


Sharing Saemaul Movement Experiences with Africa



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Considering the Saemaul Movement as a successful model of rural community development that can differentiate Korea from other ODA donors, the Korean government is exporting the Saemaul model to a number of developing regions including Africa. Policymakers and scholars in such developing countries wish to benchmark key success factors of the Saemaul Movement in the course of devising strategies for rural development in their own countries. President Park Geun-hye, in her meeting with African ambassadors to Korea in April 2013, expressed the will to “contribute to Africa’s development by sharing the experiences of the Saemaul Movement.”

There are, of course, arguments that it will be difficult for the Saemaul Movement to take root considering the institutional capacity and social, cultural characteristics of African countries. The reasoning behind this is that the Saemaul Movement was initiated with political will of the top national leadership, carrying down to a tight and efficient implementation system and supported by the voluntary participation of village residents, whereas it is too much to expect similar conditions in Africa. Efforts to deliver the Saemaul Movement experiences are also regarded with skepticism due to the different social and cultural factors, since African countries are accustomed to a natural economy and possess the corresponding work values and labor consciousness. This means that after completing the amount of labor necessary to sustain a living, there exists no further motivation to work, and thus there are no values that support the willpower to work longer hours to improve quality of life or to satisfy individual desires.

However, it is rather hasty to conclude that the gap in initial conditions between Korea and Africa means that sharing Korea's experience and knowledge will come to no avail. Since there is no one-size-fits-all model that applies to any time period or region, there will be limitations when transferring the Saemaul Movement experiences to Africa. However, Korea does have experience in leading rural development to success amid a structure of poverty similar to that of Africa's today. There may be views that the Saemaul Movement was used as a political agenda in Korea, but there is no question that it was a model of success for the country's rural development, and thus efforts should be made to recycle this into the 'soft power' of Korean ODA. Africa's most urgent need today is, rather than financial capital, an understanding of the basic principles of the Saemaul Movement such as diligence, self-help, cooperation, and an enlightenment campaign that would enable autonomous or inherent development, which for instance would focus on 'how to instill motivation to work hard.' The process of delivering development experiences in this case does not involve a direct transfer of Korea's development know-how, but should rather be understood as part of a 'creative ODA' process that flexibly applies experiences and lessons while reflecting the realities of the recipient country.

Even so, since delivering the Saemaul Movement would involve applying Korea's unique rural development experiences to other countries under different circumstances, it is necessary to further adopt a customized approach that fully considers the distinct environment and characteristics of the recipient country. The Saemaul Movement delivery project is closely related to social spheres such as culture, tradition and lifestyle, so it would not do to directly

transplant the Saemaul experiences, which were strictly uniform and integrated. A country's particular experiences cannot be directly applied to another, so rather than deliver the experiences without alteration, it would be wise to provide customized services that could help recipients apply the experiences to their own circumstances.

Recognizing such issues, it becomes necessary to seek new ways of approach in the deliverance of Saemaul Movement experiences.

First, given the nature of the African rural societies, the recipient unit should be homogeneous societies of common principles, rather than entire countries. The African rural society consists of distinct groups based on tribes, and within these groups there exist inner bonds and mutual cooperation principles as well as traditional leadership. Considering that the key to the Saemaul Movement's success was strong regional bonding, cohesion and traditional leadership, such characteristics in the African society can only enhance the absorptive capacity for the Saemaul Movement.

Second, we should place a focus on 'soft power' support so that Korea's experiences can be used to prepare the basic conditions for rural modernization. The international ODA community is losing its energy, as seen in the issue of aid fatigue, and the sharing of Saemaul Movement experiences can boost vitality by serving as a soft power that can dramatically improve aid effectiveness. One of the reasons the Saemaul Movement was unable to take root was because the procedure focused on material support rather than on a systemic approach that involved plans such as farmer organizations. The problems in Africa's rural areas cannot be solved by one single 'big push', and this lesson is made evident in the past 60 years of international efforts to develop Africa's rural communities. Assistance through loans incurs foreign debt issues in the recipient country, while material support such as food aid is a one-time event, and both methods therefore make limited contributions to resolving poverty in developing countries.

Third, since the participation of local residents determines the success of the Saemaul Movement, it is important to induce voluntary participation by instilling a sense of ownership and 'endogenous' visions for development. Merely promoting Korea's experiences will not evoke interest or the will to participate. Instead, an incentive system should be developed to properly motivate residents to participate voluntarily. Such voluntary participation is essential for the successful naturalization of the Saemaul Movement, and the absence of this factor

will inevitably lead to the discontinuance of the project. The UN MVP (Millennium Village Project) also pursues a bottom-up development paradigm, and the key issue here is likewise the participation of local residents.

Lastly, rather than disperse the Saemaul Movement into small units across a number of countries, it would be more advisable to take a phased approach by first creating a success story through a strategic pilot project, and then spreading the example to neighboring regions. The Saemaul Movement in Korea succeeded through the vertical integration of government capacity (among agencies and relevant policies), but this cannot be applied to Africa, which lacks coordination among ministries. It is therefore necessary to apply the Saemaul Movement methodology to pilot projects and use these to accumulate experience and know-how. Creating a success story out of the Saemaul Movement will require a phased approach under a comprehensive plan with a mid- to long-term perspective of at least three to five years. The Saemaul Movement projects should not end in simple endeavors such as livestock farming or road construction, but should be initiated as a comprehensive development project involving the entire village. [KIEP](#)