

Keynote Session.

The Future We Want

Democracy is more and more backsliding, and casualties and civilization destruction are due to ongoing wars. The climate crisis has recently morphed into a climate catastrophe, and it is threatening lives. Despite appeals for overcoming the crisis, the most basic conditions to sustain life as a human being are destroyed, and freedom and democracy are forced into the corner because of the blind eyes of international organizations and Western nations and extreme selfishness. In the keynote session, we analyze the causes of freedom and democracy and discuss what efforts are needed for sustainable development.

Moderator Cho Hyo-Je (Sungkonghoe University)

Speakers

1. Forty Four Years After the Gwangju Uprising: Reflections of an Asia Activist
Walden Bello (The State University of New York at Binghamton)
2. Why Has Inequality Grown After Democratization?:
The Effects of Power, Institutions, and Ideology
Kim Yuntae (Korea University)
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International Solidarity for Sustainable Development and Human Rights
Park Jin (National Human Rights Commission of Korea)

Gwangju and Gaza: The Struggle against Unjust Wars and for a Just Peace

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It was with great gratitude that I received your invitation to speak at the 44th anniversary of the Gwangju Uprising. At the time of the insurrection, I was an activist in the United States working for an end to the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, and along with so many others seeking an end to their countries' authoritarian rulers, I embraced the people's insurrection in Gwangju as my own. I followed the events in Gwangju closely and felt a stab in my heart when I heard how the troops of Chun Doo-Hwan massacred thousands of people, most of them young people and students. I was likewise angered by the news that the United States was complicit in the atrocities that marked the military retaking of the city by releasing the units involved from the joint US–Republic of Korea military command.

Many lives were sacrificed in Gwangju, but it was their blood that paved the way for the coming of democracy to South Korea in the late 1980's and 1990's. The Gwangju Uprising was one of the events that started my long academic and activist association with the peoples of Korea, both North and South of the 38th Parallel. Like the stab I felt when I heard about the horrific killings by Chun's troops in Gwangju, I also felt the 38th Parallel as a long gash in my heart when I approached the DMZ in June 1988 after a three week journey from Mount Paektu near the Manchurian Border to Pyongyang and Wonsan, then to the world's most militarized border separating the two halves of this blood-drenched peninsula.

I have been asked by the organizers to speak about war and peace in the world today, and how we can tilt the global balance towards peace. This is, as the Americans say, a tall order.

However, let be begin by saying that wars can have many and diverse causes, but it is when local conflicts are intertwined with geopolitics and geoeconomics that they become especially dangerous and destabilizing.

Volatile Intersections of the Local and the Global

The three major wars or conflicts that are ongoing today demonstrate how volatile this intersection between the local and the global is.

In the Hamas–Israeli conflict, we see how the maintenance of the Israeli settler–colonial state is intertwined with the preservation of the global hegemony of

the US.

In the war in the Ukraine, a bloody war of attrition between two countries was provoked by Washington's push to expand NATO to a country of the former Soviet Union.

In the South China Sea, we are witnessing how disputes over territory and natural resources have been elevated to a global conflict by the US's effort to maintain its global hegemony against China, to which it is losing the geoeconomic competition but over which it continues to enjoy absolute military superiority.

In short, the main cause of global instability today lies in the fusion of the local and the global, geopolitics and geoeconomics, empire and capitalism.

Balance of Power, Balance of Terror

What makes current conflicts especially volatile is that they are occurring amidst the absence of any effective multilateral coercive authority to impose a peaceful settlement. In the Ukraine, it is the balance of military might that will determine the outcome of the war, and here Russia seems to be prevailing over the Ukraine–NATO–US axis.

In the Middle East, there is no effective coercive power to oppose the Israeli–US military behemoth—which makes it all the more remarkable that despite a genocidal campaign that has been going on for nearly four months now, Israel has not achieved its principal war aim of destroying Hamas.

In the South China Sea, what determines the course of events is the balance of power between China and the US. There are no “rules of the game,” so that there is always a possibility that American and Chinese ships playing “chicken,” or heading for each other, then swerving at the last minute, can accidentally collide, and this collision can escalate to a higher form of conflict such as a conventional war.

Without effective coercive constraints imposed by a multilateral organization on the hegemon and its allies, the latter can easily descend into genocide and mass murder. Whether in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Gaza, the Geneva Convention and the Convention against Genocide, have been shown to be mere pieces of paper. Some will ask, what about the United Nations. Unfortunately, the United Nations has become nothing but a talk shop, paralyzed by the power of the veto enjoyed by the permanent members of the Security Council.

The Right of Self Defense

Given the absence of a multilateral referee that can impose its will, it is only the development of political, diplomatic, and military counterpower that can restrain the hegemon. This is the lesson that national liberation wars in Algeria and Vietnam taught the world. This is the lesson that the Palestinian resistance today

teaches us.

This is why even as we condemn wars of empire waged by the hegemon, we must defend the right of people to resort to armed self-defense.

The Role of Global Civil Society

This does not mean that efforts at peacemaking by global civil society have no role to play. They do. I still remember how shortly before the invasion of Iraq, the New York Times came out with an editorial on Feb 17, 2003, in response to massive mobilizations against the planned invasion of Iraq, that said that there were only two superpowers left in the world, and they were the United States and global public opinion, and that then President George W. Bush ignored this outpouring of global resistance at his peril.

Global civil society did contribute to the ending of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by eroding the legitimacy of those wars among the US public, making them so unpopular that even Donald Trump denounced them, in retrospect that is, as did many personalities that had voted for war in the US Congress.

The recent decision of the International Court of Justice that ordered Israel to prevent genocide in Gaza is likely to have a similar impact as the global civil society's resistance to Bush, Jr's, invasion of Iraq. The ICJ decision may not have an immediate impact on the ongoing war, but it will erode the legitimacy of the project of settler colonialism and apartheid in the long run, deepening the isolation of Israel in the long run.

Gaza and Gwangju

Since we are on the subject of Gaza, allow me to tell you more of my reflections on the events in taking place in that small part of the world, for the war there is a test for us all, and we either pass this test or fail. What is this test? It is the test of our humanity.

Over the last six months, Gaza has been the scene of genocide, where Israeli troops have already killed some over 30,000 Palestinians, 70 per cent of whom have been women and children. Now these fascist forces are poised to enter the city of Rafah, promising more slaughter, more sorrow.

I have not had a good night's sleep since the Israeli invasion of Gaza. Indeed, one cannot enjoy one moment of personal happiness while massive carnage is taking place somewhere in the world. This ability to empathize with others' sufferings is the basis of human solidarity. It stems from our common humanity.

We ask ourselves, why is Israel so committed to totally destroy the Palestinians as a people? We ask, why is the United States so committed to providing the weapons and ammunition to enable genocide? We ask, why is Europe, which once told us in the global South that it was the pinnacle of civilization, supporting

barbarism?

