Abstract—The field of international development cooperation is being increasingly influenced by “emerging donors,” countries like South Korea which are capitalizing on their own development history to engage developing countries with innovative policy experiences. These newly formulated development cooperation initiatives face significant challenges, however, especially when negotiating what role the state should play in interpreting a country’s past development. South Korea’s case shows that if emerging donors can address key issues inherent to knowledge sharing in their new programs, they could mobilize a wealth of policy know-how to augment development initiatives in other countries.

The past few years have seen the beginnings of three large shifts in international aid to developing countries. Firstly, the rise of middle-income economies such as China, India, Pakistan, and Nigeria has tilted the balance of poverty away from low-income countries. With the majority of the world’s poor no longer living in the poorest countries, debates are rife among aid donors about whether the focus of development aid should be on poor people, or poor countries. Secondly, the methods of development practice are undergoing increased scrutiny. The ongoing evidence debate and heightened interest

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in new methodologies such as randomized control trials (RCT), are prime examples of a broad contestation of past methodologies.\textsuperscript{2} Thirdly, the 2008 financial crisis has precipitated a gradual retreat of ‘traditional’ Western donors from the center-stage of development aid, and has begun to place new actors closer to the spotlight. The fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, Korea in 2011 confirmed this trend with its focus on incorporating new strategies in planning and financing development through the private sector and emerging donor countries.\textsuperscript{3}

The rise to prominence of emerging donor countries—countries which have seen significant economic progress over the past decades and which have developed sizeable foreign aid programs—is an ongoing process, and competition with the sheer scale of aid from the United States and Western Europe is still not comparable. But countries such as South Korea, Japan, Turkey, Brazil and others are increasingly developing their own approaches and methods to helping other countries. They are namely mobilizing lessons learned from their own histories of development, sharing experiences and adapting older policies and ideas to the new century.\textsuperscript{4}

The Republic of South Korea (below Korea) is one of these few countries to have gone from aid recipient to aid donor. In the 1950s and 60s, Korea was just emerging from the devastating Korean War and had a per capita GDP lower than that of the Philippines and an industrial base that was all but decimated in the war. In just four decades, however, Korea graduated to middle-, then high-income country status, and now leads the world in key industries such as electronics and shipbuilding.

Korea is also one of just two members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s Development Assistance Committee to have previously received foreign development assistance. With a rapidly expanding foreign aid budget, Korea has heavily invested in development cooperation programs that capitalize on lessons from its own past economic growth. As such, creating coherent development programs based on the Korean development experience is central to the future of Korea’s international development cooperation. However to ensure effectiveness, Korea will need to shape its knowledge-sharing programs into more coherent open initiatives which promote a truly pragmatic look into its rich development history.

Korea’s experience-based aid initiatives are relatively young, and are encountering problems which could threaten their relevance to, and positive impact on, less developed countries. Korea (and by extension, all of the emerging donors who are in the beginning phases of formulating their development cooperation)\textsuperscript{5} must seriously reexamine and address a number of potential shortcomings endemic to their aid systems.

**Analyzing Past Policies**

The Korean government’s Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP) has been the flagship of its development experience-based cooperation since its inception in 2004. The
program engages low- and middle-income countries on questions of economic and social development policy, finding and assisting in the implementation of policy solutions and recommendations based on Korea’s own low- and middle-income past. In 2011, the program partnered with twenty-five countries in KSP initiatives. KSP also uses researchers affiliated with the state’s Korea Development Institute School of Public Policy to publish extensive analysis on topics in Korea’s economic development in a project called the “modularization” of Korea’s development experience.6

The program is bringing forward alternative policies derived from Korea’s own development experience and has the potential to act as a channel for heterodox economic policy formulation and implementation in developing countries. These policies include designing export initiatives fueled by monetary policy and central bank control in the Dominican Republic, or protecting domestic industries as a part of economic diversification in Gabon.7

In many instances, the tools of policy have changed with time; KSP’s policy recommendations are not a carbon copy of the policies which saw Korea’s rise over the last half century. Protectionist trade policies, for example, are advocated only insofar as they do not conflict with the regulations of the global trade regime, and while emphasis is placed on developing export-orientated growth strategies, this is advocated more through gradual deregulation than through industrial policies.

Changes in the policy toolbox notwithstanding, a careful examination of KSP policy recommendations to other countries along with the contents of the KSP modularization shows that the goals of policy remain very similar to those advanced during Korea’s low- and middle-income years.8 These goals are to deepen national industrial capabilities (through economic restructuring and simultaneous export-oriented and domestic market-centered approaches) and to create a knowledge-based economy which prizes research and development, information technology, and higher-value inputs to increase total factor productivity.9 While keeping intact the basic goals of Korean development policy in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, KSP is adapting Korea’s own development experiences to the realities of developing countries today.

