



## YOON HYE-RAN

The civil society movement in South Korea began only about two decades ago, but already, the number of civil society organizations in the country has grown, along with the range of issues that they address. Public opinion surveys also show that such organizations are regarded as one of the major movers of South Korean society, and are believed to have much influence on people's positions on public issues.

Unfortunately, the movement has not seeped down to the grassroots. One reason is that it is relatively young—the formation of democratic civil awareness takes time. Another reason is that the movement's orientation and methods show little or no grassroots or citizen participation. It depends instead on specialists and staff. This is why the

civil society movement in South Korea is, and continues to be, “a movement without a society,” rendering it difficult for citizens to participate in it.

YOON Hye-ran, a wife and mother in Cheonan, South Korea, who made these observations, hopes to overcome the problem by activating civil society at the community level. She says the enforcement of the system of local autonomy in the country beginning in 1991 has given rise to new political opportunities that have been described variously as “local politics,” “living politics,” or “grassroots democracy.” They have created room for more direct participation of citizens in civil society organizations.

To help make this happen, Yoon conceived in 1998 the Citizens Opening the World for Welfare (COWW), a civil society organization which aims to make citizens themselves equal and worthy partners in community building so that everyone in the community can live a decent life. It fosters new, grassroots or community-level groups or organizations and continuously educates leaders who are imbued with democratic civil awareness.

When COWW was just being organized, Yoon found that there were many issues that affected ordinary people and to which the new organization could respond. But the most serious, most urgent, and most apparent concerns in 1998 when COWW was formally established were the effects of the economic or the IMF crisis, so-called because the crisis was blamed on policies which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed on the developing economies of Asia. These included eliminating restrictions on capital flows, maintaining high domestic interest rates in order to attract investments and bank capital, and pegging the national currency to the dollar to reassure foreign investors. As a consequence of these policies, these countries' economies suffered permanent currency devaluations, massive bankruptcies, the collapse of entire sectors, busts in real estate, high unemployment, and social unrest.

Jobless workers meant hungry families, especially children. Yoon said there was no such situation in the country since the Korean War. “Because of that, people began to realize that poverty is not an individual issue but a social issue that they have to deal with,” she says.

Because COWW was just starting—it had only two staff members and did not have enough money to help others—it tried to use what was available in the community. The most urgent need was to feed, protect, and educate the children. For these tasks, Yoon found local churches, student volunteers, and

instructors from the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to be most effective. These YMCA instructors were paid by the YMCA, but they served as volunteers in the COWW program. Apart from COWW's feeding activities, these instructors taught the children English, music, origami, art, and speech.

In the beginning, the churches just gave food to the children, using their own facilities and resources. Student volunteers and YMCA instructors mobilized by Yoon conducted educational and recreational activities for these children. Later, as more people became interested in these efforts, the churches adopted the program and operated it by themselves. Yoon found some people who were really interested in helping children and she trained them to organize a totally new organization out of this program. Known as Children Opening to the Future, this new organization is completely independent of COWW and, as time passed, took initiatives beyond merely feeding the children. These included exposing them to activities like camping, visiting museums, and as they grew older, becoming part of group homes.

COWW then turned its attention to gaining human rights for those whom Yoon describes as the other social minorities—differently abled children, the mentally disabled, women victims of domestic violence, and the elderly—and integrating them into their communities. Yoon says these people cannot live a life without proper assistance; though the South Korean economy and society have developed rapidly, the problems of these social minorities remain. And though the number of civil society organizations has grown, very few of them work for the rights of these minorities.

Through COWW, Yoon also advocates for reforms in public policy on a variety of issues. Small organizations, she says, can help others in need, but a change in the whole system—particularly through reforms from the bottom rather than from the top—is preferable.

Such change is possible only if one has political power. By networking with its many small organizations, COWW was able to show during the 2002 provincial elections in Korea that it did have such power.

It organized a meeting attended by about a thousand people and all six candidates for mayor of the city of Cheonan. Before the meeting, COWW published and distributed a book on a social policy agenda that was based on issues gathered from the people themselves. Because none of the candidates knew about the issues, copies of the book were given to them to read. During the meeting, COWW conducted a debate among the candidates on these issues and thereafter conducted seven forums to discuss the thirty-three items in the agenda.

