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**The Saemaul Undong:  
South Korea's Rural Development Miracle  
in Historical Perspective**

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## **The Saemaul Undong: South Korea's Rural Development Miracle in Historical Perspective**

Celebrated as one of the great success stories in rural development in the modern world, the Korean Saemaul Undong (SMU – New Village Movement) began in the 1970s as a community-based village modernization program that, when combined with a green revolution strategy, substantially increased rural incomes and quality of living. Although by the 1980s it had all but disappeared from Korea's national development strategy, it continues to be represented as a model for rural development for other countries to emulate. Most recently, a refurbished SMU program has become a central feature of Korea's foreign assistance to Asia, Africa and Latin America. The discussion here focuses on three questions. First, what were the main elements of SMU, and do they constitute a model for rural development? Second, how can we evaluate the successes and limitations of the SMU experience? Third, how does the current SMU program being exported to other countries differ from the original, and how does it fit into the contemporary world of rural development?

### **OVERVIEW**

The Saemaul Undong (SMU) – New Village Movement – was created by the Park Government in 1970 to lift the nation's village from poverty and provide basic food crops for burgeoning urban populations. Originating as a village modernization program with materials provided by government used to mobilize village self-help projects, it was subsequently linked with the advent of the Green Revolution in rice production. It rapidly became a nation-wide program for rural development that by the end of the decade had spread to cities as a national symbol of the Korean way of government guided participatory development.

Successes attributed to the Saemaul Undong (SMU) are manifold. Village upgrading and heavily subsidized rice production together raised rural household living standards and incomes to the level of urban households. Korea also approached self-sufficiency in rice. Village projects had a positive snowball effect, with one success encouraging another, leading to substantial village improvements in a relatively short period of time. Local level officials became more efficient in implementing public programs and were better able to support village and agricultural needs. As a source of unity and national identity, SMU also became a prominent slogan and symbol of an autonomous Korean way of development.

Limitations of the SMU have also been recorded. Taking place during a period of martial law meant that participation was contained within village level projects, with critical assessment of the program from the press or university scholars muted and rare. Its lack of rural-urban linkages indirectly contributed to national spatial polarization of development and eventual depopulation of rural regions and rural towns. The industrial component of the Saemaul Undong, which was oriented toward decentralizing operations of large corporations, did not significantly advance. The mechanisms of the green revolution component of SMU created high cost production regimes that proved difficult to sustain after support was withdrawn.

As its accomplishments reached their limits, SMU's two major components of village modernization and the Green Revolution also proved to be unsustainable, and by the early 1980s SMU could not be readily reinvigorated by the post-Park governments. Villages had been modernized to the levels that self-help cooperation could achieve at that scale. High levels of subsidies for agriculture could not be

indefinitely maintained. Limits on the use of Korea's Tong-il high-yielding rice variety had also been reached. Equally important, political unrest following Park's assassination and subsequent continuation of martial law under new military leadership added to a turning away from the Saemaul Undong as symbol of government-inspired development.

In the decades from the 1980s to the present, the Saemaul Undong has gone through several reformulations. The principal direction running through all of them has been to limit the role of government in SMU and to increasingly emphasize the spirit of voluntary cooperation as a central character of Korean people and national identity. SMU offices continue to operate at the national level and among local governments in Korea. The national government has recently called upon the SMU spirit as a key element of its foreign assistance to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Implicit in this approach is the idea that a Korean way of rural development has intangible elements that can assist people in other countries to draw on their own voluntary efforts to better their lives

As a complex set of policy experiences, the lessons of the Saemaul Undong are historically bounded and contextually contingent. As explained below, the dynamics that made it successful in the 1970s could not be reconstituted either in Korea or anywhere else in the contemporary world. It is not a matter of level of GDP per capita, i.e., that it would be appropriate for other countries now at the level of income that Korea had at the time of SMU's heyday. Agriculture technologies, structures of government, modern agriculture and many other factors have changed rural regions everywhere in today's globalized economies.

However, when viewed as a social learning process, lessons might be drawn from the SMU experience that transcend its historical confines. One is the inspirational knowledge that it did occur. In other words, as an experiment in rural development that learned and adjusted as it went forward, the Saemaul Undong reveals an experience in which central government effectively paid attention to rural welfare and livelihood and, through a combination of policy interventions, succeeded in mobilizing rural society and raise rural standards of living toward those of the city. SMU also shows that in acknowledging that cooperation can make important contributions to people's welfare and livelihoods, government can have a role as catalyst in initiating rural advancement.

This catalytic role was partially derived from the legitimacy enjoyed by what has come to be known as Korea's developmental state. As explained by Woo-Cumings' (1999:20) explication of Johnson's (1984) seminal work on the developmental state in Japan, the Park regime enjoyed a "moral mandate" of unquestioned acceptance of a strong state presence in people's lives. This was crucial in carrying out Saemaul projects, which depended on the capacity to "mobilize the overwhelming majority of the [rural] population to work and sacrifice" for a "revolutionary project" (Woo-Cumings 1999:20). However, without the cement, steel and agricultural inputs provided by government, and without the extraordinary government price support for grain production, stirring the enthusiasm of rural people alone – even with the catalytic mandate of the developmental state – would not have been sufficient to raise rural well-being and incomes.

The successes and limitations of the Saemaul Undong as it played out in the 1970s are still not settled matters in Korea. Older generation rural households tend to look back at the decade as one of great SMU accomplishments that lifted rural Korean from poverty. They recognize, however, that the time for rural development to be based on voluntary labor has passed into history. People from urban areas seem to have a more mixed assessment of SMU, which many see as a top-down rather than bottom-up program that was carried out by a dictatorial regime. In either case, SMU is an important episode in Korea's national development that has lasted in the collective memory of people decades after its halcyon days were completed.

## THE SAEMAUL UNDONG IN THE CONTEXT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE

Rural development planning is best understood as a local response to prevailing ideas and concepts at a particular historical moment. General ideas and prescriptions for rural development have changed greatly over time, as have the global and local contexts for rural development planning. The place and time of the Saemaul Undong as an approach to rural development is rural Korea in the 1970s, a decade during which Korea was among a handful of “miracle” newly-industrializing countries and ideas about rural development were shifting from reviving traditional pre-colonial communal traditions to formal economic sector development approach focusing on an emerging “green revolution” in grain production as its centerpiece for rural development.

In this milieu, villages in Korea were renovated and the rural economy grew rapidly under the banner of the Saemaul Undong that remains an iconic experience in modern South Korean history. Eventually, the question to be asked is whether lessons can be drawn from this experience that are relevant to efforts to develop rural areas in other countries in the world. Preliminary to addressing this question is a need to locate the Saemaul Undong within the prevailing theories, strategies and practices of rural development of its time.

The intention here is to assess the components and key interrelationships of SMU as a way to think through them with reference to other contexts and thereby identify which programs and projects inspired by the Saemaul Undong might be worthy of pursuing elsewhere today. While this is a speculative undertaking that is full of caveats and cautionary stories, this study concludes that lessons can be drawn from the successes as well as pitfalls of the Saemaul Undong, and practical approaches toward rural development can be extrapolated as starting points in other contexts. Such a conclusion cannot be drawn from a consideration of the Saemaul Undong alone, but is equally contingent upon understanding the Saemaul Undong in a comparative perspective.

This exploration best begins by first looking into the history of ideas about rural development as they (re-)appeared in the post-colonial world following World War II and then fundamentally changed by the 1970s with the advent of national development planning as an economic and technical process. Initially, rural development thinking in Asia and other decolonized world regions gave emphasis to community development and advocated a return to traditional social relations and endogenous forms of livelihood. Gandhian economics in India, Ujamaa development in Tanzania, Harambee in Kenya, and such luminaries as Paulo Freire in Brazil captured the imagination of rural development to focus attention on the village, the community, and the poor as agents of their own progress (Hunt 2003; Nyerere 1962; Freire 2000; Ngau 1987). Non-alignment rather than re-integration into a global capitalist world system was a prominent posture of what was then called the Third World. In Latin America plantations owned by transnational corporations were nationalized, and socialist revolutions were underway.

Socialist experiments were soon to become the exceptions rather than the mainstream, and by the late 1960s the community-centered approach was also being superseded by newly theorized universal models of stages of national economic growth and industrial takeoff (Lewis 1954; Fei and Ranis 1964; Rostow 1960). These changes in thinking were part of the advent of developmentalism as a technocratic and economic process that gained dominance along with the prominence given to the United Nations and the World Bank as major development policy institutions, which also gave credence to the appearance of the strong-arm developmental state, Korea being an oft-cited principal example (Amsden 1989, Evans 1995, Byres 1986, Douglass 1994, Kang 2002) (see Section 5 below). In Korea the Park government began to piece together a large technocratic capacity, with policy think tanks and planning bureaus established and headed by economists, business school graduates and engineers who mostly had graduated from U.S. universities (Park 2005).

