Saemaul Undong revisited: A case of social capital mobilisation for rural community development in South Korea of 1970s

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Abstract

This study aims at a re-interpretation of the Saemaul Undong (New Community Movement) in 1970s Korea. By emphasising the successful engagement of society, the study departs from the usual understanding of the ‘Korean miracle’ led by a strong state leadership. Using an analytical framework of social capital, this new understanding of community development emphasises the role of society, here represented by Saemaul Leaders as middle agents, and their ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ mechanisms, while presenting the state as a, though important, mobiliser and assistant to these representatives of the communities. From this, communities are no longer simply recipients of, or followers to, the central leadership, but they turn out to be active participants and in fact leaders of community development. The concrete strategies are expected to provide practical lessons and implications for today’s developing countries, many of which want to learn from the Korean experiences that remain valid more than four decades later.

Keywords

Social capital; community development; Saemaul Undong; Korea
Introduction

The Korean economic success has often been cited as one of the exemplary cases of the so-called ‘developmental state’ (e.g. Amsden 1992; Evans 1995; Wade 1983), with the role of the strong and efficient state and bureaucracy, or a strong leadership and its timely and effective decisions regarding industrial strategies for economic transformation, emphasised as a main factor. Although this is partly true, another part of story is that the ‘society’ also contributed to the achievement of the ‘miracle’, especially in terms of rural community development in the 1970s. This argument does not intend to undervalue the importance of the leadership or the effectiveness of the usual top-down approach, but it does argue that what is also important is how the state can use, develop or even promote, if necessary, the power of society (or ‘social capital’) in local contexts.

This study thus aims at providing a different – but complementary – perspective in explaining the Korean development path, using the analytic framework of social capital and examining to what extent the state has been successful in using ‘social capital’ for its goal of rural transformation. Examining the Saemaul Undong of 1970s, it enquires into the particular combinations of ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’, and ‘linking’ social capital, as applicable, that the Korean state used for mobilising social capital towards a common goal of economic prosperity and community development. In so doing, the study emphasises the importance of dynamic state–society relations and cooperation towards development, via middle agents, called Saemaul Leaders.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on social capital, focusing on those most relevant to the current study, and showing how it can offer a new framework to examine the case of Saemaul Undong. The third and fourth sections introduce earlier studies and descriptive backgrounds of Saemaul Undong. The fifth section then highlights the role of Saemaul Leaders as middle agents who were to ‘bond’, ‘bridge’ and ‘link’ social capital across state–society relations, as well as the government’s assistance and supportive measures in regard to making this happen. The final section summarises the main findings and delivers implications for developing countries who seek practical advice with regard to their own development.

Social capital, development and an analytical framework

Scope, units or levels of social capital

Most studies agree that social capital is something that: i) is related to social networks; ii) consists of some aspect of social structure; and iii) by triggering certain collective actions on the part of relevant parties, can benefit some individuals, communities and the national economy (for varied definitions, see, for example, Bourdieu 1985; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998; Putnam 1993; Woolcock and Narayan 2000).\(^1\) What is more – and what particularly interests us in the field of development studies – is that; iv) it can be constructable (Evans 1996a; Harriss and de Renzio 1998).

Confusions in surveying the concept of social capital from the existing literature, however, often result from the implicit use of the unit or level of social capital analysed in each study. The pioneering studies on social capital in modern sociology, such as Bourdieu (1985) and Coleman (1988), had more implications at the individual level, focusing on the benefits accruing to individuals by virtue of participation in groups or through their use of certain social networks. The seminal work by Putnam (1993; 2000) expanded the terms of ‘individual’ assets to a community level, by, in one of

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\(^1\) Detailed discussion of the concept itself is not a primary objective of this study. The most comprehensive survey of it can be found in Woolcock (1998: 189, see note 2 in particular).
his critics DeFilippis’ words (2001:791), ‘conflating [it] with’ civil society or “what some have called ‘civic virtue’” (Putnam 2000: 19). Although Putnam’s contribution in making this notion more visible and important in the literature and practice on community and national development is undeniable, his re-definition has been much criticised – perhaps as much as it has been cited worldwide – for its tautology (for example, “if your town is ‘civic’, it does civic things and if it is ‘uncivic’, it does not” (Portes 1998: 20)). In other words, its ‘circular reasoning’ fails to disentangle the causes and effects of social capital (Portes and Landolt 2000, see more pp. 535–6) or it has a ‘deterministic or even culturalist logic’ (Harriss 2002). It has also been criticised for its simplified understanding of civil organisations as being normatively good while they are essentially shared-interest groups, which are not necessarily beneficial for everyone (DeFilippis 2001). Also, it has been criticised for its (perhaps unintended) effects of detachment of issues from power relations and, accordingly, a capacity to see economic capital as the ultimate consequence (DeFilippis 2001), and similar detachment from social content and context, thereby “depoliticizing development” (Harriss 2002).