It is not hard to imagine the condition of the people of Gaza. You need only put yourselves in the shoes of the people of Gwangju 44 years ago. An uprising against the repressive regime had broken out, with people taking to the streets and seizing the provincial government offices. Students form a civilian militia, armed with a few light weapons they seized at police stations. They appeal to the rest of South Korea to join them, and some communities do show their support. But it soon becomes clear your city is alone, and that paratroopers and other units armed with US weapons are coming to crush you, with the blessings of the United States. Do you run away, go home? Well, some people do, but thousands of young people, even middle school students, decide to face the soldiers in the streets, convinced that fighting and dying to preserve the flame of freedom won by the insurrection is more important than dying.

A Just Peace

We often see peace as an ideal state. But the peace of the graveyard is not peace. A peace bought at the price of fascist repression not only is not desirable but it will not last.

Like the people of Gwangju 44 years ago, the Palestinian people will refuse peace at any price, peace that is obtained at the price of humiliation. As they have shown in the 76 years since the Nakba, their massive expulsion from their lands and homes, the Palestinians will not settle for anything less than peace with justice, one that enables them to recover their lands seized by Israelis, establish a sovereign state “from the river to the sea,” and allow them to hold their heads up in pride.

They want peace, but it must be peace with justice.

Does this not sound familiar? Was this not the same spirit that animated the people of Gwangju 44 years ago, the sense that it was better to die on their feet than live on their knees.

Palestine needs us. And Korean people can support the Palestinian struggle in many ways, among them by stopping the South Korean government from selling arms to the Israeli military that the latter then uses to kill Palestinians. In fact, from 2014 to 2022, the South Korean government exported \$43.9 million (57 billion won) worth of weapons to Israel. Expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people can be very concrete, like the way 150 people in Daejeon did last January when they protested in front of the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) office, demanding the South Korean government stop arming Israel. The protesters in Daejeon have set an example for all of us, and I have been elated to hear that Ms. Kang Eun-Mi, an MP with the Justice Party who was born in Gwangju, has signed a petition asking the Korean government to stop arming Israel.

In 1980, at a time of darkness throughout the global South, when dictators like Chun, Marcos, Mobutu, and Suharto ruled unchallenged, the people of Gwangju

revolted and lit the way forward for the rest of the world. Today, it is the Palestinians who are lighting the way forward in the struggle to defend democratic rights, justice, national sovereignty, and peace. Palestine needs us. But we also need Palestine. And let us thank our Palestinian sisters and brothers for leading the way, for lighting the way for the rest of the world.

Why Has Inequality Grown After Democratization?: The Effects of Power, Institutions, and Ideology

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Introduction: The Tragedy of Unequal Democracy

Several years ago, as Bong Joon-ho's "Parasite" and Hwang Dong-hyuk's "Squid Game" garnered attention globally, articles praising South Korea's pop culture for gaining immense popularity poured out. *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, on the other hand, highlighted the severe inequality in South Korea depicted in these films. Should we celebrate the fact that Korea's social tragedy has become entertainment commodity just as the Brazilian favela has been turned into a tourism attraction? In effect, "Parasite" and "Squid Game" serve as uncomfortable mirrors reflecting the realities of Korean society.

Though it may be difficult for South Koreans today to believe, severe inequality in South is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the 1950s, the nation was one of the most equal societies in the world. The Farmland Reform Act of 1949 (Land reform) eliminated landlords, making the nation one of the most equal countries in the world, second only to communist states. Although the gap between the rich and poor widened with capitalism-based industrialization after the Economic Development Plan in 1962, it was not severe.

Contrary to assumptions that elections and democracy generally reduce inequality (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012), inequality in South Korea intensified following democratization in 1987. The thirty year period from 1992 to 2022 saw an unprecedented increase in inequality, generating a 'great divide' in society (Kim, 2023). As of 2022, the top 1% of the population accounts for 12.3% of income, with the top 10% accounting for 36.1%. Income concentration in South Korea is third after the advanced economies of the United States and the United Kingdom. The relative poverty rate for those below 50% of median income is over 14.9%, and 16.9% for of low-wage workers, ranking South Korea high among advanced industrialized countries. In addition, inequality in South Korea is evident in various income distribution indicators such as industry, class, and gender (Shin, 2012).

South Korea's severe inequality is paradoxical considering its rapid economic growth. South Korea received high praise for transforming itself from one of the poorest countries in the world in the 1960s to the 10th largest economy in the world. Thanks to advances in information technology, the nation ranks first in per capita internet and smartphone usage. The resistance movements of students and citizens against military regimes following the Gwangju Uprising in 1980 has significantly contributed to South Korea's rebirth and maintenance of democracy, enabling free elections and regime change.

However, the quality of democracy worsened. South Koreans have very low levels

of satisfaction with their lives, happiness, and confidence in society. The nation has recorded the lowest birth rate and highest suicide rate in the world which reflects the unhappiness of the society. The number of South Koreans who feel safe when they encounter a stranger and the number who have someone to ask for help is the lowest among developed nations. Private education expenses, household debt, and plastic surgery expenses are the highest in the world. Fierce competition for survival and socioeconomic status has led to high anxiety and depression. South Korea's tragedy exposes the social failure under the surface of material success and is deeply related to extreme inequality (Kim, 2017).¹⁾

This paper explains how economic inequality has grown since South Korea's political democratization in 1987 and how inequality threatens democracy. To that end, it employs a comparative approach as it analyzes South Korea's political history, economic structure, and social policies and Europe and the U.S.'s institutions. First, it focuses on the imbalance in power relations between capital and labor, which contributes to South Korea's growing inequality. This analysis includes structural changes such as globalization and technological advances along with the effects of 'Chaebol capitalism', company-based labor unions, and a weak welfare state. It argues that "unequal democracies" such as the United States have emerged as governments adopted policies biased toward conglomerates and the rich. Second, as in Europe and the U.S., the government's tax and social policies should be viewed as a result of political struggles, emphasizing the role of politicians and political parties. Political battles and pledges for regional development have drawn attention in Korea, while socioeconomic democratization has largely disappeared from the agenda. This shift may result from 'winner-take-all politics' due to the Majoritarian Representation System. Third, it analyzes the power effects of various ideologies, including meritocracy, elitism, 'trickle-down economics', and self development, that legitimize inequality. Finally, it puts forth qualitative development of democracy and the reinforcement of the welfare state as methods to address Korea's unequal democracy.

Imbalances in Power Relations: State and Social Institutions as a Battlefield

In sociology, inequality refers to the unequal distribution of life, social, and economic resources as well as power. According to the Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn, inequality can be categorized into vital, existential, and material or resource inequalities (Therborn, 2013). Vital inequality refers to inequalities in birth, death, and health status. Human life expectancy and health are influenced by society. Existential inequality refers to inequalities of status and recognition within

1) According to research by the British social epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, the United States, with its high levels of inequality compared to Sweden, exhibits higher rates of child mortality, illiteracy, prison incarceration, drug addiction, depression, mental illness, and homicide than Sweden, which boasts high levels of equality. The excessive concentration of wealth and the spread of poverty can dampen psychological stability, weaken economic engines, and reduce the well-being of society as a whole (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

social relationships, manifested in various forms such as discrimination and exclusion. The prime examples include racism and sexism. Material or resource inequality refers to inequalities in economic income, wealth, and political power. Economic inequality, which receives significant attention, focuses on quantitative disparities in goods, particularly inequalities in income and wealth.

