Achieving Administrative Transparency
Through Information Systems: A Case Study
in the Seoul Metropolitan Government

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Abstract. Information systems have been mostly used to enhance the
efficiency of administrative procedures in the local government sector
as well as the central government sector. Information systems also help
to improve transparency of civil affairs. The OPEN (Online Procedures
Enhancement from civil application) system in the Seoul metropolitan
government of South Korea has helped to achieve transparency in the
civil administration by preventing unnecessary delays and unjust han-
dling of civil affairs on the part of civil servants. The focus of this study
is an administrative informatization at the level of the local government,
not at the level of the central government. This paper, therefore, exam-
ines the success factors of the OPEN system, i.e., the powerful leadership
of the city government, the development of Information and Communi-
cation Technology (ICT), and citizens' attitudes. In addition, this paper
analyzes some barriers to the development of the OPEN system and its
existing problems.

1 Introduction

With the development of ICT, has come an infrastructure for accessing infor-
mation in a more convenient manner, and many government offices have started
to utilize it in their administrative tasks. Especially, the larger the size of the
government organizations become, the more the information system is necessary.
Many countries have focused on initializing the information system and on us-
ing it with ease, and the Korean local government is one of them. Although a
number of countries have invested a huge amount of their budget in administra-
tive information systems, there are few instances in which they have made real
successes. With this in mind, the Seoul metropolitan government has achieved
great performance using the OPEN (Online Procedures Enhancement from civil
application) system in its electronic civil affair system.

The OPEN system was first introduced in 1999. It provides online services
for approximately 54 kinds of administrative procedures in 10 areas such as san-
tary problem, building construction, etc. Citizens can check their civil affairs
on the Internet. In other words, they can know administrative processes at each
step in real time. Not only focusing on realizing the process of civil affairs online, but also unveiling their all steps which had been notoriously haunted by injustice and corruption, the OPEN system has showed a great success in achieving administrative transparency. In addition, another success can be found in that the OPEN system was established with a relatively small budget and scale of a local government, which is totally different from the previous one where the Korean central government poured large budget and manpower.

The performance of the OPEN system had, however, been in question at the initial stage of the development. Moreover, civil servants of the Seoul metropolitan government were not in favor with that system because it was suspected that the new system would limit their discretion and increase the amount of their work. In this paper, we will answer the following questions:

- How has the OPEN system been planned and developed?
- Does this system add more convenience in both administrative and technical perspectives, how does it have an effect on lowering the corruption level of civil affairs?
- What are the problems pointed out from the developing stages of the OPEN system, and what are the possible solutions to them?
- What factors have led the OPEN system to success?

In the next chapter, this paper addresses the conceptual background of corruption and transparency in administrative procedures. In the following chapter, the OPEN system will be introduced, and its impact will be investigated. Finally, this paper will analyze the problems of the OPEN system and suggest possible future issues.

2 Theoretical Background

He, Z pointed out that the concept of corruption is a negative phenomena and unhealthy tendency within the party and government departments and that this concept has three features [1]. The first feature is that the core element of corruption is not abuse or misuse of public power but the very use of public power for private benefit. The second feature is the ambiguity of the term “private interest” in contrast to “public interest”. In other words, sometimes, private benefits include not only personal gains but also the public interest. The last feature is the question of the subject of corruption. It often refers to public bodies and their leaders, as well as individual public officials.

From the viewpoint of the first feature, how can public power be used for private benefit? It can be explained by the theory of principal-agent relationships. Becker and Stigler first introduced a principal-agent model of corruption. After the introduction of a principal-agent model, many researchers have extended that theory [2]. Tirole [3], [4] and Laffont [5] extended the classic principal-agent framework to include chains of principal-agent relationships. According to Smith and Bertozzi [6], the relationship between governments and citizens can be explained by principal-agent theory, i.e., citizens are principals and, in