Under the economic tutelage of national development planning, rural became a sector, with villages as sources of labor for producing commercial crops (McNicoll 1993). While urban industry was the hope of the future, agriculture needed to play its part in three ways: to supply cheap labor for urban industry; to supply food for rapidly expanding urban populations; and to provide capital for investment in infant industry through price squeezes on agricultural commodities. In this manner, rural development was subordinated to the mission of accomplishing a historic transition from a moribund agrarian society to a dynamic urban-industrial economy led by high rates of economic growth that, according to the popular theories of the day, would trickle down to rural households (Lewis 1954, Fei and Ranis 1964).

However, by the 1970s economic growth was found to still be leaving large segments of society in poverty, particularly rural households, leading to “basic needs” as a counterweight to unrestrained economic growth. The World Bank put forth its strategy for “redistribution with growth”, which was intent on measuring the cost of the dampening effect on economic growth that policies aimed at redistributing wealth and income from the rich to the poor might bring (Chenery, *et al.*, 1974). As a concept, basic needs accentuated the role of agriculture in providing food, particularly grains as food staples, as poverty was redefined as a lack of calories measured by the income needed to sufficient amounts of rice to sustain life. Such a definition resonated in Korea in the 1950s and 1960s. Historically an agrarian economy, South Korea became even more so following the division between North and South Korea at the end of the Korean War, which left the colonial industrial structure and natural resources in the North and very densely-settled rural regions in the South.

The densities and pressure on agriculture were intensified by the repatriation of more than a million Korean citizens from Japan following the end of World War II. Under the first several years of the Park government in the 1960s, urban industry became the favored sector, and agriculture began to lag more seriously behind rising urban demand. This was dramatically changed in the 1970s with the advent of the Saemaul Undong and its associated Green Revolution program.

The shift toward basic needs also readily lent itself to the objectives of the science of crop engineering that was then producing and disseminating the Green Revolution as a rural development strategy aimed at contributing not only to rural households but equally to rapidly increasing ranks of urban workers who, in their seemingly unlimited supply, received very low wages in the city. The Green Revolution soon became a centerpiece of policies throughout the world, including Asia (Ruttan and Hayami 1990, Ahmed 1988, Goodman and Redclift 1991). Countries such as Korea that had previously been recipients of food aid could at last be self-sufficient in basic grain production, and in so doing could give new hope to agriculture as a source of rising rural incomes while feeding the expanding cities and creating higher levels of food security (Barraclough 1991, Staatz and Eicher 1990).

In parallel with the shifts in mainstream policy paradigms, the 1970s proved to be an exceptional decade during which strategies for an “alternative development” also flowered. These ranged from explorations of Maoism to a re-energized “liberation theology,” “small is beautiful” initiatives, and continuing proposals for community-based rural development. Indicative of the times was the emergence of dependency theory in Latin American manifested in the signing of the Cocoyoc Declaration at a United Nations gathering in 1974. In calling for national self-reliance to redress the failures of global economic growth, the Declaration stated that “a temporary detachment from the present economic system that perpetuates economic dependency” could be required (UNEP/UNCTAD 1975, p.4). In other words, what constituted rural development in alternative development proposals was not just minor tinkering with the new conventional theory, but were instead diametrically opposed to it.

Critiques of the Green Revolution found their way into the search for alternatives as well. Among the identified problems were high dependency on chemical inputs and water, and thus prohibitive costs to small farmers; high risk of pest infestations due to the homogeneity of adopted grain varieties; vertical integration into global agribusiness that increased farmer outlays and risks; and the pushing of women out of agriculture, to name a few (Shiva 1991, Sorj and Wilkinson 1994). Despite such criticisms, the Green Revolution was adopted around the world and become a main component of the Saemaul Undong as well.

Because of its high costs and need for high levels of coordination in delivering new seeds, expanding irrigation systems, organizing credit systems, and constructing rural roads and storage facilities, the Green Revolution was also highly dependent upon government support. This fit well in the Korean context of a strong central government. In Korea, as in all countries adopting the Green Revolution, the government needed to create large-scale credit cooperatives, build storage facilities, and buy large shares of the crops and market them as well (Kim 2004). Without such government-initiated support the Green Revolution would not have been adopted by farmers, almost all of whom had very small farms and low incomes.

Providing low-cost credit through farmer cooperatives was especially crucial in getting rural households on board the Saemaul Green Revolution movement. Government involvement in the purchase and sale of grains was necessitated as well by the policy to buy high from farmers and sell below market prices to burgeoning legions of low-wage urban workers, most of whom were migrants from the countryside, as a way of lifting rural incomes while keeping a lid on urban wages to remain internationally competitive in expanding export industries, which was a major issue in sustaining the Korean government's strategy of export-oriented industrialization.

Another element added to rural development thinking internationally during the decade of 1970s was the spatial dimension, namely, rural-urban relations and linkages. While some of this discussion focused on debates concerning urban versus rural bias in planning (Lipton 1976, Chambers 1983, Bezemer and Headey 2008), from a more pragmatic perspective a host of strategies appeared for linking rural with urban development. These included such ideas as special integrated rural development programs that include non-farm employment and rural spatial linkages, central place theory and urban functions in rural development, and many other rural-urban linkage programs such as "agropolitan development" stressing the need to localize governance institutions (Friedmann and Douglass 1978, Johnson 1972, Ruddle and Rondinelli 1978, Tacoli 2006).

As compelling and diverse as the many proposals for integrating rural and urban development at local levels might have been, in Korea none was adopted, and the focus on urban industry prevailed through the widespread adoption of the "growth pole" approach toward industrial deconcentration away from rapidly growing metropolitan regions (Lo and Salih 1978). The growth pole approach effectively de-linked urban from rural development as a regional or localized development process, and the treatment of rural and urban as sectors to be planned under separate bureaus also contributed to the absence of a much-needed spatial or subnational regional dimension to national development policy.

This missing urban link in rural development would ultimately prove to be an Achilles Heel of much of rural Asia, including Korea, as spatial polarization of population and development continued to focus, first, on the Seoul Capital Region and, secondly, on the Seoul-Busan corridor. In Korea by the 1980s rural regions and rural towns had already begun a process of chronic depopulation that would continue to worsen in the coming decades. The adoption of a national policy of regional balance in the 1990s had no effect in reversing rural population decline (Douglass 2000).

The above overview shows how the Saemaul Undong emerged during a decade of worldwide changes in rural development thinking and strategies as they were being applied to what was then being called less developed or developing countries. In its own way, the Saemaul Undong represents a bridge between the traditional community development approach popular in the earlier postcolonial world and the then emerging models of economic sectors and the role of agriculture in providing foundations for the expected national urban-industrial transition, which was beginning to take off in Korea in the late 1960s. It also appeared at a moment when previous thinking about the lack of prospects for an agriculture-led development were being challenged by the advent of the Green Revolution, which became a major component of SMU.

As explained below, Korea's amalgam of Saemaul rural development components had unique features, three of which stand out as being paramount to the success of the Saemaul Undong. One was radical land reform as a foundation for both rural and urban-industrial growth. Another was the ability to use urban industrial growth to subsidize rural development rather than squeezing agriculture to provide capital for urban-industrial growth, as was the common experience in other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The third was the capacity of government to mobilize rural households that was based on a sense of common purpose imbedded in the general acceptance of a strong developmental state in rural Korea. None of these key elements is readily found either individually or in combination in the rest of the world.

Even with these exceptional features, the New Village Movement can still be said to have fit within the emergent conventional thinking about rural development of the 1970s. It did not venture into the ferment in that decade for alternative development that leaned toward either devolved models of participatory democracy or the varying degrees of socialist experiments that were underway in North Korea, China and Vietnam. While it did draw upon traditions of community cooperation in Korean villages, it did not solely rely on this component, but instead also included a national Green Revolution campaign that was being adopted around the world.

#### **THE SAEMAUL UNDONG IN THE CONTEXT OF RURAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN KOREA**

How the Saemaul Undong proceeded in relation to ideas of rural development in the 1970s is summarized in Table 1, which shows its key components as it progressed over the decade and beyond. The main point to be drawn from the table is that while the Saemaul Undong adopted most of the components then thought to be important for rural development as part of national development, it did not follow the progression of the more general case, and it also had elements uniquely innovated in Korea.

**Table 1. Components and Chronology of the Saemaul Undong**

<b>Phase/Components</b>	<b>Main features</b>
<b>Pre-Saemaul Undong (1950-70)</b>	<b>National focus on urban-industrial development</b>
Land reform	Radical land-to-the-tiller reform before Saemaul Undong was initiated
Role of agriculture	Relatively benign neglect of agriculture
<b>1st Phase (1970-75)</b>	<b>Focus on village modernization</b>
Village modernization	Materials given to villages for self-improvement.
Saemaul Undong Training Centers	Elaborate national system of Saemaul Undong training centers set up to train and indoctrinate leadership. Acted as mechanism to locally integrate rural development activities beyond sector ministries.
Saemaul Spirit	An ideology of Korea as a culture of cooperation launched to raise enthusiasm and mobilize contributions and participation.
<b>2nd Phase (1972-78)</b>	<b>Focus on agriculture</b>
Green Revolution	Forced adoption of high-yielding varieties of grain
Extension services	Embedded in the Green Revolution phase of Saemaul Undong
Rural cooperatives	Set up with Green Revolution
Mechanization	Belatedly adopted mechanized farming
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Phase (1973-1977)</b>	<b>Saemaul Undong expansion to non-agriculture and cities</b>

Source: author from various reports.