Studies on the causes of inequality in academia can be classified into three main approaches (Kim, 2023). First, the structural perspective argues that inevitable increases in inequality stem from structural changes such as globalization, technological progress, and demographic shifts.

Second, the political economy perspective focuses on actor-level factors including corporate governance, corporate investment, human resource management strategies, and the collective bargaining power of labor unions, highlighting imbalances in the power relations between capital and labor.

Third, the institutional perspective addresses various social systems, electoral systems, and political systems such as education and welfare. In particular, it looks at the role of government taxation and social policies.

In the real world, structure, agency, and institution are closely intertwined, influencing one another and making clear delineation difficult. Nevertheless, it is crucial to focus on the impact of the role of agencies on inequality including Chaebol conglomerates, company-based labor unions, and government officials rather than attributing inequality solely to structural conditions such as globalization and technological progress. This is because different levels of inequality exist among nations despite similar structural conditions. Germany and Sweden exhibit relatively low levels of inequality compared to South Korea, despite sharing a high dependence on trade and a focus on manufacturing.

Economic liberalization and factory automation do not automatically exacerbate poverty and inequality in South Korea. Power dynamics between companies, labor unions, and the government, along with various institutional structures within each country, determine the level of inequality. An “inclusive social system” that provides equal opportunity for all and embraces the marginalized reduces inequalities, unlike an “exclusive social system” that prioritizes the privileged few (Kim, 2017). In case of South Korea, inequality has continued to grow owing to wage and employment strategies inherent in ‘Chaebol capitalism’, the labor union systems of different companies, and ‘developmentalism’ as a national strategy that heavily emphasizes economic growth.

‘Chaebol capitalism’ in South Korea is largely responsible for the increased inequality in the country. The characteristics of Chaebol capitalism have persisted despite criticism of the concentration of economic power, collusion between politics and business, and crony capitalism following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Chaebol capitalism impacts inequality through four dimensions: astronomical annual salary increases for conglomerate CEOs and executives, wage increases for conglomerate employees through companies’ labor union system, the growing wage

gap between conglomerates and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises through vertical integration of industrial structure, and increased low-wage non-standard workers (such as part time and temporary workers) through labor flexibilization. Despite the evident role of Chaebol conglomerates in exacerbating inequality, there is little interest in corporate governance reforms and democratic regulatory mechanisms among political circles with demands from civil society often being disregarded.

In South Korea, the government's tax and social policies have wielded significant influence on inequality. Following the surge in unemployment triggered by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the Kim Dae-jung administration faced political pressure to expand welfare. However, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government radically pursued neoliberal economic reforms, including the opening of capital markets and flexibilization of the labor market, while also introducing social insurance and public assistance for laborers and the poor.

The historical significance of strengthening the welfare state during economic crises cannot be overstated. However, a "weak welfare state" proved insufficient to prevent the rise in inequality resulting from neoliberal reforms. First, the welfare state could not develop sufficiently as the government cut corporate taxes and income taxes for high-income earners while limiting fiscal burden to the bare minimum. Second, blind spots in social insurance were excessively large, with half of the population not covered by the national pension and employment insurance schemes. In particular, an aging population has led to a surge in the poverty rate among the elderly.

Shortly after taking office in 2003, the Roh Moo-hyun government declared the "\$20,000 Era" as proposed by Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI), emphasizing a growth-oriented model. A weak welfare state failed to stem growing inequality. First, government welfare spending increased slightly, but labor market inequality continued to worsen. Second, although the childcare budget increased, it failed to address the declining birthrate. Third, while health insurance coverage expanded and the cost of major illnesses decreased for ratepayers, the expansion of stop-loss insurance by large enterprises worsened the public nature of the program. Lastly, the enactment of the Temporary Worker Protection Law that allowed two-year employment did not prevent the rapid growth of non standard workers.

The Lee Myung-bak government temporarily implemented tax increases and welfare expansion policies after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. At the same time, however, wealth was further concentrated to the wealthy class and large corporations due to the lowering of the Comprehensive Real Estate Holding Tax and corporate tax rates. In 2012, the Park Geun-hye government, facing the public's calls for economic democratization and a welfare state, also campaigned on welfare expansion pledges. However, the government reversed its stance on the Old Age Basic pension for the elderly and other campaign promises after winning the election. Progressive governments were proactive in introducing new welfare systems, while conservative governments were passive, only expanding welfare in

response to natural increases such as the aging population (Kim, 2023).

Although inequality levels in South Korea have risen, it is true that the country entered the welfare state era during the decade of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments. Consequently, the welfare budget continued to grow during the conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. Over the past two decades, South Korea's welfare spending ratio has grown at one of the fastest rates in the world. Nevertheless, the weak welfare state has failed to address social problems stemming from inequality, such as a low birth rate, a high elderly poverty rate, and rising suicides, even with a GDP of more than \$30,000 per capita.

Since the mid-2000s, public assistance and public pensions have incrementally contributed to reducing income inequality, but public transfers to the poor adjacent are insufficient and have not significantly reduced elderly poverty either. The elderly poverty rate stands at 45%, the highest among developed nations. The effectiveness of social insurance in reducing inequality is limited, as non-standard workers are excluded from employment insurance and national pension systems.

The main reason for South Korea's ineffective redistribution is its excessively low tax burden and social expenditure ratio. In 1980, the highest income tax rate stood at 70%, but it was halved in the 1990s, leading to a regression in the progressive income taxes. Additionally, the consumption tax rate also remains relatively low. Since the Moon Jae-in administration came to power after the 2016 candlelight rallies, the income tax ceiling was raised slightly, but the tax burden ratio has barely risen. As of 2022, South Korea's tax revenue ratio of GDP stands at 23.8%, lower than the OECD average.

As a result, the social expenditure ratio relative to GDP ranks at the bottom of the OECD. Under the Moon Jae-in administration, South Korea's public social expenditure budget as a percentage of GDP in 2022 was 14.8%, significantly lower than the OECD average of 21.1%. This figure falls well below that of countries like France (31.6%), Germany (26.7%), Japan (24.9%), Greece (24.1%), Sweden (23.7%), and the United States (22.7%).

South Korea's growing inequality should not be seen as the inevitable result of structural changes in technology and industry. Technological determinism overlooks the impact of human behavior and social institutions. Even phenomena that are considered structural factors do not occur by accident. The rise of the global economy is a social transformation driven by the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as transnational corporations. Technological progress is also influenced by government industrial policies and corporate investment. The financialization of the economy, 'shareholder capitalism', and the weakening of labor unions are also institutional outcomes shaped by human decisions.

