



Saemaul Undong: Responsible leadership for just development in South Korea



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Saemaul Undong, also called the New Village or Community Movement, was a community-based development programme promoted in the Republic of Korea during President Park's regime in the 1970s. To reduce the urban-rural income gap in a relatively short period of time (the decade of the 1970s), it has brought unprecedented success, as seen in South Korea's overall socioeconomic improvements and decrease of extreme poverty. Based on the movement's contributions, individual research and public discourse have argued for the potential of applying Saemaul Undong's strategies and activities to developing countries. Nevertheless, the movement's weaknesses, such as the government's ignorance of the particular needs of rural populations and the sustenance of dictatorship, imply the necessity for fundamental changes in the goals and policies of Saemaul Undong before it can be utilised for different contexts. This article explores how the limitations of Saemaul Undong should be amended.

Contribution: This article utilises Emmanuel Levinas' 'Ethics of the Other' as an effective framework that can be used to critique, in particular, the top-down and ambitious approach of the movement and address the significance of responsible leadership that, with hospitality, promotes a just society by being attentive to the suffering of socially vulnerable populations, concerning their dignity, uniqueness, and equality.

Keywords: Saemaul Undong; Emmanuel Levinas; ethics of the other; responsible leadership; developing countries.

Introduction

Saemaul Undong, also called the New Village or Community Movement, was a community-driven development programme promoted in the Republic of Korea during President Park's regime in the 1970s.¹ To reduce the urban-rural income gap in a relatively short period of time (the decade of the 1970s), this movement has brought unprecedented success, as seen in South Korea's overall socioeconomic improvements and decrease of extreme poverty (Park 2009). Nevertheless, the movement's weaknesses, such as the government's ignorance of the particular needs of rural populations and the sustenance of dictatorship, imply the necessity for fundamental changes in the goals and policies of Saemaul Undong before it can be utilised for different contexts. In this article, the exploration of the ethical aspects as a component that partially shadows the success of the Korean Saemaul Undong and the discussion on how its limitations could be addressed are undertaken. Emmanuel Levinas' 'Ethics of the Other' will be utilised as an effective framework that can be used to critique, in particular, the top-down and ambitious approach of the movement. It addresses the significance of responsible leadership that, with hospitality, promotes a just society by being attentive to the suffering of socially vulnerable populations, with respect to their dignity, uniqueness, and equality. This study involves a literature review and an application of Levinas' theological conceptions to the analysis of historical events. The methodological limitations are acknowledged, as this approach does not explicitly establish Levinas' ethics as directly referring to leadership. However, the intention is to shape or illuminate the concept of just leadership in the light of Levinas' arguments.

Levinas' Ethics of the Otherness

Responsibility as a sensible response to the call of the Other

Levinas established a view on ethics based on the encounter and relationship with the Other, which is articulated through his major publications. According to Levinas, this relationship is neither

1. Considering that the Saemaul Undong was led by Chung-hee Park, the term 'Park' in this article exclusively refers to Chung-hee Park.

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founded on the 'being' of the ego nor it is chosen or thought by the ego (Levinas 1981). Beyond essence, the relationship rather precedes one's being as *a priori*. In other words, the Other affects us 'despite ourselves' (Levinas 1981). This marks the non-ontological nature of Levinas' ethics that diverged from the Western philosophical tradition, where metaphysics has focused on the ontological relationship. Levinas critiqued the latter as a realm of intentionality and consciousness in which all objects are reduced to a thing that can be cognised and grasped. Levinas contended that the ontology-focused sphere neglects transcendence where objects exist beyond comprehension and where 'the Other' is not reduced to 'the Same', but instead stands beyond the grasp of 'the Same' (Levinas 1989). Breaking from the metaphysics of ontology, Levinas emphasised *transcendence*: human beings' ability to move away from preoccupation with themselves and resist 'totalisation' that limits thoughts and exteriority. The way the Other presents himself or herself, surpassing the self's perception of the Other, is an essential element of a relationship between 'I' and 'the Other'. It is a relationship that involves a face-to-face encounter between the two singularities, ensuring their particularity or 'subjectivity' (Levinas 1969). In other words, the actual discourse that occurs between them preserves their distinctiveness and provides uniqueness and signification to both of them (Levinas 1969).

