

Tiny Ideas, Big Changes

Won Soon Park from the Hope Institute dissects the Social Invention Programme, a model designed to change and improve social policies by actively engaging a community of citizens.

As I write this, the world is still coming to terms with the implications of the people revolution in Cairo. The handover of power from a corrupt leadership to the citizenry is, for many, welcome news and the fact that it came about as a result of common interests banding together rather than the leadership of a super-hero is something to note. More to the point, Cairo demonstrated the power of ordinary men and women, citizens, to take control and become the decision-makers of their own daily life.

Power to the People

The Hope Institute—an organisation based in Seoul—recognises, and strives to tap into, the potential in each citizen at the grassroots level. One of its key programmes, the Social Invention Programme, is based on the values of participation and openness, locality, and pragmatic alternatives.

The traditional policy-making process does not always reflect the voices of the citizens and tends to involve only a handful of experts, public policy specialists, and politicians.

Social Invention is the process by which people think about and share new ways of helping others and solving social problems. It is, in short, a strategy for social change that starts from creative thinking by the very people whom the ideas will affect.

To implement its goals, the Hope Institute adapted an idea from the Global Idea Bank—a project led by the UK's Institute for Social Inventions—and created a platform on which the citizens' ideas could be gathered. The choice was a logical one. After all, the Global Idea Bank collects ideas for positive social change and provides a space in which these ideas can be discussed online. But the Social Invention Programme goes one step beyond the collection of ideas by taking these ideas to realisation.

In the current case, we sent out a request asking for ideas on how to best bring about social change for the social issues that they face or observe.

Process of Social Invention

There are four steps to the process:



Won Soon Park is the executive director of the Hope Institute in South Korea. A prominent civic leader, he has founded several non-profit organisations such as the Beautiful Foundation and the charity shop, the Beautiful Store. The Hope Institute, an independent think-tank, is his latest project.

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1. Seed Idea: Collection

We started by collecting proposals and ideas for social change through an online webpage. Ideas are regarded as seeds that possess the potential for change, and they are divided into Seed, Sprout, Tree and Fruit. The ideas are then further categorised into different groups such as quality of life/social welfare, public good, economy, culture/arts, environment, region/participation, and human rights/minority groups. The ideas could be generated at any time, but, occasionally, we create specific topics.

2. Sprout Idea: Idea Sorting and Basic Research

Next, the researchers at the Social Innovation Center in Seoul examine the possibility of realising the ideas generated. In this particular case, they checked if there were any precedents. At the same time, we opened up the discussion to the online (and off-line) community by providing a comment section and recommendation tools. In turn, this input was reviewed by a special expert group and citizen evaluation team.

3. Tree Idea: Making it Public

Following the basic research and evaluation process, the ideas are then publicised through newspaper campaigns and other media outlets. The goal is to generate a public discussion and, hopefully, the distillation of a public consensus. Citizens, experts and relevant government officers gather and discuss the issues arising from the idea in a Rumble Rumble Forum. The Tribunus Plebis club—a supra-partisan association

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of members of the South Korean National Assembly—was set up to support the legislative process of turning ideas into legislative proposals.

4. Fruit Idea: Realisation of Idea

The ideas eventually become a reality through either the legislative process or through the agreement with the relevant public institution or local government. Sometimes, the ideas are delivered to relevant corporations to be reflected in their products. Between 2007 and 2009, 3,595 ideas were collected, and over 130 ideas went through sorting and media exposure process.



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Ideas that bore fruit

Some examples of changes brought about by community-generated ideas are:

1. Improving public services: Subway handles

Seoul has nine subway lines and these are used by the majority of its residents on a daily basis. One citizen proposed an idea of diversifying the height of the train handle by taking into consideration different groups of people in Korean society, such as the disabled and the children. This idea was further developed through the Social Invention Programme at the Hope Institute and proposed to Seoul Metro where it was accepted and implemented.

2. Pursuing cultural change: Campaign for women at early stages of pregnancy

Many ideas proposed a change in the attitude and lack of consideration towards pregnant women, especially those at the early stages of pregnancy. One idea proposed making buttons and posters to raise awareness on the issue. The Ministry of Health and Welfare adopted and further developed the idea in a campaign.

3. Improving corporate products and services: ATM machine commission fee notification before withdrawal

The notice of commission fees charged on withdrawal of cash used to be written in small letters next to the machines. An idea proposed notifying the amount of commission fee immediately before the withdrawal so that customers could decide if they wanted to proceed with the transaction. This idea was proposed to the Federation of Korean Banks and it was subsequently applied to all cash machines in South Korea.

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Significance of Social Invention and its Diffusion

The idea of Social Invention starts with the tenet that “everyone is a policymaker.” We trust that the ideas for a better society lie in the everyday experiences of ordinary people. By focusing on the everyday life, many things that are taken for granted tend to be questioned with a new perspective.

The appropriate height of subway handles, for instance, was questioned because of the experience of a citizen. This question generated discussions on the standards to be applied when public goods and services are designed. In this way, the value of the Social Invention Programme can be seen to lie in the questioning of the obvious and thinking of news ways to solve social problems.

Indeed, the Social Invention Programme has inspired other initiatives on open innovation. Government organisations, local councils, non-profit organisations and several corporations—among them the Seoul Metropolitan Government, the Iksan Hope Coalition, the Goyang Social Innovation Center, and SK Telecom—have adopted its platform.

The current Social Invention Programme is going through a transition period. It is experimenting with new models of citizen action for social change. These experiments have led to Social Invention competition models that place more emphasis on the actions of the citizens, and so provide a new platform for new ideas and real action.

