

Policy Forum 08-099: The Daejeon Green Growth Forum: An Effort To Build A New Korean Economy From The Bottom Up



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By Liao Ran and Chen Ke

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I. Introduction

Liao Ran and Chen Ke, students at Solbridge International School of Business in Daejeon, Korea, write, "Although the ultimate impact of the Daejeon Green Growth Forum's efforts has yet to be seen, it is a tribute to Korea's capacity for innovation that this environmental forum has come to play such a central role within less than a year of its establishment."

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II. Article by Liao Ran and Chen Ke

- "The Daejeon Green Growth Forum: An Effort To Build A New Korean Economy From The Bottom Up"

By Liao Ran and Chen Ke

Korea has not been known as a leader in environmental technology. Its industries have lagged behind Japan and Germany in implementing energy efficient manufacturing technologies and achieving low carbon emissions. Yet Korea, a compact nation of 48 million citizens famous as rapid adopters of new technologies, has some major advantages now that it has entered the environmental growth ring.

Koreans are clearly remarkable innovators. Time and again, Korea has shown its ability to change course, to adapt to changing circumstances, by reinventing itself economically and culturally. After all, Korea had no background in shipbuilding in the 1960s but now leads the world in that field by dint of the determination of its policy makers and industrialists.

The Daejeon Green Growth Forum is an example of how quickly Koreans are changing their thinking about the environment and how serious they are about implementing their new ideas. Koreans at the local level have formed a coalition bringing together experts from major research institutes, representatives from businesses, NGOs and local and central government to tackle the problems of making the city energy-efficient and environmentally sustainable. It is unusual enough for experts in technology to sit down with government officials to discuss mass transit and energy conservation, but for environmental activists best known for their protests in front of city hall to join the discussion is astounding.

The Daejeon Green Growth Forum now has not only an imperative to work with the city to build in Daejeon a model for Asia of an ecologically-friendly urban space, but also a budget from the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Knowledge Economy to help it to do so.

The group started out in January of 2008 as an informal meeting of figures from the leading research institutes and universities in Daejeon (Korea's science and technology R&D cluster) who felt strongly about environmental issues and were frustrated with the pace at which new technologies developed in the labs are implemented at the local level.

Two members of the Daejeon Green Growth Forum (then known as the Daejeon Environment Forum) put forth its vision for Daejeon as an "Ecocity" in a short article published in Korean and English entitled "Daejeon: Environmental Capital of Asia" that drew considerable attention.

The group started small. Researchers stole away from their laboratories in the evenings to meet in the conference rooms at assorted research institutes in Daejeon and to discuss how the expertise available in Daejeon could be put to work to transform the city. The excited, and sometimes heated, debates began over dinner, followed by a member's presentation, followed by a roundtable discussion.

On one such occasion in March 2008, Junghoon Han of the National Fusion Research Institute presented his plans for the construction of new bicycle paths in the city. Dr. Young Choi of the Korea Institute of Machinery and Materials, gave his input as an engineer and Dr. Jiwon Yang as a chemist. The debate covered myriad topics, from innovative designs for bicycles and surfaces for bike paths to approaches to publicizing bicycles among citizens and convincing city hall of the project's value.

Within four months, the forum had gained such a reputation that it hosted Daejeon's Mayor Seong-hyo Park and convinced him of the importance of their efforts. Many elements of the discussion on bicycle paths from Dr. Han's presentation are now under serious consideration by the city.

The members of the Daejeon Green Growth Forum came to the dialogue from different fields but all were committed to using their specialized knowledge at the local level. From the enthusiastic and ebullient Ahn Jihwan of the Korea Institute of Geosciences and Mineral Resources to the incisive and penetrating Sang-soo Kwak of the Korea Institute for Bioscience and Biotechnology, who spends much of his time in China in an effort to introduce genetically modified sweet potatoes to arid regions of China, a variety of personalities were represented. The politically savvy, the idealists and the pure scholars all joined in at the dinner table.