As a consequence, the elected mayor took interest in the issues because he knew that these were what concerned the people. He responded by changing the rules on the use of social welfare facilities in the city, building the Cheonan Mental Health Center, assisting the helpers of the handicapped, providing transportation service for the handicapped, and listening to organizations concerned with particular issues before laying down policies on these issues.

All these initiatives have shown how one seemingly ordinary woman can bring about positive and far-reaching changes in her society through voluntary, selfless, and locally grounded work.

YOON, the wife and mother who made all of these things possible, was born on January 22, 1968 into a family of six girls in Cheonan, Korea. They had a loving and caring father, Seok-man Yoon, and a stern mother, Ae-ja Lee.

Seok-man Yoon was born into a family of farmers, but he found work as a low-ranking officer in the provincial government. Being independent-minded and not submissive to higher authority, especially when they were wrong, Seok-man Yoon had difficulty getting a promotion. He studied engineering at the prestigious Hanyang University in Seoul but had to drop out because his family could no longer afford to keep him in school. These frustrations caused him to drink a lot.

Ae-ja Lee worked in a garment factory after finishing middle school but decided to run a very small Korean restaurant instead when she saw that her husband's salary was not enough to support the family. But even the income from this business was not enough, so when Yoon Hye-ran was five or six, she was sent to her maternal grandmother who lived in the countryside to be brought up there. A very kind and warmhearted woman, this grandmother was a member of the Holiness (Christian) Church. Except for Yoon's eldest and youngest siblings, all of her sisters also took their turn at being raised by this grandmother and becoming a Christian like her.

Cheonan, Yoon's hometown, is a very old and quiet city. It lies south of Seoul, about an hour's ride away by train from the capital. It is linked by train to other cities as well. Being a transport hub, Cheonan plays a critical role in the development of the economy of the region. In 1990, the city had a population of two hundred thousand. By 1995, this had grown to five hundred thousand. The city is surrounded by agricultural areas, but in its center are factories of high-technology industries like Samsung, and learning institutions, including universities, which have spilled over from Seoul.

Yoon attended Namsan Elementary School in Cheonan. She was fetched by her mother from her grandmother's house in the countryside just two days before school opened. Yoon did not do well and spoke little in school because she "was not really pleased to be there, having lots of good memories with my grandmother in the countryside."

From Namsan, Yoon went to Cheonan Girls' Middle School and then to Cheonan Bok-ja Girls' High School, a private, Catholic school. Neither she nor her parents chose the schools she went to because, under the Korean educational system at that time, the government decided to which school a student should go.

Yoon says that although she was one of the best students in her high school, she was more interested in what lay outside school than in her studies. For one, she had many friends who came from different groups, including those who were really poor. For another, she developed a passion for books and from her third year in middle school on, she set up a group of students from other middle schools with which she could share and discuss books.

A nun who was her teacher in religion and reading provided her with the most useful information for this activity. But in the absence of someone else who could provide guidance on what books to read, Yoon and her group mates read all sorts of books—including those that they had difficulty comprehending and for which they had no one to turn to for help. The members of her group merely recommended to one another what books to read. Yoon recommended Korean translations of *The Little Prince*, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *Hope for the Flowers* (a best-selling inspirational fable by Trina Paulus), and poetry by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

THIS was the 1980s. South Korea was in the throes of violent political changes. The assassination of President Park Chung Hee in 1979 occasioned martial law and a coup staged by General Chun Doo Hwan. Assuming the presidency and consolidating power, Chun carried out measures to extinguish dissent, including the bloody suppression of the Kwangju uprising in May 1980 that led to the death of hundreds of civilians.

Except for what was taught in school, Yoon took no interest in politics or the problem of two "Koreas" that was (and still is) an obsessive theme in Korean political life. She was more interested in art, books, and poetry.

In 1986, after completing high school, Yoon took the entrance exam for university studies and qualified to enter any of the second-best universities in the country. She chose Yonsei University in Seoul, which unlike the government-run Seoul National University, is privately run and very expensive. She was able to meet its costs because her parents took care of the greater part of her tuition. Her eldest sister helped her (they

shared a room in Seoul), and she herself worked during vacation, teaching high school students to prepare them for their entrance examination, or working in the university or in city hall.

