

INTERVIEW

**Interview with Soo-jeong Ha:
Head of the Nordic Research Institute and Sustainable
Development Specialist**

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Soo-jeong Ha is a writer, journalist, and Policy Communications expert specializing in Sustainable Development and Public Policy analysis. She was previously a speech writer for the Mayor's Office of the Seoul Metropolitan Government as well as the Communications Officer for the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education. Soo-jeong is currently the Head of the Nordic Research Institute, where she heads various research projects and writes on public policy, sustainability, welfare state, social integration, as well as other topics related to Nordic issues. She has written two books, A Biography of Olof Palme (2012) and A Walk to Nordic Business (2017). Prior to that, she worked as a project manager, researcher, and the Chief of Staff to the CEO at The Hankyoreh, a South Korean independent daily newspaper where she was an official stringer covering Scandinavia and managed several projects in partnership with international media outlets and research institutions. Soo-jeong obtained a Master of Science in Sustainability Studies from Uppsala University in Sweden. In this interview, Soo-jeong shares her experiences living and studying in Northern Europe, her insights on sustainable development policies in the Scandinavian region, particularly Sweden, and her opinion on current sustainability efforts and practices in South Korea.

YJIS: For our readers who are not familiar with you, could you briefly introduce yourself?

SH: To put it simply, I'm a writer. For me, it is not just a job. Rather, it's something that I do because I truly enjoy it. Previously, I was working as a speechwriter for the mayor of Seoul, and now I am working on communications solutions projects at the C-level of corporations in the private sector. Before that, my work included writing books and carrying out individual research.

YJIS: We were intrigued to hear that you have spent a lot of time in Northern Europe, in countries such as Sweden and Norway. What would you say is your favorite thing about Northern European society? Has living there influenced you, such as your personality and/or career in any way?

SH: To give you some context, when I was deciding where to study for my media license, I had two options—one was England and the other was Norway. I had a feeling that I would have other opportunities in the future to go to London, so I chose Norway. Looking back, it was definitely the right decision. Norwegian society fits me really well because of its beautiful nature and the laid-back attitude of people. Later on I studied in Uppsala in Sweden and I had a similar feeling about Swedish society. As I grew up in Korea, I was able to make a lot of comparisons and contrasts between Korean society and Northern European society.

I think there are a lot of things that Korean society can learn from Northern European societies. For example, in Korean society during the Joseon dynasty, there was a class system. While this sort of system no longer exists now, division based on social status in Korea is still very much visible. In contrast, in Nordic society, everyone is equal. You don't see so many extremely poor or extremely rich people. But in Korea, it's more polarized. When I first began my studies in Sweden, I was surprised by how we don't use the formality, "professor." I asked the professor, "Why don't we call you 'professor', but by your first name?" and they said that if you call somebody by their occupation or job, it could create some kind of inequality between people. I began to learn that everyone should be referred to by their first name, including professors, seniors, and even the Prime Minister. I would like Korea to have more of a focus on equality and perhaps adopt some of these less-hierarchical attitudes between people.

Another big distinction between Korean and Nordic society relates to education. Korean students scored very well on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test. So several years ago, a group of Swedish politicians came and visited a lot of schools in Korea to learn the secret of the high performance of Koreans on the PISA test. However, they decided that they shouldn't follow Korean education because students in Korea didn't look happy at all. My Swedish friend told

me that when he was here in Korea to work for SK (a telecommunications company), he discovered that Korean people are too focused on work. In Sweden, work-life balance is really important, but in Korea, people are very devoted to their work. If they set a goal, they keep going until they reach it. I think this competitive mindset of Koreans made Korea develop and grow in a very short period. But in Nordic countries, according to him, everything is provided. So people do not need to work very hard to sacrifice their personal life and health, but here in Korea, you have to. However, in the case of my Swedish friend, Korean society fits him better as it provides him with many opportunities to fulfill his aspirations, goals, and future desires. In contrast, Swedish society is kind of boring to him. So I would definitely say there are things each society can learn from each other. Overall, I'd say both Swedish and Korean societies have pros and cons.

