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**THE EVOLUTION  
OF SOUTH  
KOREA'S ODA  
STRATEGY:  
THE MOROCCAN  
CASE**

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# The Evolution of South Korea's ODA Strategy: The Moroccan Case

## Abstract

South Korea's history of rapid industrialization and its long-standing alliance with the United States have shaped national state logic to a large extent around a desire to strictly comply with the common norms for aid in the international community, and to affirm itself as a large conventional donor, often at odds with attempts to introduce a more innovative image of South Korea by designing unique Official Development Assistance (ODA) models to be implemented in developing countries.

In this study, we first track the development of South Korean aid performance through its transformation from a recipient country to a donor country. We then examine the South Korean national discourse and narrative about public aid, as well as the involvement of ordinary citizens in diplomacy through volunteering practices. To this end, the case explored throughout the study consists of South Korean volunteer practices in Morocco in the context of ODA. We argue that, as it has advanced, this development aid mechanism has become a diplomatic tool for shaping South Korea-Morocco relations.

We conclude with observations on the immediate and future impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Korea's implementation of its strategic ODA plan, with a focus on actions related to the African continent and Morocco.

Keywords: South Korea, Official Development Assistance, South-South cooperation, middle power

## Introduction:

There are unavoidable linkages between a country's history and its identity as an aid donor. Indeed, aid policies can inform us about not only donor countries but also the taxpayers who have indirectly made aid possible. There is evidence of this in the fact that more often than not, a change in a society's concerns translates into a change of priorities in the donor country's aid policies.

This article is based on field research conducted between June 2018 and March 2020. It consisted of an internship at Morocco's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, semi-structured interviews with volunteers affiliated to the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the analysis of daily blog entries by South Korean volunteers in Morocco, as well as the consultation of literature and documentation from various institutions related to the development of South Korea, development assistance and cooperation between Morocco and South Korea.

The first part of the article looks into the positioning of South Korea as a former aid beneficiary that achieved rapid industrialization (later followed by democratization) and shaped its development aid models accordingly, in line with the requirements of membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) since 2010. We then proceed to offer a tentative explanation of the role played by the structure designed for South Korean development assistance in the rapprochement between South Korea and Morocco in recent years. The second part focuses on the involvement of ordinary citizens in South Korean diplomacy through volunteer practices in the context of Official Development Assistance as a component of public diplomacy. We provide in particular results related to South Korean development assistance in Morocco. Lastly, we open the discussion on the implications of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic for South Korea's ODA strategy in Africa and more specifically in Morocco.

### Going official: the legacy of a formerly poor country as an emerging donor

The aftermath of the Korean War (1950-1953) and the involvement of the United States in the Korean peninsula have without doubt shaped South Korea's vision of Official Development Assistance (ODA). In the space of five decades, South Korea is no longer a beneficiary of international aid for immediate war reconstruction or for international development purposes<sup>1</sup>. In 1963, the South Korean government started to help developing countries, first with American funds, then only a few years later, with its own means, programs and schemes. To date, the narrative of giving back to the world the help it received in the second half of the twentieth century has taken on great proportions in the discourse about Korean ODA within the country and abroad<sup>2</sup>.

As a recipient country, South Korea, under President Syngman Rhee (1948-1960), made

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1. Kim, Pil Ho & Kim, Jinhyung. "Coordination and Capacity: Building in US aid to South Korea, 1945-1975", in Kim, Eun Me & Kim Pil Ho (2014). *The South Korean Development Experience: Beyond Aid*, the Critical Studies of the Asia-Pacific, pp.47-64

2. Kim, Soyeun (2011). "Bridging troubled worlds? An analysis of the ethical case for South Korean aid", *Journal of International Development* 23, 802-822

the important decision of having and maintaining the final authority over aid policies and construction, with all the risks that it entailed, even when the state relied heavily on American funds to function. In a way, South Korea was ahead of its time in terms of ODA management: before the formalization of the principle of ownership in the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness (2005), according to which partner countries (should) have effective control over policies and strategies pertaining to development and coordination of international development initiatives<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, the initial American vision for South Korea as a recipient country of its aid program was an integration of the country into a regional economic order governed and controlled by Japan<sup>4</sup>. This would have reduced costs for the United States and simplified its Asian strategy. Rhee's opposition to this idea, explicitly and repeatedly expressed in his letters addressed to President Eisenhower<sup>5</sup>, and popular anti-Japan sentiments, encouraged South Korea's continued independence in choosing its own development path and made the Americans change plans as an aid provider.

However, American officials were often unhappy about Rhee's management of aid funds and pessimistic about the prospects of Korean growth<sup>6</sup>. In this respect, an insightful article published by Hahm Pyong-choon in *Foreign Affairs* in 1964 denounced the tendency of the American administration to point out in reports and official meetings a "mendicant mentality" that was apparent to them among the South Korean population up to the 1980s: Americans did not witness any tangible impact of American aid other than alleviating poverty in the short term. Hahm explained the sacrifices and painful choices that the country made as an active player in the American containment strategy during the cold war to limit the diffusion of communism, mainly the partition of Korea which made the South of the country lose important resources and fall into greater poverty than before. According to the author, American aid was broadly interpreted as a form of repayment for the role played by Korea. Not surprisingly, the aid program was first proposed by President Truman in the same terms: "Korea has become a testing ground in which the validity and practical value of the ideals and principles of democracy which the Republic is putting into practice are being matched against the practices of communism which have been imposed on the people of North Korea. The survival and progress of the Republic toward a self-supporting, stable economy will have an immense and far-reaching influence on the people of Asia. Moreover, the Korean Republic, by demonstrating the success and tenacity of democracy in resisting communism, will stand as a beacon of the people of Northern Asia in resisting the control of communist forces which have overrun them. If we are faithful to our ideals and mindful of our interests in establishing peaceful and prosperous conditions in the world, we will not fail to provide the aid which is so essential to Korea at this critical time"<sup>7</sup>. Extending help to South Korea, in the form of ODA, meant showcasing the success of American democracy, as opposed to communism.