At Yonsei, Yoon, for no particular reason, majored in history. “I didn’t have much help when I chose that subject,” she explains, except that, apart from her love for reading, she also liked history. She did not do well when she started at Yonsei because she felt as though she had become “a small, really small person.” She recalls, “I was not aware of what to do at the time.”

Yoon says many of her fellow students in her department took part in the South Korean democracy movement. At the time, students were at the forefront of the struggle against the dictatorship of Chun Doo Hwan (1980-1988), backed by the United States. Battles between student demonstrators and riot police swirled through campus neighborhoods and city streets.

Senior schoolmates helped her study politics. But she became confused because the books she read in the university said everything that she was taught in high school was wrong. For example, back in high school, she liked very much Park Mok Weol, a poet who became famous during the Japanese occupation. But in the university she was told that Park was pro-Japanese. “So the poet I liked was a bad person from this political perspective,” she explains. Yoon also had to struggle between taking active part in the democracy movement and staying uninvolved because she was aware of the sacrifices that her sister and her parents were making so she could stay in school.

For Yoon’s fellow students, the 1980 massacre of prodemocracy students by the military in Kwangju meant a lot. And the most urgent issue for them was the overthrow of the dictatorship of Chun Doo Hwan.

Yoon was not sure she believed in the goal of South Koreans establishing for themselves a truly democratic government. She explains that she was shocked when Lee Han Yeol, a fellow student at Yonsei, lost his life when he was hit by shrapnel during a demonstration. She did not know him personally but she knew he was in the same year as she was.

“The reason I did not participate in the democracy movement was not because I did not consider their goal right but because I was not brave enough to join them,” she candidly says. “So, after [Lee was] killed, I always felt guilty.” Guilty, she says, because many fellow students had to quit school, were imprisoned, or were compelled to do military service.

When Yoon was in her third year at Yonsei, she saw that there was already a clear distinction between those who actively participated in the demonstrations—the left—and those who did not—the right. Because she did not know which way to turn and because there was a problem in the family, she decided to take a year’s leave from the university.

BACK home, Yoon had a serious talk with her father who wanted her to work with the government as a diplomat. To be able to do this, she would have to pass an exam. She promised her father that she would do her best but stipulated that should she fail, her father would let her do whatever it was that she wanted.

Yoon kept her promise to do her best to prepare for the exam—but she did not pass the exam. This left her frustrated, happy, and relieved, all at the same time, because she felt she did what she could to please her father.

Thereafter she returned to reading books. She read Cho Jung Rae’s *Taebaek Mountain Range*, a best-selling story that was sympathetic in its treatment of the experiences of a band of communist guerrillas during the Korean War. The controversial work exposed the author to criticism as a North Korean sympathizer. Yoon did not, however, see the work in these terms. She was fascinated by the book because it told the story of the conflict, not from the perspective of those whom Yoon describes as “the privileged” but from the viewpoint of ordinary people—the grassroots.

Yoon read the book twice and actually visited the places that it mentioned. According to her, the book enabled her to see how indigenous Koreans sought the rectification of what was wrong in history, to read about the lives of ordinary people, and to see their different responses to changes.

Yoon said the book and her reflections on it, her university education thus far, and her exposure to the democracy movement enabled her to think at this point about what she should do with her life. “I was able to identify myself with people in [Cho Jung Rae’s] story by feeling the same blood—the Korean blood—boiling inside. . . . I sensed a kind of self-identification as a real Korean who can embrace other Koreans at the time.”

Yoon says the book is “quite neutral” on the conflict between left and right “although it shows lots of this left side.” But she says it is not an ideological book; in fact, it declares that ideology is “not the only one that can solve people’s life problems.”

The problem in the family that was the other reason Yoon took a leave from university concerned a younger sister. She was expelled from high school because of poor grades. Yoon cared deeply for this sister because for Yoon, she was a symbol of the socially marginalized. She was slow while in middle school and could not make the grade for high school in Cheonan, so she had to attend high school outside the city.