Growing Pains

Despite the efforts of the Knowledge Sharing Program, however, Korea’s development experience-based cooperation efforts have several clear limitations which reduce the effectiveness and meaning in harnessing successful development stories.

Firstly, there are factors which inhibit the scale, scope, and efficiency of Korean aid in a larger sense. Most of these elements are well-known in the Korean development policy community,10 and have recently been highlighted in the 2012 OECD Development Assistance Committee’s peer review of Korea’s development assistance. They include low overall levels of ODA to GNI (0.12 percent in 2011) and a high ratio of tied-to-untied aid (68 percent to 32 percent in 2010).11 In addition, Korean aid faces the dual challenge of aligning its thematic focuses with its various country partner strategies and in better incorporating results-based management frameworks into projects on the ground in developing countries.
All these limitations have been debated at length leading up to and since OECD’s 2012 Peer Review. To the extent that they inhibit the development of aid programs in general, these elements also adversely affect the operation and positioning of knowledge- and experience-sharing programs. In the wake of the publishing of the 2012 Peer Review results, there has been an effort by the Korean government to address the main obstacles highlighted by the review team. Despite a general agreement in the Korean aid community on the need for reform, however, the specific policies in question are still a matter of debate. In response to the Peer Review, the Korean government is proposing gradual changes, focused on the size of Korea’s aid package and the way in which it monitors aid. These changes include engagements to increase overall Official Development Assistance (ODA), increasing the portion of untied grant aid in Korea’s ODA allocations, and improving aid program evaluation processes for better results-based management.\(^\text{12}\)

Other voices in the Korean aid community, notably in civil society, have pointed out that while progress on certain fronts (notably in increasing the size of overall ODA) is being made, other more fundamental issues are being left aside. Civil society has held campaigns for more accountable and efficient Korean aid, most recently advocating that Korea join the International Aid Transparency Initiative.\(^\text{13}\) Furthermore, civil society continues to advocate that the Korean government solve the problem of aid fragmentation in accordance with the recommendation of the Peer Review, by consolidating its various tied- and untied-aid agencies under one single organization.\(^\text{14}\) Despite stated willingness by government actors to act on certain provisions for improving the quality of Korea aid, existing tensions among agencies have inhibited comprehensive and deep-reaching reforms for more efficient aid.\(^\text{15}\)

There are still more serious limitations which touch directly on Korea’s knowledge-sharing initiatives, possible solutions to which could give direction, not just to Korea, but to other emerging donors with similar aid architecture and orientations. Development experience-based aid programs are susceptible to politicization and monopoly by the state of a contested past, as well as being prone to adopting an overly narrow economic view of development, which may limit an otherwise rich repertoire of development lessons.

\section*{Politicizing the Past}

Korea’s knowledge-sharing initiatives are suffering from the monopoly that the Korean state holds over interpreting and reproducing the Korean development experience. Given the continued political significance of certain historical policies and the serious fragmentation problem of Korean aid, not only is doubt cast on the idea of a single unified “Korean model” or “Korean experience,” but formulating development policy based on
the Korean experience can be highly politicized, and may in turn suppress new interpretations of how Korea developed.

The clearest example of how knowledge sharing can be politicized in Korea is the *Saemaul Undong*, or New Village Movement. The New Village Movement was an integrated rural development movement initiated by Korean strongman Park Chung-Hee’s government in the early 1970s. Through state subsidies of agricultural production and heavy investment in rural infrastructure, the movement sought to close the rural-urban gap by encouraging people in the countryside to take an active role in building their communities.16 This model of rural development, however, has also been criticized for its totalitarian nature; Park also used the movement as a method of control to solidify the country’s military dictatorship and tighten Korea’s Republican Party’s influence, effectively making the New Village Movement an extension of authoritarian power.17, 18

This history makes trying to export the New Village Movement program to other countries a singularly political affair. Since the election of Park’s daughter, Park Geun-Hye, to the presidency last year, the Korean executive branch has been promoting the use of Saemaul Undong as an aid program by encouraging its aid agencies to boost spending for similar rural development programs19 and by encouraging the UN to incorporate similar programs in its development policies.20

Yet within Korea there has been much opposition to the state’s interpretation of the New Village Movement and to the Ministry of Strategy and Finance’s designation of the movement as a “successful case.”21 Whether the movement was a success or not depends on whom you ask. On one hand, the government identifies three basic success factors in the movement: the state’s ability to supply villages with raw materials (such as cement), the competitiveness among villages which lead to more efficient work, and the spirit of cooperation within villages that made community cohesion possible.22 These factors can be applied, according to the government, in developing countries that are experiencing rural poverty and where the state is able to generate these factors.