Beginning with the singularities of the Korean experience, a critically important precursor to the Saemaul Undong that laid the social and economic foundation for it to advance was agrarian land reform. This was carried out in Korea beginning in 1948 in the early postcolonial years under US occupation and a newly elected democratic government. With Japanese colonial landlords vacating Korea, decolonization left the land in disarray and Korean landlords in a relatively weak position in being associated with Japanese colonization as collaborators, allowing tenants to feel empowered to withhold rent payments. At the same time, with a communist regime being established in what would become North Korea, land reform was seen by political parties vying for popular support as a necessary means of winning the support of the majority of Korean people, i.e., farm households (Mitchell 1949, Jeon and Kim 2000).

The outcome of Korea's land-to-the-tiller agrarian reform was the creation of a nation of very small-scale owner-operators typically working farms of one hectare or less. In 1945 tenants comprised 70 percent of farm household (Pak 1956). By 1961 owner-farmers held a reported 97 percent of agricultural land (Jeon and Kim 2000:255). With the price fixed at the time of agreement by landlords to sell the land at the value of 150 percent of one year's crop at early 1950s prices, high rates of inflation greatly assisted tenants in paying for land purchases over a number of years. Korea stands with Japan and Taiwan as the only market-oriented countries in Asia to have achieved radical land-to-the-tiller agrarian reform. Though the resulting farms were very small, farm incomes immediately increased with land reform and were mostly sufficient in providing for family food

security (Jeon and Kim 2000). As new agricultural technologies and price support were made available, incomes greatly increased.

Another diversion from the prevailing models in the Korean experience was the decision by the national government not to use agriculture as the economic base for financing the growth of urban industry. Even though Japanese colonialist had made investments in irrigation and other aspects of farming, Korea, unlike Taiwan, did not inherit a well-developed agricultural economy from its colonial experience. Throughout its post-colonial history Korea has been and remains a major importer of food (Ho 1979, Muller 2010). Instead of relying on rural development to finance urban industry, Korea was able to create an exceptionally powerful industrialization process through international loans, foreign assistance, including U.S. military financial transfers, and a nationalized banking system that was used to subsidize SMU rural development. The subsidies started in 1972 and were accomplished by paying high prices to farmers for rice, which was then sold at lower prices to urban consumers.

Though the high level of subsidies were not sustained in the longer term, into the latter half of the 1970s they had the double virtues of raising rural household income to a level equal to that of urban households while also keeping prices low for the urban workforce. This was counted by rural households who benefitted from it as one of the great miracles of the Saemaul Undong. For the first time in history, official data showed that rural households were economically on a par with urban households.<sup>1</sup>

Also setting Korea apart from the 1970s mainstream rural development strategy was the initiation of the Saemaul Undong as a village modernization program rather than first as a program to increase agriculture productivity. The government's stated purpose for the program was to lift the standard of living of rural people up to the level of urban households. Implicit in this intention was poverty alleviation through physical improvements in village infrastructure, amenities and housing. Beginning in the winter of 1970-71, officials brought 330-500 bags of cement and one ton of steel reinforcement rods to each village throughout the country. Fortuitously, the cement became available due to oversupplies made by recently completed world-class cement plants that were seeking help to dispose of their growing inventory (Kim 2011).

Following the self-help use of these materials, the government reviewed the work that villagers had done and ranked each village according to its capacity to make good use of the resources. The most successful ones were given more resources to develop further and to act as inspirations for other villages to follow. Within a few years, reports compiled by local officials found that almost all villages had reached the highest "developed" category of Saemaul village renovation (Moore 1984). Using the first round assessment the government decided to exclude nearly 18,000 low performing villages from the next round, leaving just 16,000 villages to participate in it. Among those that received the new round of recourses, village leaders noted that competition to do better than neighboring villages was one of the principal motivations to undertake SMU projects (Kim 2011). Approximately 6,000 of the excluded villages decided to join the second round using their own financial resources for materials.

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<sup>1</sup> Since rural families were larger than urban families, using per capita income data would show higher income inequality favoring urban areas where households have fewer members at that time. In addition, income data in Korea during this time eliminated highest income groups from the calculations, making government statistics on household income data questionable (Steinberg 1982).

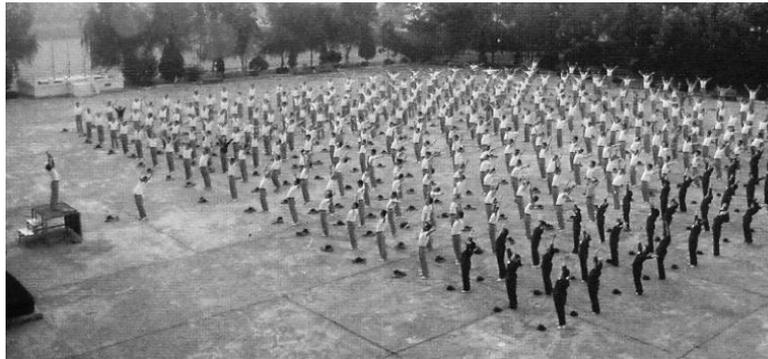
Throughout the decade of the 1970s Saemaul Undong experience, the village remained as the territorial unit for policy implementation (Moore 1984). A nationally orchestrated Saemaul ideology of social cooperation was advanced to mobilize popular involvement at grassroots levels. Central to this ideology was idea of accelerating national development to overcome the lost decades of colonial rule that had favored industrialization of North Korea, which had become South Korea's chief competitor as a contrasting model of development that might still hold sway among some elements of society in South Korea.

The large planning technocracy that Park had been putting in place in Seoul was called upon to administer a nation-wide program to activate rural households and villages by raising people's enthusiasm through Saemaul events with flags, songs and spirited testimonials of officials and farmers alike. Three levels of administration and bureaucracy were created. At the lowest level, every village had a general assembly and a village development committee, which was composed of 12 elected delegates headed by a Saemaul leader, to make village-wide decisions on project proposals. For its part, the Government prepared lists of suggested or recommended projects it thought were appropriate for the level of village in question (Goh 2010). It also required each village to have a woman as one of the Saemaul leaders. This was accompanied by a women leaders' training program. To more effectively link with villages, Saemaul training centers were established across the country. From these centers, cadres of central government trainers worked with local officials and residents in selecting and implementing village projects (Figure 1).

Korean villages, like rural societies throughout the world, had a long history of social cooperation that could be readily tapped by the descending layers of Saemaul administration and training:

Korean rural villages had organizations for mutual cooperation among farmers called *Dure* (farmers' fraternity for mutual aid) and *Hyangyak* (autonomous regulatory charter). Villagers were united around some traditional characteristics, such as regional affinity, common interests and group works. In view of these features, villages were designated for the main engines to push ahead Saemaul projects, and were thus to directly receive the government's materials support (Goh 2010:6).

Above the village were the Saemaul Leaders Training Institutes at the provincial and central levels. Leaders would come to these institutes for intensive one or two-week periods. A principal focus of training was motivation for rural development and gaining abilities to convince villagers of the importance of SMU. At the highest level were the President and his cabinet, which met at least once a month to discuss the program's progress. President Park was directly involved in all aspects of SMU, including writing its theme songs and lyrics (Kim 2011). County, provincial and central governments also took on the duties to document, monitor and evaluate the progress of SMU. The national press and television were continuously called upon to favorably report on SMU projects as well.

**Figure 1. Training Center for the Saemaul Undong (c. 1972)**

Source: NCSUMK (2011)

By 1977 all villages in the country had joined the New Village Movement and were moving of the ladder of implementation of new projects (Kim 2011). The success of village modernization substantially added to the feeling of rural prosperity, which, in turn, served to enhance the Saemaul ideology of national solidarity that was to become part of the nostalgia and continuing high regard for the Saemaul Undong even decades later when its key drivers were no longer at play.

In addition to village modernization, the Saemaul Undong adopted the strategy and policy package of the Green Revolution. Up to this point, government policymakers had felt that the very high rural densities in Korea, which also indicated very low labor and land productivity, held little promise for productivity and income gains in agriculture. At the same time, with grain rationing in cities and Korea being a major recipient of US food assistance, price incentives to increase production were dampened.<sup>2</sup> Thus unlike many other countries, rural areas of Korea were left in what could be called a state of benign neglect (Kihl *et al.* 1981). Although government was a major purchaser of rice and barley from the 1950s onward, and it had kept purchase prices low as a means to keep urban wages down, the squeeze was not as great as, for example, in Thailand where an export rice premium reduced farmer incomes by as much as 50 percent (Phongpaichit and Baker 1995). The main implicit impact was to reduce incentives for farmers to invest in grain production and agriculture more generally, leaving rural Korea further behind the city in income gains (Ho 1979).