When considering the various changes influencing inequality, it is crucial to recognize that inequality arises when the balance of power between rich and poor is disrupted or biased in favor of one side. This power dynamic is most visibly

manifested in government policy-making. Even now, conservative politicians and economists in South Korea argue that economic growth takes precedence over reducing inequality. They argue that the paramount concern should be how to expand the economic pie rather than how to divide it. In the 2023 presidential election, the leading candidates adhered to the discourse of economic growth and paid scant attention to tax and welfare reform. They disregarded the fact that the most important responsibility of politicians is to ensure the fair distribution of prosperity across all populations of society, not promoting economic growth. What was behind this?

The Limits of Electoral Systems and Political Parties: The Rise of the 'Brahmin Left' or 'Gangnam Left'

South Korean politics is marked by a presidential system that centralizes power in the hands of a single individual alongside the Simple Plurality Rule System, where only the top vote-getter in a constituency wins. Following war and the division of the Korean peninsula, anti-communism emerged as a dominant ideological force in South Korean politics, leaving the country without a party to take the lead on class issues (Choi, 2010). After democratization in 1987, the direct presidential election system and Majoritarian Representation System (first-past-the-post voting) were reintroduced, leading to a structure where the opposition party was the majority. However, there were no parties to represent workers and marginalized groups in the regionalism-based party system.

In 1997, the first regime change occurred in South Korea which led to the Kim Dae-jung government and Roh Moo-hyun government coming to power but redistribution was not high on the agenda in the Majoritarian Representation System. Even now, the National Assembly is more concerned about securing local constituency budgets than taxation and welfare. It is less likely for marginalized groups, such as the working class, the poor, youth, women, and the elderly, to be elected as a representative. Consequently, it is challenging for the voices of marginalized groups to be heard in the legislative and budgetary process, reinforcing the 'politics of exclusion'.

Many studies focus on the electoral system and strategies of political parties rather than the president's philosophy and the ideological orientation of political parties which influence the growth of inequality. First, inequality is closely related to electoral systems. The American political scientist Toben Iversen and British political scientist David Soskice argue that differences in electoral systems impact inequality (Iversen and Soskice, 2006). Europe has a Parliamentary System of government with Proportional Representation System, while the United States operates under the Majoritarian Representation System and a Presidential system. Although Europe was more unequal than the United States until the early 20th century, Europe is now much less unequal than the United States. Despite Europe's historical inequality exceeding that of the United States until the early 20th

century, Europe has since become significantly less unequal than the United States.

In Europe, the Proportional Representation System seldom leads to majority governments seizing power, and parties compromise by forming coalition governments. In consequence, an inclusive social system that reduces inequality develops, known as Consensus Democracy. Conversely, the Majoritarian Representation System in the United States and South Korea fosters a two-party system allowing the party that wins the election to monopolize power. Majoritarian democracies are highly competitive and spur political polarization. Conservative parties opposing higher taxes and welfare expansion more often hold power in such systems. Majoritarian democracies, exemplified by the United States and South Korea, have exclusive social institutions and elective affinity that deepen inequality.

Majoritarian democracies are less inclined to develop inclusive social systems, such as public education and social insurance. The American political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson argue that “winner-take-all politics” has emerged in majoritarian democracies in the United States, diminishing the influence of parties representing marginalized groups (Hacker and Pierson, 2011). Conglomerates donate substantial sums to media, universities, and research institutes, recruit high-ranking public officials, and influence political parties through campaign funds. Similarly, in South Korea, the systematic exclusion of the working class, the poor, and the marginalized has resulted in government policy-making favoring conglomerates and the wealthy.

South Korean civil society has long advocated for expanding the Proportional Representation System and adopting a German-style electoral system to reform the country's politics. It emphasized the need to prevent wasted votes, uphold the principle of proportionality, and ensure the democratic election of proportional representatives. Just before the 2020 general election, the National Assembly enacted a quasi-consolidated Proportional Representation System, a variant of the German electoral system. However, the United Future Party (renamed as People Power Party now) strongly opposed it and enforced a satellite party. Lee In-young, the floor leader of the Democratic Party of Korea, largely responsible for the absurd electoral reform, irresponsibly created a deformed satellite party in a move criticized for worsening the electoral system. In the Open Democratic Party, Kim Eui-kyeom, accused of real estate speculation, was elected as a proportional representative. Since then, the big two-party system has been strengthened, real estate prices have skyrocketed, and the lives of low-income people have further deteriorated.

Second, the electoral strategy of progressive parties affects inequality. Since the 1990s, poverty and inequality have persisted without improvement despite the presence of progressive parties in power. In his book *Unequal Democracy*, the American political scientist Larry Bartels analyzes how deep-pocketed corporations have changed not only the policies of the Republican Party, but also those of the Democratic Party in the United States (Bartels, 2008). In the late 1990s, the Democratic Party shifted away from its traditional policies of progressive taxation

and fiscal expansion in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy and fiscal balance reflecting demands from conglomerates. Additionally, in response to pressure from Wall Street, they rolled back financial regulations and introduced policies that fueled real estate speculation.

This trend was not limited to the United States but also extended to Europe. During the rise of 'Third Way politics' around the world in the 1990s, the British Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party, and the Swedish Social Democratic Party pursued lower taxes, fiscal balance, and welfare reform while supporting trade and financial liberalization at the same time.

In South Korea as well, Third Way politics also gained popularity during the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. However, Third Way politics exacerbated poverty and inequality. It also diminished the values of social justice and equality. In particular, Third Way politics underestimated the negative effects of economic globalization, resulting in the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (Kim, 2012).

Why did this happen? We should look at actions rather than words. Since being in office since the late 1990s, the Democratic Party of Korea claimed to represent the middle class and the working class. However, actions such as privatizing public enterprises, enacting laws on layoff and flexible labor market legislation, lowering income taxes for the wealthy and corporate taxes for corporations, and promoting private health insurance had a significant impact on inequality. While the government pursued policies of economic liberalization and tax cuts for the wealthy, the salaries and wealth of the Chaebol and the wealthy skyrocketed, while the incomes of the middle and working class stagnated or declined.

Why have progressive parties around the world, including in Korea, abandoned policies to reduce inequality over the past two decades? This is closely linked to the social bases of political parties. It has become a widespread phenomenon for progressive parties, which have long represented the working class, to turn away their traditional party base in advanced industrialized countries. This trend is also closely related to party strategies. Deindustrialization, which began in the 1960s, has led to a decline in the working class and a weakening of labor movements, while highly educated white-collar and information services jobs have increased dramatically. Progressive parties recruited highly educated white-collar workers in large numbers to win elections.

In the 1990s and beyond, the proportion of highly educated, high-income members increased in the U.S. Democratic Party and European social democratic parties. Though this shift led to cultural issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and identity politics taking the forefront, this diminished the voice of economic progressives. The influence of labor unions waned, and redistribution was put on the backburner. Progressive parties, like their conservative counterparts, eased financial regulations and cut taxes for the rich, while also seeking to cut welfare for the poor and privatize the social security system.

The French economist Thomas Piketty coined the term 'Brahmin Left' in his work *Capital and Ideology* to describe highly educated, high-income progressives who, despite their rhetoric of progressiveness, enact policies that primarily benefit the wealthy. They advocate for tax cuts for the affluent and prioritize the inheritance of social status through education (Piketty, 2019). The Brahmin Left turned a blind eye to poverty and inequality and focused on identity politics, including middle-class lifestyles, homosexuality, feminism, and abortion.

