

# Exporting Urban Korea?

Reconsidering the Korean Urban  
Development Experience

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## 1 Introduction

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# 1 Introduction

## Reconsidering the Korean urban development experience for international cooperation

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This book builds on the collective efforts of the scholars and researchers who have studied the dynamics of urban development in the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea) against the backdrop of increasing Korean Official Development Assistance (ODA) spending. The Korean government, armed with its developmental success, is now seeking an enhanced role in the world of international aid by building “the Korean model of ODA”. In particular, the area of urban development has been playing an important role in this model-building effort, with Korea placing a special emphasis on the overseas infrastructure development market to boost its national economy. In this process, there appears to be a tendency to present the country’s development experiences as a reference point for other countries in the Global South to emulate. Korea’s condensed urbanization and industrialization, accompanied by the expansion of new cities and industrial complexes across the country, have become an attractive “model” to aspire to, even if the fruits of such development may not have been equitably shared across geographies and generations (Shin, Zhao and Koh, 2020).

Work for this book started in response to recent calls among some contributors to pay academic attention to current ODA programs in Korea, particularly those focused on the way urban development experiences are interpreted and formulated as a “model”. So far, there has been a substantial body of literature on the Korean ODA based on its economic and social development experiences (see Kim and Kim, 2014a; Yi and Mkandawire, 2014). However, the urban dimension of the Korean ODA has not been sufficiently charted, despite the fact that the Korean government has placed an additional emphasis on “model-building” to market the country’s urban development experiences in the Global South. Often, such experiences have been reinterpreted in a way that dissociates them from their historical, socioeconomic and political contexts, repackaging them in pursuit of the narrowly defined national interest. The size of Korean ODA spending on overseas urban development is already huge and is getting larger; however, academic reflections on what it means to learn from Korea have been lacking. Against this backdrop, the contributors to this book attempt to make critical reassessments of

the Korean urban development experience while shedding light on the contextual understanding of such experiences. In this way, this book hopes to ensure that Korea's contributions to the international cooperation to build more equitable, resilient and sustainable urban futures occur in a manner that does not impose Korea's decontextualized version of urban development on other countries.

### **Korea's unique position in international cooperation**

To some extent, Korea represents a rare "success" story for an ODA recipient, transforming itself from a poverty-stricken and war-torn country to the world's 11th largest economy within five decades. Korea graduated from an aid recipient country when it paid off its final structural adjustment loan to the World Bank in 1995, and was removed from the OECD's list of recipient nations in 2000. Korea had joined the group of international donor countries when it established the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF) to provide concessional loans in 1987 and launched the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in 1991 to deal with grant aids. After joining the OECD in 1996 and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2010, Korea became an influential emerging donor in the world of international cooperation. In this regard, Korea occupies a unique position in the landscape of international cooperation.

In fact, even among emerging donors, Korea enjoys an idiosyncratic position. The literature on emerging and non-traditional donors has stressed that the aid they provide is grounded in different motivations from those of traditional donors (Mawdsley, Kim and Marcondes, 2017). Unlike traditional Western donors, who have been motivated by geopolitical and/or humanitarian interests, the emerging donors, led by China in particular, have been concerned more with the economic opportunities afforded by ODA. US aid to Afghanistan is considered to be motivated by geopolitical concerns, whereas China's aid to Nigeria is often regarded as being driven by China's economic interest in the oil market. The Korean ODA also shares a common feature with emerging donors in terms of its emphasis on the role of ODA for trade promotion. Moreover, like other emerging donors, Korea shows a low ODA/GNI (Gross National Income) ratio, a high percentage of concessional loans and tied aid, and a large number of recipients (Chun, Munyi and Lee, 2010). On the other hand, Korea exemplifies interesting differences from other emerging donors. Unlike other emerging donors, after joining the OECD/DAC, Korea has made a consistent effort to emulate traditional donors by constantly increasing the ODA/GNI ratio and by trying to conform to the norms and rules upheld by traditional donors (Kim, 2019). The OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews 2018 indicated that "Korea deserves praise" in its efforts to follow the recommendations of the Peer Reviews 2012 (OECD, 2018).