Korea's Green Revolution was not the "induced innovation" associated with Japan and Taiwan's agricultural revolution based on extension services, model farmers and market incentives (Hayami and Ruttan 1979). Rather, it was a process of "directed innovation" by a strong developmental state that compelled farmers to adopt the Tongil high-yielding varieties, and in so doing to enter into a system requiring expensive chemical inputs, expanded government storage capacities, state-sponsored cooperatives and intensive irrigation (Burmeister 1987).

In this regard, by placing the Saemaul Undong under the Ministry of Home Affairs, which is in charge of local administration, the program was able to avoid debilitating divisions into a number of specialized, and often competing, agencies such as agriculture, public works or finance. In this manner SMU was able to work as a crosscutting institutional arrangement to coordinate efforts at the local level. Thus instead of separate line agencies operating as institutional silos linking the center to villages, SMU was pushed forth by awakening local government officials to the need to

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<sup>2</sup> From 1956 to 1970, under US PL 480 food aid, Korea received \$800 million worth of aid commodities, largely in the form of wheat and cotton (Ahn and Miles 2011).

activate and cooperate with villagers to accomplish a wide array of interconnected projects that, in this sense, worked to integrate, e.g., road and bridge construction with programs to mechanize farming that depended on good roads. As further explained below, it also enhanced government efficiency at local levels.

Mechanization of grain production was also part of the Green Revolution. In this regard, Korea began to use small tractors and tillers much later than other countries that had entered the new crop regiment. Although initial programs were established in 1972 to encourage the use of agricultural machinery, only after 1978 was mechanization of rice transplanting and harvesting fully pursued with the promulgation of the Agricultural Mechanization Promotion Law aimed at greatly increasing the supply of machinery and its use. Indirect subsidies for mechanization appeared in several forms, ranging from government subsidies for the production of farm machinery in Korea, which kept sales prices lower than they would otherwise have been, to the setting up of repair and maintenance facilities, supporting R&D for further machinery development, helping to organize joint-use systems among farmers, and tax exemptions from farm machinery purchases (Cho 2003). The effects of mechanization were transformative. The tractors could be used for non-farm production and marketing as well, and, although slow, became a means for general farm to town transportation. This observation also underscores the contributions of rural roads to improving rural economies during the Saemaul Undong. By the 1990s mechanization was nearly complete.

Mechanization was also important in compensating for the decline in the rural population and, in particular, agricultural labor force. The number of farm households in Korea reached its peak in 1967 at 2.6 million; by the end of the 1980s it had fallen to 1.8 million (Seok 1998). Since household sizes shrank, too, the actual drop in rural population was tremendous. From 1960 to 1990 the rural population of Korea decreased from 14.5 to 6.6 million. During the same period the share of rural population over age 60 more than doubled to reach 1.3 million. As vividly shown by comparing Figure 2, taken in the 1960s, with Figure 3 showing the difference in crop transportation after tractors became available in the latter 1970s.

Rural depopulation in Korea, and elsewhere in Asia, was principally a depletion of younger working age people. As such mechanization was crucial to overcoming labor shortages and a rapidly aging rural population. Power tillers, tractors, transplanters, sprayers, threshers, and dryers and forage cutters all began to enter into farming in Korea in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> In a country that was highly protected against the import of manufactured retail goods, the possibilities for rapidly advancing the use of agricultural machinery were directly related to the increased industrial capacity of Korean manufacturers to make them, which came fully online only from the latter half of the 1970s (Kim 2011). Mechanization was likewise critical for the survival of family farms. From 1970 to 1991 the average age of household heads increased from 45 to 60 years old (Seok 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> As an indicator of the rapid decline of Korea's rural population, despite government subsidies and support for the purchase of farm machines, their sales reached a peak in 1997 and have plummeted since due to fall in demand (Kim 2011).

**Figure 2. Farmer Uses Traditional *Chige* to Carry Heavy Loads (1960s)**

Source: Everyculture.com (2013).

**Figure 3. Mechanization Comes to Rural Korea (c. 1978).**

Source: NCSUMK (2011)

Table 2 compares Korea with rural and urban population growth in Korea with other economies of Asia. It shows that during the 1970s and 1980s when the Saemaul Undong was in full swing, Korea experienced the highest rates of rural population loss and among the fastest pace of urban population growth rate among the selected countries.

Almost all of the urban population growth accrued first and foremost to the Seoul Capital Region and, secondarily, to the southeast coastal Ulsan-Busan-Masan complex and cities such as Daegu and Daejeon located along the Seoul-Busan urban-industrial corridor. This pattern underscored the absence of rural-urban linkages that might have provided non-farm employment opportunities in rural regions. Table 3 and Figure 4 show the steadily increasing degree of spatial polarization in Korea from 1960 to the 1990s. Table 3 indicates that from 1960 to 1998, the concentration of factories continuously surpassed the increasingly high concentration of population in the Seoul Capital Region. In 1980 after the first decade of the Saemaul Undong, Seoul accounted for more than one third of the national population and 44 percent of the nation's factories. Figure 4 graphical

displays the polarization pattern over time. Even the second largest city, Busan and its surrounding South Gyeongnam Province did not gain in share of population from 1960 to 1998, the year of the Asia finance crisis. Seoul Capital Region has continued to increase its share of national population into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Douglass 2009).

**Table 2: Rural Population Growth Rates, 1960s-1990s, Selected Asian Countries**

Country	Rural growth rate (% per year)				Peak Year	Average urban growth 1965-95
	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s		
Taiwan	0.2	-1.0	-1.4	n.a.	1967	4.0
South Korea	0.5	-1.4	-3.8	-1.6	1967	4.5
Thailand	2.9	1.7	1.3	0.9	2012	3.4
Malaysia	1.9	1.0	1.1	-0.2	1994	4.6
Indonesia	1.9	1.6	0.7	-0.4	1993	4.7
China	2.2	1.6	0.4	-0.2	1992	3.8
Vietnam	2.0	2.0	2.1	1.2	2017	3.1

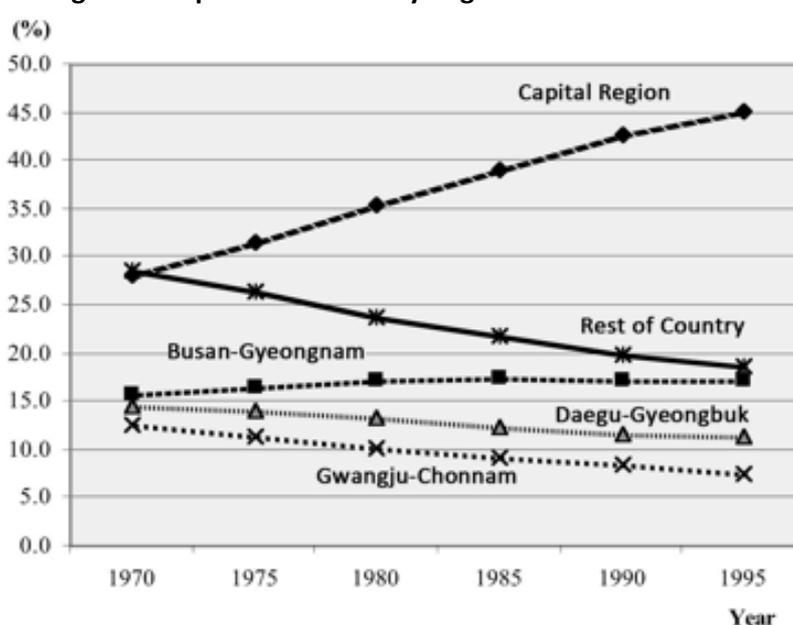
Source: United Nations, cited in McNicoll (2006), Table 3.

**Table 3: Share of National Population and Factories in the Seoul Capital Region, 1960-1998**

	1960	1970	1980	1990	1995	1998
Population	20.8	28.2	35.5	42.8	45.3	45.6
Factories	26.7	32.8	43.8	54.8	55.6	55.1

Source: National Statistics Office, Government of the Republic of Korea.

**Figure 4: Population Shares by Region in Korea 1970-1995**



Source: Korean Statistical Information Service (2013).

One of the more surprising features of the Saemaul Undong and all of the agriculture support policies that went with it was that farm sizes stayed relatively constant, neither increasing nor decreasing significantly over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Several reasons can be found for this. One was that because there was no large landlord class, farmers were not compelled to sell land due to rent squeezes. At the same time, the government strongly enforced the terms of the 1950s land reform that limited farm size to a maximum of 3 hectares. Another element was mechanization, which allowed aging farmers to continue farming even with reduced labor supplies. A third was, ironically, the price of land, which was so high that most farmers did not have the financial capacity to buy other farmers' land (Seok 1998). High rates of out-migration also meant that parents did not have to divide land among children, and thus there was pressure to decrease in farm size through inheritance.