Levinas specifically articulated that in the face of the Other, the 'ego' becomes no longer committed to self-preservation but is called by the Other to have an ethical responsibility for the Other (Levinas 1981). This is where the relationship with the Other possesses asymmetry. It does not entail reciprocity that connects to a contractual perspective. It is far from fulfilling self-interest or rights. It is also distinct from benevolence or altruism. Rather, the relationship supposes an unconditional 'obsession' with the Other that does not originate from the subject's consciousness but starts with the call of the Other (Levinas 1969). The encounter with the Other gives rise to an individual's unconstrained acts of responsibility that happen on a precognitive level – prior to will and intention and beyond mere instinct. Such responses are enabled because of the body's primordial reaction to the suffering undergone by the Other (Levinas 1969).

The infinite nature of the responsibility for the Other

For Levinas, the responsibility for the Other involves infinitude, in line with its asymmetrical and unconditional nature, as he stated: 'At no time can one say: I have done all my duty. Except the hypocrite' (Levinas 1985). Responsibility is rather extreme – the more the ego responds to the Other, the more he or she is responsible. The ego is responsible even for the Other's responsibilities. Levinas often quoted Alyosha Karamazov, who insisted, 'Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and each one, and I more than others' (Levinas 1978). It is also important to know whether the Other equally responds infinitely to the ego, the answer is

negative, as the relationship is radically asymmetric. Again, the ego takes responsibility without expecting reciprocity (Levinas 1969).

The infinite nature of responsibility also applies to the scope of the Other. As a way to illustrate the infinite range of 'otherness', Levinas distinguished between *sociality* and *society*. In modern social philosophy, society is generally considered to be where all humans stand as equal autonomous individuals with equal rights. It is where those individuals take on their functions or roles – nevertheless, without understanding the particular contexts of their social formations (Levinas 1893). Distinct from society, sociality involves encounters with the Other 'in his or her strangeness', where the social relation is neither reduced to one's thoughts, feelings, or memories, nor to culture, ethnicity, race, or social status. In addition, in sociality, social relations are not diluted to mere social contracts (Levinas 1893). After all, Levinas argued that a person cannot be reduced simply to a member of society. Rather, the Other refers to those not integrated into social adequacy or norms (Levinas 1969). To this end, Levinas' idea of taking infinite responsibility for the Other supposes individual persons' unconditional and concrete service for those distant from them not only physically but also in terms of social background.

'Comparison of Incomparables': The issue of justice

Despite its seemingly ideal nature, the asymmetric relationship with the Other is challenged by the entrance of a third party – that is, another Other for the subject, which also means an Other for the Other – that Levinas described as 'other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply their fellow' (Levinas 1969). All the 'others' exist in the face of the Other. With the introduction of the third, the infinite and timeless responsibility that the subject has towards the Other becomes limited. The ego is no longer fully committed to the Other, as it is also responsible for serving the third (Levinas 1969). The intertwined relationships imply that each subject is in multiple relationships with the 'human totality' (Levinas 1987).

The presence of the third gives the subject the possibility of choice, along with a dilemma of measuring and comparing the different responsibilities, discerning which party is needier (Levinas 1981). To this end, the appearance of the third party necessitates the pursuit of justice. Specifically, it is the stage of 'love' transforming into the stage of justice, where the infinite embrace of the Other is interrupted as a society is established with the entrance of the third (Burggraeve 2002). It is where the different others are compared and judged – and the service or responsibility is calculated and divided. As Levinas stated, 'Justice is needed, that is to say, comparison, contemporaneity, reunion, order, thematization' (Levinas 1981).