Grootaert and van Bastelaer (2001) note that the scope of social capital can vary from ‘micro’ (i.e. individuals) to ‘macro’ (i.e. nationwide institutional relations and structures such as the political regime, the rule of law, the court system, etc.), via ‘meso’ at the firm- or group-level. Indeed, finding a good job by using a personal network may be understood at the individual level of social capital but does not necessarily work for the entire community or society’s sake. Loury’s (1977; 1992) definition of social capital referring to “naturally occurring social relationships among persons which promote or assist the acquisition of skills and traits valued in the marketplace” also tends to foreground the individual level of social capital, although it also notes the social inequality as a consequence. In other words, it may be useful for the individual’s sake but not necessarily for other candidates and competitors to the beneficiary, nor for the entire society which may benefit more from merit-based performances rather than from a kinship/social network-driven acknowledgement system for a desirable social transformation. These units or levels of social capital again differ from what macro-theorists often use and understand. For example, Woolcock’s (1998) ‘micro’ level does not refer to ‘individuals’ but rather to the civil ‘society’ (or community) level, in opposition to ‘macro’ which refers to ‘state’. As the current study also deals with community- or beyond-community-level developmental issues, we shall note first that the ‘micro’-level social capital referred to here, unless otherwise stated, refers to the local community level rather than individuals.

Social capital and community (and beyond) development

Confusion also comes partly from the fact that most researchers have focused on a single and therefore static unit/scope of social capital or on trying to extrapolate from cases with different levels or units of social capital, rather than to paying attention to the dynamics of the different levels of social capital. Pointing out this problem, Woolcock (1998) has developed a synthetic framework that engages both the micro and macro levels and the linkage or synergy implications. In doing so, he has incorporated Evans’ (1995) earlier ideas about ‘embeddedness’ and ‘autonomy’ and extended them to include a micro level and to explain bottom-up development as well. Understanding of the interconnectedness of different levels of social capital and the importance of understanding of the dynamic, rather than static, mechanisms involved is particularly important to explain its role at the centre of community (and beyond) development. This is one of the points that this particular study seeks to explore using the case of Saemaul Undong.

As noted earlier, social capital, being a source of benefits for certain individuals or groups, which share social relationships and networks to a limited degree, can also be negative through exclusion of outsiders and excessive claims on group members and/or restrictions on individual freedoms.

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2 For diverse forms of social capital, see also Harriss and de Renzio (1998), pp. 932–3.
(Portes 1998). What matters for community (and beyond-community) development, then, is how to minimise or transform the limited scope of social capital so as to cover and benefit an increasing number of potential beneficiaries. The answer may be sought from notably Evans’ (1996a) and his followers’ understanding of the ‘scaling-up’ of social capital.

Rather than seeing it as a zero-sum game, the state–society synergy was noted in the Synergy view on social capital and economic development: based on five cases studies included in the special issue of World Development (1996), Evans (1996a: 1125) notes that synergy can be created and constructed by efficient government organisations and state actors need to “translate local networks into developmentally relevant ‘scaled-up’ organizations”. More precisely, the “soft technologies” of organisational design or “organizational details” can be applied as a method – for example, in Lam’s (1996) study of a Taiwanese irrigation system, the permanent placement of local staff enhanced embeddedness in local communities and in turn contributed to the successful completion of a shared project by enhancing ties between farmers and local public officials.

Also noteworthy from Evans (1996a: 1125) is that while most developing world communities do possess certain latent social capital (in terms of ties among friends and neighbours based on trust and rooted in everyday interactions), perhaps the missing ingredient is “a competent, engaged set of public institutions” that can effectively ‘scale-up’ to a macro-level:

Creative action by government organizations can foster social capital; linking mobilized citizens to public agencies can enhance the efficacy of government. The combination of strong public institutions and organized communities is a powerful tool for development. Better understanding of the nature of synergistic relations between state and society and the conditions under which such relations can most easily be constructed should become a component of future theories of development. (Evans 1996a: 1130)

So, as many earlier studies confirm, social capital per se should not be an ultimate goal but rather should be understood as a means by which capital and power are channelled into development. As Portes and Landit (2000: 547) conclude that: “social capital can be a powerful force promoting group projects but ... it consists of the ability to marshal resources through social networks, not the resources themselves. When the latter are poor and scarce, the goal achievement capacity of a collectivity is restricted, no matter how strong its internal bonds.” Based on this, we believe that one of the key government actions should be providing the community concerned with resources to start with. Resources here can either be material, but could also be knowledge to increase resources, or even consist of dispatching or training someone to spread knowledge to increase resources and the like.

While the importance of ‘co-production’ between state agencies and private capital or community members has been noted in earlier studies, concrete methods to be used by the state to encourage the (preferably voluntary) participation of communities are rarely elaborated. It is this gap that we want to help fill, as, in the end, all developing countries need these concrete methods. This does not mean that what has been successful in one country can be copied by another country but they at least can serve as possible options to try out.

**Earlier studies on Saemaul Undong**

In line with the well-known literature on the ‘developmental state’ that covers the Korean case, much of the literature on Saemaul Undong takes a top-down approach, emphasising the importance of the role of the government or a top-level strong leadership (e.g. Kwon 1997; Park 1998; Park 2009; Han 2010). While a few studies have noted its negative aspects such as “politicizing the far

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3 Other perspectives include the Communitarian, Networks, and Institutional views (for further discussion, see Woolcock and Narayan 2000).
sector” (Moore 1984; or to some degree, Kim 20044) or the “appropriation of peasants” in the process of industrialisation (Hwang 2011), most studies underline the Undong’s positive outcomes as a “government guided community development programme” where strong leadership and commitment has been emphasised over and over again (Park 1998), eventually achieving poverty reduction and the empowerment of rural people (Park 2009).