In addition, the group was joined by two foreigners, Nakamura Toraaki, a long-term resident Japanese committed to environmental issues, and the American Emanuel Pastreich of SolBridge Business School, best known for his efforts to promote closer relations between the nations of Asia. Korea's social movements are generally quite insular, so the very idea of having foreigners involved in such an effort from the beginning is nothing short of revolutionary.

The membership grew. By July of 2008, there were 20 members in the Daejeon Green Growth Forum from the Korea Electric Power Research Institute, Chungnam National University, the Korea Basic Sciences Research Institute, KAIST (Korea's foremost technical university) and others institutions. Jiwon Yang, KAIST's Vice President, and environmental technology expert, took over as chairman.

The discussions carried out at the Daejeon Green Growth Forum did not take place in a vacuum; its members were also active participants in a larger debate on Korea's future. Daejeon, with its combination of research institutes and businesses, is a microcosm for the concerns of Korea as it wrestles with the challenges of an export-driven economy in an age of high energy costs and environmental threats.

Those themes were encapsulated in President Lee Myung-bak's address commemorating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Korean Republic, delivered on Aug. 15, 2008. President Lee honed in on the importance of green growth for the Korean economy in the twenty-first century in this speech, stating that "Low carbon green growth ... is a new national development paradigm that creates new growth engines and jobs with green technology and clean energy. The world has gone through the stages of the agricultural, industrial and information revolutions. Now, it is entering the age of an environmental revolution."

This speech took the environmental movement from the periphery to the center of the policy debate in Korea, with the crisis of climate change and environmental degradation receiving new attention from a conservative administration that few would have expected to focus on the environment.

A "Green Growth Forum" was established in Seoul on Sept. 9 under the aegis of the Ministry of the Environment, bringing together members from academia, business, the research institutes, and media.

Next, the Daejeon Metropolitan City announced its vision of a "Green City Daejeon" on Oct. 6. Mayor Park increasingly spoke of the importance of leadership in environmental issues and embraced the vision of tapping into Daejeon's research capability to rejuvenate the city in coordination with the central government. He asserted that the perceived conflict between growth and environment could be overcome and a new synergy developed from the marriage of the two concerns.

The next step was the establishment of a Green Growth Forum at the local level to coordinate the actual policies required to implement President Lee's vision. The Daejeon forum was the natural choice. The Daejeon Environment Forum was renamed as the "Daejeon Green Growth Forum" in a formal ceremony held at the Yusung Hotel in Daejeon on Nov. 27.

The forum's character was transformed, moving from an ad hoc gathering of like minds to a formal institution. The forum gained new members from industry, government, the media, NGOs and religious groups, and established an executive office and advisory board. Three working groups were inaugurated: climate change technologies (reducing greenhouse gases, energy independence), green industries (environmental technology development), and the green society (the revolution in daily life, education about the environment). Vice President Yang continues in his role as chairman, assisted by Ho Kang, director of the Daejeon Environmental Technology Development Center at Chungnam University.

The Daejeon Green Growth Forum plans to develop into a think-tank for environmental technology and policy that will have impact throughout Asia because of the stature in research of the institutions in Daejeon, with the goal of inspiring other communities to employ locally the technologies available in their research institutions.

Vice President Yang spoke of the future of the Daejeon Green Growth Forum in the following manner:

"The Daejeon Green Growth Forum is concerned with sustainable development, a topic that has not been addressed previously in a sufficiently serious manner. An important aspect of our forum is the support it enjoys at both the local level and in the central government. Around the world people are thinking increasingly about the environment as part of the economy, but here in Daejeon we have a critical mass of research institutes that not only have expertise in environmental sciences, but are major players in the local economy. We can impact the local economy directly through our actions."

Although the ultimate impact of the Daejeon Green Growth Forum's efforts has yet to be seen, it is a tribute to Korea's capacity for innovation that this environmental forum has come to play such a central role within less than a year of its establishment.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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