The ambivalent position of Korea in international aid is attributable to the nation's two different—and sometimes poorly coordinated—motivations within its ODA strategy, namely, the mercantilist interest and the diplomatic interest. On the one hand, in line with other emerging donors, Korea has placed a strong emphasis on "aid for trade" and has tried to utilize ODA as a tool for expanding

business opportunities for Korean private firms abroad. This push has come mostly from the Ministry of Economy and Finance of Korea (MOEF)—responsible for the nation’s economic affairs and budget distribution—through the use of ODA programs such as EDCF and KSP (Knowledge Sharing Program). On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and its implementation arm, KOICA, have a different policy priority, which is to enhance Korea’s presence on the global diplomatic stage, often described as “middle power diplomacy” (Howe, 2015). This strategy involves finding a niche in the international aid market for Korea, which has fewer resources and less experience compared to its counterparts. All the efforts of the Korean government to follow the international norms given by the OECD/DAC and to take an active role in international cooperation—such as hosting Busan HLF-4 in 2011—seem to arise from this motivation.

These two different motives create a barrier to a more integrated and coordinated ODA policy, particularly the coordination between grant and loan programs. They are also a source of fragmented ODA programs in Korea where many agencies from central and local governments seek their own organizational interests in the ODA market (OECD, 2018). It should be noted, however, that the situation reflects the unique developmental position of Korea, which is situated between the advanced economies and the Global South. As an OECD member state, Korea seeks to increase its role on the international diplomatic stage by emulating the practices of traditional donors. However, at the same time, as a nation that is still catching up with the major advanced economies, Korea faces strong pressure, particularly from domestic politics, for its ODA to contribute to expanding economic opportunity.

### **“Modeling” the Korean urban development experience**

Self-referencing is, perhaps, the most distinctive feature of the Korean ODA strategy. The Korean government seems to regard the nation’s development experience as a valuable asset, particularly when it comes to its efforts to find a niche in the international aid world. A large part of Korea’s ODA programs builds on its reputation as a development success.

It is often noted that Korea emphasizes the role of knowledge in development cooperation (Doucette and Müller, 2016). For instance, the KSP, which started in 2004 as a key ODA platform for Korea, is focused on knowledge sharing with the Global South. KSP particularly stresses the Korean experience of economic development, highlighting that “Korea’s development experience contains practical solutions accumulated through trial and error, and its knowledge of successes and failures is a great asset for developing countries to help take on development challenges and promote sustainable growth” (KSP homepage, [www.ksp.go.kr](http://www.ksp.go.kr), last accessed March 30, 2020). KSP was launched by the MOEF and is implemented by three agencies, each one focusing on a different area of engagement: the Korea Development Institute (KDI) on socioeconomic development, the Export–Import Bank of Korea (EXIM Bank) on construction and infrastructure and the Korea Trade–Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) on trade and

investment. All these are government organizations that have played pivotal roles in the course of Korea's economic development. At the time of writing, KSP has reportedly conducted 427 projects with 76 partner countries across the globe so far (*ibid.*) and has consolidated its role as an iconic program of the Korean ODA (see Potter, 2019 for a critical assessment of KSP).

Shortly after joining the OECD/DAC in 2010, the Korean government attempted to improve its ODA strategy based on its own development experience. In 2012, the Korean government released a report, *the Korean Model of ODA Strategy*, in an effort to reorganize its development experience from an international cooperation perspective. The report pointed out that partner countries had allegedly been making strong demands for Korea to share its development experiences, which these countries would emulate Korea (The Korean Government, 2012). More importantly, however, the report emphasized that the Korean ODA should be more focused in terms of target areas and delivery processes in order to overcome the drawbacks caused by a lack of experience and the limited ODA budget. According to the report, the Korean ODA was to aim at “the sustainable development of partner countries, focusing on the demand and conditions of partner countries ... based on the comparative advantage of our development experience” (*ibid.*, p. 16). In accordance with this aim, the report identified the key features of the Korean development experience and provided principles, strategies, and major programs tailor-made for diverse regions (*ibid.*).