Since the 2000s, South Korea's democratic and progressive parties have also attracted a growing number of highly educated, white-collar members. In particular, those included lawyers, professors, and other professionals who have been dubbed the "Gangnam Left." Since the Roh Moo-hyun government came to power, some scholars have condemned those who emphasize economic inequality as the 'old left.' They emphasize the rise of the 'new left,' which promotes a culture of anti-authoritarianism, arguing that the middle class has become the new mainstream.

Since the 2016 candlelight rallies, the proportion of the highly educated middle class from the Seoul and Gyeonggi area has risen within the Democratic Party, weakening its interest in policies related to basic pensions, non-standard workers, and the balanced regional development of the country. Further, there were instances of hypocrisy where words and actions did not align. Contrary to the Democratic Party's policy direction which introduced the Comprehensive Real Estate Holding Tax in the 2020 general elections, party representative Lee In-young called for cuts in the Comprehensive Real Estate Holding Tax in Gangnam. Policy Committee Chairman Kim Sung-hwan, who criticized real estate inequality in the 2022 local elections, advocated easing property tax for those who owned multiple residential properties.

Since political democratization, the limitations of delegative democracy, which entrusts policy-making to elite politicians, have become apparent. South Korea boasts the highest percentage of the population with political party membership and the most bill proposals among legislative bodies worldwide. However, the major parties concentrated on electioneering and focused on winning elections by mobilizing their core support base. The Democratic Party of Korea, in particular, advocated universal welfare and formed the Euljiro Committee during its time as the opposition party. After coming to power, however, it distanced itself from labor unions, ignored temporary workers, and began to be concerned about the backlash of the wealthy and the interests of the middle and upper classes. Not only has politics hit rock bottom, it is actively working to prop up those at the top.

The turnout of the low-income voters who traditionally supported the party is declining amidst shifts in the Democratic Party's electoral strategy. South Korea is also experiencing the "income gap in voter participation" phenomenon found in the West (Kwon and Han, 2018). This is a phenomenon in which low-income individuals are more likely than higher-income individuals not to vote, while

higher-income individuals are more likely to vote. This is closely related to "unequal responsiveness," wherein elected representatives are unresponsive to the needs of low-income groups but respond keenly to the economic interests of high-income groups. Income inequality in voting and unequal responsiveness of elected representatives are linked, leading to unequal democracy. Income inequality and political inequality are closely intertwined.

While the 2016 candlelight rallies as well as the 2016 South Korean political scandal and politics-business collusion highlighted growing dissatisfaction with socioeconomic inequality, significant improvements in inequality have not materialized even after the Moon Jae-in administration took power in 2017. The highly educated middle class, which has become the core of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, remains sensitive to political and ideological issues, but less concerned with socioeconomic issues affecting the poor. The rapidly growing influence of enthusiastic supporters through podcasts, YouTube, and online comments has given rise to fandom politics and have made hate speech against opponents popular (Park, 2023). While fandom politics has its roots in democratic institutions, it poses a threat to democracy over time.

In his work *Post-Democracy*, the British sociologist Colin Crouch analyzed the characteristics of contemporary politics using the new term 'post-democracy' (Crouch, 2004). Post-democracy describes the paradoxical situation of a state that is technically characterized by procedural democracy and rule by law, but betrays the fundamental objectives of democracy. In post-democracies, ideological distinctions between political parties become blurred and a candidate's image supersedes social issues. Elections have become a spectacle of marketing and advertising, rather than a competition of policies. Voters are excluded from the policy-making process and are either relegated to the role of spectators watching campaigns as a show or those focused on commenting on the internet as a political hobby.

South Korea is also exhibiting signs of post-democracy. The influence of the corporate elite that dominates politics has become excessive. The government is swayed by corporate lobbies as it engages in backroom deals to sell off or privatize public companies and make decisions on deregulation. Senior government officials transition into roles within large corporations, law firms, investment firms, and accounting firms after retirement. The National Assembly is distorted into a mechanism that legitimizes the special interests of the economic elite rather than serving the universal good. In this way, the essential meaning and objectives of democracy are gradually eroded.

Ideologies and Justification of the System: Meritocracy, Elitism, Trickle-Down Economics, and Self-Development

In 2021, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) examined perceptions of inequality for eight major countries, including South

Korea, from the 1980s to the recent past (OECD, 2021). Overall, "inequality perception," a subjective assessment of inequality, displayed an upward curve, peaking in 2008 and falling slightly in recent years. 'Inequality favorability,' the degree to which people tolerate inequality, has followed a similar trend. This indicates that while people are concerned about rising inequality, they are also increasingly adapting to it.

South Korea shows the most contradictory perceptions of inequality. When asked about the causes of inequality, 46% of South Koreans cite parental wealth, which is much higher than the average (26%). However, 86% also believe that individual efforts are important to mitigate inequality, which is higher than the average (74%). While Koreans are concerned about inequality, they are more likely to address it on an individual level rather than emphasizing the government's responsibility or addressing it on a societal level. Where does this perception stem from?

The ideological mechanisms that maintain inequality around the world are affected by power effects in the socio-political, economic, and psychological domains. The ideology of inequality encompasses diverse discourses, but meritocracy, elitism, 'trickle-down economics', and self-development exert particularly compelling power effects (Kim, 2018). These four discourses are closely linked to legitimize ideologies that rationalize inequality.

First, meritocracy argues that individuals should be rewarded differently based on their abilities. It is based on the logic that anyone can succeed through hard work, regardless of their parental background. The term meritocracy did not have positive connotations at first. In the 1950s, British sociologist Michael Young described a society in the year 2033 where everyone in the upper class is smart while everyone in the lower class is stupid despite equal opportunities given to everyone in *The Rise of Meritocracy* (Young, 1958). Young warned that a future society in which one's job is determined by their ability could be a grim dystopia.

Despite Michael Young's critical satire, meritocracy has acquired positive connotations. American functionalist sociologists believed that a society with differentiated rewards would promote motivation to work, justifying inequalities in class structure. In the United States, meritocracy became popular as an alternative to the mechanical egalitarianism of the Soviet Union.

In South Korea, meritocracy was also embraced as the opposite of egalitarianism. In particular, the education craze was considered an important means of achieving upward social mobility. The combination of familism, which posits that a child's success leads to the success of its family, and the ideology of meritocracy has significantly contributed to the highest university admission rates in the world.

However, meritocratic discourse cunningly conceals the hereditary nature of not only wealth, but of status on a societal level behind the veil of individualism. Jung Yoo-ra, the daughter of Choi Soon-Sil, sparked a controversy over illicit university admission. When she remarked "If you are incapable, blame your

parents," it sparked widespread outrage among the young generation. The daughter of a professor at Seoul National University, Cho Gook, was also bombarded with criticism for her illicit university admission. The myth that South Korea is a meritocracy has been shattered.

