.

All the benefits, however, could not have been realized if the citizens had not bought into them. The media covered the planning and execution of the CRP favourably and published stories about Cheonggyecheon and the project’s likely impact. If it were not for the newspaper articles, magazine columns, and radio broadcasts about the project, it would have been much more difficult to realize them.

The idea of revitalizing Cheonggyecheon first emerged among engineering professors in the late 1990s. Upon realizing that the project was not only doable but necessary, the deeply respected novelist Park Kyung-ri decided to support the idea. A research circle, “Cheonggyecheon Reviving Research Forum,” was formed and nurtured the idea. The “dream” grew and became serious enough to be a subject of scholarly discussion in symposiums. The then-mayoral candidate, Lee Myung-bak, was searching for a big and fancy idea to present in the approaching mayoral election, and the revitalization project caught his attention. After receiving professional advice, Lee made the project his number one official campaign promise and announced that he would restore Cheonggyecheon when he won the election. Through this process, the idea matured in the public domain, and Lee won the mayoral election.

THREE IMPLEMENTATION ORGANISATIONS

The CRP would have been impossible without its three-part, interconnected implementation system. The Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project Headquarters was the project's major engine. Its task force was made up of a "dream team"—capable public officials from various departments. This task force served as the project's administrative facilitator; the headquarters was staffed with 28 elite officials and an additional 15 administrative assistants. A well-known name in the field of urban planning headed the organization. Two months after its establishment, the headquarters' responsibilities expanded to include addressing conflicts with local merchants and establishing a negotiation team.

The Seoul Development Institute (SDI), the city's research institution, also played an important role. The CRP research team comprised dozens of scholars and researchers with a range of research specialties—architecture, ecology, hydrology, urban planning, engineering, economics, sociology, and public administration. The scholars not only prepared the master plan for the architectural restoration, but they were also expected to foresee possible difficulties in the plan's implementation, including conflicts related to citizen participation.

The third and final part of the implementation system, the Cheonggyecheon Restoration Citizen's Committee, provided a link between the public and the city and played an important role in facilitating the exchange of ideas. The 127-member committee consisted of a main division with six subdivisions. Each subdivision focused on a particular subject area: history and culture, natural environment, construction safety, transportation, urban planning, and citizen communication. The citizen communication division was expected to resolve CRP-related conflicts by monitoring and responding to public opinion. The committee's performance was mixed; it played a major role in facilitating meetings between the city and the citizens, including local merchants, but when its suggestions were rejected, some of the members resigned.

In hindsight, the committee's role was less important than its existence. The mayor, having made the political gesture of forming and using a huge civic organization of famous professors, journalists, pastors, and professionals, signaled his seriousness about the project. Yet, the committee's lack of impact also hurt the broader effort. Mayor Lee wanted the committee to provide the city with manageable advice, not opinions that would risk stopping or delaying the project. Thus, the committee lacked members who could work from the "bottom-up." Local residents, merchants, and related non-governmental organizations did not have seats on the committee, leading some to question the committee's democratic validity and to argue that it did not represent citizens in a true sense.

The three-implementation organizations established strong interrelationships. Some committee members were SDI doctors. The SDI doctors were dependent on data provided by headquarters; the headquarters could not proceed to the next phase without the advice and authorization of the committee. These strong ties created a triangular interdependence, which proved to be a major reason behind the project’s success: while the headquarters was the implementing arm, the SDI served as the brain, and the committee played a (limited) role as the eyes and ears.

The creation and use of the triangular system—the headquarters, the SDI, and the committee—pushed forward the complicated project. The visible goal of the three-part organization was simple—restoring Cheonggyecheon. Yet, the ultimate goals were multi-faceted and included reviving the historical and natural heritage of the commercial area, improving flood control, lowering the temperature of the downtown area, and improving the aesthetics of Seoul. The CRP showcased all of the characteristics that one would expect from a large-scale public project and provided an excellent opportunity to understand what happens when policy implementation meets the realities of public opposition.

THE OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite its publicity, the project lacked public confidence. Most Seoulites wanted to see the stream opened but were simultaneously doubtful of the project’s feasibility (see Table 2). The concern is whether the public would buy into the project as fervently as the mayor did.