This account of the third party presents the question of how responsibility – which is supposed to be unconditional, called *love* by Levinas – and justice can possibly exist together. If justice interrupts love, aren't they in mutual contradiction? How can justice be managed with the fundamental command of love? In other words, how can ethics be put into practice? Regarding this, Levinas stressed that love and justice are neither separate nor incompatible notions, but justice comes from love (Levinas 1998). Importantly enough, the arrival of the third and the consequent promotion of justice does not invalidate one's responsibility for the Other. Levinas stressed that each subject should not lose sight of the uniqueness of the Other. Each of the others stays in his or her uniqueness and dignity – Levinas called the measuring process the 'comparison of incomparables' (Levinas 1981). It was an important paragraph!

Furthermore, justice does not indicate insufficiency or debasement of responsibility. Rather, responsibility stays infinite; however, the substantial service or responses provided to the Other become limited. In this sense, justice can become a cure to the 'blindness' of the infinite service by taking the third – also a neighbour – into consideration (Faldetta 2018). This relationship reveals that justice embodies responsibility in the actual world (Faldetta 2018).

Theological implications of Levinas' ethics

Although Levinas presented his ideas without theological drives and overtone, his philosophy and ethics certainly revealed significant theological implications, particularly for hospitality.

The mandate of unconditional hospitality based on the essence of the self resonates with the theological understanding of hospitality grounded in the universal grace of God. The grace manifested in the Scripture is all-embracing without making a distinction between who is deserving and not, and it calls everyone to join God's act of hospitality (Faldetta 2018). All humans are created in the image of God and are therefore 'designed to exist as God exists' (Zizioulas 1985). In other words, all humans are to exist in one community with interdependence, preserving each one's distinctiveness. They are to make space for the Other with brotherly love and to reflect and participate in the 'ultimate and genuine form of human life' in relationships with others and the self (Zizioulas 1985). The ethic of hospitality is further developed by the incarnational Christology depicted through Christ's healing ministry, death, and resurrection. Christ modelled a moral life and redeemed humanity through crucifixion and resurrection. Grounded in the resurrection that conquered death, Christ invited those who have been forgiven to live out 'a new ethic of peace and hospitality', with compassion and solidarity, acknowledging the weakness and vulnerability inherent in human suffering (Shepherd 2009). In particular, Christ defended the socially powerless by condemning violence, materialism, social discrimination, and power imbalance, and he summoned

God's people to participate in justice through healing, respect of dignity, social equality, and freedom (Marshall 2005). The understanding of personhood and the urge to practise radical and unconditional hospitality throughout the Scripture provide a fundamental foundation and justification for Levinas' idea of the self and the mandate to embody infinite responsibility for the Other.

Examining Saemaul Undong: Merits and weaknesses

Saemaul Undong: Initiatives, process, and outcomes

Saemaul Undong was a government-initiated and community-driven movement that occurred from 1971 to 1979. President Chung-Hee Park's government initiated it to ameliorate the economic imbalance between the urban and rural areas of South Korea. South Korea accomplished rapid economic development in the early 1970s with the government's use of industrial policies and export-focused trade regulations. Nevertheless, the Park regime employed a selective strategy that emphasised the implementation of urban policies and neglected the rural regions, with little focus on programmes to promote agricultural innovation (Kim 1985).

The overall movement was promoted with so-called 'top-down mobilization' and 'bottom-up participation' (Baek, Kim & Lee 2012). The government started a national level of cement distribution to villages as an encouragement to carry out their own community projects. This turned out to be unexpectedly successful, which motivated the government to establish a more organised support system for villagers (Lee 1984). This top-down mobilisation enabled villagers to be equipped with various agricultural skills and, over time, to participate in the movement voluntarily. As a group, the rural inhabitants competed with other villages to obtain selective incentives from the government, which united individual residents within villages and raised performance efficiencies (Baek et al. 2012).

With this broad framework, the movement's focus at first was to improve rural living conditions and infrastructure. The government adopted new agricultural technologies, encouraged the use of chemical substances and fertilisers, and promoted crop diversity in agriculture. Moreover, machinery was introduced with the enlargement of roads, and the villagers could receive up-to-date information because of extended telephone lines and electricity (Park 2009).