One of the efforts to build “the Korean model” can be seen in the interpretation of the *Saemaul* (New Village) movement, which was a government-initiated rural development campaign in the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was quickly adopted as a flagship ODA program in 2016. KOICA and other state agencies have embarked on a worldwide campaign to disseminate Korea's rural development experiences under the banner of “Global *Saemaul*”, which includes leadership training as well as other rural development practices (Jeong, 2017; Kim and Kang, 2015). The “Global *Saemaul*” strategy implies that this “model” can be applied in Global South countries regardless of their different social and economic backgrounds. The “Global *Saemaul* model” played a significant role in the recent history of Korean ODA under the previous government (2013–2017), which inherited a political legacy from the authoritarian regime (1961–1979) that organized the Saemaul Movement (Doucette and Müller, 2016).

In a similar vein, attempts to reproduce the “Korean model” can also be witnessed in the area of urban development, which has aimed at elevating the status of Korean urban development experiences to a pre-packaged commodity and a model that can be marketed to the Global South. Urban development—including infrastructure investment—has special importance in Korea, not only because it has played a crucial role in Korea's economic and social development, but also because the country's overseas construction market accounts for a significant share of the national GDP (around 4–6 percent 2015–2018, [www.index.go.kr](http://www.index.go.kr)). As such, urban development is crucial for sustaining the national economy. Against this backdrop, the model-building of the urban development experience

for ODA has emerged alongside efforts to enhance business opportunities for the urban development sector in the overseas market (see Martin and Geglia, 2019).

One of the notable examples that epitomizes such practices is the ODA strategy to export the experience of new town construction under the banner of “city export” (see Chapter 9 in this volume by Yu-Min Joo). The phrase “city export” began to emerge in the mainstream media when Korean construction companies such as POSCO and GS Construction made an inroad into condominium complex development markets in Vietnam, Mongolia and Algeria in the mid-2000s, a process that has been dubbed the “Korean Wave in construction” (*Munwha Daily*, 2007). Soon afterwards, the concept entered into government discourses to become “the Korean model of urban development”. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT) and its affiliate Land Corporation were quick to use the “city export” concept to package their new city development projects, thus implanting “the Korean style of new city” in countries such as Kuwait and Azerbaijan (*Meil Daily*, 2009). The Seoul Metropolitan Government has also been active, under the slogan of “city export”, to share its urban policy innovations—ranging from public transportation to e-government—with cities of the Global South. The recent smart city promotion of the Korean government is a new addition to this “city export” strategy (Han, 2019; Noh, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Basically, while these are all public initiatives, they are obviously intended to boost overseas market shares for Korean private firms.

However, as pointed out by Chua (2011), efforts to export a country’s development experiences as a “model” are problematic because it is inherently difficult, if not impossible, to crystalize “the model” from historical and place-specific development experiences. Korea is not an exception in this regard. As pointed out by critics (for example, Kim and Kim, 2014b; Igbafen, 2014), it would be naïve to describe the Korean development experience as a singular and uniform narrative.<sup>2</sup> Korean development experiences can be differently interpreted depending on which timeframe one considers and which industrial sector or policy area one looks at. For instance, state policy toward the financial sector in the 1990s may be understood in a completely different way from that in the 1960s. The relation between the state and market in the manufacturing sector in the 1980s would have been different from the one in the social welfare sector during the same period. If one takes the political democratization of the late 1980s into consideration, one’s interpretation of the Korean development experience would become even more complicated. Historical context, therefore, matters when it comes to transferring a country’s development experiences elsewhere. In this regard, the aforementioned effort to export the rural development experience in the form of the “Global *Saemaul* model” can be said to have reduced the complex, multi-scalar experiences of rural development to a set of technical issues of resource allocation or a simple question of how the government successfully cultivates the spirit of development (Doucette and Müller, 2016). The complexity of the Korean development experience has made it difficult to construct a so-called “Korean model” that can be simplified and thus transferred or exported to the Global South.