The discourse of meritocracy, which separates individual ability from society and deems it absolute, has been used as a tool to justify inequality in society. An individual's abilities cannot be considered merely the result of happenstances like being endowed by nature with special talents or being born to wealthy parents. Meritocracy adherents deny or ignore the fact that their wealth and income are acquired by the contributions of other people and the community.

Second, in South Korea, elitism has become a potent ideology that rationalizes inequality. Until recently, columnists in conservative media openly advocated for inequality, stating that "inequality is what drives society." They also argued that "organizations should be led by leaders selected based on their ability."

The term elite comes from the Latin term meaning "to choose" and was used in late 19th-century France to refer to a top group of people who were superior in ability to the public. In the late 19th century, the Italian sociologist and economist Vilfredo Pareto argued that the emergence of elites is inevitable, no matter how much equality is advocated for, and that the rapid changes in society are nothing more than a "circulation of elites" through transitions in the ruling class.

Elitism is a clear negation of democracy. However, after being elected recently as the leader of the People Power Party, Lee Joon-seok said, "Basically, a few people with skills or abilities change the world," adding, "I'm willing to be bear criticism that I am being elitist." He called for "fair competition," criticizing policies that protect socially disadvantaged groups such as women, the disabled, and the elderly. However, he rejected or turned a blind eye to equal opportunity and affirmative action policies that achieve social fairness.

Third, 'trickle-down economics' argues that when taxes are reduced for the rich and corporations, and economic growth is achieved, wealth is distributed to everyone, creating a "trickle-down effect." The idea that an unequal distribution of wealth benefits everyone in the long term was considered a scientific theory. In the United States since the 1980s, 'trickle-down economics' convinced politicians to adopt neoliberal economic reforms.

Even today, mainstream economists are concerned about high tax burdens and continue to criticize the welfare state as a disincentive to work and an obstacle to economic growth. But despite enormous tax cuts for the wealthy after the Reagan administration in the 1980s, corporate domestic investment did not increase and prolonged economic stagnation continued. Over the past three decades, inequality has been aggravated overall as advanced industrialized countries adopted trickle-down economics.

The situation in South Korea is similar. Since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, 'trickle-down economics' has dominated economic policy, leading to the highest

concentration of wealth rather than distribution of wealth. Trickle-down economics effectively functioned as a political project to expand the profits of those in high-income tax brackets and corporations. Trickle-down economics operates as more of an ideology that dominates academia and politics, rather than as a scientific theory based on empirical evidence.

Fourth, self-development has become a survival strategy for individuals living in unequal societies. It has become a new discipline and industry, even acquiring a religious characteristic. With meritocracy and endless competition intensifying, three significant cultural and psychological changes occur in real life: the enthusiasm for self-development, the emphasis on positive thinking, and the emergence of the culture of "healing."

Today, self-development is not just a means of competing for jobs, but a psychological variant of economics' "human capital" theory, which gives people strong economic motivation. Rather than changing society, conformity to the present state is encouraged and achieving individual competitiveness through self-development becomes the sole goal of life. Taking care of one's appearance is also considered a crucial aspect of self-development, especially imposing excessive burdens on women.

Perspectives that emphasize self-development ignore the structural conditions of society and praise the positive attitude of the individual. A prominent academic theory that emphasizes a positive attitude toward life is Positive Psychology. Although originating in the United States, Positive Psychology is also gaining popularity in South Korea. Positive Psychology claims that a positive attitude can increase happiness and enhance the quality of life. It convinces individuals to abandon externally oriented, materialistic values in favor of inner peace.

"Healing" is a psychological mechanism for those who fail in infinite competition. As not everyone can succeed and there are more who fail than succeed, there is a greater demand for psychological healing. While *It Hurts Because You're Young* became a bestseller, it does not raise questions about youth unemployment. The popularity of popular psychology, such as *The Power of Alone Time* and *Don't Get Hurt For Being Nice To Others By Yourself* has led more and more people to view societal problems as individual problems.

The American sociologist Richard Sennett pointed out in *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* that those laid off in the United States due to restructuring blamed themselves (Sennett, 1998). Similarly, Korean youths attribute their unemployment to their academic backgrounds and credentials. Systematic analysis of inequality, the rising number of temporary workers, and over-competition has disappeared and lectures prescribing individual solutions have become popular. Techniques for managing emotions created a "happiness industry," reproducing a conformist ideology that ignores the pain of inequality.

Corporations compel individuals to consume more for instant gratification instead

of thinking deeply. Those who flock to high-end restaurants and luxury resorts perceive themselves superior to others. Today, "YOLO," or "spend for your own happiness," has become the new zeitgeist. As capitalism penetrates into the human psyche, the logic of economics and consumption dominates people's way of thinking and their spirit.

In Korean society, despite efforts toward scientific, moral, and psychological justifications, the ideologies of meritocracy, 'trickle-down economics', and self-development, have logical fallacies leading to destructive social consequences. The logic that describes inequality as an individual problem, not a societal one, has fundamental limitations. While a certain level of economic inequality is inevitable in capitalism, excessive inequality conflicts with the principles of democracy. Ideologies justifying inequality cannot coexist with the ideals of a democratic political community, where all people are equal, have equal rights, and cooperate with each other (Kim, 2018).

Conclusion: Toward Qualitative Development of Democracy and The Welfare State

Democracy as a democratic political system should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed endpoint. Democratic ideals of civil liberties, social justice, and equality are achieved through policies that are fit for these ideals. As proponents of democracy forecast and strive for future outcomes, it is essential for them to learn from past experiences. Let us listen to the words of regret by President Roh Moo-hyun in his autobiographical book *The Future of Progress* after leaving office.

"What I did wrong was that when I got the budget, I should have just grabbed a colored pencil and drawn a line upwards saying 'Increase social policy spending.' I should have just said 'What are you talking about, just raise welfare spending by 30% this year, 40% next year, 50% the year after,' and drawn a line. Instead, I just sat down and said, 'What percentage did it go up?' Now that I think about it, yeah, I should have done it brazenly, but I did it stupidly..."

Still, South Korea's Chaebol conglomerates and economic bureaucrats vehemently oppose welfare expansion and tax increases while emphasizing economic growth. The phenomenon of high-ranking bureaucrats who control economic policy moving on to careers at Chaebol conglomerates, large law firms, and accounting firms after retiring continues. Inequality is exacerbated and democracy is declining as self-serving politicians pursue policies that favor the wealthy.

After the Global Financial Crisis that hit the global economy in 2007-2008, perceptions of inequality began to change. In 2012, the World Economic Forum, a gathering of the wealthy and of business leaders, identified "income inequality" as the gravest threat. A 2014 report by the international aid organization Oxfam claimed that policies that favor the rich, tax evasion, and austerity policies that cut welfare were the causes of growing inequality (Oxfam, 2014). The report warned

that the wealthy are dictating government policy and dominating the economy, which is undermining democracy.

Since 2012, there has been a shift in the policies of the conservative World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The World Bank has argued that policies that reduce income inequality help economic growth in the long run. The emphasis shifted from growth alone to redistribution. The OECD has also proposed "inclusive growth" (OECD, 2013). Solutions such as tax reform, minimum wage increases, and strengthening social safety nets were recommended to governments worldwide.

