



Paradiplomacy and the Role of Local Actors: A Case Study of Bleberan Village in Collaboration with Gyeongsangbukdo, South Korea

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Abstract

Paradiplomacy has become a significant phenomenon in contemporary international relations, where subnational actors seek to build global networks to support local development. However, in practice, subnational actors cannot operate alone but rely on the involvement of non-state and transnational actors. This study analyzes the roles of key actors in implementing paradiplomacy in Bleberan Village, Gunungkidul, in collaboration with the Gyeongsangbukdo Provincial Government, South Korea. Data were collected through interviews with the village government, Village-Owned Enterprises (Badan Usaha Milik Desa or BUMDes), the Gyeongsangbukdo Saemaul International Foundation (YGSI), and the mushroom farming community. The results show that the success of paradiplomacy is primarily determined by the complex interactions between transnational actors (YGSI and the Gyeongsangbukdo government), local actors (BUMDes, village government, and farming communities), and individuals with stronger socio-economic capacities. Although the Korean government has provided support through grants, training, and infrastructure, the program's sustainability faces challenges, including weak financial management, limited human resource capacity, and inadequate support from the local government. These findings confirm that paradiplomacy is not simply a subnational relationship, but a multi-level practice involving networks of transnational and non-state actors. Therefore, strengthening local capacity and clarifying cross-actor collaboration mechanisms are crucial prerequisites for the sustainability of paradiplomacy.

Keywords: *Paradiplomacy, non-state actors, YGSI, BUMdes, Farmer Community.*

INTRODUCTION

Paradiplomacy refers to the involvement of subnational actors—such as local or city governments—in establishing cross-border relations. Paradiplomacy has developed as part of the decentralization of power and globalization, where regions are perceived to have international interests distinct from those of the state (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Keating, 2000). Early literature on paradiplomacy positioned subnational actors as the sole and primary actors in carrying out this practice, where the state continued to play a role as the legal framework that encompassed it (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990).

Within this framework, provincial, district, and city governments collaborate directly with foreign subnational actors. Paradiplomacy is often described as “micro diplomacy” replicating state functions at the local level (Cornago, 2010). Keating (1999) highlights its role in advancing economic interests and identities, while other scholars note its contributions to environmental improvements (Anderson, 2024; Lückers, n.d.), as well as enhancements in political and security domains (Bernal-Meza, 2024). Kuznetsov (2015), however, stresses that subnational governments remain the main drivers, with other actors merely providing support. Early literature framed them as the sole legitimate actors, given their political authority, legal capacity, and ability to formally engage internationally (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990).

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This study challenges that paradigm, arguing it is insufficient for explaining contemporary dynamics. The Bleberan Village case shows that while subnational actors are central, they cannot act alone. Non-state actors also play significant roles in policy planning and evaluation (Jang & Yoonjung, 2016; Anderson, 2024), knowledge and technology transfer (Riadi, 2021), and even security (Rodrigues & Mattioli, 2017). Thus, the research explores how non-state actors interact and share roles in paradiplomacy between Yogyakarta and Gyeongsangbukdo, emphasizing the need to move beyond state-centric and subnational-exclusive perspectives toward multi-level governance and cross-border actor networks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early paradiplomacy literature often positioned local governments as the primary actors interacting across borders. However, contemporary studies of transnational governance and international relations demonstrate that interregional cooperation in practice occurs within a multi-level, multi-actor framework. The multi-level governance framework explains that authority and policy functions are distributed across levels of government and the non-state sector, so that cross-border processes involving local governments are almost always mediated by networks of civil society organizations, foundations, universities, religious institutions, business associations, and private companies (Christie, 2022; National Intelligence Council, 2023; Rhodes, 1997). In the transnational relations tradition, non-state actors are seen as connectors that channel ideas, resources, and norms beyond state sovereignty, whether through advocacy networks, epistemic communities, or public-private partnerships (Haas, 1992; Nye & Keohane, 1971; Orogbemi, 2021).