We can see a similar difficulty in the Korean ODA strategy accompanying efforts to build “the Korean model of urban development”, which is the focus of this book. In this model-building discourse, the model presents itself as a one-size-fits-all solution to recipient countries. It is hard to see what components from past urban development experiences would constitute the “Korean model” and how they can be applied to the divergent socio-cultural and politico-economic conditions in the Global South. The problematic role of the “Korean model” is further exacerbated by the fact that the government’s and practitioner’s arguments have mostly focused on how public actors can contribute to expanding the overseas construction market for Korean private firms. Consequently, norms of international cooperation—such as aid effectiveness and local ownership—are largely disregarded. As such, the currently circulated narrative of the “Korean urban model” may inevitably be narrow, simplistic and of less cultural sensitivity, thereby calling into question the viability of exporting the model itself.

### **Interrogating the Korean urban development experience**

Even though Korea’s urban development experience cannot be captured by a simple singular narrative, this does not mean that Korea’s experiences have nothing to offer to the Global South. To some extent, it is hard to dispute that Korea’s urban development during the past six decades has been a success story. Korea was a predominantly rural society in the early 1960s; however, after urbanizing and industrializing at a dazzling pace, it has become a highly urbanized and industrial country. At the beginning of the 1990s, more than 80 percent of the national population was living in urban areas, with living conditions and physical infrastructure (e.g., paved motorways, sanitation and communications) undergoing dramatic improvements. For example, the housing floor area per person expanded from 8.6 m<sup>2</sup> to 31.7 m<sup>2</sup> between 1970 and 2018, despite an explosive increase in urban populations (see <http://stat.molit.go.kr/>). As far as the policy response to rapid urbanization is concerned, Korea is a clear benchmark for rapidly urbanizing countries.

How, then, should we understand the Korean urban development experience and its implications for international cooperation in our urbanizing global world? How can we go beyond the narrow and simplistic interpretation of the Korean experience and move forward to reinterpret it for the benefit of the global community in general? These are the key motivating questions that this book was designed to address. Contributors to this volume have been given the space to respond to these questions in ways that speak to their own research expertise. Before delving into individual chapters dealing with specific issues, we will outline the common ground shared by the contributors as entry points into further discussion.

First, we attempt to contextualize the Korean urban development experience. That is, we attempt to understand such experiences against the underlying conditions that shaped the adoption and implementation of particular

policies. It has often been neglected in Korean ODA practices that there are important economic, social, political, and institutional conditions required for a particular policy to establish itself and start working. This is especially true when it comes to urban development, where the spotlight is more often placed on physical appearance, with the economic and institutional background that conditioned the production of the physical structure tending to be overlooked. For instance, Korea's new city development may look attractive to politicians and government officials in the Global South, and the urban strategy that led to it may appear simple and straightforward to transfer, when one only focuses on the construction work. What was important for the success of the policy of new city development, however, was that it was implemented under the specific politico-economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s, which had high economic growth rates and an expanding middle class, as well as under particular institutional and legal arrangements according to which government, research institutes, public corporations, and private companies could work together, albeit with some friction (see Chapter 4 by Hyun Bang Shin and Chapter 12 by Se Hoon Park). Without understanding these specific contexts, efforts to transfer the new city development experience elsewhere will be wasted.

With regard to refocusing on the contexts of policies, two different dimensions can be identified. One is, of course, the context in which a particular urban policy was adopted and implemented, which may differ according to the different development stages of Korea. The country in the 1970s and 1980s was under the circumstance of the authoritarian state, weak civil society and high economic growth. Globally, Korea was situated in a "new international division of labor" and Cold War geopolitical tensions. All these elements, to varying degrees, influenced the development of Korea's urban policy and its implementation. It is also critical to understand the context of a country implementing lessons learned from the Korean experience. Many developing countries have a weak state, a fragmented society, high social inequality, a negative colonial legacy, low economic growth rates and are subject to the neoliberal world economic order. In addition, each country has unique social and economic conditions that are too diverse to be simplified, which limits the possibility of replicating certain development experiences (see also Chua, 2011; Shin, Zhao and Koh, 2020). In this regard, the current urban ODA in Korea is less sensitive to the diverse developmental contexts of the recipient nations, despite its emphasis on a demand-driven approach and local ownership.

