

Africa looks to learn from east Asia's development experiences

From Kenya to Ethiopia, policymakers are looking east in the search for an adaptable development blueprint

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The idea that countries might want to learn from each other's broad development experiences strikes a lot of people as problematic - or even quite odd. It certainly goes against much of the current international development agenda. For all their talk of "best practices", donors are keen to distance themselves from the "one-size-fits-all" approach they have been accused of adopting in the past, preferring instead to emphasise locality-specific solutions.

But how else to explain the results of the research I carried out in Ethiopia and Kenya last year? Despite the vast historical differences between the two countries, leaders in both were remarkably eager to imitate other nations they saw as successful. Moreover, both groups looked to one region in particular: east Asia.

"In my head, I've got practically everything mapped out - if you give me 10 years, I will give you South Korea," proclaimed one Kenyan technocrat.

"We are 20 years behind China," said an Ethiopian bureaucrat, "and we're trying to do what they did to get where they are."

These feelings are not just held privately, but make their way into policy and practice. Both Kenya's ambitious vision 2030 long-term development plan and Ethiopia's growth and transformation plan (pdf) draw heavily on similar concepts in Malaysia, Singapore and elsewhere in the region. All four foreign advisers on Kenya's key national planning body originate from east Asia, and pamphlets used to train cadres in Ethiopia's ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, use Taiwan, South Korea and China as examples of agricultural development and state intervention. Most senior decision makers I spoke to had visited the region several times on dedicated study trips, and such visits grow in number every year.

Asia (and especially China's) new and much-heralded economic ties with Africa may certainly have something to do with this, but not as much as one might expect. If economic dependency were all that mattered, the EU - still the biggest trading partner of, and donor to, Ethiopia and Kenya - would surely rank first as the model to follow. Instead, many Africans view east Asia's development experiences as more replicable, in the medium term, than those of the west, which seem slow, remote and academic by comparison. Policymakers have seen, in their own lifetimes, how countries such as China and Singapore were able to "come of age" in a hostile international environment. So why shouldn't they, too, be able to turn things around?

The lessons these governments draw from such models vary, but many hark back to principles that have become decidedly unpopular among mainstream western civil society and donors. Kenya and Ethiopia look at east Asia, and see the need for a strong and unifying national leadership that can transform and unite traditional communities into a new nation of "modern" citizens. This leadership is responsible for using the country's resources to build large and ambitious infrastructure projects, such as Ethiopia's controversial Gibe III dam. It oversees but does not control the economy, intervening directly where necessary to create globally competitive industries and sectors. It relies on advanced technology and double-digit economic growth to solve most of the country's problems.

So important is this economic growth, in fact, that democracy is hardly possible without it; countries develop in stages, they point out, and cannot be expected to become democratic overnight. All of these lessons are a far cry from both the market-led approach of the Washington consensus, and from the participatory, flexible and community-led route advocated by its critics.

Of course, Ethiopian and Kenyan leaders do not claim to use east Asia as an exact blueprint for development. There is much talk of adapting foreign models to local social, historical and cultural realities. Nor do the two countries draw identical lessons: Kenya's history of capitalism means that it looks to economically liberal countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, while Ethiopia's communist past makes it more comfortable with countries that have a history of strong state intervention, such as China and South Korea. Many other factors will continue to influence development in Africa - not least how successfully these lessons are actually adapted and applied.

However, the fact that the east Asian model is so attractive to many African countries is bound to have profound implications for development practitioners. Western aid is not the only game in town anymore, and the global development agenda is no more immune from the influence of a rising Asia than the global economic system has turned out to be. Developing countries can now choose between an ever-growing variety of donors, trading partners, investors and development strategies. Whether or not we agree with the models they pick - or even with the idea of a development "model" at all - we would do well to listen to and engage with these views. There'll be no point in trying only to reform and improve western aid if the real debate is happening somewhere else.

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