In South Korea, inequality has been a growing concern since the 2016 candlelight rallies. In 2019, the Moon Jae-in administration proposed an "inclusive state" and released the Basic Livelihood Security Plan, which is similar to the international community's advocacy for "inclusive growth." However, South Korea's inclusive state strategy has been largely ineffective as it pursued fiscal expansion without aggressive tax increases. While income inequality has improved slightly, wealth inequality has further worsened, and South Korea remains the country with the most severe inequality in the developed world.

Inequality is now a major challenge for South Korean society. Moving away from the dominance of free market fundamentalism, the country should prioritize the active role of the government. It is urgent for the government to shift its policies to simultaneously pursue economic efficiency and social equity. Economic growth alone does not automatically eliminate poverty and reduce inequality. Economic and social policies should be considered in an integrated way. During the Industrial Revolution in Britain 200 years ago, legislation regarding the prohibition of child labor, the eight-hour workday, and labor unions significantly contributed to the reduction of poverty. Inequality would not have been reduced without the inclusive social systems that countries implemented after World War II, including public education, public health, national pensions, and universal social insurance.

Inclusive social systems oppose mechanical egalitarianism and free market fundamentalism. The historical experience of Soviet communism demonstrates that absolute, mechanical equality is neither feasible nor desirable. The nationalization of the means of production and the autocracy of the Communist Party legitimized the privilege of political elites and totalitarian domination. On the other hand, we must also reject the extreme worship of the free market and the jungle capitalism of extreme self-reliance and infinite competition. This is because while market economy seeks efficiency it inevitably fosters inequality. Strengthening the welfare state, which pursues both market efficiency and social solidarity, is necessary.

Implementing a 'dual strategy' is essential to strengthen inclusive social systems in South Korean society. First, Consensus Democracy must be strengthened through electoral reform in the political system. Second, Chaebol reform, tax justice, and labor-management agreements must be pursued in the economic system. However, institutional reforms take time and face obstacles. The future is particularly bleak in the absence of change in the political sphere. This is why it is crucial for

progressive civil society to play an active role in proactively pressuring political parties and the National Assembly. It is necessary to go beyond party participation and voting and change party platforms, election pledges, and government policies. Democracy is at risk if the political sphere continues to favor a free-market approach, neglect universal social security, and disregard the vulnerable.

In his 1944 book *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi argued that free markets do not transcend history and are a human invention. As Polanyi describes that "satanic mill ground men into masses", an unregulated free market inevitably destroys society (Polanyi, 1944). Social integration should be pursued through the role of the state, by emphasizing quality of life and social justice, not quantitative growth and endless competition. Only with an active role of the state can democracy develop.

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Who Is at Risk? What Can Be Done? International Solidarity for Sustainable Development and Human Rights

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1. Introduction: Who is at risk?

We live in a time often characterized by crisis. This is fueled by a confluence of factors: growing inequality, persistent conflicts and non-peaceful states, ecological changes driven by the climate crisis, and the routine occurrence of disasters and catastrophes. These red flags for humanity aren't equally distributed – the most vulnerable face the harshest consequences. In August 2022, torrential rains in Seoul tragically killed three members of a disabled family living in a semi-basement apartment in Shinlim-dong. While residents in safer areas remained relatively unscathed, for those dwelling in unsuitable housing, heavy rains became a life-or-death situation.

Over the past three years, the ongoing La Niña phenomenon, marked by temperatures drop by more than half a degree Celsius in the eastern Pacific Ocean, has caused devastating floods in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Brazil. Conversely, northeastern Africa has endured six consecutive years of drought, displacing an estimated 2.2 million people. Rising sea levels threaten island nations like Fiji, Tuvalu, and Kiribati, potentially rendering them uninhabitable. The UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates climate change could displace up to one billion people by 2050, while the UNHCR reports an annual average of over 20 million climate refugees since 2008.

One of the most vulnerable groups during COVID-19 were patients in closed psychiatric wards. In February 19, 2020, Daenam Hospital at the city of Cheongdo experienced a massive COVID-19 outbreak. All 103 patients on the 5th-floor psychiatric ward were infected, resulting in 13 deaths. The close quarters of the ward facilitated a 100% infection rate and a 7.8% mortality rate, leading to the city to be designated as a special disaster zone.²⁾

The elderly were another highly vulnerable group. While everyone faced difficulties, those reliant on in-person social care services were especially challenged. The suspension of meal programs, public healthcare gaps, and reduced social care services exacerbated survival and health issues for the homeless and care gaps for the disabled, elderly, and children. Tragically, increased care burdens led to cases of suicide by individuals with developmental disabilities and their caregivers, alongside a rise in reported elder and child abuse.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 exposed and amplified existing economic

2) https://ilyo.co.kr/?ac=article_view&entry_id=371267

polarization, discrimination, and racial inequalities across the globe. Data revealed a stark reality: socially marginalized minorities in multicultural countries like the US and UK faced a higher risk of contracting and succumbing to the virus. This ignited a critical discussion on health inequities. Dr. Eliseo J. Pérez-Stable, director of the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) at the National Institutes of Health, and his team reported in *The BMJ* that “disparities in COVID-19 cases and deaths in some parts of the United States reached up to two to three times higher for people of color compared to white Americans.” Dr. Eric Rubin from the U.S. National Institute on Aging added, “In Louisiana, 70% of COVID-19 patients were African-American and Latino, yet these groups comprised only 30% of intensive care unit capacity.”

Furthermore, the pandemic triggered mass unemployment, replicating the worst aspects of the Great Depression. Temporary, irregular workers, and ethnic minorities bore the brunt of job losses. This highlighted the double burden faced by the most vulnerable: discrimination in healthcare access and the economic devastation of unemployment. Low-income individuals trapped in temporary jobs, refugees fleeing instability, and foreign laborers seeking a better life – all marginalized groups – were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's economic fallout.

Disasters and catastrophes strike indiscriminately, but their consequences are far from equal. To fully understand a crisis, it is crucial to examine the faces of those most affected. Who is at risk? Who is most vulnerable? The third presentation of "Crisis of Freedom: The Future We Want," titled "International Solidarity for Sustainable Development and Human Rights," begins with the questions: "Who is most vulnerable in a crisis?" and "What can be done?"

2. The nature of the crisis

The Age of Climate Crisis

'Climate change' refers to changes in the climate system caused by changes in the concentration of greenhouse gases due to human activities, resulting in changes beyond the natural climate variability that has been observed for a considerable period of time, and 'climate crisis' refers to the condition in which such changes pose irreparable risks to human civilization, including not only extreme weather, but also water shortages, food shortages, ocean acidification, sea level rise, and ecosystem collapse, requiring dramatic greenhouse gas reductions.³⁾ The climate crisis poses the greatest threat to human rights directly and indirectly on a wide range and scale unparalleled by any other human rights violation.