The absence of strong economies of scale related to farm size, especially in paddy production, was another important factor in farms not increasing in acreage (Herath 1983). To the extent that such economies exist, they were mostly to be realized in the sharing of off-farm infrastructure and equipment, such as irrigation and water management systems, storage facilities, machinery, roads and agricultural services. In this regard, farmers typically shared machinery rather than each farmer buying it. Government Green Revolution programs and village modernization also provided off-farm infrastructure and services. By the end of the 1980s rural depopulation was reaching a point that the government began to support experiments with group farming as a way to deal with labor shortages and aged workers (Kim 1992). But during the heyday of SMU, this had not yet occurred, and, as noted, farms remained "postage stamp" sizes.

In the early years of the 1970s the Green Revolution worked out well to increase incomes and supplies of grain. However, once price support was ended in the latter half of the 1970s and the somewhat typical problems of HYVs emerged – widespread plant disease, high costs of production and high indebtedness – farmers tended to return to other seed varieties, including the Akibare variety adopted from Japan in the 1980s, and less expensive forms of production (IFPRI 2002). In 1978 the Tongil high-yielding variety (HYV) of rice seed was being used on more than 75 percent of all rice land, leaving the nation highly susceptible to a blast outbreak that swept across the country in that year, leading to a severe drop in rice production that continued over the next two years. As a result, the Green Revolution in rice production came to an end in 1981 with the withdrawal of state insistence on using Tongil HYV and the *de facto* policy to let farmers make their own decisions about production (Burmeister 1987). High uses of chemical inputs and mechanization continued, however, which also led to high levels of borrowing and potential indebtedness that has since plagued rural Korea (Nemeth 1988).<sup>4</sup>

The documented successes of Saemaul Undong as village modernization and Green Revolution led the government to proclaim that every successful rural development venture was the result of the Saemaul Undong spirit of selfless cooperation (Brandt 1979). This masked, however, very different government-rural relations as the focus shifted from village to agriculture and later onto urban factory production and schools. As villages completed the projects they could do through self-help and the green revolution ran its course, the principal component that remained was the Saemaul spirit, which over time was glorified in a Saemaul song, flag, cap, vest, and training centers with testimonials from Saemaul veterans about the power of Korean society to join together to overcome adversity and develop the country (Figure 5).

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<sup>4</sup> Government statistics show that the average indebtedness of each rural South Korean household increased from 111,061 won in 1978 to 839,666 won in 1982 (Anh and Boyer 1984:442).

From this ideological perspective, another take on the stages of Saemaul Undong has been recently put forth with its renewal as an exportable rural development strategy. As shown in the Table 4, the process is now being presented as one in which government first leads the way, and then as it matures into its current form, it became so ingrained in society that it becomes “autonomous” in its continuing advancement as a voluntary and private sector initiative. This can also be seen as another way of saying that the Saemaul Undong had, by the early 1980s, run its course as an umbrella for linking rural development policies of government with popular rural mobilization (Moore 1984). Instead, the Saemaul Undong had turned into civil society efforts promoted by neoliberal political philosophy.

**Figure 5. The Saemaul Flag Flies over a Bridge Construction Project, 1972**



Source: NCSUMK (2011)

A number of factors contributed to bringing the Saemaul Undong to an end by the early 1980s as a multi-faceted rural development program. Democracy movements and the discrediting of the regimes that followed President Park made the Saemaul Undong less lustrous and more critically assessed. Villages had been substantially upgraded, and subsequent new directions in agriculture and urban areas did not have the same level of social engagement that village modernization had. Local governments, though not yet enjoying autonomy from the center, also began to reduce the presence of Saemaul offices in many provinces.

**Table 4. Stages of Creation and Regenerations of the Saemaul Undong**

Stage	Characteristics	Period
1	Foundation and Groundwork	1970-1973
2	Proliferation	1974-1976
3	Energetic Implementation	1977-1979
4	Overhaul	1980-1989
5	Autonomous Growth	1990-1998

Source: NCSUMK (2011).

Villages were also beginning to more seriously depopulate. From 1960 to 1980, the share of national population in cities jumped from 28 to 57 percent (Ko 1994). By 1990 the share would reach 74 percent, and by 2000 Korea's urban transition was nearly completed. Rural populations were not only shrinking relative to the total urban population, they had entered an era of chronic shrinkage, leaving an aging labor force too few in numbers to launch a renewed comprehensive Saemaul Undong for rural revitalization.

With continuing high protection of agriculture from international trade, the demographic shift meant that fewer farmers were charged with providing greater quantities of food for ever larger numbers of non-agricultural populations (Savada and Shaw 1990). Fulfilling this imperative was beyond the Saemaul Undong capacities as understood under the ideology of village-level grassroots mobilization for local improvements. Mechanization of farm production was also unable to compensate for the declining rural labor force in terms of endlessly improving productivity.

Korea's success in agrarian land reform also began to create new bottlenecks because farms were too small to create the types of economies of scale needed to ratchet up production to new heights with fewer, aging farmers. Thus while during the entire 1970s experience of the Saemaul Undong and its Green Revolution, the country substantially completed the cycle of transformation from peasant to small-scale commercial farmer in Korea, these producers were not supported to a level at which they could well carry out their expected roles of providing self-sufficiency in food production for the nation.

From its experiences in the 1970s, the Saemaul Undong left a legacy of social mobilization for contributions to village life that would last through the years to serve as the basis for its resurrection as a main program in Korea's new era of giving assistance to rural development in other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. As explained by the National Council of Saemaul Undong Movement (NCSUMK (2011) the Overhaul during the 1980-89 period was all about recentering the movement on the following:

- Social atmosphere: kindness, order, selflessness, and cooperation
- Escape from inactivity and contraction
- Economic development: combined farming, distribution improvement, and credit union activities
- Environmental activities: cleanliness, developing parks throughout the country, building better access roads
- Reborn as a private sector-organization: enhancing the role division between government and private sectors

These points sum to a tacit acknowledgement that the days of big government leading the way were over. The private sector was now expected to take the reins all the while that people were still being encouraged to be kind, selfless and cooperative as a way to escape from inaction supposedly related to the shrinking village and dissolving rural life. The principal economic push was to consolidate farms, expand local credit organizations, and maintain high levels of protection of the agricultural sector from international competition. The National Council in 2010 declared that "Rural modernization is not a matter of raising the economic viability of the agriculture; rather, it is directly connected to the modern attitudes and mindsets of the agricultural populace (NCSUMK 2011). The lasting legacy, then, became the Saemaul spirit of social cooperation, self-help and diligence. In this regard, emphasis must again be given to the role of the national government in being the catalyst for rural mobilization through village modernization and economic growth through increasing the productivity of land and labor in agriculture.

The Saemaul Undong had many laudable achievements (Tables 5 and 6 and Figures 6 and 7). Village modernization reached most villages to materially improve living standards. The added focus on subsidized grain production tremendously increased rural incomes (Burmeister 1987, Han 2004, Choe 2005).<sup>5</sup> Along with previously accomplished land reform, the programs and projects associated with the Saemaul Undong greatly reduced the most extreme forms of rural poverty, even though poverty remained widespread (Brandt 1979). Tile replaced thatch roofs; village roads were widened and resurfaced; bridges, and stream embankments and irrigation facilities were substantially improved. Rural households had cooperative savings accounts to help finance purchases of durable goods everything such as television sets as well as farm equipment and inputs.

**Table 5. Village Improvements through the Saemaul Undong, 1970s**

Project Name	Unit	Objective	Performance	Growth
Expanding Village Roads	Km	26,266	43,558	166 %
Constructing New Agricultural Roads	Km	49,167	61,797	126
Installing Small Bridges	Unit	76,749	79,516	104
Constructing Village Centers	Unit	35,608	37,012	104
Building Warehouses	Unit	34,665	22,143	64
Housing Improvements	Unit	544,000	225,000	42
Improving Village Layout	Village		2,747	
Constructing Sewage Systems	Km	8,654	15,559	179
Supplying Electricity	Household	2,834,000	2,777,500	98
Operating Saemaul Factories	Unit	950	717	75

Source: NCSUMK (2011), Table 3.

One way of appreciating the accomplishments of the SMU in the 1970s is to have a view of conditions in rural Korea in the 1960s before its initiation:

The 'barley hump' (rural famine before the barley harvest in the late Spring) was dominating over most Korean farmers. About 80 percent of Korean farmhouses remained thatched, only 20 percent of them could enjoy electricity, half of them had no village entry roads for cars, and even power tillers were denied access in most village roads (Goh 2010:1).

