



Policy Brief

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Slow Policy Transfer : Suggestions for Korea's Knowledge Sharing Program

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Abstract

Policy implementation requires attention to and the coordination of a diverse set of contextual factors. This is even more so the case in effective policy transfer, where contexts can be dramatically different. This concern is particularly relevant for countries like Korea, who emphasize policy transfer in their overseas development assistance. This brief first considers a subset of substantive ways in which Korea's context during its development phase differs from those of its contemporary aid partners. It then offers some suggestions for improving Korea's Knowledge Sharing Program through a fuller embrace of "slow policy" transfer.

Introduction

Success or failure in policy implementation is contingent upon a wide array of diverse contextual factors. Distinct cultural practices may lead to identical policies having different impacts on different subpopulations. Similarly, identical economic policies may have different impacts under divergent industrial structures or trading environments. Such contextual variations may manifest themselves within a single country geographically, socially, or temporally as regional cultures, social groupings, or historical circumstances shift.

Contextual differences are typically even more pronounced between countries. Therefore, policy transfer from one country to another where it will be implemented must be even more sensitive

to context's ramifications for policy. Policy transfer all too often takes place without appropriate consideration of these concerns, leading to an oversimplification of both the donor's and the recipient's policy environment.

This oversimplification of policy environments and hasty, uncritical implementation of policy from one country in another has been called "fast policy". Just as "fast food" is standardized and served rapidly but also lacking in nutrition, fast policy transfers a single pre-packaged policy model, which is rapidly copied and implemented but also fails to consider contextual difference in any meaningful way, typically producing superficial, ill-fitting policy practices. Poor fit frequently results in squandered resources, more limited capacity building, and even livelihood destruction.

The attractiveness and dangers of fast policy are particularly salient for countries that emphasize policy transfer and knowledge sharing in their overseas development assistance (ODA). Korea is one of these countries. The centerpiece of its ODA strategy is its Knowledge Sharing Papers (KSP) program, which modularizes and shares Korea's unique development experience and knowledge on issues identified by recipient countries. This brief first establishes that simple comparisons between Korea's past and developing countries' present, which are implied in the process of modularization and systematization of Korea's past, are fatally oversimplified. It then makes a few modest suggestions for improving Korea's Knowledge Sharing Papers (KSP) program on the basis of "slow policy" transfer.

Korea's past is not other countries' present

Korea offers Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to over 100 countries, but concentrates its activities on 24 priority partner countries spread across the globe. Unfortunately, these countries' circumstances are significantly different both internally and externally from Korea in its developmental period, constraining the simple replication of Korea's past policies.

Though Korea's priority partners are fairly representative of low & middle income countries generally, they are only similar to historic Korea in a limited way. For instance, they are similar to Korea on some measures, such as gross fixed capital formation (in the 1970s), GDP per capita (in the 1970s), and value added by manufacturing (in 1960). Demographically, however, Korean birth and death rates were higher than most of their priority partners today, resulting in much lower life expectancy for Koreans during the developmental period. Longer life expectancy implies different life-course trajectories, which in turn imply different labor and consumer market composition, reproductive decisions, and labor participation rates. Addressing the impacts of this demographic difference will require distinctly different social welfare programs, health investments, and employment policies.

Historic Korea possessed not only a different demographic composition from its contemporary parallels but also a different industrial structure. While Korea's economy relied on manufacturing, its priority partners rely on services and in some cases natural resources, which South Korea has always lacked. Because services are typically non-tradable,

priority partner countries' reliance on services poses a serious obstacle to implementing Korea's export-led industrialization strategy, which was built upon an already nascent manufacturing sector. For those countries that rely on natural resources, the well-known Dutch Disease generates additional difficulties in industrializing by increasing production costs through currency appreciation.

External conditions are also dramatically different. The integration of the global economy has eliminated characteristics that facilitated Korea's economic growth. In its development phase Korea enjoyed virtually unparalleled access to the US market for its manufacturing exports. While bilateral trade agreements may be reestablishing favored access to large markets, the prevailing World Trade Organization (WTO) regime of low tariffs has leveled the playing field and equalized market access, increasing competition for budding industrial interests. This same free trade regime has forestalled contemporary developing countries adoption of the trade protection measures that were vital for Korea's growth. As a result, Korea's priority partners are exposed to much higher levels of trade as a percent of GDP than Korea experienced, leaving them more vulnerable to the volatility of global markets.

While there are innumerable other differences between Korea and its ODA priority partners, including land distribution, this overview makes it clear that the development challenges facing priority partners today are significantly different from Korea's development experience. This does not mean that Korea's experience is worthless for its priority partners, but it does mean that simple models codified for fast policy transfer do not represent an optimal approach.