How did the South Korean case come to be considered a success story in official aid? Several factors are concomitantly involved in the success of aid policies and development programs in South Korea under the government of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979). The first

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3. OECD (2005), *Déclaration de Paris sur l'efficacité de l'aide au développement*, Editions OCDE

4. Cumings, Bruce (2010). *The Korean War: a history*, The Modern Library, New York, Chapter 5

5. Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Korea, Volume XV, PART 2*

6. Brazinsky, Gregg (2009). *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy*, University of North Carolina Press, pp. 31-40

7. Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (1950), "The Truth about Korea", p.3

phase of aid mainly consisted of immediate post-war reconstruction efforts. Priorities in directing aid funds appeared to be feeding an impoverished population and constructing a South Korean Republic with authority over its population. For this reason, ODA held little promise at the beginning. Yet, an important consequence of ODA was the rising centrality of the state in making decisions and in managing the private sector, as the government was responsible for the allocation of subsidies to companies<sup>8</sup>.

The rise of South Korea into a developed country could be called a miracle, in the sense that the exact combination of factors behind its rapid economic growth and human development remains a mystery, fed by dozens of theories. Many simultaneous processes boosted Korea's economy, and so far, multiple models of development have been domestically studied in order to build a convincing South Korean aid structure inspired by its particular history<sup>9</sup>. For instance, the Saemaul Undong movement, which is largely criticized because of its links to the authoritarian rule of President Park Chung-hee, remains one of the most popular Korean aid initiatives. It was directly adapted from the South Korean experience of development in the field of agriculture in order to be applied in currently developing countries<sup>10</sup>.

## From a Poor to a Donor Country

Speaking of the role of South Korea as a global stakeholder in ODA calls for a deeper understanding of its own development. This in turn reinforces its image as a middle power, capable of becoming a "bridge between developing and developed countries"<sup>11</sup>. In fact, this narrative is ambiguous and implies larger responsibility for South Korea than it is possible to foresee. Indeed, the image of South Korea as an intermediary between developing and developed countries makes observers question two elements: does South Korea's recent history of poverty truly make policymakers better understand the current challenges of developing countries? And to what extent does South Korea endorse aid management methods adopted by the bloc of developed countries on the one hand, and on the other hand, the principles of South-South cooperation endorsed by emerging donor countries with similar patterns of fast development? In 2010, South Korea joined the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), thus falling under the category of conventional donors, orientated by OECD principles and regular supervision, leading to multiple reports with a number of recommendations to improve its 'DAC-ability'.

As mentioned above, the fast development of South Korea, followed decades later by its effective democratization, is a mystery both to the Korean government itself and to third parties. Some speak of the role of private companies owned by families (chaebol), the focus on the heavy chemical industry as well as the five-year development plans initiated by President Park Chung-hee, while others highlight the importance of the Korean belief in the possibility of development, which has resulted in early successful

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8. Brazinsky, Gregg (2009). *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy*, University of North Carolina Press, pp. 31-40

9. Shin, Hyon-hee (2016). "[EYE] Shaping the game of development assistance", *The Korea Herald*  
URL: <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160715000675> Last access: July 2019

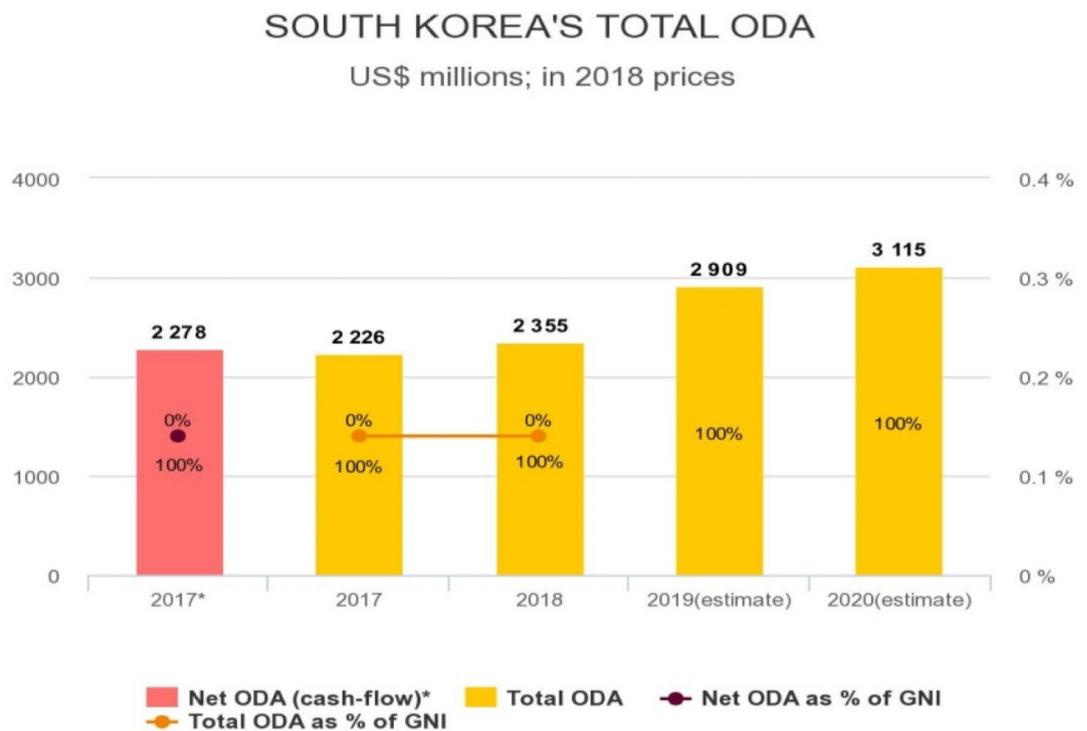
10. Rezrazi, El Mostafa (2018). "Les modalités de coopération agricole des pays asiatiques en Afrique Australe" in OCP Policy Center (2018). *Dialogues Stratégiques: La place des Etats-Unis un an après l'élection de Donald Trump, le nouveau profil de l'Afrique Australe*, Volume IV, pp.111-136