The fourth of Yoon’s sisters, she always thought that because their mother was very strict with her Ae-ja Lee could not be her real mother. But no one knew that this was what she had to struggle with before she was expelled from school. For Yoon, the expulsion would only increase her sister’s chances of failing in society. Left to herself, she might do something rash like become a hostess in a bar, which would only bring her harm. “She could be anyone you could imagine who cannot recover from her situation because she was too young to make up her own mind at the time,” Yoon says.

Yoon’s father, whose health was already extremely unstable at this time, was sympathetic towards Yoon’s sister. But their mother, according to Yoon, was “too busy . . . taking care of all those things around her” to look after her daughter, or even just to be interested in her. “Everything was too chaotic for [our] mom to really take care of my sister,” Yoon says. Instead, it was their grandmother, who was a good friend of Yoon’s sister, who helped this sister come to the right decision.

Yoon brought her sister to Seoul to take an examination which, if this sister passed it, would give her the equivalent of a high school certificate. She passed the exam, but barely: her grade was not good enough to get her into university, so she just began working with a small company.

Yoon herself became a volunteer in an organization in Cheonan that helped and provided guidance to young people. “I wanted to make a kind of organization which can help and guide young people because I realized that I didn’t have enough mentors who could help me and guide me . . . during my high school period,” she explains.

AFTER Yoon’s leave from Yonsei ended, she returned to the university to finish her degree. Back in Seoul, she asked around for an organization that could help young people in Cheonan and she was told to begin with a widely known organization like the YMCA.

At first Yoon was reluctant to talk with YMCA because it was a Christian organization. Although a Christian herself, Yoon, while studying at Yonsei, became alienated from Christianity and even wanted to give up being a Christian. For her, Christianity was “helpless in my eyes, hopeless, not doing anything for society.” But she went to the YMCA anyway and became a volunteer there because she wanted to learn how it and similar organizations did their work.

At the YMCA, Yoon met a lot of senior students, volunteers like herself, who were members of the Student Catholic Association. She said this group was a good model for Christians because its members were actively involved in the democracy movement. They were trying to reform the YMCA which remained, one hundred years since its founding in Korea, according to Yoon, “very static and not very active in society.”

“[These] young people . . . strongly believed that YMCA can help Korean society and make it possible to have democracy,” Yoon says. “They thought YMCA could be at the center of the democracy movement.”

Yoon explains that since 1987 the democracy movement wanted to give civil society—ordinary citizens—an important role in the movement. Before then, it was believed that the movement was carried out by specialists—politicians, educators and students. Yoon says, “We thought if we could reform the YMCA to help the ordinary [people], we could have a great impact on the democracy movement in Korea because they have a lot of chapters and networking throughout Korea.”

While working with the Seoul YMCA, Yoon began laying the groundwork for the establishment of a YMCA chapter in Cheonan. This was a real challenge for Yoon. In its one hundred years in Korea the YMCA could not set up a branch in Cheonan, even if it had set up forty branches elsewhere in the country. And it was not for want of trying. Yoon would later find out that there were nine earlier attempts to set up a YMCA chapter in the city. All failed. Her attempt would be the tenth.

Yoon found support for her effort among two friends from her girls’ high school. They agreed that a YMCA chapter should be set up in Cheonan to help young people because they themselves went through the same political turmoil that Yoon experienced. The two started working to earn some money to help Yoon set up the chapter. Added support came from Won-Geun Lee, a graduate of social work from Seoul’s Chung-Ang University, who was also from Cheonan and whom Yoon approached for help after he had just completed military service. Together, he and Yoon, who would become his wife in 1994, served as volunteers at the Seoul YMCA, to train there.

Yoon said the national YMCA was distrustful of her and Lee because they were too young at the time and because it knew of all the unsuccessful attempts at setting up a YMCA chapter in Cheonan. But through hard work, with help from people working in the Seoul YMCA, particularly those from the Student Catholic Association, and with the support of 150 senior citizens who mostly came from outside of Cheonan and were working in new jobs in Cheonan, Yoon and Lee succeeded in setting up the Cheonan YMCA in March 1993, four years after they began training with the Seoul YMCA. Yoon said that, with introductions from professors, she met each of the 150 senior citizens and found that they had an even stronger desire to see a YMCA chapter set up in Cheonan. They saw the difference in what the two cities could offer in facilities and opportunities to its young people. They also donated some money to sustain the effort to set up the chapter. “We did not need a lot of money to run [the effort] because we were all volunteers,” Yoon explains. “We didn’t get any salary. During the day, we worked in the office. In the evening we worked outside, helping [each other].” For Yoon, this involved giving private tuition in English grammar and composition to high school students.