Some caveats and reservations concerning SMU's achievements are needed, however. According to Ahn and Boyer (1984), none of South Korea's thirty-four thousand villages remained classified in the "underdeveloped" category by the end of the 1970s. Yet Brandt (1979, 1980) reported that more remote ones did not become significantly engaged in the movement, and, further, the poorest 15-20 percent of villagers who were landless or land poor did not benefit from the agriculture component. Other observers also reported that competition among lower level officials encouraged false

<sup>5</sup> In 1988 rice accounted for 90 percent of total grain production and over 40 percent of farm income. The government's rice support program reached a record US\$1.9 billion in 1986, with a purchase prices that was about five times that of the world market (Savada and Shaw 1990). But farming costs had also skyrocketed, and as land ownership shifted to cities high increases in tenant farmers followed. In 1985 nonfarm owners of farmland amounted to 65 percent of total land in tenancy.

reporting and exaggerated statistics (Moore 1984). Without press or academic freedom to report and research SMU projects, caution is thus called for when drawing from the evidence compiled from official sources. Even with these types of caveats, however, the weight of reporting from a multitude of sources nonetheless points to the conclusion that the programs and projects pursued under the rubric of the Saemaul Undong did make substantial contributions to rural welfare and incomes.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 6. Villagers Mobilized to Modernize Houses and Village Infrastructure, c. 1972**



Source: NCSUMK (2011)

**Figure 7. Village Houses after Renovation, c. 1972**



Source: NCSUMK (2011)

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<sup>6</sup> In 1976 the government spent one-quarter of the Ministry of Home Affairs budget and 9 percent of the entire national budget on programs associated with the Saemaul Undong. Villagers had never before received such largesse from government.

**Table 6. Rural Household Income Changes, 1970-1979**

Year	Household Income	Agricultural Income		Non-agricultural Income	
		Amount	Ratio (%)	Amount	Ratio (%)
1970	255,800	194,000	75.9 %	61,800	24.1 %
1973	480,700	390,300	81.2	90,400	18.8
1976	1,156,300	921,200	79.7	235,100	20.3
1979	1,531,300	1,531,000	68.7	696,200	31.3

Source: NCSUMK (2011), Table 3.

Emboldened by the rural popularity of SMU, the government attempted to expand it to urban Korea in the latter 1970s, but the record of success in doing so is less clear. Its major use was to provide a common emblem for neighborhood and citywide projects such as planting trees, cleaning drains, and other city betterment campaigns, many of which were ongoing or would have been pursued under other banners. There is no doubt, however, that its presence was felt in cities as governments organized parades and other events to prominently display the perceived power of SMU in social cooperation for the common good.

In terms of Saemaul factories, Ho (1979) concludes that the economic impact of the SMU Factory Program was quite modest. What gains were made were heavily concentrated around Seoul, Busan and Daegu. Further, because the policy was aimed at attracting firms to relocate away from bigger cities, almost all of the factories were export units of Korea's *chaebol* conglomerates rather than emerging from the countryside, which severely limited local multiplier effects. The regional pattern of Saemaul factories is presented in Table 7. It shows that from one-third to more than one-half of the number of establishments, jobs and exports were attributed to Gyeonggi Province in the Seoul Capital City region. Other high shares were in the Saemaul Undong heartland of North and South Gyeongsang provinces, i.e., near Busan and Daegu, which were major sites of textile and footwear production.

**Table 7. Regional Distribution of Saemaul Factories, 1976**

	Number of establishments		Employment		Output		Exports	
	Unit	% of total	Persons	% of total	Million won	% of total	US \$ 000	% of total
Pusan	3	0.83	1,081	2.21	2,095.0	1.77	3,799	2.06
Gyeonggi	116	32.13	20,876	42.71	46,165.3	38.94	73,828	40.11
Gangweon	16	4.43	1,610	3.29	1,651.7	1.38	2,805	1.52
Chungcheongbug	20	5.54	1,863	3.81	4,273.6	3.60	4,318	2.34
Chungcheongnam	33	9.14	4,689	9.59	11,720.1	9.89	21,645	11.76
Jeonrabug	21	5.82	2,048	4.19	2,845.2	2.40	3,935	2.14
Jeonranam	24	6.65	1,643	3.36	4,153.2	3.50	4,955	2.69
Gyeongsangbug	69	19.11	7,348	15.03	16,177.1	13.65	27,311	14.84
Gyeongsangnam	55	15.24	7,510	15.37	29,151.5	24.59	41,157	22.36
Jeju	4	1.11	206	0.42	325.3	0.27	304	0.17
<b>Total</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>48,874</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>118,548.0</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>184,057</b>	<b>100.00</b>

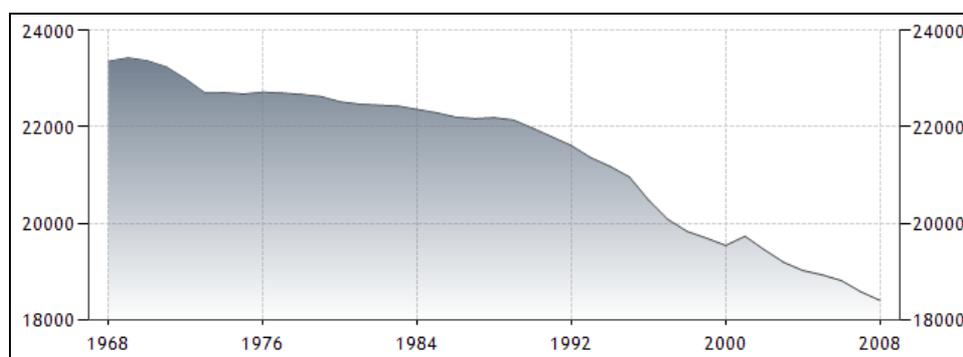
Source: Rural Industry Development Division, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 1977.

Other critical perspectives provided more far-reaching cautions against wholeheartedly praising the Saemaul Undong. Nemeth (1988) documents how once self-reliant communities in Cheju-do were pulled into the program in ways that led to the atrophy of village capacities rather than enhancing them. Shifting agricultural land from self-provisioning to commercial production made rural life more precarious in the face of unpredictable market price swings. The processes of incorporation into the movement ultimately led to the loss of community, accelerated outmigration, and debilitating depopulation. Muller (2010) further elaborates that for the country as a whole, rural life after the 1970s deteriorated along with a rapidly aging population, urban encroachment on prime agricultural land, and WTO pressures to further open Korea to imports of agricultural commodities from abroad.

Others have chronicled how disillusionment was intrinsic to the program in that mechanisms that were adopted to implement it could not be sustained. Price support for agricultural commodities, village modernization, and the green revolution were all elements that had intrinsically limiting features in their time horizons (Moore 1984). These were the key material dimensions of household and village mobilization that was also effectively promoted through ideological exhortations to joint together to support Korea's magnificent rise from rags to riches. In other words, the developmental state was crucial in activating and promoting the social values galvanizing people into action. Thus when authoritarian rule in the post-Park era lost popular support in the countryside as well as in the city, a key element underpinning popular support of the Saemaul Undong was forfeited, particularly after the 1980 Gwanju massacre of civilians by the Chun regime.<sup>7</sup>

Concerning other spheres of national development, although a stated purpose was to raise rural incomes, an equally prominent driver was the perceived opportunity to keep basic food prices low for a very rapidly increasing urban labor force engaged in competitively producing goods for export. The subsequent adoption of the Green Revolution had its successes in terms of self-reliance in grain production to a point at which rationing was no longer needed. Its longer-term legacy is not so clear, however. The agricultural transformation in Korea substantially replicated programs pushed by central governments in most countries in the world. With its purpose to provide rice for the city, it inhibited the pursuit of the longer-term need to diversity agriculture for rural resilience and sustainable incomes. Meanwhile, the amount of agricultural land began to precipitously decline as urbanization expanded into prime agricultural areas and, in an increasing number of cases, it was abandoned (see figure 8).

**Figure 8. Agricultural Land in South Korea (Km2)**



Source: Trading Economics (2011)

<sup>7</sup> President Chun also removed the Saemaul Movement from the Ministry of Home Affairs and appointed his younger brother to lead it. In 1988 the son was charged with large-scale extortion and embezzlement while he was chairman of the movement from 1981 and 1987 (Savada and Shaw 1990).

Assessing the value of the Saemaul Undong as an ideological force is the most difficult task. On one hand, its popularity in the minds of many Korean people remains exceptionally high, and this has allowed the use of the term to be instrumental in mobilizing people across the nation, rural and urban, to engage in altruistic, voluntary activities for the common good. The success at this level is well recorded and, as mentioned, has been the focal point in the export of the movement to other countries.

On the other hand, separating emotional attachments from material benefits risks oversimplification. As noted by Kim Chung-yum (2011:216), President Park's Chief of Staff from 1969 to 1978, the government had tried to compel farmers to produce rice at below market prices in the 1960s, and the results were poor. He regards the President's decision to raise the government purchase price substantially above the market rate as one of the most effective mechanisms to achieve high participation in the Saemaul Green Revolution. Kim's observations are confirmed by Ahn and Boyer (1986) who, in undertaking a rural survey taken in 1983, found that lack of allegiance to the Saemaul Undong was directly related to levels of indebtedness, tenancy, and low income (Boyer and Anh 1991).