The substantive role of non-state actors in interregional cooperation can be traced across several policy stages. At the agenda-setting stage, advocacy networks and philanthropic foundations often map issues, frame problems, and construct normative justifications that local governments then adopt as shared priorities; this mechanism is clearly evident in the literature on city diplomacy and global city networks (Acuto & Rayner, 2016; Lecours, 2008; Pejic & Acuto, 2021). At the program design stage, comprised of academics and technical experts, epistemic communities provide policy knowledge, operational standards, and performance indicators while bridging capacity gaps between local authorities (Orogbemi, 2021; Haas, 1992). At the implementation stage, NGOs, cooperatives, business associations, and private companies contribute material resources, market networks, and service infrastructure, and play an intermediary role with target communities—a social “translation” function often lacking in government bureaucracies (Evans & Rodríguez-Garavito, 2018; Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004; Sending et al., 2015). In the policy monitoring and learning phase, universities and research consortia conduct independent evaluations, curate good practices, and facilitate policy transfer between regions through joint learning forums (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004).

However, the involvement of non-state actors is not without tensions. Several studies have warned of the risks associated with fragmentation, diffuse accountability, donor dependence, and potential “agenda skew” when the priorities of transnational networks are not fully aligned with local needs (Evans & Rodríguez-Garavito, 2018; Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004; Cooley & Ron, 2002). The governance literature, therefore, emphasizes the importance of institutional design that clearly links civic participation to public mandates, transparency mechanisms, and an explicit division of roles between local authorities and non-state partners (Christie, 2022; National Intelligence Council, 2023). At this point, orchestration and polycentric approaches offer a compromise: local governments remain the “mandate holders” while non-state actors fulfill standardized and monitorable complementary functions on (Gorwa, 2019).

Overall, recent literature demonstrates that successful intergovernmental cooperation is rarely the result of a single public actor's actions. Instead, it results from complementary interactions between local authorities and non-state actors that provide ideas, legitimacy, resources, and capacity for implementation. This combination enables cross-jurisdictional collaboration despite capacity disparities and opens space for policy innovation through networked learning. The theoretical implication is the need to view paradiplomacy and interregional cooperation as structured, multi-actor practices, where non-state actors are not merely "complements" but organic components of the cross-border governance architecture.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the roles of actors in Bleberan Village, Gunungkidul, in the paradiplomacy practices of collaboration with Gyeongsangbukdo Province, South Korea. The case study enables exploration of complex actor relationships within specific social and economic contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Focusing on multi-actor collaboration in sustainable development programs, such as mushroom cultivation, the research highlights the roles, interaction strategies, and contextual influences shaping implementation. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of subnational paradiplomacy and its impact on local empowerment, extending beyond the reach of quantitative methods.

The primary data collection technique was in-depth interviews, which explored actors' perceptions, experiences, and strategies in implementing paradiplomacy. Interviews were conducted with village governments, Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes), the Gyeongsangbukdo Saemaul International Foundation (YGSI), and mushroom farming communities directly involved in program implementation. Informants were selected purposively to reach key actors with strategic positions in local paradiplomacy practices (Gentles et al., 2015). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing researchers to ask open-ended questions that allowed informants to freely explain their experiences, while ensuring coverage of key research themes such as the roles of each actor, the forms of cooperation, the obstacles encountered, and the dynamics of cross-border collaboration (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Interview data were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of actor roles, interactions between actors, and factors influencing the success or obstacles of paradiplomacy cooperation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The role of local actors in the collaboration between Bleberan and Gyeongsangbukdo villages in South Korea was examined using a qualitative approach, which has weaknesses due to its subjective nature. The researcher, as the main instrument, acts as an observer, interviewer, and data collector, while also compiling reports and conclusions based on the research findings. Therefore, the research results are highly dependent on the researcher's interpretation. Further evidence can be enriched by using a quantitative approach. In addition to being objective due to the researcher's limited involvement, qualitative research will use samples, and its research results will be applied to the population. Quantitative research can be conducted by highlighting the effectiveness of the role of local actors in the collaboration between Bleberan and Gyeongsangbukdo villages in South Korea.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bleberan Village in Collaboration between the Yogyakarta Regional Government and the Saemaul Foundation