Limitations of Saemaul Undong

The outcomes resulting from the process and strategies of Saemaul Undong reveal several significant socioeconomic contributions to the rural regions. The improved infrastructure led to an increase in productivity and,

consequently to an increased income generation for rural populations. New technologies and fertilisers enabled them to live and work in a healthier and more convenient environment. This not only increased agricultural productivity but also provided the villagers with opportunities to engage in new types of work and have better access to the markets and resources that were significant for their activities (Park 2009). Such advancements brought about positive mindset changes for rural people. By engaging in various new agricultural and social activities, the rural inhabitants could have 'learning-by-doing opportunities' and cultivate competency to take charge of different projects (Park 2009). The entire process empowered them to gain confidence and increased their self-reliance in work management, also developing a spirit of cooperation (Park 2009).

Increased burden and indebtedness among rural populations

Despite the economic development of rural areas, Saemaul Undong imposed a growing burden as the movement proceeded. When the movement was focused on infrastructure development in rural regions, the residents participated in activities and projects by providing their labour. However, as the emphasis changed to income generation, the movement's leaders demanded that the villagers contribute through cash donations rather than labour. Consequently, a number of participants – farmers, in particular – became indebted to a significant degree (Baek et al. 2012). The average household debt of the rural area increased tenfold from \$1300.00 in 1969 to \$17300.00 in 1975. This was a substantial amount of debt, considering that the average household income rose ninefold during the same period. Furthermore, the indebtedness rate skyrocketed another tenfold from 1975 to 1985, surpassing the farmers' income fivefold up to fifteenfold (KOSIS 2008). The amount of debt, far exceeding the income over time, indicates that economic development was accomplished 'at the cost of increasing debt' and, therefore, caused the suffering of the rural populations (Baek et al. 2012).

Heightened income disparity between urban and rural areas

During Saemaul Undong, the central government adopted a dual price system in agriculture, in which the government purchased daily food, such as grains, from farmers at high costs and resold it to villagers at cheaper costs. This policy raised rural people's incomes (Baek et al. 2012). However, the dual price system was withdrawn in the mid-1970s when inflation and an economic recession swept through South Korea. The government shifted its policy to paying low for crops as a way to preserve the low price for agricultural products (Park & Han 1999). Along with the policy change, the government began importing crops from foreign countries at a lower price, contributing to a decrease in rural income. Consequently, the rural economy regressed, and the urban income gap became enlarged again concerning both nominal and real income (Park & Han 1999). The villagers' experience of indebtedness, unaffordable

infrastructure, and maladaptation in the agricultural market led many of them to migrate to urban regions in the late 1970s (Park 2009).

Exclusion of the rural populations in absolute poverty

Another consequence of indebtedness and economic disparity was the further marginalisation and exclusion of poor populations in rural areas. Inequality between those who earned decent amounts and those who lived in absolute poverty worsened during Saemaul Undong, when poorer people had enormous debts and burdens for donations. When they had to participate through labour donations because of their lack of sufficient cash, they had more burdens than others, as they were engaging in wage work as a means of living. Statistics indicate that 15% to 30% of the rural population consisted of the impoverished, whose economic conditions did not improve from Saemaul Undong. They could not benefit from the movement with a lack of land for farming and insufficient income to adopt newly developed technology (Brandt 1981).

Coercive top-down nature

The next significant downside of the movement was its fundamentally top-down nature, which was preceded by and further intensified President Park's authoritarian regime. It continued South Korea's national development path, with Park's efforts to strengthen national power through rapid industrial improvements from the early 1960s and seek validation of this rule (Reed 2010). Advocates have argued that the guidance of powerful and heavy leadership, even coercion, was necessary to motivate villagers to participate and utilise resources (Park 2009). Nevertheless, such a defence has been criticised because governmental direction and assistance are plausible with a democratic system (Park 2009).

Under the ambitious and strictly authoritarian regime, the attitudinal changes remained limited. Although empowered with enhanced self-sufficiency, they could take part only in projects that were directly related to Saemaul Undong, rather than expanding their work to political activities (Park 2009). Moreover, the mindset changes were accompanied by abuse from Park's regime. President Park exploited the rural participants' faithfulness by pressuring them to support the regime. The flip side of their heightened confidence and positive view of themselves was that the villagers became the victims of the government's modernisation policy for rural regions as a means to solidify its rule (Moon 2010).