Yoon and her friends were also fortunate to meet someone who let them use space in his property for free. This someone, Lee Chung Keun, now serves as chair of the board of trustees of Cheonan YMCA.

Yoon says the Cheonan YMCA now has the distinction of being the only chapter that was not established from the top but was founded by the elderly and by young people themselves.

When the chapter was set up, not Yoon but a man, Park Sung Ho, was named its manager. This happened not only because Yoon was young (she was only twenty-two, he was thirty-one) but also because at that time, the national YMCA did not allow a woman to be manager of a chapter. Though it was hard for her to accept the fact at the time, Yoon served only as one of the chapters’ many staff members under the manager. Today the situation has changed: women can be managers of YMCA chapters.

Yoon says she never thought of establishing a Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) because at that time, “I didn’t see myself as a woman” but just as a citizen. “That’s why I was very uncomfortable because people trust my husband more than they do me,” she adds. Yoon, however, acknowledges that Park helped a lot in founding the Cheonan YMCA and that he acted as her mentor, particularly on how to sustain the chapter and how to manage it systematically and effectively.

Once the chapter was up, it organized forums to determine the problems and issues facing the city. Yoon says that, as long-time residents of Cheonan, she and her friends knew what these problems were. But they wanted these problems to be brought out in the open; they wanted to provide people an opportunity to discuss and resolve the issues, and to identify people, particularly specialists, who were really interested in addressing these issues.

The problems that emerged included those concerned with young people and those related to transport, education, and the environment. The issues brought up included the role of Christian churches in society, the cleanliness of the waterways of Cheonan, and the city's traffic system. YMCA had to address all of these things because the city had no other comparable organizations to deal with them.

The problems of young people related to their school life, particularly their grades. These were very important to Korean students because low grades were equated with failure and conflict with parents. Their other concerns were sexual issues, friendship with the opposite sex, and their future.

For these young people, the Cheonan YMCA ran a counseling program that was initiated and funded by the government, and for which the chapter employed counselors and social workers. It also brought in dramas, orchestral concerts, and performances by popular singers and musical groups, which the youth of Cheonan would otherwise not have had the opportunity to experience.

Yoon also introduced the concept of having a center where young people could go. She explains that this center was less a place or a building than a place where groups prepared activities for the young and then used a university facility or some other place as venue for these activities.

As time passed, Yoon observed that people took part less and less in YMCA's activities; only the YMCA staff and the specialists remained active in the end. It was also while working with the Cheonan YMCA that she saw that civil society had the potential for changing society but that this required a change in the mindset of people as members of a society and in their concept of themselves.

BEGINNING in 1995, the work of civil society in South Korea in general came under increasing criticism that the civil society movement did not have real citizens and did not have citizen participation. In other words, the civil society movement had no society to speak of.

Yoon confirms this. Since the democracy movement peaked in 1987 (when Chun Doo Hwan, bowing to internal and external pressures, acceded to popular elections), civil society has been acknowledged to be an important player for social change. But in order to be heeded by government, the organizations that constitute this society have to be large enough to enforce change.

To influence government and to promote their opinions, these organizations have been using mass media. Yoon acknowledges that to some extent this strategy has succeeded. But it has left out the participation of ordinary citizens, and for this reason she could not help but wonder what really was in the minds of ordinary people and what the connection was between them and the work of civil society organizations.

A television program that Yoon was watching gave her answers to these questions. The program, titled *Request of Love*, showed cases of the poor, followed by appeals for contributions. "I didn't like it because it was not right to stimulate people's emotions just to help others," Yoon says. "I thought it was more necessary to have a systematic change in society."

But what really surprised her was that so many people responded to the program. "That was what I was able to find out from that program. People had enough interest in others. So I wanted to use that interest of ordinary people to form a systematic way by which they can help society in need."