The paradiplomacy between Yogyakarta and the Semaual Foundation began on January 15, 2001, when BAPPEDA Yogyakarta received representatives from Gyeongsangbuk-do Province, who

delivered a cooperation proposal from their governor. This was followed by Yogyakarta's visit to Gyeongsangbuk in September 2003, where a Letter of Intent was signed by Deputy Governor Paku Alam IX and Governor Lee Eui-Geun ([Deniar & Maharani, 2022](#)). Within the sister-city framework, the Saemaul Undong model—a community-based development initiative from South Korea—was introduced and implemented in Yogyakarta through the Gyeongsangbukdo Saemaul International (YGSI) Foundation, notably in Bleberan Village, Gunungkidul ([Puspitasari et al., 2019](#)).

Researchers selected Bleberan Village because its dry climate, with low rainfall, is suitable for mushroom cultivation, which requires minimal water. The readiness of both the community and village officials further supported this choice, making Bleberan an ideal example of participatory development through paradiplomacy. The decision was reached through intensive communication among YGSI, the regional government, and the local community, ensuring community involvement from the preparation stage. According to the village head, residents acted as both subjects and objects of development, actively participating in discussions and collectively deciding their priorities, which fostered a sense of ownership over the program.

In addition, Bleberan already had a Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes), a key requirement for YGSI's program, as it ensures continuity beyond the pilot phase. From a socio-economic perspective, Bleberan is located in Playen District, one of the poorest areas in Gunungkidul Regency, making the program especially valuable as an alternative source of income and a means to improve family welfare.

Bleberan Village has grown into an independent mushroom cultivation center, generating real economic benefits for the community. Through the Saemaul Undong Program under YGSI, the village embraced the "one village, one product" concept by establishing mushroom units across 11 hamlets. With halal and PIRT (Produk Industri Rumah Tangga or Home Industry Food) certification, along with administrative support from local government agencies, the group supplies fresh and processed mushrooms to Playen District and beyond, while also becoming a village tourism icon that attracts visitors and MSMEs ([Desa Bleberan, 2020](#)). Studies further show that beneficiaries have gained income from selling mushrooms and seeds, reflecting a positive economic impact on the community.

In the paradiplomacy between Yogyakarta and Gyeongsangbukdo, local non-state actors play a crucial role in ensuring program success. What began as interprovincial cooperation took concrete form in Bleberan Village through cross-actor collaboration. The Saemaul Undong model proved effective only when adapted by local actors with authority, institutional capacity, and economic interests. This reflects principles of collaborative ([Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson et al, 2012](#)) and multi-level governance ([Hooghe & Marks, 2001](#)), where success in cross-border initiatives depends on networks of actors at different levels. The roles of YGSI, village government, BUMDes, and mushroom farmers illustrate that outcomes are achieved not by a single actor, but through collaboration.

YGSI as Facilitator and Catalyst

The Gyeongsangbukdo Saemaul International Foundation (YGSI) plays a crucial role as both a facilitator and catalyst in implementing the paradiplomacy program in Bleberan Village. Research by [Newman \(2001\)](#) and [Vigoro et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrates that a non-profit organization can serve as both a facilitator and a catalyst in community development. The organization serves five functions: facilitator and catalyst. First, it fosters collaboration and trust among actors, promoting openness in sharing ideas and resources. Second, it organizes the innovation process in a structured manner through project coordination, ensuring efficiency and seamless overlap. Third, it develops partners' absorptive capacity through training and knowledge exchange with various stakeholders. Fourth, it provides transformative leadership that fosters a creative culture and the courage to take

risks. Fifth, it addresses systemic barriers with adaptive strategies, making innovation market-oriented and producing sustainable social solutions (Newman, 2001; Vigoroso et al., 2023).