YJIS: What made you decide to pursue a Master's degree in sustainable development in Sweden in particular?

SH: When I was in Norway, I traveled to Sweden for fun. I went to Uppsala by chance and discovered that Uppsala University is the oldest university in all Northern countries and they have a tradition where Nobel Prize winners give lectures there. I was so impressed by that kind of academic atmosphere, so I told myself I should come back to this school. After I returned to Korea, I looked at the master's programs there and discovered that this university offers a program on sustainable development—something that I am really passionate about—and it is taught in English. Also, I was aware that Sweden is a very advanced country when it comes to sustainability. Environmental protection and sustainability is something I'm very passionate about. For example, I've never used conditioner for my hair because when I was young, I heard that it's not good for the environment since it takes a lot of water to purify them. So I avoid chemicals and use a lot of natural hair treatments. I was interested in the area of environmental protection, even if there were no such words like "sustainable development" back then and I saw Sweden as a leader in this area. I thought that I could gain useful knowledge there that could give me an edge in my professional background. That's why I chose to study in Sweden.

YJIS: What would you say were some of the biggest challenges you faced while studying abroad in a Nordic country like Sweden and how did you overcome them?

SH: Of course, coldness, the long winter, and darkness. It's so beautiful in August, when the first semester starts, but this doesn't last long. The winter starts in November and lasts until April, so more than half of the year is winter. But summer is so rewarding because it is so beautiful. Food was also a challenge for me initially, but it actually ended up creating a good opportunity for me to improve my cooking skills. I took advantage of the low price of items that tend to be more expensive in Korea, such as cheese and bread.

In terms of overcoming these challenges, I was able to do so through the friendships I built. Our program consisted of 60 students across 16 nationalities and the students were like a family. The program was very intensive so we met up every weekday to study and met every weekend for parties. We remain very close up to this day. When any one of us gets married, we send an invitation one year in advance so we can plan our vacations, and so far I've been to Turkey, Japan, and Belgium to visit my friends.

YJIS: Can you tell us more about your work at the Nordic Research Institute?

SH: Well, I became interested in working at the Nordic Research Institute because I really like studying Nordic society. My work includes articles, contributing to the newspaper, making YouTube videos, writing posts for the blog, getting featured on the radio—those sorts of things. It's truly fun for me. In Korea, not so many people are interested in delivering information about Nordic society in a non-academic way. I am a writer, and I am good at expressing ideas in pure, easy, and simple language, so working for the Nordic Research Institute enables me to use my skills to share information related to Northern Europe. In fact, yesterday, I submitted an academic paper to the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs. It is a government agency that asked me to write a paper about how Sweden is dealing with young carers. Young carers are people under 18 who are living with sick parents. We had a huge issue last year

in Korea where a 21-year-old man literally let his father die because his father had a serious brain disease and he could not take care of him. He ended up getting sentenced for murdering his father just because he did not have the means to save his life. This provoked the question, “can we blame him?” If society took care of his father, then he might not have committed this kind of crime. The Korean government is trying to introduce legislation to help avoid this problem, which is why the institute asked me to submit a paper on the topic.

YJIS: Can you briefly introduce your book *The Biography of Olof Palme*?

SH: Olof Palme was the Prime Minister of Sweden from 1968 to 1986. He is actually a huge figure that made Sweden known to the world. The reason I decided to write a book on him is that, first, his son was our professor in Uppsala. Second, as I have mentioned, I believe Swedish and Nordic societies are the ones we should follow in many ways. If we can implement some of the practices in these societies in Korean society, it would be very beneficial for everyone. I asked two of my friends what they think are the main differences between these two societies, and they said education and politics. They also said that Olof Palme was the person who set the basis for the current education and political models of Sweden. I then started to research him and discovered that his achievements as a politician are awe-inspiring and that he set the foundation for the modern welfare society in Sweden. His concept of a welfare state also influenced neighboring Nordic countries like Finland, Norway, and Denmark. Unfortunately, he is still not well-known in Korea due to language barriers. A few Koreans might know that he is the former Prime Minister of Sweden and was assassinated, but I want him to be known for his life more than his death. So I wrote this book to introduce him to Korean society.