Yoon looked around for civil society organizations that could help people who were interested in helping others connect with relevant groups or organizations but she could not find any. Most social work, she found, was done by government through recognized social workers.

So in 1997, while she was working on her master's degree in public administration at Sogang University in Seoul, she began setting up COWW. It was formally established in June 1998.

COWW took Yoon less time and effort to put up than the Cheonan YMCA because there were no procedures and requirements by some mother organization she had to follow. Moreover, COWW articulated

many issues that affected ordinary people and responded to these. Hence, the organization was well-received by many.

How did Yoon motivate citizens to participate? Not by pointing to individual experiences or abstract moral principles, or by saying participation is an obligation, she says, but by providing citizens opportunities for meeting members of social minorities. Such encounters, she says, help make these citizens realize that problems of life which they considered private in the past are, in fact, public concerns. The opportunities for these encounters between citizens and members of social minorities took various forms:

1. **For parents of differently abled children**, there were parental awareness sessions, camps, exposure and discussions. The program for such parents began after Yoon and COWW encountered mothers of children with Trisomy 21, also known as Down syndrome. From this program, the Chungnam Differently Abled Children's Parents Society was founded in 1999.
2. **For children from low-income families** who were most seriously affected by the 1998 economic crisis, there were after-school programs, group homes, and public debates on children's issues. From these activities the organization Building Up a Brighter Future for Children was born in 2003.
3. **For the social integration of the mentally disabled**, there were parental awareness sessions, support of small group meetings, field surveys, public debates, and networking of experts. These activities gave rise to Citizens Concerned about Community Mental Health in 2001 and the Center for Mental Health in Cheonan City in 2003.
4. **For the human rights of women, particularly victims of domestic violence**, the interventions included providing shelter, small group meetings, awareness sessions and lectures, field surveys, and public debates. The program for this sector gave birth to the Chungnam Differently Abled Women's Solidarity in 2000 and the establishment of the Center for Self-Support of Differently Abled Women in 2003.
5. **For the health and welfare of the elderly**, the interventions consisted of lectures and awareness programs, a day care center, and sharing of food. Begun after an increase in the aging population and an imbalance in community welfare for the elderly were noted, the program evolved into the health and welfare center for the elderly called Zelkova. This center, founded in 2003, became independent in 2005.

Yoon says these social minorities are marginalized not only by the forces of Korean culture but also by the system and by the way people regard disability and the disabled. These days, she says, the economy is the most important and most urgent concern of people in South Korea. The preoccupation with the economy can overshadow other issues. "So the concepts of people and the disabled have to change, so that society will move to provide a better environment for the handicapped," she says. "These are not personal issues but social issues as a whole that the community has to deal with."

TO prepare COWW to respond to a social need, Yoon, inspired by management guru Peter Drucker, "incubates" leaders for the new program or organization that will meet this need. Like Drucker, she believes

a healthy organization should not depend on just one leader who would control everything. Large organizations require a lot of resources, but small organizations with different leaders could be run more economically and effectively, she believes.

For example, more people took part in the activities of Children Opening the World when it became independent of COWW. Among the other organizations for which Yoon and COWW incubated leaders are the Cheonan Association of Parents of Handicapped Children and the Association for the Cheonan Elderly.

Incubating organizations is a systematic way of training leaders. Although COWW can provide people who can help the handicapped or the disabled, these people cannot meet the different needs of these sectors. COWW realized that it needed to help those who do meet the needs of these sectors, to enable them to solve problems on their own.

In the case of handicapped or disabled children, Yoon found that the helpers who needed helping were these children's own mothers. So she sought out these mothers to help them meet their own needs. The resulting organization was the Cheonan Association of Parents of Disabled Children. Yoon says the incubation system has a multiplier effect. Organizations incubate other organizations, as what happened in the case of the association of parents of disabled children: it now has four chapters in Korea.

Why the metaphor of an incubator?

"I am a mom, so I know this well," Yoon replies. "Those who are not sufficiently prepared to survive outside, I keep and train them, equip them to be independent of their mother. So incubation is the period to enable them to survive by themselves."