Second, we intend to have a balanced view on the Korean urban development experience, recognizing both the positive and negative aspects of the government's interventions. The conventional approach in the Korean ODA mostly focuses on the bright side of Korean modern history while neglecting its darker side, such as spatial disparity and social inequality. As Howe (2015: 30) adeptly points out, the model claimed by the Korean government is a "sanitized" one. Even if we portray Korea's urban transformation as generally a success story, there is a less-spoken-about version of the story with a large area of hidden shadow. State-driven urban development was fast-paced and effective in terms



of quantified achievements, but it was made possible in the context of a weak civil society and inadequate welfare system (Shin, 2018). As described by Won Bae Kim in this volume (Chapter 3), the regional disparity between the Seoul Metropolitan Region (SMR) and the rest of the country has been exacerbated over time due to the continuous concentration of people and businesses in the SMR. The massive housing redevelopment projects of the 1980s and 1990s caused large-scale forced evictions and displacement, consequently marginalizing vulnerable people (see Chapter 10 in this volume by Seong-Kyu Ha and Shin and Kim, 2016). The 2009 Yongsan Incident—which resulted in the tragic deaths of six people in the aftermath of a violent clash between police and resisting commercial tenants (Kim, 2009)—demonstrated that the negative legacy of urban transformation still looms large. It should be noted that the difficulties facing Korean cities at the moment mostly result from those conditions that made it possible for the nation to develop in previous decades.

Third, we try to go beyond the conventional technology-oriented and business-interested approach, by reinterpreting urban development as social institutions embedded in society. In the Korean ODA, urban development has been predominantly viewed as nothing more than engineering and/or infrastructure projects. This reductionist interpretation prevails not only among government officials, but also among many academics in Korea. It is suggestive that the ODA program by MOLIT has been designed and managed by the Overseas Construction Policy Division as part of the ministry's promotional activity for the overseas construction market (Park et al., 2019). Furthermore, the smart city promotion, actively supported by the incumbent government, has focused mostly on technological improvement and infrastructure development, neglecting all other social, economic and political impacts on urban environments. One important problem in the technology-oriented interpretation of the Korean experience is that it cannot provide any normative value for international cooperation. Perhaps this approach could help persuade domestic taxpayers in the short run; however, this cannot be the best way to take advantage of the Korean development experience to strengthen the nation's position in international cooperation.

Since the adoption of the 2030 agenda by the United Nations in 2015, the international community has underscored the normative values in urban development by adopting the concepts of inclusive, resilient and sustainable cities. In addition, the concept of “the right to the city” has come to the forefront of discussions among international organizations such as the UN Habitat and Cities Alliance; this concept is said to represent an alternative view of an increasingly polarized global urban society (Parnell, 2016). These international norms were further developed by the UN Habitat when the New Urban Agenda was adopted as a guiding principle for the international community in Quito, Ecuador in 2016 (UN Habitat, 2016). However, these norms have not been adequately discussed and adopted by the urban ODA in Korea. Korea's urban development experience could perhaps be interrogated in line with this international movement, thereby allowing Korea to stake out a better role in the international community as a critical source of inspiration for rapidly urbanizing countries.

## Structure of this book

This book is organized into three parts. In Part I, we outline the urban transformations in Korea since the 1960s and their implications for international cooperation to attain sustainable urban development. Mike Douglass (Chapter 2) offers a comprehensive overview of the Korean urban and regional development, focusing on major policy shifts that are closely associated with the changing configurations of the relationships between the government, civil society and the corporate economy. While acknowledging Korea's success in achieving a degree of national prosperity, Douglass also reminds us of the struggles and inequities that called for changes in governance at urban as well as national scales. Won Bae Kim (Chapter 3) examines the main concerns and elements of regional policy in Korea over the past six decades, highlighting the two major concerns of regional disparity and regional competitiveness. In doing so, he draws implications from Korean regional policy for international development cooperation. Hyun Bang Shin (Chapter 4) asserts that Korea's property-based urban transformation was pursued by the developmental state in its effort to nurture the growth of (real estate) capital and middle classes and that the property hegemony-based model of urban (re-)development is effectively a rent gap-based revenue-sharing model, which widens asset inequality and leaves little room for non-financial contributors. He calls for a careful treatment of the country's urban development experiences before exporting such a model of city-making to urbanizing societies elsewhere. Blaž Križnik and Su Kim (Chapter 5) offer an insight into the role of community and neighborhood in urban transformation in Korea, which is a rarely charted area in the existing literature. While highlighting the dynamics of state–community relations in the process of urban development, they claim that the state facilitated the commodification of localities through property-led urban redevelopment while, at the same time, localities challenged the state and struggled against the commodification of localities.