YJIS: What are your plans or hopes for your career and future in general? Also, for those interested in working in a field related to sustainability, what sort of advice might you have?

SH: My ultimate goal is to be a novelist. I love crime novels and would love to write a crime novel. I also want to portray society in my writings

and include themes such as friendship and goodwill, then share my stories to the people I meet and motivate them. That's my personal goal.

Regarding sustainability issues, I believe that everyone should care about sustainability on an individual level. We depend on corporations, society, and government for a better environment, but as individuals, we should also be aware of the environment. We are the customers and the taxpayers, so if we choose a certain direction, corporations and governments will follow us. So it is important to care about sustainability issues as an individual, and I believe everyone can do that.

About working in the field of sustainability, I can see that there are many companies hiring more people with a sustainability background. Many companies have created new positions such as 'chief sustainability officer', which they didn't have before. So more opportunities are opening up. You might have more opportunities if you are studying engineering, science, or some environmental-related field. There are a lot of opportunities related to sustainability in startups. These days, many large corporations are finding ideas and merging these startups, as well as investing in sustainability-related startups.

YJIS: Let's move on to talk more about your views on sustainable development. How would you say Northern Europe has been working on promoting sustainable development? Which methods do you see as the most important?

SH: While in Korea, we don't view sustainable development as a national goal, in Nordic countries, it is set as a national goal. These countries have the kind of target where, by 2050 or 2030, they will use 100%renewable energies . Everyone—from the civil society to the government level—has the same goal. So, that's something different from other societies. From Greta Thunberg to the Prime Minister, it's everyone's mission.

Having said that, I think every society has room to improve, including Nordic countries. I mean, when you say sustainable development, it is not only about the environment, but also social equality, social stability, and how you run the society. These kinds of methodological ways also need to be sustainable. In Nordic countries such as Sweden, there are

social issues related to immigration and inequality, and recently right-wing parties have been rising. The Swedish government has been trying to solve their issues, but there are always new problems to tackle.

YJIS: Sweden held the general election in September this year, and the right-wing Sweden Democrats (SD) won a collective majority in the parliament. In other neighboring countries, right-wing populist parties are also gaining more support in recent years. What do you think are the reasons leading to this trend and how do you think the rise of populism affects the sustainable development in Northern Europe in the future?

SH: In Sweden, the right-wing party is the second largest party. The populist parties are gaining more power than ever. Yet they are not invited to the Nobel banquet nor are they a part of the cabinet. Sweden Democrats represent racism and nationalism that are not accepted in Swedish society. On the other hand, they represent the disadvantaged class in Sweden. Poor and less educated people tend to support the Swedish Democrats. It's very similar to Trump supporters in the United States. If the Social Democratic party, the oldest and largest party in Sweden, is not representing the poor or lower classes, then this would be problematic because, after all, they are the labor party. So hopefully, there's a way to resolve the current social problems in Sweden because those people need to be heard, and in a way the Swedish Democrats are doing that. So, it's a complex question. Regarding how the rise of right-wing parties is going to influence sustainable development policy in Sweden, I think they are more like pro-nuclear parties. Sweden has declared they were going with 100% renewable energy by 2030. But due to the Putin invasion of Ukraine, energy prices are also high in Sweden. So they are trying to reopen nuclear power plants. So it's going to have an impact on the whole of Europe, not just Sweden.

YJIS: Scandinavian countries are generally known for having high-quality education systems, where students can attain high academic results without going to cram schools, studying 24/7, and having so much academic pressure. What is the main reason for these countries to be labeled as having a high-quality education system compared to Korea?