11. Howe, Brendan (2015). "Development Effectiveness: Charting South Korea's Role and Contribution" in *Middle-Power Korea: Contributions to the Global Agenda*, Council on Foreign Relations Press, pp. 21-43

efforts to generalize education and to prioritize it as a way of social mobility. In fact, President Park Chung-hee was an important figure of the can-do spirit movement, who integrated into domestic agricultural development programs ways to lift up the spirits of farmers and make them believe in their power to change their lives through hard work<sup>12</sup>. Another example of the cultural attachment to “hope in future development” in South Korea, which is clearly representative of the strength of nation-building under Park Chung-hee, was the extent to which the discourse about Korea’s economic take-off and further potential of development presented by the American economist Rostow was largely accepted, endorsed and appropriated in many milieus, including governmental agencies, academia and the general population<sup>13</sup>.

Now that South Korea is a donor with a diverse range of partner countries and a volume of ODA estimated at \$3.12 billion in 2020 (see Figure 1), the real issue lies in how far their ODA purposes should include each of the following components: (i) development, (ii) aid and (iii) diplomacy.

**Figure 1: The evolution of South Korea’s total ODA from 2017 to 2020 (Donor Tracker, 2020)**



OECD, table DAC1. 2019 and 2020 estimates based on SEEK’s calculations.  
\*In 2017, net ODA was still officially measured according to the cash-flow methodology.

12. Eckert, Carter J. (2016). Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: the roots of militarism (1866-1945), the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

13. Park, Tae-gyun (2001). “W.W. Rostow and Economic Discourse in South Korea in the 1960s”, Journal of International and Area Studies, Volume 8, Number 2, pp.55-66

Moreover, the ideas of a 'Global Korea' officially entering an era of globalization and the country's openness, its 'resource diplomacy' rooted in envisioned deeper ties with African countries and its public diplomacy according to which South Korean citizens can contribute to shaping a stronger global image of the country among foreigners through direct dialogue, were all officially advanced by the government of Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013)<sup>14</sup> around the same time as South Korea was saluted as the host of the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (HLF-4) in the city of Busan in 2011 for its innovative plan to shift the attention of the international community from understanding aid as a form of help to considering aid as one of the various flows contributing to a country's development, such as investments and exports<sup>15</sup>. It is also interesting to see that Ban Ki-moon, the South Korean UN Secretary-General at the time, hinted during the convening of the same forum at the fact that the bureaucratic aspects of ODA might overshadow its purpose of development ("aid is not only a technical matter, it is a path to building the future we want"<sup>16</sup>).

Once ODA is equated to international development cooperation, and both donors and recipients take up the equally-important positions of partner countries, two direct consequences are noted: a move away from traditional ways of administering aid, namely reproducing models of development, and greater focus on mutual gain, in the sense that aid projects are similar to cooperation or joint development programs, decided after a thorough assessment of comparative advantages. This explains the recent advancements in Moroccan-Korean ties, partly through ODA programs.

## Bilateral ODA: a Platform for Cooperation Between South Korea and Morocco

South Korean bilateral ODA to Morocco can easily be seen as a platform for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In recent years, Morocco has been a self-proclaimed African leader in various projects, and in particular in the field of renewable energies. Therefore, partnerships with Morocco hold the promise of opening doors to cooperation with other African countries for South Korea. Previously, we have pointed out the transformation of the international structure of aid. As a consequence, former images of donor and recipient countries are undergoing significant changes. Yet, despite the attractiveness of slogans such as "South-South cooperation", contacts between former and current developing countries are still far from satisfactory, and the old ways are firmly anchored in the minds of populations who benefit from aid, according to which only 'the traditional rich' enjoy enough power to help them.

The lack of economic influence and meager people-to-people contacts have a notable impact on the perceived relevance of ODA in recipient countries; it is a characteristic of bilateral aid relations between South Korea and Morocco, and this is particularly visible in South Korean volunteering practices in small cities and in the countryside. This in turn shows that South Korea's international image has yet to catch up with the rapid South Korean development especially in terms of democratization and state-building which

14. Mo, Jongryn (2016). "South Korea's middle power diplomacy: a case of growing compatibility between regional and global roles", *International Journal*, Vol.17, No. 4, pp. 587-607

15. Mawdsley, Emma Savage, Laura & Kim, Sungmi (2014). "A 'post-aid world'? Paradigm shift in foreign aid and development cooperation at the 2011 Busan High Level Forum", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 180, No.1, pp. 27-38

16. OCDE, Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness: Proceedings (available online on [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org))

is an even more recent process in South Korea than its economic evolution. Chang has labeled this situation as “compressed modernization”<sup>17</sup>. Undoubtedly, the visibility of South Korea as a donor state needs to be reinforced.