Potential KSP improvements

Korea's Knowledge Sharing Program possesses a number of features. First, the KSP is demand-driven, addressing needs identified by policymakers in the partner country. Second, policymakers, experts, and practitioners use Korea's experience to develop tailor-made policies for partner countries. Third, the KSP builds the capacity of partner country policymakers and officials through research, consultation, and training. Fourth, the program not only assists in the development of policy blueprints but also assists in implementing those policies in the recipient country. Finally, the program can be extended if both parties see value in doing so.

KSP consultation projects typically incorporate a small number of short visits to and from each country by experts and policy practitioners from the other. Korean policy experts conduct pilot studies, draft policy recommendations, consult, and participate in seminars and workshops. Policy experts from the partner country typically provide data and relevant information, serving as sources of knowledge about partner countries for the studies.

Interviews with KSP contributors and secondary sources suggest that the KSP faces difficulties achieving its intended outcomes. First, though not strictly unidirectional, knowledge creation and policy development is biased toward Korea. As the previous paragraph suggests, the division of labor tends to restrict partner country stakeholders to data collection, rather than analysis and policy development. These more creative aspects of knowledge production are dominated by Korean experts and policymakers. This is due in part to the second challenge of time constraints for

preparing KSP papers. Time constraints lead to short, occasional, and tightly scheduled country visits that leave little room for participants to foster the tacit knowledge of the partner country that is vital to understanding the contextual differences that can make or break policy implementation. Time constraints are also reflected in the tight timelines KSP participants are given to produce recommendations. In the name of (short term) efficiency, short deadlines bias participants toward uncritically adopting easily available fast policy models that transfer only narrowly codified knowledge. Contemporary efforts to “modularize” and systematize Korea’s development experience can easily exacerbate this problem by enticing experts to select policies from a simple menu of predigested models shorn of many contextual elements that may be relevant to the partner country.

These issues could be resolved through the adoption of “slow policy” transfer. To build a fuller understanding of diverging contexts, slow policy transfer would expand the set of stakeholders to include not only recipient country policy makers and experts but also knowledgeable and concerned laypersons. Slow policy transfer would constitute a form of collective learning in which actors in the sending and recipient countries would work together throughout the process to identify policy challenges, learn about each country’s context, and develop a policy response. The deeper consideration of a wider range of contextual concerns by a larger number of actors would also require increased temporal and financial resources.

Though Korea’s Knowledge Sharing Program (KSP) is intended to engage slow policy transfer, as indicated above, time and resource constraints built into the

program incline toward unidirectional fast policy transfer. This inclination could be counterbalanced by extending the time and resources available for completing each program. By reducing pressure for the rapid completion of deliverables, participants would be able to shift from top-down conveyance of information to co-learning, which requires much more informal interaction and collective work. One particularly productive approach would be the incorporation of extended stays in each country for participants from the other. Extended stays would facilitate the absorption of tacit knowledge of the other country’s social practices and environment, which are not apparent during brief, highly scripted visits. These extended stays would be most effective in a semi-structured environment achieved by seconding policy makers to partner institutions or ministries. Tacit and practical knowledge accumulated during extended stays would serve to highlight social, economic, and political differences that might require significant adjustments in policy implementation.

Extended stays, however, may not appeal to all participants. In particular, more senior experts may not be able to engage in extended stays due to domestic obligations. Instead, sending junior policy makers for extended stays would offer long term benefits. While they may lack the expertise of their seniors, they may be more open to new experiences and learning. Delegating such responsibility would also encourage the transfer of knowledge from senior experts to junior experts. And, of course, it would cultivate a new generation of experts with new forms of expertise, thereby contributing to the success of future KSP projects.

Conclusion

This policy brief has argued that successful policy implementation depends on accommodating a wide variety of contextual factors. It first illustrated only several ways in which the social, economic, and political context of Korea during its developmental phase is distinct from that of its contemporary ODA partners. They differ internally with respect to demographic makeup and industrial structures. Externally, they differ with respect to their exposure and vulnerability to global markets. Though limited in scope, these differences are sufficient to demonstrate that the Korean model of development can only be transferred with extreme caution.

Despite its intention of going beyond simplistic fast policy transfer, time constraints inherent in the implementation of Korea's Knowledge Sharing Program hinder the realization of that intention. Time constraints and the modularization of information about Korea's development experiences encourage fast policy transfer based on necessarily oversimplified understanding of policy context. If the KSP were to embrace slow policy transfer by slowing down the time frame for policy development, particularly through extended stays in partner countries by experts, the tacit knowledge required to build better policies would be more effectively acquired and incorporated.

About the author

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