In Part II, we attempt to critically reassess the modeling of the Korean urban development experience and its implications for other countries from an international comparative perspective. Jamie Doucette and Farwa Sial (Chapter 6) argue that the self-referential model-building of Korea's knowledge-sharing initiatives risks replicating national state-centrism, a view that is often invoked in celebratory narratives of Korea's rapid economic development. Cuz Potter and Jinhee Park (Chapter 7) emphasize the limitations of a singular model for envisaging Korean urban development. By taking the example of a condominium complex construction project in Vietnam, they propose that “a multitude of models” is inevitable. Hyung Min Kim, Julie Miao and Nicholas Phelps (Chapter 8) identify the relative position of Korea amid the recent emerging urban development leadership in East Asia. By comparing the three urban development models of Korea, China, and Singapore, they shed light on how each model may reflect the national development path as well as the national interest.

In Part III, we explore individual policies and institutions, focusing on how these policies and institutions were established and practiced in Korea

and what these experiences might mean for international cooperation. Yu-Min Joo (Chapter 9), by examining how the so-called “city export” discourse was formulated and developed in Korea, sheds light on the rarely told dimension of the Korean model, that is, the public value of urban development for international cooperation. Seong-Kyu Ha (Chapter 10) reviews the housing and urban redevelopment policies of Korea from the “housing right” perspective. He claims that the overall quality of housing in Korea has improved considerably since the 1980s but that, at the same time, urban redevelopment projects have further marginalized vulnerable groups, thereby eventually generating the polarization of housing conditions in Korea. Seowhan Lim (Chapter 11) explores the land development scheme in Korea, which has played a pivotal role in facilitating rapid urban transformations. Detailing the structure and features of Korea’s land development scheme, he stresses the background conditions that enabled it to be designed and implemented in a society under authoritarian rule and speculative land demand. Se Hoon Park (Chapter 12) sheds light on public research institutions as an integral part of Korea’s national developmental system. He examines why and how policy research institutes in Korea have played such a pivotal role in public policy development with special focus on three elements: the knowledge production market, government-institute relations and the urban development regime. Last but not least, Jieun Kim (Chapter 13) deals with public development corporations as an engine of development and as part of Korea’s urban development model. She illustrates how public development corporations became pillars of the urban development model, how their roles are changing as Korea’s economic growth and urbanization slow down and what implications they offer to the Global South.

In conclusion, this book was planned according to the simple assumption that not all countries in the Global South have the potential to follow the same developmental path that Korea took in the 1960s and 1970s. Korea’s development experience, no matter how remarkable it is, is just one example, specific in time and place. One may certainly draw lessons from it. However, at the same time, the experience of Korea must be critically reflected upon and the lessons drawn from it modified by other countries facing different developmental contexts. These modifications require a more nuanced understanding of the relevant policies than we have seen in current ODA practices. In this regard, we hope that this book opens discussion about, rather than offers hasty answers to, our question of how the Korean urban development experience should be reinterpreted and what it can contribute to rapidly urbanizing countries to allow them to be more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.

## Notes

- 1 See the presentations in the forum organized by KOTRA and the Seoul Metropolitan Government on July 4, 2019 in Seoul (Han, 2019; Noh, 2019). This forum was designed to discuss future policy directions for supporting the so-called “city export”

with participation from the Seoul Metropolitan Government, LH Corporation, private engineering companies, and related experts.

- 2 Similar limitations can be witnessed among “developmental statist” theorists, who have highlighted the importance of state power and state autonomy in explaining the economic development of Korea (see Amsden, 1989; Woo-Cumings, 1999). Such explanations are not sufficient to tell the story of the Korean state because they focus too much on the efficiency of governance and the centralized operation of government functions, thus incurring the shortfalls of “methodological nationalism” and “methodological statism” (Doucette and Park, 2018).

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