Despite its negative implications, Saemaul Undong's top-down nature has been rarely mentioned and even purposefully left out in discourse on the movement, unlike South Korea's notable economic development. Underlying this was South Korea's ambition to become a distinguished participant in global politics by making Saemaul Undong universally applicable (Douglas 2013). The Park

administration, with an intention to omit the coercive aspect and claim its broad applicability, claimed that:

Not only was every level of government involved in promoting SMU [*the movement*], an entire parallel bureaucracy was created to ensure that plans made at the national level were communicated from the President down to the local level. (Reed 2010:7)

Other national and international discourses on Saemaul Undong that the regime engaged in also tended to ignore or leave out the Yushin Constitution. This constitution was amended in 1972 by the Park administration to prolong its power, and thus it contained codes on the President's dictatorship. This fact reveals that Saemaul Undong was 'a nationwide political mobilization campaign' plotted to check the indignation of urban populations against Park's rural voters, who had constituted much of his support (Park 2009).

The contributions and shortcomings of Saemaul Undong indicate its inability to be adopted for the improvement plans of less developed countries, where society is less urbanised and society members have more desperate socioeconomic needs compared to developed countries. For the application, a practical amendment of the limitations must be made while the strengths evolve and are maintained.

Problematizing Saemaul Undong through Levinas' ethics of the other

Levinas' account of the constitution of the self, one's relationship with and infinite responsibility for the Other, and the implications for justice signifies the problems of Saemaul Undong and the aspects to be rectified for it to be applied to broader contexts.

Most essentially, the constitution of an ego and the nature of the relationship between the self and the Other can be used to critique the Park regime's intention to use Saemaul Undong to raise itself rather than promote the fundamental development of rural areas. According to Levinas, the encounter of the ego and the Other occurs when the Other cannot be comprehended with the ego's cognition, labelling, or evaluation but stands in uniqueness or 'transcendence' – beyond the understanding of the Same. In addition, it is the ego's responsibility to commit to the Other rather than committing to himself or herself. In the case of Saemaul Undong, as the Park administration initiated and proceeded by mobilising the public, the rural populations ended up being used as instruments in the regime's long-term rule. Individual rural people were grasped as a group of entities that could achieve the regime's goal. Levinas' perspective on how an individual should be treated in a relationship – the significance of appreciating the unique value of the Other – problematises the relationship that the Park regime pursued with rural people. Ignoring the distinctiveness of the villagers came not only from an ontological understanding but also from a selfish ambition that focused on preserving the self and was not concerned with the possible negative impact that operating from such an understanding could cause.

To this end, the relationship is more symmetrical than asymmetrical. The Park administration's treatment of rural populations turned out to be far from taking unlimited responsibility but was calculated and self-biased. Considering the worsened financial and emotional conditions that rural people eventually faced, the government should have recognised its responsibility to grasp the participants' challenges and needs and provide necessary support. Focusing on the propagation of the regime's governance competency with the visible positive outcomes of the movement neglects the government's further 'unlimited' responsibility to provide continual assistance to eradicate the lingering suffering of the rural people.

To be specific, Levinas' account provides insights into how a responsible leader should look and thus can be used to critique the type of leadership that the Park regime showed. Levinas' philosophy implies that the relationship between a leader and community members is intersubjective and 'social-relational', where the two parties stay attentive to and genuinely engage with each other, rather than 'descriptive and instrumental where the former becomes judgmental, authoritarian, forceful' (Jones 2014). At the centre of the leadership are listening and responding to the members and learning from them with humbleness. In other words, leadership entails the process of 'de-centering the Self in order to experience the needs of Others truly' (Jones 2014). On the contrary, President Park exercised leadership based on a hierarchy and coercion where a leader is placed at the top of the structure and the community members are positioned as passive followers who are submitted to the leader. A fundamental shift in the authoritarian leadership is a necessary prerequisite not only for developing countries' future improvement plans but also for any society to promote socioeconomic and political growth as well as social justice.