On the other hand, civil society and some academics present an alternative view with lessons from the experience of the New Village Movement. In many instances the importance of the coordinating role of the government is put forward. During the 1970s, it is argued, rural incomes were boosted mainly through state subsidies of both domestic agricultural supply and demand.23 These interpretations underline the state’s role in market coordination, and look to state-centered policy recommendations for developing countries which are traditionally less emphasized or even omitted from the state’s own analyses.

Still more scholars and non-governmental organizations have made the claim that the renewed push to expand Korea’s New Village Movement programs overseas is more informed by political and diplomatic considerations than by recipient country
Korea’s aid is highly fragmented, with more than thirty different government bodies involved in international development aid. The interpretation of any country’s past carries important political implications for its present; the government’s formulation of policy for development cooperation with foreign states becomes de facto an issue of domestic policy.

Absent from the Debate: Civil Society

The Korean state’s control over experience-based development policy and its severe aid fragmentation show how problematic it is to consolidate a single model for export in the context of development cooperation. The absence of a single model does not mean that effective knowledge sharing is impossible, as long as the void is filled with a constructive, cross-cutting social dialogue that seeks to bring out the nuances of Korea’s past and ongoing development. The interpretation of any country’s past carries important political implications for its present; the government’s formulation of policy for development cooperation with
foreign states becomes *de facto* an issue of domestic policy. Given a history of rapid industrialization and economic growth under authoritarian rule like Korea’s, it could be expected that social movements and civil society actively voice disagreements in content and interpretation of development policies, especially should this development cooperation purport to revive old authoritarian-era economic policies.

While the Korean government is advancing an agenda for experience-based knowledge sharing on theoretical and implementation fronts, Korean development NGOs and civil society—while actively critical of other aspects of Korean aid—are, however, not making their presence felt on these issues. The relative silence of civil society on development knowledge sharing has several causes. Firstly there are few Korean NGOs which actively monitor and engage with Korea’s development policy. This translates in practice to fewer policy papers and smaller, less diversified civil society representation at multi-party events and panels: in short, lower visibility and impact.

Secondly, there is as of yet little connectivity between domestic development policy focused Korean NGOs and their counterparts which directly implement and supervise programs in developing countries. This means that civil society contestations of the Korean state’s development policies are not necessarily linked to evidence from Korean development NGOs overseas. This disconnect fails to link contemporary development projects back to the successes or failures of the Korean development experience.

Lastly, there exists an important gap in connectivity between civil society organizations working on domestic development issues and development NGOs. A country’s development experience can be accessed and analyzed through a number of intermediaries (including state ministries and foreign aid organizations), but civil society is one of the few alternative, non-statal sources of “development history.” They are well placed to put forward a different story on the effects of state development policies. These organizations include trade unions, business cooperatives, government oversight groups, and more. These organizations’ interaction with domestic development NGOs to produce a broader contestation of the state’s discourse of development cooperation, however, is very limited. Instead, Korean development NGOs are much more active in building alliances with international civil society and have developed tight ties with certain state development apparatus, as evidenced by the regular appearances of development NGO papers in Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) publications.

These three points all drive home the absence of any prolific contestation of the state’s analysis of Korea’s development history. While there are certain examples of Korean NGOs and think tanks putting forward alternative versions of Korean development and alternative policy recommendations these are few in number. The state still very much holds a monopoly on policy implementation and discourse surrounding Korea’s development experience.

**A Narrow Vision of Development**

Furthermore, the idea of a Korean model of development, as well as the packaging of that model, has confined itself to a narrow, mostly economic interpretation of development.
Korea’s astounding rise from abject poverty to the world’s thirteenth economy certainly does have relevant policy lessons to give in terms of economic development.

But the Korean example is also germane to many other fields, which are very important to the development of a country. An examination of the most coherent effort to map Korea’s development history and lessons for other countries, the KSP Modularization work demonstrates this lack of thematic diversity. The project refers to numerous topics that are related to industrialization and economic development, such as public works and tax reform, but barely mentions other important aspects of development. While some important themes such as welfare policy and environmental conservation are featured, many topics that are critical to development, such as organized labor and press, are ignored.

Yet Korea has just not seen gains in its GDP since 1960. Growth was accompanied, at different stages, with labor movements, freedom of the press initiatives, and many other social advancements. How did this progress come about? What was the relationship between, for example, industrialization and environmental conservation? What factors fostered the meteoric growth of civil society organizations in the period just after democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and what effect did this have on Korea society? All of these questions are vital to a holistic understanding of how Korea enacted such a rapid social and economic change in so little time.

These questions are also equally important to understanding the effects of economic policies in broader society. There is a noticeable gap in the empirical literature on Korean economic development, as most of it skirts around—or does not lend serious weight to—intrinsically social impacts of economic phenomena. This is very valuable to developing countries today, which are increasingly looking beyond simple prescriptions for growth and more toward mechanisms to lower social risk, redistribute wealth, and build up resiliency.