On the other hand, more recent studies based on the oral testimonies of Saemaul Leaders have noted a previously ignored part of the success, in terms of the role of the new leaders of local communities, who were often elected from among villagers rather than selected or dispatched from the government, and showed vividly how they became the ‘linkage’ between the state and the society they came from and worked for (e.g. Kim 2009; Yoon 2011). While these studies contributed to the literature by correcting the earlier state-focused myth explanation, their over-emphasis of the bottom-up approach has again failed to deliver a balanced picture of the story.

The most balanced explanations of the Saemaul Undong have come from governance-focused studies such as those by Soh (2007) and Lim (2012).5 Soh (2007) presents a successful case of community governance, which differs from top-down, unidirectional governing, and refers to a system that involves every stakeholder – including village members – as ‘co-producers’ of public goods and services. In doing so, he explains that what Saemaul Undong did successfully was to convert traditional kinship-based community into beyond-kinship local societies, empowering citizens to participate. The idea of up-scaling community-based social capital was hinted at; the operations and the functioning system, such as exercising the power, decision-making, the role of citizens, and, as a consequence, the process of mobilising various forms of capital, both physical and social, from the community level and in turn materialising them into concrete activities, were put forward as a principle, or a paradigm shift “from government to governance”. According to Soh (2007), the power-exercising method of Saemaul Undong was based on motivation by the government in promoting voluntary participation by village members. He noted that community spirit was present before Saemaul Undong but needed to be mobilised and promoted and that, for that to happen, the active involvement of the government was required, especially at the initial stage. In other words, how to motivate and mobilise was the question. While noting that the actual decision-making process of Saemaul Undong was bottom-up style (i.e. village members were to decide which project should be prioritised for their own community development), for this to happen, government financial and physical assistance, as well as the creation of a common goal, was also emphasised.

Drawing on the work by Soh (2007), Lim (2012) makes it explicit that the exploitation of social capital and its elements such as participation, trust, and networks, were crucial to Saemaul Undong’s success. Lim also underlines the close collaboration between the state and the communities involved, which was promoted by shared goals and a democratic (i.e. bottom-up style) decision-making process, stressing that this form of governance was the key driving and dynamic force in inducing and promoting social capital. In this way, Saemaul Undong – ironically under the Park Chung Hee regime, the most oppressive period in modern South Korean political history – enabled a new,

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4 Kim (2004) interprets Saemaul Undong as political mobilisation but at the same time emphasises it being based on rural communities’ voluntarism, actively mobilised by the state sector. Yoon (2011), based on interviews with former Saemaul Leaders, who turned out to be not only ‘built’ by the state but had also ‘become’ leaders themselves, refutes a simplistic interpretation of Saemaul Undong as top-down political mobilisation.

5 For the sake of balance, we should acknowledge that Baek and his colleagues (2012) have also attempted to examine both state mobilisation and society participation, but, in a disappointing discordance with their own suggested framework (which was based on Woolcock’s (1998)), their analysis failed to cover the state–society relations dynamics.
democratic mode of local governance, allowing local villagers’ decision-making autonomy in regard to their priority projects and voluntary participation (Lim 2012; Soh 2007).

From the review, a common issue often cited as one of the factors behind the success of Saemaul Undong is the role of the government as initiator of the movement. At the same time, people’s participation was considered key to the success. Drawing on the earlier review on social capital, what we are mostly interested in is the government’s role in waking up and enhancing, or constructing and scaling-up, community-level social capital. In so doing, some earlier studies have also noted the importance of the new opportunities as well as assistance and resources, but these works did not state explicitly what kinds of resources worked and how the state could deliver them successfully.

Based on these discussions, and attempting to fill this gap, the ultimate objective of this study is to disentangle the dynamics of state–society relationships. It aims at explaining, in particular, the ways in which the state has promoted and mobilised local social capital by enhancing local networks and trust and eventually achieved high rates of participation without which no programme can succeed, no matter how strong the state’s desire to implement it successfully. In doing so, this study pays particular attention to the role and capacity of Saemaul Leaders as middle agents with the power to bond, bridge, and link social capital, within communities, between communities, and between state and communities. Figure 1 suggests an analytic framework for the current study.

Figure 1. Social capital for development and its agent: An analytical framework

Before moving onto these aspects, however, the following section describes briefly the background of Saemaul Undong and reviews the senses in which it was a success.

**Saemaul Undong: Background and achievements**

While some earlier authors argue that Saemaul Undong cannot be seen as a success in terms of increasing rural income – which was originally put forward as the main objective (Hwang 2011) – or even state that it actually resulted in an increase of debt among rural households (Baek et al 2012),
we cannot ignore its meaningful contribution to the improvement of rural communities’ living standards (see Table 1).