She adds: "I got the spirit from Jesus [Christ]. What makes it possible to incubate others is self-denial, endurance, persistence. If the mothers' group does not deny itself and persevere until its children are strong enough to survive, this process of incubating will not be possible. This is what Jesus did when He was on earth. He incubated others—His disciples. That is what I am painting in my mind—to give birth to new life, one has to give one's life away."

Yoon says a social welfare organization that is being incubated goes through six stages:

1. **Unearthing of issues and presentation of problems.** During the economic crisis in 1998, there were many opportunities for meeting the needs of undernourished children and the human rights problems of disabled adults and children. But these needs and problems were hidden from public view, so they did not draw the interest of society or of support systems for these social minorities. Yoon said these needs and problems surfaced "accidentally." When they did, she said, COWW made them an important issue in the community and posed them "officially and objectively."
2. **Organization of initial groups.** Instead of coming up with short-term solutions to these needs and problems, COWW sought to strengthen the community's capacity for solving problems by educating its members. When a problem arose, COWW networks with interested individuals and quickly provides them opportunities to get together to assess the situation objectively, share information on the support being given to the need at hand by government and nongovernmental organizations, and then come up with long-term solutions. For the needs of disabled children, the interested parties who were brought together initially included not only individuals such as doctors, special education teachers, and certified social workers but also organizations. For undernourished children, the individuals and groups that came together initially included housewives, college students, and religious.
3. **Planning and implementation.** Social welfare programs not only provide social services to people but also build a structure for citizen participation. This structure serves as a

mechanism for identifying and educating potential leaders from among responsible and devoted individuals. In the case of the program for children from low-income families, for example, the pool of potential leaders included social education teachers, volunteer workers from churches or companies, and college students who took part in an after-school program for these children. Those who were more interested were made part of an administrative committee and were motivated to take on more responsibility by being made part of decision-making structures.

4. **Preparation for independence.** Being part of a decision-making body imbues one with more responsibility and a sense of belonging. For this reason, Yoon says, the small but independent start of a new organization is a good way to increase people's commitment towards voluntary activities. "Usually," she says, "two to five years are needed for incubation but in this period, active participants learn necessary processes with a view to making their organization independent in the years to come." At this stage also, it is important for one to do the following: (a) share vision with members of decision-making bodies such as boards of directors, (b) strengthen capacity for publicly airing problems and presenting solutions on issues, (c) increase the ability of staff to create programs that will promote the objectives of the organization, (d) secure funding, determine whether such funding could be made stable, and find out how wide the donor base of funds is, because this could affect the number of activities and programs that the organization could undertake. In addition, participants in the incubation process should be able to come up with solutions together.
5. **Independence.** To make the birth of an organization publicly known, it should have an official founding ceremony. The new organization will have its own decision-making structure and office that is totally independent of the mother organization, and that will implement its own activities and programs based on its capacity and objectives.
6. **Networking with agencies and other organizations.** The power to lay down policies affecting social minorities in South Korea still rests with the country's local governments. But such policies and support programs for these minorities are still lacking. Until 2002, civil society organizations have done little for these minorities because social welfare has always been a marginal issue even within these organizations. In 2002, however, a local election year, there was a significant shift in this situation. Civil society used its power of networking to draw government attention to the issues and to make government come up with needed policy decisions. Its instrument for exercising such power was the Cheonan Network for the Welfare City. That year, the network published and distributed a book entitled *Policy Proposals on Social Welfare* and organized a public debate among the candidates for Cheonan mayor. More than a thousand people participated in that debate. It sent a strong reminder to policymakers who used to be indifferent to social welfare that the social welfare network could generate great political influence. It also made social welfare, which used to be a marginal issue, a central issue in Cheonan. Thereafter, the network was able to pursue its agenda through a series of social welfare forums where its proposals were taken up. Many of these proposals were adopted as local government policies. In 2005, the network changed its name to Cheonan Council on Social Welfare.

Yoon believes that groups do not have to be large to be effective agents of change. Her dream for Cheonan is of a city energized by the actions of "many small, healthy organizations."

YOON says that because there are problems in society that are urgent, it is important that social change be effected within a short period. More important, however, is to bring about long-term changes in the foundations of society.

She says that although she is working with COWW now, there is a possibility that she will have to quit. “So to have a healthy organization, it is important to train people as leaders,” she says.

