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Success of Korea's Rural Development Program Applicable to Afghanistan

October 11, 2015 | Dr. Steven Kwon



During the past 12 years, I have had the opportunity to visit Afghanistan over 50 times. During these visits, I have noticed the many similarities between Afghanistan and Korea, my native homeland. The citizens of both nations have faced the many challenges of multi-year wars yet have remained determined and even hopeful in the face of adversity. Also, the current food insecurity situation in Afghanistan

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reminds me of my youth spent in Korea when many children and families suffered from malnutrition due to limited access to food.

Korean 1950-1953

1950's – 1960s: The War and Post-War Years

I was entering elementary school when the war between North and South Korea finally ended in 1953. The country had been totally destroyed with over two million reported deaths. There were no jobs, families had been forced to flee their villages, and many households were left without fathers, brothers, or sons. Korean people everywhere were suffering from poverty and hunger, with the lives of widows and children particularly impacted.

When the first post-war winter came to Korea in late 1953 - one as cold and harsh as winters experienced in Afghanistan – many Koreans perished due to lack of food and shelter. Times were particularly tough from March to May as the wheat and barley crops were not ready to be harvested. I recall visiting my neighbor's house, only to see his six children lying on the floor, weak from hunger as they had not eaten for several days. Although the village people tried to help one another, malnutrition from protein-energy deficiency coupled with illness, particularly tuberculosis, was widespread. Sadly, the combination of cold weather and lack of food resulted in the deaths of an additional three million people in the years immediately following the war.

Seoul in 1950-1953 War

Korea remained a poor country into the 1960s. Rural areas, where over 70% of the population lived, were impacted most heavily with many families only eating one meal per day. Unemployment reached 35% and many children, including some of my friends, were forced to leave school to work on farms to supplement their family's income. As Korea lacked abundant natural resources, heavy industry, and advanced technologies, we had to rely heavily on imports. During the 1960s, Korea imported on average \$108 million of goods per year, yet exported only \$86 million. Additionally Korea was receiving \$430 million in foreign aid consisting of food and other basic necessities.

1970's: Economic Turnaround with the New Village Movement

Fortunately things began to look up in the late 1960s and 1970s. A key person responsible for the post-war economic turnaround was the late President Chung-Hee Park who governed South Korea from 1961-1979. President Park launched a political initiative called Saemaul Undong or "New Village Movement" to modernize the rural economy. Initially, Saemaul Undong addressed the growing disparity of the standard of living between urban centers, which were rapidly industrializing, and small villages, which continued to be trapped in poverty. Diligence, self-help and collaboration were the slogans we villagers were taught to encourage us to participate in the Saemaul Undong development process. The Korean government provided the seed money and infrastructure support for implementing the Saemaul Undong movement development projects. The government also encouraged religious leaders, local elders, and everyday villagers to participate in the design and implementation of the projects. Similar to rural communities in Afghanistan, Korean villages have long been characterized by tight social bonds based on the concept of

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common home place and family lineages. As in Afghanistan, Korean Villages traditionally select their own leaders, hold meetings to settle problems, and organize cooperative work teams for planting, harvesting and other village projects.

The early stage of the Saemaul Undong movement focused on improving basic living conditions. Here, the government provided participating villages such as mine with a fixed amount of raw materials, including cement and iron bars, free of charge, allowing villagers to build whatever they wished with them. Later projects concentrated on building rural infrastructure by bringing irrigation systems, bridges, and roads to rural communities.

The strong national focus on the Saemaul Undong movement, coupled with an emphasis on education and hard work, laid the foundation for Korea's post-war reconstruction. In the early 1970s, a number of major programs were implemented in Korea. First, the political leaders did their best to bring much needed stability to the country. Second, there was an increased focus on both heavy industry such as steel and electronics, and also on consumer goods such as textiles and shoes. In 1964, the country's exports totaled only \$100 million but by 1977 exports exceeded \$10 billion. Third, emphasis was placed on the development of a trained labor force and an improved education system which resulted in a high literacy rate. And finally, Korea became self-sufficient in rice production, a key food staple.

Current view of Seoul city

As a result of these changes, living standards in rural Korea improved greatly. Farm household income increased from an average of \$215 in 1970 to \$1,286 in 1979. In my village and throughout the neighboring countryside, there was increased productivity of rice farming, the major livelihood of most rural families. As a result of these changes, total rural poverty declined from 28 percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 1978. This national Saemaul Undong movement has been the major vehicle of post-war Korea to create the "Han River Miracle of Korea" which has established Korea as the 8th ranked trade partner and the 12th ranked economic power of the world today.

Korea's New Village Movement Learning Can Benefit Afghanistan

Korea's economic progress in the 1970s due to the successful Saemaul Undong movement exceeded expectations. Agriculture was the core of many Saemaul Undong rural development programs. Although rice is a mainstay food in Korea, Soybeans (Kong in Korean) is also a native crop. Beginning in 1970, many Korean farmers began growing more Soybeans for home consumption in order to help overcome protein-energy malnutrition in a self-reliant way. This Korean experience of defeating malnutrition through Soybeans in the self-reliant way of the Saemaul Undong movement was introduced to Afghanistan by Nutrition and Education International (NEI), an international NGO. Since 2003, this model of self-reliant Soy industry development program has been pursued in Afghanistan through the efforts of key Afghanistan Ministries, particularly with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), the private sector, and NEI. Together, they have worked to establish a self-sustainable full Soybean value chain that addresses malnutrition. This value chain includes four parts: Soy seed production, Soybean cultivation, Soy processing, and market development. In 2012, the World Food Program identified NEI's soy development as an effective model to improve

food security of the nation. This soy program, based on the Saemaul Undong concept, became a joint program of NEI and World Food Program, and is currently funded by the Republic of Korea. Today it is common to find rural farmers in poverty-stricken areas throughout Afghanistan cultivating Soybeans for sale to local markets with some held back for home consumption. Once the farmers have produced Soybeans as trained by NEI and incorporated Soybeans into their family diet for increased protein intake, they can use the harvested Soybeans as seeds for the following years, and therefore protect their families from falling to malnutrition. This nutritional intervention in the self-reliant way of Saemaul Undong is becoming more accepted in rural Afghanistan. Soybeans have proven to grow well across Afghanistan. Given the nutritional benefits, affordability and great taste of Soybeans and other Soy foods, there is no reason why Afghanistan cannot be the first country outside Korea to defeat malnutrition through the development of a self-sustainable Soy industry!

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Dr. Kwon received his Ph.D. in Food Biochemistry from the Ohio State University, and worked for Nestle Nutrition as the Director of Technical Services. He is the founder and CEO of the Nutrition and Education International (NEI) working to defeat malnutrition among women and children of rural Afghanistan through developing a self-sustainable soy industry.