Future directions for a broader application

Consideration of particular suffering of the powerless

Although Saemaul Undong would not be an appropriate model for every developing country, significant lessons can be drawn for any developing countries' development plans. It can provide insight into the kind of amendments that should be made to the movement for a broader application. Most fundamentally, and to reiterate, there should be a shift in the way the movement's leaders treat its participants. The villagers and others who may be affected by the movement should be viewed as neighbours who need care rather than instruments to accomplish a business goal. Their unique backgrounds and experiences – their 'otherness' – are to be acknowledged and appreciated. More concretely, leadership should be more attentive to the villagers' particular sufferings, such as their lack of cash, consequent financial burden, indebtedness, and absolute poverty that may prevent them from accessing enhanced infrastructure, and offer programmes and assistance adjusted to their specific needs. In addition, the inauguration of any project would need to be advanced by the voluntary participation of the residents. To

become responsible leaders, the regime should form a social structure that treats individuals as autonomous beings whose equality needs to be respected so that the vulnerable are no longer marginalised and can become active social participants.

Just assessment and distribution

In the process of supporting socially vulnerable populations, the problem of justice arises. There are multiple villagers in any rural region, so there are multiple groups with different incomes and social statuses who need varying governmental assistance. As the provision of limitless service to everyone becomes impossible, the presence of effective and hospitable third parties can be established when leadership conducts a considerate comparison and measurement of each party's situation, desires, and needs. Such an assessment would have to lead to just distribution through establishing, revising, and implementing concrete laws and policies. In grasping each party's needs and ways to promote their active and effective participation, local institutions can play an essential role as mediators that interact intimately with the participants and deliver timely assessments to the government. The leaders should endeavour to create small and large communities, from faith communities to social organisations, which will help engage the villagers up close – enabling 'real encounters' with others that prompt proper responses.

Servant leadership

The qualities of such empowering leadership reflect hospitality that leads to justice – manifested through Christ in the Scripture, providing insight into future directions. Jesus' ministry took a sociopolitical orientation, as he condemned socially privileged people's misuse of power and exclusion of the socially oppressed. As demonstrated in the synoptic gospels, Jesus practised radical hospitality by prioritising the needs of the vulnerable, such as the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, women, and children; showing solidarity with them; and forming an embracing community that respected their equality and dignity. Jesus' leadership was 'upside down' and servant leadership, rather than authoritarian and exploitative, sought to promote a more just society (Marshall 2005). This is the type of leadership that leaders of the development movement are to incorporate – giving preference to the underprivileged over their selfish ambitions – so that the improvement plans meet the participants' actual wants and needs rather than imposing additional or unexpected burdens on them. In planning and leading a movement, the will for social change must be imperative for movement leaders.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to critique Saemaul Undong through the lens of Levinas' philosophy regarding relationship and responsibility. It has suggested the features of hospitable and responsible leadership to redress its limitations. Although the contributions of Saemaul Undong should be acknowledged and further developed, the ways in

which the authoritarian approach ended up imposing additional and unexpected burdens on the villagers without assessing their unique challenges should be recognised. They should be modified, particularly for the movement to be applied to developing countries where society members are suffering from absolute poverty and a lack of social participation. Indeed, the nonreciprocal relationship argued by Levinas would be extraordinarily difficult to embody in the real world, where the principle of exchange, with cost-benefit analyses and comparisons of alternatives, becomes the basis of most relationships. Likewise, chasing self-interest and power has been not only pervasive but taken for granted in the realm of politics. Nevertheless, Levinas' account leads us to consider the appropriate role of leadership in developing a society to improve the living conditions of powerless populations. For cultures embedded with individualism and instrumentality, movements led by responsible leadership that strive to practise the radical form of hospitality will contribute to pursuing justice with the continual transformation of an inequitable social structure.

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Authors' contributions

I.S.Y. provided philosophical and theological perspectives. Y-C.Y. contributed to analysing and critiquing the nature of Saemaul Undong.

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