As an extension of the Gyeongsangbuk-do Provincial Government and the Semaul Foundation, YGSI not only embodies the South Korean philosophy of Saemaul Undong but also ensures the availability of financial, technical, and field-based resources to enable the program to run effectively. This role is evident in their efforts to implement paradiplomacy collaboration. First, YGSI builds trust with the community through intensive consultation and mentoring, resulting in residents' willingness to accept YGSI's offer of cooperation in community empowerment through mushroom cultivation.

Second, YGSI organizes the innovation process by ensuring well-coordinated training and the Mushroom Center. In 2019, the Bleberan and Ponjong Village governments, along with relevant regional government agencies (OPDs) from Gunungkidul Regency and Yogyakarta Province, received training in mushroom cultivation in Seoul (Desa Bleberan, 2019). YGSI also built facilities such as a baglog production building and a multi-purpose building for mushroom farmer training and provided funding for the construction of mushroom barns and home mushroom barns.

Third, the community's absorptive capacity was enhanced by transferring practical knowledge about mushroom cultivation and business skills, enabling them to absorb new technologies and practices tailored to local needs. This knowledge transfer on mushroom cultivation was also accompanied by other training, such as mushroom processing. This training even enabled mushroom farmers in Bleberan Village to become facilitators in community empowerment and the development of mushroom cultivation in other areas. As Ippah admitted, mushroom farmers in Bleberan Village often serve as resource persons in mushroom cultivation and badlog production training.

Fourth, YGSI demonstrates transformative leadership by fostering a spirit of independence and hard work, while also helping residents address the challenges of a consumerist mentality. Grace Majestyka explained that the Saemaul Foundation in South Korea introduced three key principles—diligence, independence, and cooperation—as the core of development that once helped Korea develop rapidly. However, she emphasized that the program in Indonesia is not a broad Korean national program, but rather an adaptation managed by the Gyeongsangbukdo provincial government through YGSI. This program has shifted from a past Korean national movement to a contextual intervention tailored to local needs. Similarly, Galih added that the training provided to the Bleberan community instills the Saemaul work ethic and also focuses on developing business and mushroom production skills. He emphasized efforts to adapt the Korean spirit of hard work to the educational conditions of the Bleberan community, most of whom have only completed elementary or junior high school and still face the challenge of a consumerist mentality.

Fifth, YGSI plays a role in overcoming structural barriers—such as limited market access and resources—by encouraging the strengthening of village institutions through the Amura mushroom farmer group and Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes), thereby positively impacting the community's socio-economic sustainability through local innovations. Due to his established relationships with traders, the Bleberan Village Head acknowledged that access to the mushroom market has been relatively easy. Consequently, the market can absorb the community's mushroom harvest.

BUMDes as a Strengthened of Local Economic Institutions

Research by Hilmawan et al. (2023) and Tiara Puri (2021) demonstrates that Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes) have a significant role in driving village economic development. Their existence improves community welfare through productive businesses that increase village

income. They also strengthen micro and small industries by providing supporting facilities, such as savings and loan cooperatives, as well as agricultural input kiosks. BUMDes can also manage village potential in a more targeted manner, utilize Village Funds effectively, and encourage village economic independence so that they are not solely dependent on government assistance.

In the Bleberan context, BUMDes plays a central role in the sustainability of mushroom cultivation as a productive village enterprise. Profits from mushroom sales not only increase the income of farmer groups like Amura but also contribute to the village's original income. In this way, the benefits of empowerment are not limited to individuals but are institutionalized within village institutions, thereby strengthening the local economy. The Mushroom Center program, for example, is managed in collaboration with the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) to expand production and distribution capacity, while also serving as a village innovation in maintaining business sustainability.

Studies show that the success of BUMDes depends not only on funding but also on the quality of planning and the management capacity of village officials. Interviews with Bleberan officials highlight BUMDes as an "institutional vehicle" that sustains mushroom businesses even after YGSI's external support decreases, making it both an economic driver and a guarantor of long-term program sustainability. For instance, BUMDes has facilitated market access for Amura products, managed packaging and certification processes (PIRT and halal), reinvested profits into shared facilities like the Mushroom Center, and established fair profit-sharing schemes, thereby reducing enterprise risks and enabling scale-up opportunities (Desa Bleberan, 2019).