Table 1. Achievement of Saemaul Undong (1971-1980)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Goals (as set in 1971)</th>
<th>Achieved</th>
<th>Achievement rate (%)</th>
<th>Original Priority (1970)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sewage improvement</td>
<td>km</td>
<td>8,654</td>
<td>15,559</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village roads extension</td>
<td>km</td>
<td>26,266</td>
<td>43,558</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small dams</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>22,787</td>
<td>31,625</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh water reservoirs</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>10,122</td>
<td>13,327</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raceways</td>
<td>km</td>
<td>4,043</td>
<td>5,161</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm roads</td>
<td>km</td>
<td>49,167</td>
<td>61,797</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small bridges</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>76,749</td>
<td>79,516</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village halls</td>
<td>Every ‘Dong’</td>
<td>35,608</td>
<td>37,012</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village communications</td>
<td>Ri/Dong</td>
<td>18,633</td>
<td>18,633</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephones</td>
<td>Thousand</td>
<td>2,834</td>
<td>2,778</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water supply</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>32,624</td>
<td>28,130</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saemaul factory</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common warehouse</td>
<td>Every ‘Dong’</td>
<td>34,665</td>
<td>22,143</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stream maintenance</td>
<td>km</td>
<td>17,239</td>
<td>9,677</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautification</td>
<td>Village</td>
<td>1,529</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House renovation and improvement</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>544,000</td>
<td>225,000</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common workplace</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>34,665</td>
<td>6,263</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalls</td>
<td>e.a.</td>
<td>32,729</td>
<td>4,476</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. As assembled by local administration offices (Park 1998: 55). Not necessarily match with achievements as assessed by SMU Committee; e.g. Number one priority was ‘Village access roads to be straightened and widened.’
2. County-level administrative unit

Source: Central Committee of SMU (2000: 12), alternatively ordered by achievement rate

It is noteworthy that achievements were particularly high in relation to those projects making farmers’ lives more convenient, as residents as well as farmers, rather than in those having a direct impact on their earnings (Table 1). The former projects include paving and extending main village roads and feeder roads, constructing small dams and raceways, and improving sewage systems, while the latter concern building a common stall, a warehouse or a factory, and the like. This actually mostly meets the initial priorities of Saemaul projects as assembled by local administration offices in 1970 (Park 1998: 55, Table 6) and we can see then that the initial objective of Saemaul Undong was indeed improving living conditions in rural areas rather than improving rural household incomes by managing particular income-earning projects, unlike some of earlier studies argue and put forward as a basis for arguing that Saemaul Undong was not a success story in the end.

If we, however, remember that ‘development’ is something that goes beyond just an income increase, disregarding the achievements of Saemaul Undong due to its failure to bring about a noticeable rural income increase or slow down rural to urban migration appears to be unjustified. In fact, projects such as constructing village roads and farm feeder roads, or a village hall, and fixing irrigation and sewage systems do not necessarily result in a higher level of income for the community concerned, but they arguably do make villagers’ life easier and more convenient. In this sense, no one would disagree with the point that Saemaul Undong was a success, at least in terms of improvements to the living environment, particularly in rural areas during the 1970s. The success, in
this sense, is visible in terms of the rapid transformation of rural communities during less than a decade (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Transformation of villages by category (1972-1979)

![Figure 2: Transformation of villages by category (1972-1979) with data for Basic village, Self-help village, and Self-reliant village for each year from 1972 to 1979.]

Source: drawn from Soh 2007: 104, Table 4.

For a Basic village to be upgraded to Self-help, the village concerned needed to have met certain conditions, which included: i) having completed paving a main road; ii) having replaced at least 70% of old-style thatched roofs with cement tiles and improved sewage systems; iii) having improved irrigation (through channels, raceways and embankments) for over 70% of the total village fields; and iv) constructed one of three compounds such as a village hall, a common warehouse and a Saemaul factory and saved a community fund over 500,000 won; and, lastly, v) have implemented at least one or more community income project(s) with each household having earned 800,000 won or more (from Soh 2007: 103-4). For transition from a Self-help to a Self-reliant village, the conditions are slightly higher, with, for example, roof innovation being over 80%, over 85% of fields being irrigated, a community fund of 1 million won or over and household income of 1.4 million won, and the like. In addition, new conditions would have been met, such as having built an under 20-metre bridge, repaired over 80% of the total fences of the village, etc. In 1972, so-called Basic villages consisted of more than half of the total 34,665 villages and Self-reliant villages comprised only 7%. The proportion of Basic villages decreased from 53% to 31% by 1973 and they had disappeared completely by 1977, while Self-help villages accounted for a majority in the mid-1970s and by 1979 almost every village, except three, had reached the level of Self-reliant.

What is particularly noteworthy about the movement is the astonishing number of participants in Saemaul Undong over such a long period (Table 2). Soh (2007) explains, as the reason for the particular leap in the number of participants in the early 1970s, that villagers came to believe the sincere commitment of the government and the projects aiming at improving the living environment had contributed to building a kind of ‘community-ship’ going beyond kinship relations. Not only did they come to realise that cooperation can make a difference but trust in government assistance in response to their performances was also being built. Lim (2012) also underlines the role of public

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6 We adopted the official names of the three categories as used by the Korea Saemaul Undong Centre (see English Handbook, downloadable from the website). In the literature, other translations may be used (e.g. ‘Baseline’ for ‘Basic’ and ‘Independent’ for ‘Self-reliant’).
capital assistance in response to achievements by village projects in mobilising villagers’ participation.