SH: The focus of education in Sweden and other Nordic countries is the happiness of children. Children need to be happy, play, and enjoy outdoor activities all the time. They do sports and team building activities. In Korea, you don't see kids in the playground—they are in *hakwon*. From my experience, in Korea, we need to compete with our peers to be the first or the best. But in Sweden, the education system trains people to be good teammates and citizens. Students learn how to take care of or wait for the people who are late or people with disabilities. At school, they mingle together and learn how to live together. One of my teachers also told me that, in Sweden, it's better to be second together than being first alone. Swedish people excel in many aspects because they know that everything is complex and you can't solve a problem alone. Even if you're a genius, you need somebody. Everyone is unique, has inputs from different backgrounds, and is ready to work in a diverse team. On the other hand, in Korea, one can be a genius or excel in every aspect, but not work well with others. This is something that I worry about in the Korean education system.

YJIS: Moving back to Korea, what do you think about the current progress of sustainable development here, and which aspects of sustainable development should Korea focus more on in the future?

SH: I think the Korean companies we have, in a way, are doing well. This is because of the structure of the economy. As you know, Korea has big corporations that run a lot of things like Samsung, LG, SK, and Hyundai. They must meet the sustainability requirements because their major markets are North America and Europe. Would Korean companies still be sustainable without the market's sustainable needs? We should be aware that the world is finite. So we have to really care about the environment. Also, sustainability is not something to decorate your company with, but it should be the reason for the company's existence.

YJIS: Suppose Korea did take inspiration from Northern Europe or adopt some of the sustainable development practices there. What challenges do you think they would face by adopting such practices?

SH: In fact some Korean companies are doing really well. One example is Maeil, the biggest milk provider in Korea. They halted normal factory operations for 10 days to produce special milk powder for kids with protein intolerance. Since the market is small, most retailers do not want to sell this kind of product. Yet Maeil insists on providing this milk powder just for these kids. So it's like a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity. This is mainly due to the owner, though. Korean companies are listed but still have their owners who are very influential in the company. Therefore, if Korean companies are devoted to certain practices, it is because of the individual, the owner; not the system, direction, or the value that the company set. This is the main thing that we have to change. Also, when it comes to sustainability, I have to mention the methodology. As a person who studies sustainability, we always think that the goal, performance, and research are fundamental. But methodology is important too. Methodologies have to be interdisciplinary—includes lots of disciplines when you make a decision, as well as transdisciplinary—include every stakeholder in the decision-making process. Then, through this process, corporations could eventually make sustainable decisions. In Korea, we are more of a top-down society, so top management makes decisions. However, we must learn to trust interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods.

YJIS: So you just mentioned the sustainable practices of Maeil Company. However, in general, what do you think about Korean companies' current corporate sustainable practices apart from your company? Are there any other companies that you think are leading this way within or outside of Korea?

SH: I don't think there is a leading company in Korea per say. It's just that they are meeting the requirement. Most of them are more or less in a similar stage. In terms of overseas companies, I would say Patagonia. Recently, the chairperson donated the whole company to a newly established nonprofit organization, which will now be the recipient of all the company's profits and use the funds to combat climate change.

YJIS: Moving back to the country scale, which country do you say is leading the way in terms of environmental sustainability?

SH: Of course, Sweden and Norway. These countries are doing really well because they are rich countries, so they have a lot of room to invest. They are devoted to transforming all the public transportation to be run by biosphere and renewable energies. As these Nordic countries started implementing sustainable practices, European countries, North America, and Asian countries also started following them. So taking the initiative is really important, which the Nordic countries are doing well t.

YJIS: Do you have any final words for our readers?

SH: I don't know what the readers want to be, but I wish for their aspirations to be great. Not just for themselves or in order to make money, but for the interest of society. We are young, and young people have the power to do that. Young people shape the future of the world. Older people will follow, so you simply have to have aspirations for a better world, society, or community, not just yourself. Finally, I can tell you that money is not the recipe for happiness.