For Yoon, having a heart is more important in helping others than having skills. She says she herself was not really skillful at helping others, but her passion made her work with people in need. “So I try to find people who have the heart for people in need,” she says. She finds these people, she says, among those who meet with her because of their interest in her programs.

Yoon says the training that she provides future leaders is holistic: they not only go through a specific training process but also get the opportunity to participate in all the activities related to the programs in which they will be involved.

She also says the financial sustainability of a program or organization is important: it must have enough funds to keep it going. But it must, at the same time, keep from losing its identity or mission to controlling donors or contributors. “I try to keep the balance between having enough funds and keeping our mission,” she says.

COWW does not receive any funding from government, but the organizations that emerged from COWW’s activities can receive government support because they provide direct service to those in need. But Yoon advises them to get financial support from other sources as well. Foremost among these are the members of the organization themselves, as well as individuals and business institutions.

COWW itself derives 90 percent of its income from its eight hundred members. “It is crucial to have many members, many more members, because when they give away their money, they also give their heart,” Yoon says. “They become more interested in our work. So all those members contribute just a little but for a long time.” To keep people posted on COWW’s progress, the organization puts out a newsletter in Korean.

Yoon says it is important for trained leaders to participate in politics. But she herself would rather train others than go into politics. In fact, she sees herself as still working in a civic center years from now, training leaders for different nongovernmental organizations.

Speaking of her own personal formation, she says that although there were “always problems and noise” in her family when she was growing up, and though she was unable to do what she really wanted to do for herself then, she is still thankful. “If I had not had this family,” she explains, “I would never have understood others. . . . What I did was to expand my experience in my own family to society.” She adds: “I think it is the same with people, groups, nation, and country. What is important is for people to embrace their own society and help it to mature until it is a better place to live in.”

Yoon says the civil society movement in Korea is now active and the activities of civil society organizations have become visible. But she laments that the number of people actually taking part in the movement is still “very limited.”

“The reality of ‘civil movement without citizens’ leaves us the urgent task of citizens’ participation—making civil society organizations believe that the true subject of change as well as the driving force for change in society are its citizens,” Yoon says. It is not an easy task, she hastens to add, “but difficulty is different from impossibility.”

Yoon adds that another reason the activities of civil society organizations have “somewhat stagnated” is that the vision and thrust of individual organizations do not spread into civil society. She traces this to “self-centered perspectives”—seeking individual success and expansion—and “inner-oriented” activities rather than altruism, commitment to the common good, and extension of the civil society sphere. “Creating and expanding new organizations through ‘incubating work’ are not possible without self-denying sacrifice by a mother organization,” she says. She adds: “It is not that easy for an organization to make a collective decision taking ‘incubating work’ as one of its priority tasks.”

She explains that such work seeks to develop leaders who share a common vision for, and a commitment to, the community to which they belong. From experience, Yoon says, these leaders, though few, become, in the long run, the power in transforming their community because their devotion and their passion are able to influence the minds of the majority.

Yoon admits that there are problems and limitations. Many of the activists that were developed as leaders have experienced burnout because of work overload, strong demands from the community, and lack of funding. These could make their organizations work-centered rather than people-centered.

Despite these problems, Yoon believes that the incubating work done by COWW, although a little slow, is a concrete and feasible alternative for giving more substance to Korea's civil society movement.

CALM but passionate, only thirty-seven years old, Yoon Hye-ran still has a whole life ahead of her. Where others are still striving to find their life mission, she has already demonstrated how one person—armed with a clear mind, deep compassion, and capacity for selfless work—can change her community for the better.

Vicente G. Tirol  
REFERENCES

*Citizens Opening the World for Welfare, 2003 Annual Report* (Selected information translated into English).

Wikipedia. S.v. "1997 Asian Financial Crisis." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian\\_financial\\_crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian_financial_crisis).

Yoon Hye-ran. "Incubating Community-Based Social Welfare Programs and Organizations." Paper presented at the 2005 Ramon Magsaysay Awardees Lecture Series, Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila, September 2, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. Interview by James R. Rush. Tape recording, Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila, September 1, 2005.

Various interviews and correspondence with individuals familiar with Yoon Hye-ran and her work; other primary documents.