Yet against a backdrop of a long history of rural neglect and poverty, the sudden uplifting of villages and household incomes was a good reason for a majority of rural households to give trust and support to government-led Saemaul indoctrination. What was appreciated most of all was that government at last paid attention to rural people, and for a while most people prospered under the banner of the Saemaul Undong. The benefits were so well received that even the authoritarian rule could be put in a benevolent perspective. As woman from rural Cholla-do stated, "We were devoted to the Saemaul Undong because we could eat rice. He was a dictator, but he fed the people" (Han 2004:75). From such statements, the fond memories of the Saemaul Undong come not from "rural development" alone but more broadly from the economic achievements of the entire Park era that came to be represented as being the outcome of the unique capacity of Korean people to cooperatively build a prosperous nation (Han 2004:90).<sup>8</sup>

## THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE AND THE SAEMAUL UNDONG

A basic political dimension of the New Village Movement and rural development that separates Korea from many other experiences in the world is the strong role that the government has played as a developmental state. Since many governments style themselves as being in pursuit of development, the term "developmental state" is specifically used here to refer only to strongly interventionist states that, as presented by Chalmers (1982) in his seminal contribution of the concept, are capable of coherently designing and instituting policies both within the state apparatus and in relations between the state and non-state actors. More specifically in the instance of SMU, the government was able to impel popular participation in the movement based on a commonly held expectation of strong government presence in economy and society. While people were aware of the corruption and abuses of power of government, as long as material conditions of life were being improved, the state was able to retain its legitimacy in being the vanguard of rural development and the Saemaul Undong.

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<sup>8</sup> As rural household incomes began to fall relative to urban incomes and government investment in agriculture dramatically dropped from the late 1970s, Saemaul efforts increasingly focused on spiritual training to maintain a well disciplined society (Han 2004:78).

As it emerged from the destruction and economically ineffective leaders of the early post-colonial years, Korea under Park Chung Hee and subsequent governments is often presented as a prototypical developmental state. Without this understanding of the capability of the developmental state in Korea, any assertion that the Saemaul Undong is transferrable to another setting with a different form of state-business-civil society relationship would be quite questionable. In the same vein, without the consistency of government in actually carrying out projects that it said it would implement, village voluntarism and enthusiasm for SMU programs would have quickly dissipated.

The rarity of a developmental state has often been noted in writing on Asia (Amsden 1989, Evans 1995, Woo-Cumings 1999). It contrasts with authoritarian regimes that are highly predatory, rent-seeking, or simply plundering state revenues. In a similar vein, Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama* (1968), which presages the idea of the developmental state well before Johnson's (1982) crystallization of the concept, declared all South Asian countries to be "soft states" that lacked the political capacity to either lead development or tackle the root sources of poverty. Similarly, Yoshihara (1988), typified Southeast Asia of the 1980s as being a region of "ersatz capitalism" that was experiencing industrialization without development, i.e., without innovation, economic efficiency or human progress.<sup>9</sup>

A defining feature of a developmental state is its high degree of autonomy to allow government to adopt and implement national development policies that reach beyond class or elite interests. This does not mean that development states are without corruption or special interests, but rather that, as Evans (1995) cogently argues, it is able to leverage these interests to reach a high level of perceived reliability in taking the actions beyond these interests. In Korea and other developmental states such as those of Japan, Taiwan, British Hong Kong and Singapore, the evidence of this autonomy is often presented in the form of well functioning basic infrastructure and services, merit based recruitment of civil servants, a large and highly-trained techno-bureaucracy, and a record of redistributive economic growth. Korea was able to present this evidence into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Autonomy of the Korean state under President Park was gained from at least three major sources. Land reform was crucial in eliminating rural elites who would have been certain to challenge central government interventions in agrarian and village relationships. Secondly, the nationalization of the banking system gave government tremendous leverage over business interests, which depended on reliable access to substantial capital through the banking system. Third, until the late 1970s the *chaebol* had not yet achieved the size and scale of power to effectively or consistently challenge state authority (Douglass 1994). Taken together, these factors and others, including a very large military force loyal to Park, gave the President substantial power over elites, the techno-bureaucracy and the emerging corporate economy. In the case of the Saemaul Undong, the relative autonomy of the state was used to link government programs with a rural base that had supported Park in his rise from military to presidency. As explained below, this deployment had the effect of putting pressure on lower levels of the bureaucracy to improve their performances in working with the central government as well as with village households.

Another significant political dimension of the Saemaul Undong was the paradox of Park's conscious attempt to delink it from political party politics in favor of his party, which would have had a divisive impact on SMU. Instead he tapped into the practical concerns of rural people in ways that raised their enthusiasm without trying to appeal to other sources of ideology, such as anti-communism or Confucianist principles, that had been used to defend the regime's harsh use of police powers that

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<sup>9</sup> Yoshihara distinguishes between crony capitalism in the Philippines, presidential family capitalists of Suharto's Indonesia, royal capitalism in Thailand, and bureaucratic capitalism in Malaysia, each of which are variations of rent-seekers that comprise ineffective governments.

culminated in instituting martial law from 1972, which was to last until well after Park's assassination in 1979. Critics had already pointed out that anti-communism, in being "anti-", did not constitute a genuine national ideology (Brandt 1979).<sup>10</sup> Rewards of economic growth in the form of increased consumption of material goods also lacked a clear spiritual foundation. At the same, appealing to lineage or vertical social relations extolled by Confucianism had to be avoided if horizontal relations of cooperation spanning each village were to be tapped for political support.

In filling this vacuum in national ideology by appealing to such ideals as self-help, cooperation, and steadfast commitment to community as the Saemaul Undong motto, President Park was able to steer the Saemaul Undong toward becoming a depoliticized source of a national consciousness based on simple, shared virtues. As such it represented a paradoxical form of state populism – "a strange amalgam of egalitarian ethos, an ideal of social welfare and developmentalist dictatorship" (Han 2004:87) – that appealed to an anti-elitist egalitarianism that resonated with the *minjung* ideology that was rising among the increasing numbers of Korean Christians.<sup>11</sup>

In this manner, as long as the government produced palpable material benefits through efforts that could be said to be guided by a shared egalitarian ethos, people could look away from its excesses in the use of political power to counter democratic movements and the discontents of labor.<sup>12</sup> With land reform leveling society in the 1950s, and with extraordinary rates of urban-industrial growth relieving rural population pressures, the sources of peasant rebellions in Korea of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – poverty resulting from immiserating tenancy, high levels of inequality within rural areas, exorbitant taxes, illegal crop takings and exploitative money lending (Palais 1975) – were either absent or had been substantially ameliorated by the 1970s, even though rural poverty still remained pronounced. At the same time, martial law defended by government as a measure to counter communism meant that SMU had no radically transformative intentions; nor could it readily succumb to the urban-based populism of Latin America that saw regimes come and go around the rise and fall of charismatic leaders.

By its own logic, this non-partisan program made no reference to processes or procedures to mediate conflict. Rather, it was left to the SMU apparatus established by government to take care of such matters. Through these means the Park government was able to claim that democracy was achievable "not through elections but through gradual training and practice in carrying out state-supported projects" (2004:87). In both practice and the lore of SMU President Park showed how he was engaged in on-the-ground solutions by visiting the countryside frequently to observe and symbolically participate in them (Figure 9).

This involvement began with the creation of the movement. The Saemaul Undong Museum near Shindo Village in North Gyeongsang Province proclaims that in 1969 while on a train passing through the area President Park, who was told of the self-help successes of Shindo in recovering from a disastrous flood, stopped the train to visit the village. He is said to have then launched the New

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<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Nyerere's Ujamaa pursued in Tanzania at roughly the same time as SUM was billed as African socialism (Nyerere 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Park adroitly dropped the first round of the rationale for the Saemaul Undong that proclaimed it to be a "New Mind Movement intended to cure the malaise of idleness and complacency" that elites assumed about rural people (Moore 1984:580). Instead, he began to appeal to a social consciousness of cooperation and selflessness in uplifting communities.

<sup>12</sup> As stated by Brandt (1979:79), in drawing from social traditions, the Saemaul Undong's stress on obedience to experts and paternalistic leadership while extending the idea of community to encompass the entire nation, it succeeded in combining vertical authority with egalitarian principles.

Village Movement based on the inspiration of Shindo (Kim 2011). His special car from that train now stands next to the museum. This is one of countless stories exemplifying the inseparability of SMU from President Park, the person.

Yet although the government consistently claimed SMU to be apolitical, political analyses of the motives for launching and moving forward with the Saemaul Undong in the 1970s saw a clear relationship between the SMU and the declining political popularity of the Park government, which had relied on rural votes for its victories but in 1970 had not fared as well as it had in previous elections (Chae 2011). At the same time, cities were becoming centers of protests and insurgent actions against the government. By focusing first on village modernization, results could be quick and obvious to all, leading to a revival of popular support for Park. Raising the purchasing price of rice had an equally immediate effect of bolstering rural support for the government. Thus to a large extent, this strategy of using SMU to regain his popularity as President worked because the results were widespread and visible.