**Table 2. Major reasons behind citizens’ attitude towards the CRP
(Seoul Metropolitan Government 2005, p. 24)**

For		Against	
Environment & aesthetics	233 (46.6%)	Heavy traffic	147 (29.3%)
Water pollution improvement	141 (28.2%)	High cost	147 (29.3%)
Restoration of city’s old shape	75 (15.0%)	Daily inconvenience during restoration	141 (28.2%)

Before becoming the mayor, Lee Myung-bak was the CEO of a large construction company. Having completed a long list of big projects, Lee knew that the CRP was more than possible. He also knew that, as the most important project of his first term, the CRP’s success would dictate his political life. Known by his long-time nickname, “bulldozer”, Lee demonstrated strong leadership in selling the idea. He persuaded opinion leaders at every chance, formed a city restoration task force, advertised the CRP on street banners and subway bulletins,

launched the multi-faceted research campaign, made many media appearances, and earnestly defended the project against opposing views.

Professor McGregor of Indiana University viewed the project this way:

At first sight, the case looks so simple. The city government did not reinvent the wheel; the stream was always there. After all, all we mean by restoration of a stream is to demolish the concrete structure and open up the cover so that people see the water flow back again. One merely needs to decide where and when to begin the digging and then implement the choice. But in reality, the project demanded high level of sophistication. What remains is to understand the design variables that must be manipulated in order to achieve the outcome of the restoration.

(McGregor 2002)

A list of operational realities (see Table 3) illustrates the scale of the project. Each issue considered had sub-considerations and many of them were potential sources of conflict.

Table 3. The CRP's operational considerations (Lah & McGregor 2005, p. 24)

Issues	Specific questions for each issue	Perspectives/ Options
Project framing	<p>Whether to embark on the project?</p> <p>When should the project commence?</p> <p>Where is the location?</p> <p>What is the geographical scope?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decided by mayoral election (Do it) • Do cost/benefit analysis first • Do pilot project and analyse results • Now (restoration + urban renewal) • Long term as part of urban redevelopment Kwanggyo, Sejongro, or upper stream • Confine to stream and related ecosphere • Include business area development
Structure demolition	<p>What is the scope of the destruction?</p> <p>What is the time frame of</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete destruction vs. Leave ramps • Link or block Cheonggyero-Ringroad • • Destruct blocks simultaneously or gradual

	destruction?	ly
Stream restoration	<p>What is the appropriate type of restored stream?</p> <p>How to secure sufficient quantity of water?</p> <p>What is the appropriate water quality?</p> <p>What is the flood control method?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural type/ Early Natural (Snake) Type • Natural Type + Canal in Down Stream • Canal Type • Groundwater + treatment plant • Groundwater + Han river + treatment plant • Groundwater + rainwater in water tanks • Level I(BOD1mg/l)~Level III(BOD6mg/l) • Combine or separate rainwater/sewage • Snake type stream + trees planting • Extra rainwater pipes for flood control • Ground permeation • Rainwater collection in water tank
Area development	<p>What is the scope of urban redevelopment?</p> <p>What is the level of urban industry renewal?</p> <p>Should development cost be included in the project?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on restoration only • Restoration + General urban planning • Link restoration and area redevelopment • Aggressive area redevelopment • Improve current industry • Mix industry and residence • Turn into history/culture-oriented industry • Restructure CBD 21st century leading edge • Limit cost to the stream restoration • Include compensation and urban renewal
History &	What is the spatio-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheonggyero only vs. Adjacent areas

culture restoration	temporality? What is the scope on cultural/historic excavation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gwanggyo~Dongdaemun vs. whole area • Restoration of old bridges vs. no action
Social impact	What is the solution for stagnant market area?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct compensation vs. indirect methods

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Restoration of Cheonggyecheon brought about many changes. Contrary to expectations, the traffic in the area lightened and the average speed increased, despite having significantly fewer roads serving the area. In fact, when the roads covering Cheonggyecheon disappeared, use of public transportation increased. After the restoration, the number of passenger cars heading downtown fell by 2.3%, while the number of metro bus users grew by 1.4%, and the number of subway users grew by 4.3% to 430,000 users daily.

The reduction in passenger cars translated into less stress on the area's air quality. Test results collected from five spots in Cheonggyecheon recorded overall reductions in all types of pollution, except for Benzene and Ethyl Benzene. A White Paper also reported an overall reduction in the local temperature. Before the restoration, the temperature in Cheonggyecheon was approximately 5°C higher than the city average. The new water flow, lighter traffic, and natural air flow have all helped to cool down the area from an average of 30°C to 26.6°C. An increase in area wind speed by between 2.2% - 7.8% helps to explain the air temperature reductions.

The CRP's biggest accomplishment, however, was not the temperature changes or the traffic and air quality improvements. It was the way the project shifted public perspectives. At first, citizens doubted the project's feasibility. Today, the public celebrates it and gives due credit to the city's government. Most importantly, they have begun to have faith and confidence in themselves, faith that they could give up old conveniences for something more valuable in the end.