### South Korea’s ODA to Africa: second in priority listing?

In reality, short-term objectives are the main drivers behind partnerships between South Korea and African countries, as it was in the past. Ties between African countries and South Korea were mostly conditioned by specific aspirations on the South Korean side, such as admission to the UN as a single country, the nomination of Ban Ki-moon as UN Secretary-General and President Lee Myung-bak’s resource diplomacy, which was canceled soon after his mandate ended<sup>18</sup>. In fact, the 2015 Diplomatic White Paper published by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs includes an explanation of its priority listing of countries which receive official aid from South Korea: geographic proximity and economic and political ties are the main factors behind aid relations with the Asia-Pacific region, whereas the African continent is in need of South Korean ODA because the poorest countries in the world are located there<sup>19</sup> (see Table 1).

**Table 1: The distribution of Korea’s ODA by geographical region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019)**

(USD millions, %)										
	ODA Volume					Percentage of Bilateral ODA				
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018 provisional	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018 provisional
Asia	663.4	708.1	685.6	715.0	727.1	47.5	48.2	44.3	44.3	42.1
Africa	332.7	358.8	415.6	408.0	458.8	23.8	24.4	26.8	25.3	26.5
America	109.1	114.1	137.8	176.7	173.2	7.8	7.8	8.9	10.9	10.0
Middle East	74.6	66.3	65.9	71.5	64.7	5.3	4.5	4.3	4.4	3.7
Europe	6.5	8.8	8.9	11.6	2.3	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.1
Oceania	10.0	-4.4	-1.5	-4.1	15.6	0.7	-0.3	-0.1	-0.3	0.9
Unspecified	199.5	217.1	236.2	236.3	286.5	14.3	14.8	15.3	14.6	16.6
Total	1,395.8	1,468.8	1,548.5	1,615.0	1,728.2					

Since November 2017, Lee Mi-kung has served as the head of the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). The internal restructuring of KOICA clearly shows the alignment between Lee Mi-kyung and Moon Jae-in’s visions and priorities. In fact, Lee Mi-kyung put together an innovation committee in charge of defining ten tasks as part of new guidelines for the international cooperation agency<sup>20</sup> (see Table 2).

17. Chang, Kyung-sup (2010). “The second modern condition? Compressed modernity as internalized reflexive cosmopolitization”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 61, Issue 3, pp.444-464

18. Gray, Kevin & Kim, Soyeun (2016). “Overseas development aid as spatial fix? Examining South Korea’s Africa Policy”, *Third World Quarterly*, 37:4, pp.649-664

19. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (2015). 2015: Diplomatic White Paper, pp.196-197 [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5684/list.do](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5684/list.do) Last access: February 2019

20. Yonhap (2017). “KOICA launches ‘innovation committee’ to reform organization, raise transparency”, *The Korea Herald* [http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171207000327&ACE\\_SEARCH=1](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171207000327&ACE_SEARCH=1) Last access: February 2019

**Table 2: KOICA's ten innovation tasks (KOICA, 2018)<sup>21</sup>**

TASK NUMBER	TASK	OBJECTIVES
Task 1	Preventing the recurrence of problematic projects and restoring national trust	-Selecting ODA projects in all transparency -Establishing efficient performance assessment mechanisms
Task 2	Contributing to the realization of universal values such as peace, human rights, democracy and gender equality	Ensuring that KOICA's ODA projects reflect the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
Task 3	Overcoming the fragmentation of development cooperation and enhancing the effectiveness of development	-Reinforcing platforms to share information and knowledge about development cooperation -Establishing channels for dialogue and consultation with ministries and local governments
Task 4	Establishing and implementing an aid strategy consistent with the government's foreign policy	Linking foreign policy and ODA (New Southern Policy, New Northern Policy etc.) and contributing to the creation of the Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility
Task 5	Strengthening collaboration with all partners based on mutual respect and accountability	-Encouraging all the organizations involved in ODA projects (individuals, civil society, universities and companies) to act as responsible parties -Advocating the principle of ownership
Task 6	Actively contributing to the development of global talents and creating quality jobs	-Creating an industrial ecosystem based on ODA projects -Bridging between ODA and employment for volunteers, volunteer coordinators, interns and World Friends Korea (WFK) cooperation experts
Task 7	Disclosing all public data with the exception of personal data	-Providing access to data obtained during the implementation of ODA projects -Improving developing countries' data collection and information processing systems
Task 8	Moving toward an open and efficient professional organization	-Reinforcing KOICA's regional-led organizational system -Reflecting external voices in KOICA's professional organization and ensuring integrity
Task 9	Implementing ethical management based on social values and human rights	Establishing a win-win organizational culture (ensuring women's representation, breaking the glass ceiling, encouraging the employment of people with special needs etc.)
Task 10	Hiring external experts to evaluate the implementation of the innovation tasks	Having an independent panel inspect the implementation of the innovation tasks

21. Based on KOICA (2018). "KOICA's Innovation Committee announces ten tasks" [in Korean], KOICA's blog <http://blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=prkoica&logNo=221199583000&parentCategoryNo=&categoryNo=16&viewDate=&isShowPopularPosts=true&from=search> Last access: June 2020

This idea itself is an extension of the published “100 tasks” of the Moon Jae-in government concerning ODA. Following the general orientation of Moon’s New Southern Policy, the Innovation Committee confirmed South Korea’s intention to focus its efforts on ASEAN member countries, in addition to India, as ODA recipient countries<sup>22</sup>. Another government priority, which has been highlighted through Moon’s renewed ‘sunshine policy’, with a focus on opening dialogue with North Korea, has had the effect of conceptualizing aid as a follow-up means to restore peace and link North Korea with other countries in future years, in the hope of achieving goals of reconstruction and poverty alleviation<sup>23</sup>.