**Figure 9. President Park Visits a Saemaul Undong Village Program, April 1970.**



Source: NCSUMK (2011)

In contrast to those who saw clear political motives behind the New Village Movement, defenders of the Park regime are just as certain that he actively worked to stop political parties from using the Saemaul Undong for partisan political gain. Top officials in government concluded that the risks of politicizing the movement were too great:

The *Saemaul* Movement would have failed if it was tainted by politics. Free from the influence of politics, the *Saemaul* Movement was a pure national movement to help farmers break themselves free of poverty by instilling an ethos based on the principles of diligence, self-help, and cooperation. Recognizing this fact, participating farmers made their best efforts, finding that they could produce remarkable performances on their own; that's why the movement was sustainable (Kim 2011:225).

In sum, although political considerations were undoubtedly part of the government's motivations, the record shows that on the surface the SMU was steered clear of political party capture, and overt politicization within the village or at higher levels was avoided. To the extent that it achieved popular successes in rural Korea, non-partisanship worked best to shore up Park Chung Hee's political base in the countryside. However, in the context of Korea's rapid transition to an urban society, what did begin to become more obvious was a rural-urban divide in popular attitudes toward the Park government and therefore SMU. As the popularity of the SMU grew in villages, increasing dissatisfaction with martial law and authoritarian government grew among city dwellers.

This is not to say, however, that SMU was unpopular in cities. It did have many supporters and activities in cities as well. Rather, what might be concluded is that just like rural people, significant segments of the urban population were not able to separate the SMU from Park Chung Hee and his government. Nonetheless, urban SMU rallies, parades, and community projects were carried out in ways that also avoided direct association with Park's or other political parties. Thus different interpretations of SMU have divided some elements of Korea's urban population, who see it mainly as a political ploy, from those of rural households, particularly in the heartland of Park's origins in Gyeongsang Bukdo where the Saemaul Undong still tends to be seen as an exceptionally successful, altruistic endeavor.

Political dimensions of the Saemaul Undong also reached into local governments in practical ways. As previously noted, many observers noted that for the first time local officials became accountable for improving rural life (Brandt 1979, Burmeister 1987, *Korea Times* 2010). Competition among them to produce results was keen. Some analysts proclaim that, in fact, the biggest political impact of the Saemaul Undong was not so much one of making rural people more politically in line with government but rather making local officials more accountable to both the center and to the village. The training centers set up across the country included military-like exercises and the construction of sleeping quarters for training trainers.

Although the government asserts that SMU was a grassroots process of decision-making, in practice it was heavily orchestrated by central government. Yet in paying attention to villages and rural quality of life for perhaps the first time in history, people's enthusiasm was also reported to be genuine. As partial proof of this, official data show that approximately 60 percent of the value of all contributions of labor and material came from villagers themselves. In this sense, the possibility that people could have pursued Saemaul Undong projects in a completely apolitical manner can be put forth. But in a time when Korea had no freedom of press and public speech and assembly were severely constrained, this possibility cannot be fully explored or validated. The lasting political image of the Saemaul Undong is its association with President Park Chung Hee and a developmental state that rigorously moved policy to action.

### **SMU AS FOREIGN ASSISTANCE TODAY**

To recapitulate, the Saemaul Undong had several key features that were responsible for its successes. These included radical land reform prior to SMU; the focus on village modernization at the outset; accelerated industrialization as the source of subsidies for the Green Revolution and rural development; a strong developmental state supported by a national identity of Korean style cooperation in a highly homogeneous society; and its occurrence within a "miracle economy" development process that, along with SMU, brought rising prosperity across the country. Taken together, its replication as a complete model could not be expected elsewhere either in the 1970s or today.

However, the Saemaul Undong also had elements that can be found in other societies. Village level mobilization has its roots in post-colonial nationalism that has been tapped by governments throughout the world. The Green Revolution became a standard package of policy tools that was applied in Asia and Latin America, though it did not arrive in sub-Saharan Africa until very recently (Zoomers 2002; Blaustein 2008). Many countries have also had moments in which a development state began to appear, even if it was not necessarily long-lived. SMU was a pragmatic idea of social cooperation for improving life, which can arguably take many forms. It was not presented as a radical alternative to the existing system. Similarly, though it leveled society, land reform by itself did not spur either village upgrading or increases in agricultural productivity and incomes.

Given the possibilities that at least some elements are found elsewhere, of interest is which elements are now being abstracted by the Korean government as an Saemaul Undong model for export to other countries today. Over the past several years the Korean government has begun to export the Saemaul Undong as a way forward in rural development in Africa, Latin America, Russia and Asia. As of 2011 the government reported that at least 70 countries had already adopted a Saemaul Undong approach to development, including urban as well as rural areas.

From SMU reports on its exported model, the core element is grassroots social cooperation. This can be seen as a return to its original focus on rural development as village-based modernization and livelihood enhancement through mobilizing social cooperation. As stated in the message from the head of the Saemaul Movement (KSUC 2013), SMU in the contemporary world fundamentally relies on grassroots efforts:

‘We can do it. We will do it’; it is the basic spirit of Saemaul. How can we do it when nobody can help us and every one of us is desperate? Let us unite and do it with “Diligence, Self-help, and Cooperation”, the Three doctrine of Saemaul Undong Movement.

This theme has run throughout the course of the Saemaul Undong. From its early days onward, its leaders and many analysts as well have stated that it is less about concepts and theories and more about the practical processes of problem solving at the village level (Douglass 1983).

A sample of SMU projects in other countries reveal its small-scale, self-help focus (KSMUC 2013). In Mongolia, it dedicated itself to building a Saemaul Center (with karaoke), community well, bridge, chicken farm, green houses and planting trees. In the Philippines SMU helped to solve water problems, distribute pigs to households at no cost but with piglets expected to be given to other households after a year, teach Korean language and manners, and teach computer classes. In Vietnam attention has been given to animal husbandry, a health center, kindergarten and elementary school construction. In Timor-Leste, SMU projects include community center repair, school construction, farming tools, plumbing, and pig and chicken raising. In the Congo it has focused on land clearing for farming, crop seeds, and small farm management. The Russia SMU program presents an interesting departure from others by helping to invest in land in a maritime province of Russia to use North Korean labor to produce food for North Korea. The program includes teaching Korean to Korean Russians through a Korean brethren organization.

In addition to programs in other countries, SMU has built a large training center in the outskirts of Seoul where it brings multinational groups of participants together on a regular basis to learn SMU skills and gain an *esprit de ceour* to carry back to their home villages and towns. Testimonials from participants attest to the positive contributions SMU has made to personal lives through its training programs and projects. Learning how to manage a farm or discovering new worlds beyond the village has provided practical ways forward and liberating knowledge to many.

At the same time, this new SMU contrasts greatly with the totality of the SMU experience in Korea in the 1970s. It has no agricultural policy such as the Green Revolution, and it is not packaged with any other broad development program. Government is not asked to be the “big push” for rural development through subsidies or price supports. Land reform is not included as a prerequisite. National economic contexts are not considered as it is presented as a universal model applicable anywhere.

As such, SMU cannot by alone readily address the larger rural development issues related to livelihood and the agrarian economy in the contemporary world. In many countries a post-agrarian rural economy is emerging in which substantial shares of income are no longer from agriculture (Bryceson 1996; Rigg 2006; Haggblade *et al.* 2010). It is a world in which migrant remittances make up substantial shares of rural incomes in many countries, and where hand-held communications devices instantly link people in the village to the world to allow for extended transborder household formations (Douglass 2013). Large corporations, including those from Korea, are also buying up huge amounts of cropland for industrialized food production (Rees 2011), and contract farming with global corporations has been replacing the independent family farm for some time. In these contexts, the Saemaul Undong as a program of social cooperation will have difficulty in finding a way to assist in localizing the benefits of these dynamics beyond very small scales.

With central governments no longer expected to play leading roles in the new version of SMU, a hopeful direction toward linking micro-level projects with larger dynamics is to catch the new wave of decentralization that is spreading around the world. Just as the original SMU was able to enhance the capacities and effectiveness of local officials in Korea, the new SMU could use funding incentives to invigorate local governments to link with community-based, non-profit civil society organizations in pursuing rural development (World Bank 2001; 2005). Recent evidence from such countries as Indonesia, which has promulgated the most far-reaching devolution of governance in Asia, shows how local governments can be more responsive to community empowerment initiatives (Firman 2010).

Given the profound changes in the context for rural development since the SMU experience in Korea in the 1970s, any application of a Saemaul Undong program, new or old, represents an array of local experiments more than a model derived from history (Park 2009). The heart of these experiments continues to be that people can join together to make a difference in their lives at grassroots levels. How this will play out in the contemporary world is a matter of conjecture that is likely to encounter a wide range of experiences and outcomes. But without a clear role of government, the outstanding question is how small scale self-empowerment activities that create their own spaces of hope can scale up to become national rural development programs.

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