



Helena Kick

Decentralisation in Public Housing Policy

An East Asian Case Study Comparison

Topic and Research Question

“Has there been a process of decentralisation within national/federal public housing policies in South Korea and Japan between the Asian Financial Crisis and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?”

As the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and Japan demonstrate numerous structural parallels, it is reasonable to expect that their public housing strategies, including possible decentralisation developments within this policy realm, resemble each other. This thesis examines this question by examining how public housing policies have evolved over the chosen timeframe, aiming to disclose shared patterns between the two cases. The findings of the thesis are valuable to scholars of decentralisation, housing policy, and crisis management, as well as to policymakers, by offering comparative insights of decentralisation processes and housing policy designs.

State of the Art

While theoretical concepts such as policy design, policy actors and decentralisation have been thoroughly explored in previous literature, the same cannot be said for decentralisation in concern to public housing policy, also in concern to the two case studies. A research gap presents itself on two primary levels, firstly theoretically as no comprehensive framework exists for a systematic comparison of public housing policies across countries in concern to possible decentralisation developments. Secondly, on the empirical level, as previous research is mainly confined to Western settings. While comparisons between South Korea and Japan exist, they are rather concentrated on overall housing markets, instead of public housing, its provision and its welfare-related implications.

Additionally, there is only a limited amount of research concerning decentralisation as a result of policy design, especially focussing on governmental actors and their power distribution. While there are explorations of the usage of decentralisation of policies to ensure a more adequate supply of housing for lower income parts of society, they mostly concern themselves with developing countries. Furthermore, the interaction between crisis management and decentralisation or the usage of latter as a crisis response are also not a major focus of previous literature, with this aspect of interest stemming from the chosen timeframe, being located between two

internationally as crises described developments and also including the Global Financial Crisis.

Methodology and Approach

To be able to answer the research question, a dedicated analytical framework is used to categorise the relevant policies concerning public housing of both case studies throughout the analysed timeframe into different actor groups and levels. This framework is also used to examine possible shifts in responsibilities and tasks between the different actors. As a source material the significant legal documents from each country on the national/federal level are examined. The analytical framework is based on the established list of possible relevant policy actors, as discussed in the state of the art, which are sorted into the groups of national government, regional/local government, private actors/market, individuals/other actors, and miscellaneous.

In a first step the selected laws are analysed qualitatively individually for each country, paying close attention to the relevant adjustments within the timeframe. In a second step, the collected relevant passages and textual adjustments are categorised according to the analytical framework, i.e. according to the established actor groups and levels, allowing a comparison between the two country cases in concern to the involved actors, as well as the adjustments to their responsibilities and tasks.

Main Facts

The findings of the empirical part can therefore also be explored along two sections.

The first section of the analysis, namely the examination of the developments of the singular public housing policies in each country case, shows that both countries increasingly emphasized not only the construction of new housing units, but also the upgrading of existing housing stock. While the South Korean government adjusted its policies more frequently and comprehensively, especially before 2016, in the case of Japan there were fewer and less significant adjustments of public housing policies to be noted, with no new pieces of legislation being introduced after 2007, suggesting a comparatively lower priority of this policy area. According to this first analysis, responsibility for public housing remained distributed among national/federal, regional/state and local/municipal actors in both cases, with modest shifts towards greater regional and local involvement, often through the establishment of

committees and planning related actors, that gradually incorporated sub-national actors.

The second section of the analysis concerns itself with decentralisation trends according to the developments after actor levels and groups. The national/federal level in both country cases continues to hold the core responsibilities in concern to public housing policies, e.g. setting standards, decision-making on financing and supervision of public housing, and sees a slight increase in responsibilities within the set timeframe. The regional/state level in both countries is continuously involved in the primary aspects of public housing policies, e.g. the construction, supply, and management of public housing, as well as the preparation of regional housing plans, and a more significant increase in responsibilities and tasks can be observed. The local/municipal level acts as a housing provider and holds further core functions such as being responsible for submitting local housing plans, handling the financial side of public housing, and implementing of national policies. While this actor group receives an increasing number of responsibilities in the earlier years of the analysed timeframe, it later sees fewer changes, especially in Japan. The other explored actor groups and levels only play minor roles in the supply and management of public housing. It does stand out that especially in South Korea in the earlier parts of the analysed time frame, several cross-level committees are created, involving representatives from all administrative tiers.

Results

Overall, both country cases show a gradual redistribution of public housing related responsibilities from the national to the regional and local level, particularly in concern to planning and management, which can be interpreted as a modest decentralisation process. However, because many responsibilities remain shared and for example because committee structures blur accountability, a clearly decisive and strong decentralisation trend is difficult to ascertain. Also, regarding the overall scope of the policies and the number of amendments, this process or tendency is nevertheless of comparatively minor nature.

On the national/federal level in neither case a clear increase of responsibilities is observable, indicating neither a centralisation nor a decentralisation process. While the regional/state actors gain additional duties over time, showing a decentralisation process, some responsibilities remain largely coordinated by the national/federal level, indicating only a modest shift

toward decentralisation. The local/municipal level's role expands, signalling further decentralisation of tasks and responsibilities in concern to public housing. Concerning the other actor groups, especially due to the ambiguous regulations of the committees' establishment and their responsibilities, no clear trend in concern to decentralisation can be identified.

The findings are contextualised in the discussion in concern to several different aspects, including for example the notion of decentralisation being used as a form of crisis management or the decentralisation measurement of the Regional Authority Index (World Bank/International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2024).

While the findings and their interpretations offer a thorough understanding of the public housing policies in place in South Korea and Japan and the respective decentralisation tendencies, they also lay the groundwork for future investigations, for example through the analysis of regional and local policies in addition to the here analysed national pieces of legislation in both country cases.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/detail/79061/>.

About the Author

After completing her B.A. at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, in Political Science, already focusing on Central and East Asia during her studies and in her Bachelor thesis, this strong interest in political developments in the region led the author to join the ECOS program. In the future Ms. Kick seeks to broaden her knowledge further and continue her career in political communication.

Contact information:

a12026736@unet.univie.ac.at



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