Meanwhile, South Korean ODA in Africa primarily aims to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which explains the focus of its policies on human development. While South Korean ODA programs in Asia are an anchoring in its regional policy and history, in Africa, these programs respond to a desire to comply with the logics of international development and to make a significant contribution to its legacies alongside the international community.

### Morocco-South Korea relations and South Korea’s ODA to Morocco: two sides of the same coin?

Yun Kang-hyeon, Deputy Minister for Economic Affairs of the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Korea, labeled 2018 as “the year of Morocco”<sup>24</sup> because it witnessed a significant improvement of exchanges between Morocco and South Korea, including mutual high-level visits. Indeed, in that year alone, the Prime Minister of South Korea Lee Nak-yeon and the Prime Minister of Morocco Saâdeddine El Othmani met on three occasions. KOICA benefited from greater exposure in the course of these events because it is the main platform for cooperation between the two countries.

As important bilateral cooperation projects fall under the category of ODA rather than mere investments, El Othmani and his delegation discussed ODA matters in Busan with high-level representatives, whilst Lee paid a courtesy visit to the Training Institute for the Automotive Industry in Casablanca whose equipment was funded by KOICA. In addition, six bilateral cooperation conventions, mainly in the fields of education, training and scientific research, were signed between institutions in the two countries and involved the active participation of KOICA<sup>25</sup>. It has been reported in 2018 that Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon expressed his willingness to deepen cooperation with Morocco as follows: “linking between what Morocco wants to do and what South Korea can do the best”<sup>26</sup>. This expression emphasizes the blurry lines between ODA and bilateral cooperation in the case of Moroccan-South Korean ties. In April 2019, it was also Kim Soyoung, the KOICA Resident Representative in Morocco, who signed a Memorandum

22. KOICA (2017). 2017 KOICA Annual Statistical Report URL: [https://www.koica.go.kr/sites/koica\\_en/index.do](https://www.koica.go.kr/sites/koica_en/index.do) Last access: February 2019

23. Choi, Ha-young (2017). “[Interview] New KOICA chief vows to redesign international aid”, The Korea Times <http://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsidx=241055> Last access: February 2019

24. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “7th Meeting of ROK-Morocco Joint Committee Takes Place”, Press release <http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/index.do> Last access: February 2019

25. Marzak, Abdelhafid (2018). “Maroc et Corée du Sud passent à la vitesse supérieure”, Le Matin [in French] <https://lematin.ma/journal/2018/maroc-coree-sud-passent-vitesse-superieure/307272.html> Last access: February 2019

26. Park, Song-il (2018). “South Korean - Moroccan talks. Lee PM: expectations for practical cooperation”, KTV [in Korean] [http://www.ktv.go.kr/news/major/view?autoplay=Y&content\\_id=566861&unit=250](http://www.ktv.go.kr/news/major/view?autoplay=Y&content_id=566861&unit=250) Last access: February 2019

of Understanding with Rachid Talbi Alami, the Moroccan Minister of Youth and Sport, for further cooperation in sports training, which supposes the active participation of KOICA volunteers in carrying out training projects and exchanging knowledge. Based on these events, it is possible to argue that the intersections between cooperation and ODA in the case of Korean-Moroccan relations are clear.

Furthermore, South Korean ODA to Morocco gives priority to the public sector, namely partnerships between the two governments. Up to 2019, over 850 Moroccan officials and executives benefitted from KOICA's training programs, and in 2019, 50 of them participated in training programs on various topics such as commercial development, capacity-building for diplomats, capacity-building for specialists in railway infrastructure, capacity-building in the maintenance of meteorological instruments and early warning systems, as well as Korean language and culture<sup>27</sup>. In fact, South Korean ODA takes three forms: cooperation projects, training programs and volunteer work (World Friends Korea, WFK). In particular, KOICA's training programs, which are mainly designed for civil servants, hold tremendous potential for multilateral cooperation as it gathers officials from several developing countries. Whereas the common platform for discussions is the history of Korean development, the participants have the possibility of discussing together development-related issues and presenting their own project concept papers at the end of the training program as a way to suggest ODA projects from which their home countries could benefit in the future. However, the procedures to select KOICA's projects are lengthy as they take around two years and include various steps at different levels: the communication of the project from the Embassy of Korea to the KOICA office in the developing country concerned, the review of the project at KOICA's headquarters in South Korea, the adoption of a budgetary plan by the South Korean Ministry of Finance, a vote on the budget at the General Assembly, the selection of consultants to carry out the project once it is approved and then effective implementation<sup>28</sup>.

However, in its report of 2018, the OECD advised South Korea to involve civil society more in its aid practices and noted that in the few cases where NGOs take part in South Korean ODA, their contribution is conditioned by specific programs and their role ends upon their completion, unless the partnership is renewed<sup>29</sup>. The role of Global Care Morocco, a branch of the NGO Global Care, in the South Korean ODA program in Morocco in the health sector is one such example, as the non-governmental organization has been integrated into the smart medication project for tuberculosis patients in Morocco without any guarantee its mandate will be extended.

To sum up, through consistent funding and training, KOICA has laid a foundation for deeper cooperation with Morocco that can be mobilized when needed, and it positions itself as a middleman in collaboration projects. In that sense, the presence of KOICA is a key facilitating factor for efficient and rapid rapprochement, which remains dormant until there is a strong political will to advance relations between the two countries.

