



# Perceptions of Korean NGOs for education and educational development projects



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores features of the government-funded educational development cooperation projects run by the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea)'s non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We analyzed national and international ODA statistics, along with data from NGO worker interviews. The results show that these projects use a children-centered integrated community development approach and tend to be selected to produce short-term, tangible results. They emphasized the field much more than international agendas or national policies, perceiving a gap between these during implementation. Based on this finding, we suggest that global and local development activities could interact and influence each other, creating a balance.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore features of the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea)'s non-governmental organizations (NGOs)' educational development cooperation projects, which are funded by Korean government agencies. More specifically, it will determine how Korean NGOs recognize *education*, define *education projects*, and reflect the international educational development agenda or national Official Development Assistance (ODA) policies in their educational development projects.

In recent years, Korea, as a new donor country, has become a significant contributor to international development. Since Korea joined the OECD/DAC in 2011, the Korean government has increased the ODA budget and focused on education as one of its main support areas. Along with various actors, Korean NGOs have also played an increasingly critical role in international development and cooperation. Korean NGOs have been actively participating in development and cooperation activities since the early 1990s. Currently, there are nearly 200 Korean NGOs that participate in international development activities, and the number of projects and the size of their budgets are rapidly increasing. Regarding their budget, Korean NGOs provided 288 million US dollars in 2011 (Han, 2014). This volume is

equivalent to 50% of Korea's total ODA grants in 2011. However, there is little information on what, how and why they are conducting educational development cooperation projects and reflect the international agendas. Furthermore, research and study of Korean NGOs' activities that focus on the field of education are limited, if existent at all.

Using national and international statistics, this paper illustrates a recent trend of Korean NGOs working in development cooperation activities, in particular, within education. In addition to statistical data analysis, we have conducted in-depth interviews with eleven NGO workers who were in charge of educational development cooperation projects funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in order to gain a deeper understanding of Korean NGOs' perception of educational development projects and any subsequent linkages between their projects and the international agendas/national policies. In doing so, our research fills an existing gap of knowledge regarding Korean NGOs and their work in educational development cooperation.

## 2. Literature review and relevant background

### 2.1. Trends and issues in educational development and cooperation

The history of international development, including educational development and cooperation, is not very long. In fact, international development in governance, healthcare, education, poverty reduction, and other areas has only really existed since the

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close of the Second World War (Allen and Thomas, 2000). Education has been a key component of the international development agenda (Yoon et al., 2013). Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed the right to education as a common standard of achievement for all people, and the importance of education was shared by the international society (Choi et al., 2013). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that everyone has the right to education, and compulsory primary education provision, secondary education promotion, and higher education expansion were recommended (UN, 1948). Additionally, it was specified in Article 26 that education shall be directed toward the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedom. Furthermore, the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Science, and Cultural Organizations) Constitution (1945) expressed the belief of its founders in full and equal educational opportunities for all (UNESCO, 1945). Since this time, much effort has been made to improve the quality of all human life, particularly in less developed countries, through financial and technical assistance.

Education plays an important role, not only in human development, but also in politics, economics, and cultural development. Education contributes to several areas related to national development, such as human resource development, technical innovation, and socioeconomic growth (World Bank, 1993). This has been supported by human capital theorists, who viewed education as a kind of investment and were trying to measure the benefits of education (Becker, 1962). According to the human capital theory, economic growth is influenced by both corporeal capital and human capital. Human capital means acquired knowledge, skills, and information through education, training, and welfare that enhance workers' productivity. That is, knowledge, skills, and training acquired through education improve workers' productivity, and thereby increase both individual and national incomes. Education is considered a productive investment for the accumulation of human capital (Agbo, 2003). Research by Hanushek and Woßmann (2007) showed that economic growth was increased 0.58% by expanding the period of education by one year. From 1962 to 1980, the human capital theory provided justification for large-scale public investment in education (Heyneman, 2003).