The Paris Agreement, adopted by 2015 COP21 in Paris, aims to limit global warming to well below 2° C above pre-industrial levels, ideally striving for 1.5° C. Despite Article 2.1 of the Paris Agreement, the year 2023, eight years after

3) Article of the “Framework Act On Carbon Neutrality And Green Growth For Coping With Climate Crisis”

the agreement's adoption, marked the hottest year in the 174-year history of weather observations. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report warns of potential abrupt and irreversible changes to our planet's climate. Even if all countries achieve their current Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for emissions reductions by 2030, global temperatures are projected to rise above 1.5° C by 2040 and could reach 2.8° C or even 4.4° C by 2100.

The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) 2023 State of the Global Climate report shows that global average surface temperatures are already 1.45° C higher than pre-industrial levels, sea surface temperatures are also at record highs, and in February 2023, Antarctic sea ice reached its lowest recorded extent since satellite observations began, mirroring significant losses in Arctic sea ice and the Greenland ice sheet.

Extreme weather events fueled by climate change are intensifying across the planet. In southern Europe and North Africa, scorching heat waves caused widespread devastation. Meanwhile, Canada witnessed wildfires that burned down more than seven times the usual land area, and the Hawaiian wildfires were the most destructive ever recorded in the United States. These extreme conditions contribute to severe food insecurity. The number of people facing food crises has more than doubled, rising from 149 million pre-pandemic to a staggering 333 million in 2022.⁴⁾

Over the past three decades (1991–2020), South Korea's average annual temperature has risen by 1.6° C compared to the historical average (1912–1940), with a steady increase of 0.2° C per decade. In 2020, the country experienced its longest monsoon season on record (54 days in the central region) and heavy summer downpours that resulted in 46 deaths and missing persons. In 2022, torrential rains in the metropolitan area south of the Han River caused severe flooding. Additionally, a 9-day wildfire ravaged the city of Uljin and Samcheok, the longest continuous wildfire since record-keeping began in 1986, burning down approximately 20,000 hectares of forest.

"Heatwaves, floods, and droughts are impacting every continent, causing immense socio-economic losses," stated WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo. "These extreme weather events disproportionately burden vulnerable populations, highlighting the urgency of addressing climate change."

Disasters in everyday life

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person (Article 3). Similarly, the Constitution of the Republic of Korea states that all citizens shall be entitled to a life worthy of human beings and the State shall endeavor to prevent disasters and to protect citizens from harm therefrom (Article 34). Despite these legal protections, disasters

4) 2023 State of the Global Climate report published by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)

and catastrophes, large and small, continue to plague our society. The root causes are multifaceted: prioritizing corporate profits over people's well-being, persistent discrimination against the most vulnerable, the escalating climate crisis, and inadequate practices in disaster prevention and management.

Over the past decade, South Korea has witnessed a string of tragedies that starkly expose the prioritization of corporate profits over human safety and well-being. Incidents such as the Sewol ferry disaster (2014), the humidifier disinfectant scandal (2016), and leukemia cases at semiconductor industry (ongoing) highlight the structural inequalities within the labor market, where the most vulnerable workers – subcontractors, interns, and migrant laborers – bear the brunt of occupational hazards. Furthermore, the repeated occurrence of preventable disasters, such as the Itaewon Halloween crowd crush (2022), the Osong underpass tragedy (2014), and the semi-basement flooding deaths (2022), underscores the government's and local authorities' apathy towards public safety and their tendency to evade responsibility. In the wake of numerous tragic events, the Korean government enacted the "Serious Accidents Punishment Act" in January 2021, holding individuals accountable for large-scale accidents. Additionally, the "Framework Act on Disaster and Safety Management" was revised to enhance support for victims and recognize various causes of social disasters. These are positive steps, but more needs to be done to address underlying structural problems. Superficial disaster prevention and management practices must be replaced with a robust system that tackles the root causes of disasters.

3. What can be done?

International trends toward the climate crisis

The UN Human Rights Council has consistently recognized the climate crisis as a threat to human rights. Since 2014, annual resolutions address the issue, and in 2021, a Special Rapporteur was appointed to investigate its impact and advocate for human rights protection. The Rapporteur reports on various human rights concerns arising from the climate crisis, including climate displacement, state actions through legislation, climate litigation, and inter-generational equity. These reports raise global awareness of how the climate crisis jeopardizes human rights.

Climate justice and the human rights

The climate crisis is an urgent human rights issue, and the National Human Rights Institutions(NHRIs) are leading the charge in recognizing it. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea filed an amicus curiae brief on the climate crisis's constitutionality exemplifies this growing trend. However, a significant disparity exists between major polluters and the nations most affected. Holding these polluters accountable remains a critical challenge. The crisis disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, refugees, and low-income individuals. Recognizing this, concrete actions are being

formulated to address their specific vulnerabilities.

Solidarity in Climate Crisis Action by NHRIs

NHRIs have been working to address the human rights challenges posed by the climate crisis. Recognizing their crucial role, the UN Human Rights Council passed resolutions in 2022 and 2023 affirming the importance of NHRIs in protecting human rights during climate change. Building on this momentum, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) established a dedicated caucus group on climate change and human rights. This group serves as a platform for NHRIs to share best practices and experiences, fostering collaboration and strengthening their collective response to the crisis. Additionally, GANHRI organized a symposium at COP 28 specifically focused on the role of NHRIs in addressing the climate crisis and protecting human rights.

The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) published an amicus curiae brief and made statements verbally in the climate case at the European Court of Human Rights, arguing that governments have an obligation to protect human rights in the context of climate change. The Philippine Commission on Human Rights also conducted a seven-year investigation into the role of the climate crisis and government and corporate accountability. In addition, as discussed above, the Korean Human Rights Commission submitted an amicus curiae brief challenging the government's climate response before their Constitutional Court.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to be implemented by 2030, encompass 17 goals. Each July, a high-level forum at UN headquarters focuses on specific goals, such as poverty reduction (SDG 1), hunger eradication (SDG 2), climate action (SDG 13), and peace with strong institutions (SDG 16).

One of SDG 16's key indicators is the existence of independent national human rights institutions (NHRIs) aligned with the Paris Principles. Reinforcing this commitment, the UN Secretary-General recently launched the UN Protection Pledge and Agenda for Protection, ensuring human rights are prioritized across all UN agencies. This underlines the ongoing emphasis on mainstreaming human rights within the UN framework. To effectively integrate human rights into UN discussions, enhanced participation by certified NHRIs is crucial. Empowering NHRIs to diagnose the climate crisis as a human rights issue and raise concerns is vital in overcoming this global challenge. The World Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions and others advocate for greater NHRIs participation within the UN to achieve this goal.

To effectively address this generational crisis, strengthening the role of NHRIs is crucial. This would empower them to frame the climate crisis as a human rights issue and raise these concerns within the UN. While NHRIs currently enjoy formal participation and speaking rights in bodies like the UN Human Rights Council,

their involvement in forums such as the Economic and Social Council and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development remains limited. For mainstreaming human rights across the UN, organizations like GANHRI advocate for expanded NHRIs participation within the UN system.