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27. Lyakoubi, Driss (2019). Concrétisation sur le terrain des relations excellentes entre le Maroc et la Corée du Sud, *Le Matin*

<https://lematin.ma/journal/2019/concretisation-terrain-relations-excellentes-entre-maroc-coree-sud/325831.html>  
Last access: May 2020

28. A presentation of KOICA at the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (July 2018)

29. OECD (2018), "Korea's delivery modalities and partnerships", in OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2018, Éditions OCDE, Paris

## Volunteer Practices: The Weight of Public Diplomacy

Amidst the calculations of governments relating to ODA's best practices, individuals from donor states that have developed their own volunteering programs are encouraged to share their expertise with locals by taking part in missions in different sectors related to global prosperity. Given South Korea's history with American volunteers in the past, namely the Peace Corps, a main ambition for ODA policymakers in South Korea has been to put together volunteer groups dispatched to recipient countries, similar to the Peace Corps in terms of capacity and public recognition<sup>30</sup>. Clearly, the volunteers are not development experts and are not in charge of giving reliable recommendations on how to achieve the SDGs. However, they are susceptible to identity dynamics and often reflect on and project geopolitical, cultural and personal perspectives.

The core concept of the WFK program, now managed by KOICA, consists of providing pre-departure training to selected volunteers through a thorough assessment of their abilities and profiles, followed by a relatively short on-job training (OJT), before integrating them into institutions where they can help with the knowledge and skills that they possess. Their skill, craft, knowledge or talent can have been acquired, learned or developed at university or in their previous job. Another possibility is for them to progressively "learn in order to share" so they can implement their action plan. This is the case for a few volunteers at Global Care Morocco: in the NGO's newsletters, the members, Koreans and Moroccans alike, are regularly introduced. They mainly work on KOICA's project against tuberculosis (soon to be extended to other diseases), and by reading these newsletters, it appeared that many of this NGO's volunteers (working closely with KOICA) were unfamiliar with the health sector before joining Global Care. WFK's slogan is similar: learning and sharing.

In Morocco, most South Korean volunteers are integrated into the education sector which is convenient for many reasons. First, the language barriers make early education an optimal choice for volunteers, as well as physical education, due to reduced needs for in-depth communication. This is because the training period is too short to develop a good command of the languages and dialects spoken in Morocco. Moreover, teaching Korean in universities allows for closer contacts between young Moroccans and Korean volunteers. In the city of Fez, the music conservatory regularly benefits from the services of Korean volunteers. A simple review of the places where each KOICA volunteer is dispatched in Morocco shows clear preferences for continuing previous experiences which concluded successfully.

Youth centers and vocational training centers are equally attractive volunteering environments for KOICA, and they allow for linkages between aid project funding and volunteering funding. Volunteers often take on the role of supervisors when they join Moroccan institutions which have previously been funded and equipped by KOICA. They are often wary of their work environment. For instance, a Korean volunteer with whom I was in contact remembered that KOICA had supplied computers to the vocational training center where he was going to teach computer science, and his first action

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30. Global Peace (2015). "Featured Remarks at the Role of Republic of Korea in Sustainable Development, APPDSA Northeast Seoul Forum 2015 by Ambassador Young-mok Kim", Global Peace Foundation <https://www.globalpeace.org/speech/featured-remarks-role-republic-korea-sustainable-development-appdsa-northeast-seoul-forum> Last access: February 2019

there was an unsuccessful search for computers with KOICA stickers on. In the end, he realized that he had to overlook the matter of the disappearance of previously donated computers, and he asked for additional equipment from KOICA in order to carry out his mission. Another Korean volunteer teaching children in a youth center in Tiflet asked the director of the institution for the KOICA-funded equipment for drawing purposes and was surprised to see that everything was preciously kept inside a locked cabinet. She had to insist many times to be given the right to use them in her classes.

The shortcomings of the South Korean volunteer program in Morocco include the inadequate integration of South Korean volunteers in Morocco, the mismanagement of funds by some Moroccan partners, and the lack of assessment of the impact of each volunteer program, as well as major discrepancies between the content of the pre-departure training, which focuses on theoretical matters (the history of Korean development, the new paradigm of development in the international scene, the principles of ODA and large-scale poverty issues, geography, cultural aspects of specific regions etc.) and day-to-day volunteering experiences in Morocco. In reality, KOICA volunteers contribute to common poverty alleviation practices alongside a limited number of locals within an already-existing structure, thus there are few possibilities to bring a new vision into their lifestyles and work ethics. KOICA volunteers, especially in small Moroccan cities, often deem their “development” tasks to be too ordinary and limited in scale. In that sense, in many cases, the roles they are given fail to satisfy their ambitions of making significant changes, which were to a certain extent encouraged by the group training program they attended in South Korea before being sent to Morocco.