The public began to realize that the "old" was more than compensated by the "new." The CRP brought about a more attractive and environment-friendly city and restored forgotten history and culture. A totally new culture unfolded through the CRP's success and cleared the

way for a series of additional changes in the city. New pedestrian crossings were erected in major junctions, plazas were created in the most heavily trafficked areas in the center of the city, bus-only lanes were constructed and designated on major roads, a system to link bus and subway fares was launched, research into restoring other Seoul streams was launched, and other elevated highways were demolished—all as a consequence of the CRP's success.

In addition, more than eleven Korean cities are either considering or are implementing stream restoration. The story of the CRP grabbed headlines around the world, including in *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, *BBC News*, *Radio France International*, *The Financial Times*, *CNBC*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *The Sankei*, and *The Yomiuri*. The project also received international accolades, including awards from the Biennale di Venezia and the World Health Organization.

OPPOSITION FROM LOCAL MERCHANTS

Depending on their economic position, local stakeholders in the CRP belonged to one of these three groups: property owners, tenant-merchants, or street vendors. Property owners were happy that the value of their land would increase after the restoration due to the revitalized shopping district, improvements in natural scenery, and new urban development.

However, most tenant-merchants did not like the CRP, since it was likely to increase rents or force them to relocate their shops. In fact, among all the three groups, tenant-merchants displayed the fiercest opposition to the CRP. Well-established industries within Cheonggyecheon area were interdependent. Relocating an industry – button makers, for example – would force another industry – shirt makers – to follow. The merchants opposed the project, but eventually gave in because of political persuasion and policy promises.

The third group of local stakeholders was the street vendors, to whom the city had no legal responsibility towards. The city provided street vendors an interim refugee in the Dongdaemun sports stadium, giving them a grace period to find other job opportunities.

The city made tremendous effort to reach out to these communities through the three-part implementation system. In the end, though, the restoration of Cheonggyecheon meant a reduction in the district's commercial area and led to the relocation of stores to which, merchants and their families had been long attached. To others, particularly the street vendors, it simply meant abrupt job loss. As a result, the CRP met with a great deal of resistance. A survey among the 3,265 area merchants reported that 95.75% of those surveyed opposed the CRP.



The biggest and the most representative of the area was the Cheonggyecheon Business Area Defenders United. The group consisted of 7 shopping center merchants and 21 separate organizations. The organization turned out to be a rather short-lived, weak coalition; however, it organized picketing when the CRP master plan was announced on February 11, 2003. It also held several rallies during the following months.

The other major coalition—the Clothes Stores Association—held together better. Since the members of the association worked in the same industry, they had strong ties before the commencement of the CRP. The association's stores were also located close to Cheonggyecheon walkways; hence, their businesses would feel the first-hand physical and economic impact of the construction.

Both of these groups put up strong opposition to the CRP. The merchants demanded direct compensation for reductions in sales and lost parking spaces, and/or to be relocated from their current location. They also wanted to talk directly to the mayor. In addition to the pickets, the groups gathered petitions to send to the city council, political parties, the media, and others.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

The city did not want to squarely confront the public, but it did not want to passively avoid the conflict, either. Its overall strategy was to proactively sell the CRP plan to the public, while also seeking to collaborate on specific issues. The question came to how to simultaneously pursue these seemingly conflicting issues.

Discussion Questions

Conflict management approaches

Question 1:

Using worksheet 1 below, identify key issues of leadership and conflict management.

Question 2:

What could be some basic management principles in dealing effectively with the conflict with local merchants?



Question 3:

The city did not provide any direct compensation. Instead, the city provided a package of indirect compensation. Can you think of some indirect benefits? Was this policy fair to the local merchants?

Question 4:

How can you better organize the three-part implementation system to make it more effective?

Worksheet 1. Conflict management approaches

Dimensions	Key issues
Organizational preparation	
Political approach	
Economic approach	
Cognitive approach	

Citizen participation strategies

Question 5:

Can you make better use of the citizen’s committee? Redefine the committee’s role.

Question 6:

The citizens’ committee did not include local merchants as its members. Was this a good move? Why? How can you integrate the local merchants’ voice? What are the strengths and weaknesses of including the local merchants in the committee?

Question 7:

With regards to the local merchants, among many possible citizen communication channels, which one would be most effective?

Negotiation strategies

Question 8:

There were two groups that represented the local merchants. Which group would you, as a city official, select as the negotiating counterpart?

Question 9:

The city set the non-negotiable deadline for the project's commencement. What would be the possible impact of the deadline?

Question 10:

Trust is the key success factor in negotiations with the public. How could the government build citizens' trust and develop good relationships?

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