Table 2. Participant villages and individuals in Saemaul Undong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Villages Number</th>
<th>Increase rate (%)</th>
<th>Yearly participants Number (thousand)</th>
<th>Increase rate (%)</th>
<th>Yearly participants by village Persons</th>
<th>Increase rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>33,267</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7,200</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>34,665</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>344.44</td>
<td>923</td>
<td>327.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>34,665</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>69,286</td>
<td>116.50</td>
<td>1,999</td>
<td>116.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>35,031</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>106,852</td>
<td>54.23</td>
<td>3,050</td>
<td>52.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>36,547</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>116,880</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>3,198</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>36,557</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>117,528</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>3,215</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>36,557</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>137,193</td>
<td>16.73</td>
<td>3,753</td>
<td>16.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>36,257</td>
<td>-0.82</td>
<td>270,928</td>
<td>97.48</td>
<td>7,472</td>
<td>99.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>36,271</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>242,078</td>
<td>-10.65</td>
<td>6,674</td>
<td>-10.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (9 yrs)</td>
<td>319,817</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,099,939</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,439 (average)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lim 2012: 39, Table 3.

Indeed, it is well-known fact that the actual government assistance under Saemaul Undong started with 355 packs of cement being distributed, free of charge, to each of about 35,000 rural villages in the winter of 1970 (Korea Saemaul Undong Centre website). One condition attached to the free distribution was that it should be used for the welfare of the entire community, not to the benefit of any particular individuals. The plan received a favourable public reaction and achieved significant results beyond the government’s predictions. This certainly contributed to engaging farmers in village projects by, for example, ‘donating’ part of their land and providing unpaid labour to build village roads and small bridges, etc. The enthusiasm of villagers and the success stories in one village and another, often deliberately collected and used as propaganda, also encouraged not only other rural areas but also urban residents and industrial workers to participate in their own self-help programmes later.

Nonetheless, government assistance in proportion of the government’s revenue was not immense (Table 3). It accounts for slightly over 5% of the total revenue at its peak in 1975 and the average for the period 1971–79 was less than half of this at 2.48%. In terms of the ratio to GDP, government assistance averaged a mere 0.7%, with a peak at 1.59% in 1975. Community contributions were almost always higher than government assistance (totalling 1,316 billion versus 1,027 billion won during 1971–79), with an average ratio of over 1% to GDP.7

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7 Years 1975-76 mark an exception to this overall trend and they coincide with the years where the increase rate of village participation was the lowest.
Table 3. Annual expenditure of Saemaul Undong as proportion of tax revenue and of GDP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Community contribution (A)</th>
<th>Government assistance (B)</th>
<th>Others (C)</th>
<th>Total contribution (A+B+C)</th>
<th>Revenue (D)</th>
<th>Gov't assistance/Revenue (B)/(D) (%)</th>
<th>GDP (E)</th>
<th>Community contribution/GDP (A)/(E)(%)</th>
<th>Gov't assistance/GDP (B)/(E)(%)</th>
<th>Total contribution/GDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1,065</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>3,412</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>4,218</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>1,376</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>5,454</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>1,993</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>7,778</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>3,197</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>10,386</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>4,392</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>14,305</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>4,927</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>18,356</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>6,416</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>24,745</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>8,541</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>31,732</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (average)</td>
<td>1,316</td>
<td>1,027</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>2,751</td>
<td>33,281</td>
<td><strong>2.48</strong></td>
<td>120,385</td>
<td><strong>1.01</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.70</strong></td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Park 2009: 126, Table 6.
In addition, villagers were contributing labour for Saemaul projects. Table 4 shows that an average of 13 days per year for the period 1971–78 (19 days at the peak of 1973) per household was contributed for paving village roads, making river banks and planting trees for the community and the like. Considering this statistic does not include those labour days required to replace thatched roofs by slate or cement tiles (apparently due to the difficulties inherent in counting the days utilised), or the many hours spent at meetings among villagers for discussion on projects, these reported labour days are surely underestimated.

Table 4. Labour days contributed by villagers for Saemaul projects (1973)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>National total (millions of days)</th>
<th>Per village (days)</th>
<th>Per household (days)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village roads</td>
<td>28.60</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River bank</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautification</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36.09</td>
<td>1,078</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1978 (average)</td>
<td>26.30</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to a large-scale survey conducted in 1978 by the Korea Rural Economic Institute, 67% of the respondents said that they attended all the village meetings while another 28% replied that they attended often, implying that almost everyone in rural areas effectively participated in Saemaul Undong (Boyer and Ahn 1991, cited in Park 2009: 129). Without such active participation by villagers, no community development programme can be sustained for such a long period. The question is then, how this was made possible. Our argument here is that it was possible mainly due to the effective roles of Saemaul Leaders as middle agents of social capital (summarised in Figure 1 above).

Saemaul Undong and Saemaul Leaders

Local leaders as ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’, and ‘linking’ agents of social capital

We, Leaders, were breathing together with villagers. We could make this wonderful accomplishment, in fact, the miracle, only because we breathed together (Han 2010: 285).