Nonetheless, challenges remain, especially in ensuring supply chain sustainability. Currently, processed mushroom products are made only on demand, while most consumers prefer raw mushrooms. This compels BUMDes to seek strategies for stabilizing production and reducing reliance on fluctuating orders to maximize the added value of the mushroom business.

The Role of Communities in Village Empowerment

Local communities play a central role in village empowerment, as they are both beneficiaries and key drivers of sustainable development. Community participation in planning and decision-making through village deliberation forums or working groups enables residents' voices to be heard and their needs to be prioritized, making empowerment programs more relevant and targeted (Nurkomala et al., 2023). This approach also fosters a sense of ownership in the program, which is the foundation for the sustainability of village initiatives.

Communities play an active role in program implementation through infrastructure development, resource management, and economic activities, strengthening social capital, fostering collective responsibility, and enhancing program sustainability (Heaton et al., 2024). Their involvement in managing BUMDes and agricultural projects improves effectiveness and ensures transparency, accountability, and capacity-building through monitoring and evaluation (Kashim & Zikri, 2025; Mia et al., 2011). Thus, communities act as both beneficiaries and key pillars of long-term sustainability.

In Bleberan, the primary challenge is low business literacy, as farming communities are unfamiliar with reinvestment practices. To address this, oyster mushroom cultivation groups were formed in nearly all 11 hamlets since 2018, supported by government and international collaborations, including Saemaul Undong, which provided training on cultivation, maintenance, and processing (Desa Bleberan, 2021). This effort culminated in the establishment of the Mushroom Center in 2020, serving as a production hub, training facility, and marketing space. Equipped with modern processing tools, farmers can diversify their products, such as crispy mushrooms, and expand their market reach both locally and beyond (Radar Jogja, 2022).

Community involvement at every stage—from planning to marketing—demonstrates that community-based empowerment can create a sustainable economic ecosystem. The sustainable economic ecosystem also makes mushroom cultivation a key attraction for village tourism, drawing tourists and comparative studies from various regions. In an interview, the Bleberan village head also explained that Merak has initiated mushroom batik as a new branding product for their village. Although it has not yet generated economic benefits, this is a significant initiative born from the village community.

CONCLUSIONS

In paradiplomacy, non-state actors function as strategic partners for subnational governments. The Bleberan case illustrates this dynamic, as the Yogyakarta Regional Government did not work alone but collaborated closely with the Gyeongsangbukdo Saemaul International Foundation (YGSI). YGSI played a crucial role as a facilitator and catalyst by organizing training sessions, transferring knowledge of mushroom cultivation, building trust, and fostering community leadership. At the same time, the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) ensured the sustainability of the village economy, while the local community actively participated in planning, implementation, evaluation, and marketing. This engagement fostered a sense of ownership, strengthened social capital, and led to local innovations, including the establishment of the Mushroom Center and the development of mushroom-themed batik branding.

The Bleberan case demonstrates that the success of paradiplomacy cannot be attributed solely to local government initiatives, but rather to the collaboration of multiple actors, including provincial authorities, non-state organizations like YGSI, village institutions, and community members. This cross-actor collaboration ensured that participatory development principles were effectively implemented, generating long-term socio-economic benefits, including higher incomes, improved skills, and strengthened local enterprises.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could further explore two key dimensions. First, it could analyze the role of non-state actors, such as YGSI, in supporting paradiplomacy, particularly their contributions to trust-building, knowledge transfer, and capacity development, as well as how these enhance program sustainability. Second, it could examine the socio-economic impacts of mushroom cultivation in Bleberan, focusing on changes in income, job creation, skills, and the resilience of local businesses. Such studies would deepen understanding of how collaborative networks between governments, institutions, and communities shape sustainable development outcomes.

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