Policy Recommendations

Korea’s development experience, despite its great promise for developing countries, is not living up to its potential. In order to correct this, Korea must highlight the value that its development history brings to the makeup of international development cooperation. In a post-financial crisis world, where contestations of financial liberalization, as well as neoclassical economic principles, are gaining in popularity, Korea can make the bold move of promoting its heterodox economic stances and principles, especially with regard to industrial policy, which contributed in such large part to the country’s success. In a recent article, economist Dani Rodrik emphasized this point as a key value added in the development cooperation policies of emerging donors:

Their own development experience makes countries like China, India, and Brazil resistant to market fundamentalism and natural advocates for institutional diversity and pragmatic experimentation. They can build on this experience to articulate a new global narrative that emphasizes the real economy over finance, policy diversity over harmonization, national policy space over external constraints and social inclusion over technocratic elitism.
Secondly, Korea must work toward open and pragmatic methods for interpreting its past. It must shy away from preferring political and national strategic interests to development effectiveness. This also means opening up a national discussion on its development history, fostering dialogue where it’s lacking among civil society organizations, and enabling non-state organizations to collaborate and bring forward different, competing interpretations and actuations (through implementation in the field) of the Korean development experience. The government needs to be pragmatic in this approach, ready to change up old toolboxes and staid methodologies, while willing to call into question the development paradigms within which it is working.

Together with these measures, NGOs need to increase their presence in these debates and play a larger role, not just in bringing constructive critiques to existing frameworks, but in shaping future aid policy. In order to involve a broader swath of civil society in the aid debate, existing umbrella organizations such as the Korean Civil Society Forum on International Development Cooperation (KoFID) must frame their policy debates, advocacy efforts, and academic research in a way that can appeal to various other types of domestic civil society organizations. One possible unexplored avenue for this kind of cooperation is the linkage between migrant worker organizations in Korea and Korean-led development efforts in the workers’ home countries. Expanding the actors present in these debates will bring a more holistic interpretation of Korean experiences to bear on development policy.

Lastly, Korea stands to make a stronger contribution to international development cooperation if it challenges the boundaries of where and how its development history can be applied. Beyond economic policy, there is a trove of lessons regarding the development of Korean society, in success and failure, which respond to new needs and interests of developing countries. This recommendation aligns well with the previous one: it is only by engaging a broad cross-section of society on the question of Korea’s past development that various social issues can be brought to light.

These policy recommendations are formulated based on the Korean example, but the underlying idea that a country’s development experience needs to be analyzed and interpreted in a holistic manner – thinking beyond the state when necessary – applies to all emerging donors. Countries such as Brazil, Turkey, Japan, China, South Africa and others have real contributions to make to the international community, and must shape their development cooperation policies accordingly. Knowledge sharing for development must not be a single-minded drive to define and operationalize the past, but a whole-of-society approach to explore and share its nuances and contingencies. 

— Scott Ross served as Lead Editor for this article.
NOTES


5. While the phenomenon of new development aid donors can be ascribed to the rise in the past two decades of middle-income countries and regional powers in certain parts of the world, including the BRICS, there are instances of emerging donors engaging in knowledge sharing programs as early as the 1970s and 1980s. This is the case of Japan’s Kaizen development methodology and of Brazil’s social protection programs such as Bolsa Família.


13. This advocacy was done through several social media channels, garnering press coverage as evidenced in the following story: “The Government Must Become a Signatory to the IATI.” Accessed December 11, 2013, <http://m.mt.co.kr/new/view.html?no=2013082614268278136>.


19. This very recent expansion in New Village Movement operations overseas has not yet made the subject of any clear strategic position paper by Korea’s development actors. It has, however, made the object of working plans to expand the budget to New Village Movement programs in certain countries, namely in Rwanda and Nepal. A May 2013 conversation between the author and KOICA Rwanda’s Deputy Representative has confirmed that the country office is currently working to expand the scale of village-based rural development interventions in direct response to the new Korean administration’s stated interest in New Village Movement development projects abroad.

20. President Park’s engagement of the United Nations, namely through official meetings with the (Korean national) UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, has made echoes in the Korean press and in popular commentary.


22. Ibid.


The main Korean NGOs dealing with Korea's development policy are ODA Watch, the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy's International Cooperation Committee, and the umbrella organization for Korean development NGOs, the Korean Civil Society Forum for International Development


Korea Development Institute School of Public Policy and Management, “Modularization of Korea's Development Experience: The Operation of Nationwide Health Insurance and its Implications” (2011).

Korea Development Institute School of Public Policy and Management, “Modularization of Korea's Development Experience: The Operation of the Environmental Charging System in Korea” (2012).