It can never be overemphasised that the core driving force in the success of Saemaul Undong was the high level of villager participation and that, for this, the role and importance of this ‘bonding’ capacity of Saemaul Leaders and their social networking capacity was significant in the community

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8 All quotations in this section are from interviews with former Saemaul Leaders (author’s translations from various sources).
9 According to Han’s (2010: 271) estimation, there were over 200,000 Saemaul Leaders nationwide for the period 1971–79. Saemaul Leaders were expected to be elected every year but they worked about three years consecutively on average. There were three main routes to becoming a Leader: i) having already worked as a traditional village chief; ii) having been trained by the Saemaul Leaders Training Institute (often chosen based on local social network or recommendations); or iii) appointed from a local county office. Whichever route they took, Saemaul Leaders were generally relatively young and innovative (compared to traditional village chiefs who were often one of the most elderly of the village) and expected to work together with both local government and villagers.
concerned (Yoon 2011; Han 2010). Persuading villagers to participate in *Saemaul Undong*, whether sometimes in the form of free labour for village projects or, for some of them, sacrificing their lands and fields, was certainly not an easy job (see Han 2010). The key to success was engaging and extending possible social networks, building trust and inducing participation. In other words, mobilising social capital from their community to its best was the main task of the Leaders and the way to do that was to lead by themselves:

It was incredible back then in the 1970s. People were hilarious. Once motivated, they were doing whatever for the village development, with their own shovel and hoe. You know, paving roads, to do something, you need a Rotavator but if you want the Rotavator to come to your village, you need a larger road. I would then willingly demolish my own wall [to make way for a village road]. For your wall, I would give you a small field [in exchange for the crashed wall]. That was not ordered by the government. I rendered my own land and helped [free of charge] in the building of a village hall; it wasn’t done because of an order from above. It was not the government [but our own willingness] (Han 2010: 287).

*[Saemaul Undong* was] initiated by the government. Yes, by the government. We could not do that ourselves. Why? Because it needs money. At the very least we needed cement to begin with. ... Then, the government would say [to villagers], go and talk to your Leader. But Leaders aren’t their own. They would talk to the head of the village as well. But the authority [which the government allowed and in fact encouraged in *Saemaul* Leaders for implementing village projects], that’s what drove us as Leaders (Yoon 2011: 95).

These statements from former *Saemaul* Leaders summarise well the role of the Leaders in the movement. One part of their roles was to ‘bond’ social capital within their communities based on local social networks, inducing villagers’ willing participation in village projects. Another part was to communicate between the community concerned and the state, seeking villagers’ participation in order to successfully implement *Saemaul* projects, for which the Leaders were given the ‘authority’ by government support and assistance (see below). In sum, they were effectively ‘linking’ society (i.e. their native communities) and the state. Indeed, *Saemaul* projects were very much dependent on successful accomplishment of these linking roles, in terms of persuading villagers how important these projects were for their community and promoting villagers’ active participation and, at the same time, persuading government in order to receive more assistance for their projects.

In fact, the simple top-down approach of recruiting a *linkage* person and ordering villagers’ participation would not have been feasible. People needed to believe in the hope and possibility of the movement in bringing about modernisation and the development of their native communities. Training, provided by the state, played an important role in helping them to understand the objectives and possible ways to achieve the goals of the movement (see below). Without self-conviction, however, their contribution would have been far less meaningful. In Han’s (2010: 269) words, they were “businessmen who were convinced of and therefore practiced the value of the developmentalism.” They were, unlike the traditional village chiefs who were mostly no more than assistants to local administration, actively engaged in translating the government’s macro policies and directions into ordinary farmers’ languages and thereby in effectively mobilising villagers for the implementation of *Saemaul* projects.

In addition to their roles as ‘bonding’ and ‘linking’ agents, *Saemaul* Leaders also served as ‘bridging’ agent of cooperation when they were invited to deliver, or receive, lived experiences of a successful *Saemaul Undong* project from one village to another. This form of knowledge transfer between communities meant successful Leaders were able to happily deliver their experiences while learning and receiving practical advice for their own communities, resulting in win-win situations for both sides.
Government’s material and non-material assistance and support

Local leaders’ commitment and initiatives alone, however, would not guarantee successful implementation of any project, let alone the mobilising of society and any potential social capital successfully, if there were no material and non-material assistance and support from a higher authority.

As stated earlier, Saemaul Undong launched with the distribution of over-produced cement, with steel wires being a later addition. A little over 300 bags of cement, equivalent to about $10 million, including transportation costs, were equally distributed to each village unit at the beginning. Villagers were “excited by looking at the pile of 300 bags of cement in each village, and they began to think about the most effective use of the cement for their village” (Park 1998: 58). For the period 1971–78, an average of $250 in cement and steel wires per village was distributed annually, for the purpose of village projects. The money value of material assistance per household was not big enough to make any noticeable improvement in a family’s living but, adding in villagers’ labour provided free of charge, it was large enough to make a difference at the village level (Park 1998: 61). In addition, on the occasion of the 1st National Conference of Saemaul Movement Leaders held in November of 1972, all the villagers from Self-reliant villages were invited and honoured with a prize in cash of $2,000 for village use, which served as a further incentive and motivation.

Training is another important form of government support. A central training institute and regional training centres provided education and training for village leaders, including farmers and housewives, who were then expected in turn to train local people in their communities. During early stages, these regional Saemaul Leaders Training Institute (SLTI) paid study visits consisted of a four-day stay plus transportation for leaders from the least responsive villages to advanced villages. Park (1998: 173–81) testifies that this initial support induced the later voluntary participation of villagers, who would register at their own expense for follow-up programmes. Trainers, who were often staff and paid by the federation of agricultural cooperatives, would visit even remote villages, encouraging former trainees further. Indeed, many Saemaul Leaders, who served effectively as a linkage between the state and communities, were arguably “made by training” (Yoon 2011: 88–9).