Another obstacle to most South Korean volunteers is the lack of recognition and acknowledgement that they receive, both at cultural and professional levels. The irony here is that Korean volunteers are mobilized in matters of public diplomacy<sup>31</sup>. Public diplomacy extends the responsibility of diplomacy, which implies the spread of a positive image of Korea worldwide, from the South Korean government itself down to ordinary citizens through direct people-to-people contacts<sup>32</sup>. But in Morocco (and in other countries whose populations are not well-acquainted with East Asia), South Korean volunteers are often confronted to frustrating situations, ranging from being randomly called Chinese in the streets to getting stones and sand thrown at them by children. I was puzzled when my contact asked me if there was a religious meaning behind throwing stones at foreigners in Moroccan small cities. I answered that children from poor families, living in areas where all inhabitants know each other, often play with anything they find around them and that they are not used to seeing foreigners. In the book published by Lee Ji-sun about her experience as a KOICA volunteer in Tiflet, she paints a more contrasted picture of this phenomenon, as she gets some consolation in the way a little Moroccan girl often accompanied her to the youth center, firmly holding her hand and doing her best to defend her from other local children, who were either calling her Chinese or throwing stones at her<sup>33</sup>. But as she became more and more acknowledged by the small population as the South Korean volunteer teacher, these situations stopped happening.

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31. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (2015). 2015: Diplomatic White Paper, pp.196-197 [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5684/list.do](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5684/list.do) Last access: February 2019

32. Park, Enna (2017). Preface in Ayhan, Kadir (2017). *Korea's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, Published by Hangang Network, Seoul National University Press, pp. 9-11

33. Lee, Ji-sun (2012). *Mo-ro-kko-e kan ta-ta so-pi-a* [in Korean], Designintro

This lack of significant work to do and poor acknowledgement may undermine the sense of achievement and the perceived power of change among Korean volunteers once they arrive to Morocco and start their two-year service. Yet, in many cases, the racism or the indifference that South Korean volunteers face and the low recognition that they enjoy in Morocco fuel their desire to be better-known to Moroccans and to showcase their culture. Between the lines of many volunteers' online journals I could read their determination to inform future KOICA volunteers about what might await them in Morocco and to represent their country in a way that makes it more easily noticeable by its own cultural symbols, thus dissociable from China. That is where the public diplomacy dimension of KOICA's volunteer program and the personal action plans of South Korean volunteers converge. In the pre-departure training period they are taught, either in classes or in small groups at night after classes, several performances they can use in cultural events once they are sent to their assigned countries, such as martial arts (taekwondo), traditional dance (talchum, a mask dance) or traditional music (samulnori). In that respect, participation in cultural events and in joint volunteering actions (the dream camp" can be an escape route for KOICA volunteers in Morocco that strengthens their faith in the relevance of their actions. Meeting each other and presenting themselves as a group of South Korean volunteers with clear objectives in front of a Moroccan audience can at least give them an opportunity to properly introduce themselves. At the same time, the rapid dissemination of the Korean popular culture worldwide (the hallyu wave) helps promote the image of South Korea and its people in Morocco, a country with which it has few ties.

The essence of South-South cooperation lies in creating win-win situations between countries. As such, South Korean volunteering holds attractive promises, among which we can mention the diffusion of South Korean cultural elements and the immersion of South Korean volunteers themselves in activities related to the promotion of their identity. In addition, generally speaking, the working culture in South Korea makes retirement painful – usually, after their retirement, South Koreans devote themselves to a hobby such as hiking or playing golf, or they manage their own café or restaurant if they have the necessary funds. As work is highly valued in the South Korean culture, retiring gives way to a sense of idleness that is hard to bear for the elderly. In that sense, including seniors as possible candidates for KOICA's volunteer programs gives them an additional option to consider after the end of their career<sup>34</sup>.

As for young South Koreans, committing to a volunteering experience for two years at a time when they need to find a stable job is a difficult decision to make. One reason is that the competitive environment at school before university admissions and part-time jobs needed to pay for higher education leave no time for young South Koreans to develop civic values and political opinions. In a way, the slow pace of volunteering for South Koreans in Moroccan cities allows for deeper thinking and self-reflecting, beyond personal career issues.

However, there is growing discussion of linking volunteering experiences to actual jobs in the field of international development cooperation upon volunteers' to South Korea: this idea is endorsed by KOICA President Lee Mi-kyung who said the label volunteer is misleading and that volunteers can be seen as a pool of increasingly internationally

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34. Nam, Jeong-ho & Yeo, Yoo-soo (2018). "Volunteering abroad suits seniors", Korea Joongang Daily <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3051050>  
Last access: July 2019

oriented talents<sup>35</sup>. In the same logic, many South Korean volunteers in Morocco make no secret of their intention to test the waters through their respective volunteering experiences and eventually switch to careers in international development, thus making use of the languages they learn and their deeper understanding of ODA and development-related topics. In some cases, the two years of service in Morocco give South Korean volunteers additional time to think of possible career paths and in this sense, they get an opportunity to keep themselves busy while avoiding their fears of unemployment at home. In other cases, individuals volunteering with KOICA expect to see bits of their imagined past of a formerly poor South Korea in currently poor regions of Morocco and to experience warmer relations here than in busy South Korean cities; volunteering becomes a way to escape from a competitive and increasingly materialistic society to which they do not relate, while other South Korean volunteers simply wish to extend help to others in need.

## The Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic at the Heart of the Debate: South Korean ODA in Times of COVID-19

Currently, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic provides ground for further multilateral cooperation as South Korea has proven to be a strong candidate as a leader in the global response to the pandemic, especially because it has managed to flatten the curve without resorting to an aggressive lockdown that is particularly detrimental to the economy. However, African countries might not have comparable connectivity capabilities that allow for efficient tracing of virus transmission and testing capabilities, which were the main factors in South Korean capacity for halting the spread of the virus. President Moon Jae-in strongly called for the convening of an emergency virtual G20 summit to discuss a coordinated action plan to face the challenges posed by the pandemic. During the video call which took place on March 26, the South Korean President drew attention to the need to “cooperate in providing support to nations with lesser developed healthcare systems”<sup>36</sup>. It reaffirms the commitment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide medical supplies to other countries in the forms of commercial sales, humanitarian assistance or a combination of both<sup>37</sup>.