International organizations, such as the UNESCO and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund), as well as development banks, have played a pivotal role in educational development and cooperation. Despite the international society's efforts to improve access to education, the reality until 1990 was that more than 100 million children had no access to primary schooling (UNESCO, 2000). In 1990, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), and the World Bank coordinated the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) in Jomtien, Thailand to adopt a World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), which reaffirmed the notion of education as a fundamental human right and urged countries to intensify efforts to make primary education accessible to all children and to reduce illiteracy by the year 2000 (Choi et al., 2013). However, the EFA targets set in Jomtien were not achieved by the year 2000.

In order to review and discuss the progress of the EFA since 1990, more than 1000 participants convened at the World Education Forum (WEF) in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 (UNESCO, 2003). They adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, which reaffirmed their commitment to education as a fundamental right and called for the expansion of education opportunity by 2015 by setting six goals (UNESCO, 2000). The Dakar Framework recognizes that achieving the goals of the EFA is the concern not only of governments but also of international organizations, development

banks, and civil society (Choi et al., 2013). In addition, in the same year, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established at the UN Summit and echoed similar goals, Goal 2 (achieving universal primary education) and Goal 3 (promoting gender equality and empowering women), and were also to be achieved by 2015 (Choi et al., 2013).

Looking toward 2015, the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All goals, UNESCO has proposed ensuring "equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030" as a Post-2015 global education agenda. According to UNESCO (UNESCO, 2014, p. 1), education is a fundamental human right and a foundation for human fulfillment, peace, sustainable development, economic growth, decent work, gender equality, and responsible global citizenship. Furthermore, it is a key contributor to the reduction of inequalities and the eradication of poverty by bequeathing the conditions and generating the opportunities for just, inclusive, and sustainable societies. As such, education must be a stand-alone goal in the broader post-2015 development agenda and should be framed by a comprehensive overarching goal, with measurable targets and related indicators. In addition, education must be integrated into other development goals in order to highlight their mutual interdependence and catalyze more synergistic action across sectors. In the recent international discussion concerning the post-2015 agenda, including Post-EFA, Post-MDGs, SDGs, and others, educational development and cooperation are emphasized with both aspects of securing basic human rights and supporting the education sector, which plays a key role in implementing international agendas, such as poverty reduction and socioeconomic development (Yoon et al., 2013).

## 2.2. The roles of NGOs in international development

NGOs have played an active role in international development in recent years (Paul and Israel, 1991; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Ulleberg, 2009). In the 1980s, donor organizations began to formally recognize NGOs as development actors and sought to pay attention to them in donor programming (Sohn and Yoo, 2008). As the number and size of NGOs have grown significantly, NGOs have become common actors in development (Paul and Israel, 1991). Accordingly, there has been attention paid to understanding the role of NGOs in development and international assistance. NGOs vary significantly in their structure and in the nature of their operations (Lewis, 2001). While there are a wide range of organizations that are defined as NGOs, given the purpose of this research, NGOs in this paper are confined to development NGOs that are "committed to working toward economic, social or political development in developing countries" (Ulleberg, 2009, p. 12).

NGOs have traditionally been perceived as taking on the role of "gap-filling" in development (Ulleberg, 2009, p. 8). In other words, NGOs have often filled demands that the donor agencies, international organizations, or governments do not or cannot fully address. For example, NGOs may be better equipped to implement projects in remote areas that donor agencies or international organizations find hard to access. This perspective is based on the public good theory, which explains that, "NGOs exist to satisfy the residual unsatisfied demand for public goods in society" (Paul and Israel, 1991, p. 3). Ulleberg (2009) also explains that NGOs' characteristics, such as small scales, flexibility, and a local-based approach, contribute to filling the gaps in the role of government.

Several researchers argue that NGOs could provide alternative development approaches (Paul and Israel, 1991; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Ulleberg, 2009). Lewis and Kanji (2009) explained that bureaucratic and ineffective government-to-government, project-based aid may hinder efforts to combat poverty, and that NGOs

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