It is reported that practical and experience-based training, including project management skills and new tools and technologies in agriculture, was given to more than 500,000 persons of various social backgrounds during the course of the movement from 1972 to 1980 (Park 2009: 128). The central SLTI alone had trained over 14,000 Leaders by 1979 (SLTI 1992: 326) and they were trained in a wide range of curricula for relatively short periods of less than two weeks. The learning contents included not only technical subjects such as new agricultural technology and how to manage agricultural cooperatives and Saemaul projects for improvements in both living conditions and income-earning, but also some practical issues relating to leadership and management of an organisation/community, such as the desirable features of leadership, how to manage conflicts and promote villagers’ participation, ways to practice Saemaul Undong, successful cases, and group discussions for problem-solving, etc. (Han 2010: 278). The importance of training for leadership and the effective implementation of Saemaul projects are referred to by some former Saemaul Leaders below:

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10 Hwang (2011), who presents Saemaul Undong as a political mobilisation of the farm sector, argues, negatively, that the material resources provided by the state for the movement were nothing but bait for more farmers’ mobilisation and that, for some villages without state assistance, there were in fact no village-driven projects, while such ‘bait’ caused, in the worst cases, division rather than cooperation within a community. In sum, he argues that Saemaul Undong was a success in terms of the mobilisation of farmers, not all of them, but some of them. Ironically, Hwang’s study still supports the thesis that, for mobilisation, assistance in terms of resources is necessary.

11 The SLTI was renamed the Saemaul Undong Central Training Institute (SUCTI) in 1990 (SUCTI homepage).
A furnace is not just for smelting metals. There is a kind of furnace for making a human being anew. The SLTI was such a furnace which allowed us to be re-born.

Everything [at the training institute] was an experience-based education and it was education for my re-birth (Han 2010: 278–9).

Assistance and support should not be limited to materials, although the latter is a must. Support can also be symbolic. For example, in addition to a Saemaul song and flag, which served as symbols of the movement to unite communities and the people engaged, various orders and decorations for Saemaul Leaders were devised, along with special costumes for Leaders and letters of encouragement praising their contributions. All these initiatives served as effective, though non-material, incentives for Leaders to keep going. For example, those wearing a Saemaul Leader costume could enter and meet Ministers easily and, in one case, a village received a telephone line right after its Leader met the President and told him that his village needed phone access, contributing to the stronger leadership of the Saemaul Leader at the village level and to enhanced community participation. Many former Saemaul Leaders insist on the importance of this symbolic support and encouragement, explaining that these things rather than individual financial compensation meant and that they willingly took on the burden and responsibility of being a Leader (Yoon 2011: 91–4; see also Han 2010).

Successful farmers’ case studies were also presented in the last part of the Monthly Economic Review Session, which was held at the Economic Planning Board, chaired by the President himself for about a decade (1970–79) and attended by all cabinet members and leaders of the National Assembly. On those occasions, two successful farmers and their wives were present, as well as the heads of the sub-county office and the county office from where the successful farmers came, receiving the honour of having lunch with the President. This symbolic support impressed others strongly and the value of the movement was underlined through such occasions and spread accordingly. Such non-material support and encouragement, as vividly expressed in a former Saemaul Leaders’ interview below, played an important role in inducing and promoting villagers’ participation in the movement:

President Park said when we became Saemaul Leaders, ‘in a far future, your descendants will say proudly that our ancestors were Leaders who made our village Saemaul [a new community].’ Everyone who heard this felt thrilled and could not help but doing it from our entire heart (Han 2010: 268).

In fact, to many Saemaul Leaders, President Park remains a leader who “supported and assisted when needed, so that Saemaul Leaders, loaded with the Saemaul projects, could carry on and cross the river [of hardship of leading the community toward a common goal of development] (Han 2010: 293).”

Discussions: towards successful social capital mobilisation

There is no doubt that a strongly motivated leadership at the top level of the administration and consistency in commitment is necessary for the successful implementation of any kind of national development programme, as many earlier studies have noted (Kwon 1997; Park 1998; Park 2009; Soh 2007). Without the top-level leadership, along with administrative support, the holistic approach involving many ministries under the then Minister of Home Affairs, which chaired a Central Committee of Saemaul Undong, and a systematic channelling from a Central Committee to each village level, via social committees for coordination at each level of local government, would not have been possible. Park Jin Hwan, then a professor of agricultural economics who participated in reviews of the draft Third Five-Year Economic Development Plan (1971–76), testifies that, back then, no responsible ministry existed for either electrification or road development in rural areas and yet, despite this, at the end of the Plan, the rural electrification rate had increased from 20% to nearly 100% and roads at the village level improved by 85,000 km in the 1970s. He argues that the key
factor for this accomplishment was the political will of President Park’s administration in engaging almost every ministry in the modernisation of rural life (Park 1998: 129).

Testimonies about the direct involvement and strong commitments to *Saemaul Undong* of President Park are also widespread: he suggested inviting farmers to hear their stories rather than staging lectures from scholars and experts, he frequently visited training centres to encourage participation on the part of both trainers and trainees, and he even wrote the *Saemaul* Song himself. Starting from a Presidential Direction (No. 6140) in March 1972, which announced the launch of a Central Committee of *Saemaul Undong*, a Monitoring Section was established in every local government within three years. Public officials realised that working for a *Saemaul*-related department was a necessary and rapid route to promotion, meaning the Undong was even more actively promoted (Soh 2007: 107).