Maxwell Bone and Minsoo Kim describe the ways in which South Korea has promptly engaged with African states as a response to the pandemic in two areas: the evacuation of South Korean nationals and assistance<sup>38</sup>. They further illustrate this idea with the fact that the hospital in Kajiado that KOICA's office in Kenya has assisted in building and has been supporting to date, is now an important COVID-19 response center. They also mention plans articulated by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs to donate testing kits to six countries across the Middle East and Africa, the selection of which will be driven by factors of diplomatic interests and the needs of potential recipient countries. Similarly, the Moroccan government has been quick to reach out to South Korea through

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35. Yonhap News (2018). “Lee Mi-kyung, Head of KOICA: the expansion of projects for the New Southern Policy” [in Korean]

<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20181127107000503?input=1195m> Last access: February 2019

36. Cheong WaDae (the Blue House) (2020). “Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at G20 2020 Extraordinary Virtual Leaders Summit” URL: <https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/786> Last access: May 2020

37. Ahn, Sung-mi (2020). “Amid surge in demand for Korean-made test kits, Seoul mulls who to help first”, The Korea Herald

<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200329000210> Last access: May 2020

38. Bone, R. Maxwell & Kim, Matthew Minsoo (2020). South Korea's Response to COVID-19 in Africa, The Diplomat <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/south-koreas-response-to-covid-19-in-africa/> Last access: May 2020

its embassy in Seoul and by negotiating the purchase of testing kits from Osang Health Care, a South Korean firm<sup>39</sup>. The contract was signed on March 26, 2020 and reportedly included the donation of 10,000 extra kits.

Given that around half of the bilateral aid provided by South Korea was allocated to the education, public health, infrastructure and public administration sectors in 2018, KOICA is expected to play a bigger role as a cooperation platform in the post-pandemic world both for stronger healthcare, improved public administration and job-training. Indeed, KOICA has recently revealed its mid-term strategy that focuses on (i) providing health and medical assistance, (ii) improving the capacity of partner countries to respond to infectious diseases, (iii) ensuring food safety, accommodation and social safety net for the most vulnerable segments of the population and (iv) assisting the capacity-building of civil society advocacy in partner countries<sup>40</sup>.

Incidentally, in March 2020, amid the Corona virus pandemic, the South Korean media coverage featured the impact suspending flights from Morocco had on the lives of 60 South Koreans, mainly KOICA volunteers, stranded in Morocco, and alluded to the racism that they face, ranging from being called coronavirus to having stones being thrown at them<sup>41</sup>. The following month, on April 3, the Moroccan government arranged a special direct flight for repatriation purposes for South Korean nationals and Moroccan spouses who wanted to join their families, amounting to 105 passengers. Additionally, the Moroccan and South Korean Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Nasser Bourita and Kang Kyung-hwa discussed by phone on March 30 both the repatriation issue and the shipping of South Korean medical furniture and testing kits as parts of the same deal<sup>42</sup>. In a way, KOICA volunteers played a central role in these negotiations.

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39. Duval, Mehdi (2020). "Le Maroc commande 100.000 kits de dépistage "express" en Corée du Sud, Telquel [https://telquel.ma/2020/03/29/le-maroc-commande-100-000-kits-de-depistage-express-en-coree-du-sud\\_1676547](https://telquel.ma/2020/03/29/le-maroc-commande-100-000-kits-de-depistage-express-en-coree-du-sud_1676547)

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42. Newsis (2020). "Korean testing kits": Morocco to arrange special flights for 31 South Korean nationals. [in Korean] [https://n.news.naver.com/article/003/0009815063?fbclid=IwAR0QiTW1R\\_XCmNbPx8efRaOcjR5JBH2zPIMF1qetM0gEQTYOruUKBYVIAE](https://n.news.naver.com/article/003/0009815063?fbclid=IwAR0QiTW1R_XCmNbPx8efRaOcjR5JBH2zPIMF1qetM0gEQTYOruUKBYVIAE) Last access: May 2020

## Conclusion:

### The Uncertainties of a Middle Power in the Pool of Official Aid

To date, South Korean visions pertaining to aid policies reflect on the one hand, the nation's desire to consolidate its integration into the international community by complying closely with international norms and dominant definitions and concepts as a conventional donor, and on the other hand, the ambition to show a different understanding of aid as an emerging donor and a middle power with its own models of development assistance, rooted in its commitment to South-South cooperation.

Indeed, global diplomacy strategies under the Kim Young-sam and Lee Myung-bak administrations, which led to a greater contribution to the provision of global public goods such as overseas development assistance, the nomination of the South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Ban Ki-moon as Secretary-General of the UN in 2005, as well as South Korea's successful leadership as the host country of important international events such as the G20 Summit in 2010 and the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011 (HLF-4) helped build South Korea's image as a middle power. This has in part fed South Korea's ambition to become a rule-maker in terms of the design of development assistance policies.

In fact, during HLF-4, the suggestion to consider development assistance as one of the various flows and processes of development and think of ways to use aid as a catalyst for other development factors (business, investments, domestic resources and access to knowledge) received a great response. Although there was no follow-up plan to link aid further to cooperation in all its aspects at a global scale, this strategy can be clearly seen in the South Korean use of development assistance programs to serve broader interests of bilateral cooperation. For example, this applies to the recent developments of South Korea's relationship with Morocco, with the signature of numerous memorandums of understanding in many fields such as the automobile sector and education through KOICA's Moroccan partner institutions.

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