What matters more, however, is participation on the part of would-be beneficiaries, in this case ordinary people in rural areas. This covers the possible engagement of social capital from local contexts. For this ‘bonding’ role of existing social capital in the community concerned, ‘linking’ state and society in common goals as well as ‘bridging’ between communities, the *Saemaul* Leaders were particularly important. For such a successful mobilisation of local social capital for community (and beyond-community) development, active assistance and support from the government is also necessary. Support can take various forms, both material and non-material. Cement and steel wires as well as training opportunities and symbolic support all turned out to be effective in managing the *Saemaul Undong* successfully. Government assistance and support is believed to have worked as an important trigger of the initial movement but, as the movement continues, it also contributed to building and enhancing trust in the government. Most of all, it worked as a driving force motivating local people to participate in the movement, by witnessing their or other successful communities’ potential and capacity to achieve community development, thereby enhancing trust among themselves. Whether trust should be understood as part of, or a consequence of, social capital, as has often been debated in earlier studies, may not be as important as understanding its dynamic relations with social capital. When there is trust, social capital is more likely to increase easily than in other situations (here, trust is therefore understood as part of social capital). This, however, does not mean that social capital cannot be constructed where there is no initial trust among community members, although it may of course take longer for it to be built and ‘bonded’ further (in this sense, then, trust is a consequence).

So, what lessons can we draw from *Saemaul Undong* for other developing countries? First of all, a ‘linking’ agent between state and society is vitally important as a focal agent of community development. Former *Saemaul* Leaders’ testimonies show us how rural villagers, once strongly motivated and effectively assisted, by witnessing top-level commitment to the programme and acknowledging the government’s reshaping from something that had been seen as an organisation of control and domination into another of collaboration and assistance, turn themselves into a strong agent of development. In short, a key to the successful rural community development in Korea in the 1970s was these agents’ successes in the ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ roles by successfully mobilising local networks, trust, and participation towards a common goal.

Also noteworthy is that the extent to which *Saemaul* Leaders were able to induce voluntary participation of villagers was intrinsically related to the way they were elected – local participation was higher and performances were better when the local leadership was selected by the local population. In other words, the involvement of villagers in decision-making and respect for their decisions, including but not limited to the choice of their own leaders, increases participation (Kee et al 1987; Soh 2007).

Another point is that the *Saemaul* Leaders were not *created* by the government but rather *found and trained* thanks to active government support (Han 2010). Many potential leaders were out there
in the local communities already in the 1960s but they came to be more effective, having been trained during the course of *Saemaul Undong* (see Han 2010; Kim 2009). Contemporary developing countries should give more attention to this point than is currently the case.

From this, we would like to emphasise that there is an imperative need for physical, capital, and other forms of government support and assistance. As stated above, expecting society to work without providing any concrete material and non-material assistance and support is simply an illusion. Social capital can be constructed, enhanced, and mobilised when government helps the community. Investing capital in an endeavour to – eventually – earn capital may sound illogical. How on earth can a less-developed country, which badly needs capital, invest capital anyway? Park (2009: 125) points out that, in the case of *Saemaul Undong*, the capital investment was possible due to strong and continuous economic growth since the late 1960s, which increased tax revenue, in turn allowing the government to support and lead the programme with little budgetary concerns (see Table 3 above). For today’s developing countries, development assistance from other countries could serve as the capital required at the beginning of any implementation of such community development (see Sachs 2005), and eventually meet local development needs.

As a way to build and enhance social capital from local contexts, Soh (2007) suggests starting by focusing on common values to work together towards a better living environment (e.g. building small bridges or paved roads, improving drinking water and sewage systems, etc.). This is because this method is believed to facilitate the required transformation from a kinship-based community (the kind of social capital found in many developing contexts) to a territorial community and then the up-scaled sense of ‘community-ship’. Once self-confidence and trust has been built through the successful achievement of small projects and when people better understand how to enhance social networks to get concrete results out of village projects, a bigger project such as a more focused income-generating initiative can be pursued.

As has noted by Woolcock (1998: 186), who first theorised dynamic state–society relations as an important linkage for economic development, the challenge still remains “to identify the mechanisms that will create, nurture, and sustain the types and combinations of social relationships conductive to building dynamic participatory societies.” We hope that this study has contributed partly to these efforts. The study is also expected to make an academic contribution by reviving a once-flourished but now somewhat diminished interest in social capital and economic development. The findings of the study are also expected to provide practical lessons and implications for today’s developing countries, many of which still want to learn from the ‘Korean miracle’. A limitation of this study is that, due mainly to the exclusive use of available qualitative data from interviews with mostly successful Leaders, who tend to promote the glory of their stories, the voices of other (failed) Leaders are left out. Their perspectives may differ and in turn allow a different interpretation of the movement but the willingness to be interviewed tends to be low among unsuccessful Leaders, which may remain as a challenge for future research, let alone the fact that we are naturally losing any *Saemaul* Leader-survivors to the time.
References


Websites

Korea Saemaul Undong Centre [http://www.saemaul.com](http://www.saemaul.com)

Saemaul Undong Central Training Institute (SUCTI) [http://www.sucti.com](http://www.sucti.com)

Saemaul Undong History Institute [http://www.saemaulstudy.or.kr](http://www.saemaulstudy.or.kr)