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North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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5 DEVELOPMENT SOUTH–SOUTH COOPERATION

A largely unexplored area of diplomatic engagements between African states and North Korea is development aid. Numerous African leaders had already marvelled at the wonders of a socialist paradise in Pyongyang, while the proliferation of Juche Study Centres allowed the population at home to learn about North Korean ideology. Development aid was the logical next step in putting these ideas into practice, and, as a result, North Korean technical advisors were sent to newly independent African states to pave the way for postcolonial development. This chapter considers the questions of why African states were sympathetic to North Korean ideas about development, what both parties gained from cooperation, and how aid projects evolved in practice.⁴²⁰

During the Cold War, the newly elected leaders of Africa looked east for ideological inspiration. Walter Rodney hailed North Korea as a development model for Africa in the postscript of his seminal work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.⁴²¹ North Korea was equally praised in an edition of the *Third World Forum*, which argued that its rapid development presented ‘major lessons’ for African countries such as Tanzania.⁴²²

There were two main reasons for Africa’s interest in North Korean development aid: its miraculous post-war reconstruction and its emphasis on independence from external actors, especially from major powers. After the devastating Korean War of the 1950s, North Korea recovered much faster than its southern rival.⁴²³ Already in 1965, the Cambridge economist Joan Robinson admired North Korea’s economic growth by commenting that ‘all the economic miracles of the post-war world are put in the shade by these achievements’.⁴²⁴

Moreover, North Korea’s independent image was attractive to countries that were hostile to foreign investment.⁴²⁵ Although the transfer of North Korean expertise to Africa was part of a larger trend of socialist aid, it would be a mistake to view the DPRK as a Soviet or Chinese surrogate.⁴²⁶ The Sino-Soviet split presented an opportunity for North Korea to chart its own foreign policy course.⁴²⁷ A British diplomat keenly observed that, at the time, ‘the North Koreans have pitched their appeal, in the eyes of recipients of their aid, very much as a small, unthreatening country, seeking and promoting independence of great power influence’.⁴²⁸

Development Aid as Foreign Policy

For North Korea, development aid was a central part of its foreign policy in Africa, especially with regards to agriculture. In the twentieth century, most African countries were predominantly rural and agriculture – especially subsistence farming – was vital for the survival of millions of people. The political economist Lynn Krieger Mytelka argues that ‘the limited scope and scale of African industrialisation was widely regarded as an opportunity’ for the nationalisation and modernisation of industries in newly independent states.⁴²⁹ In other words, the field of agriculture presented an ideal opportunity for cooperation between African states and the DPRK.

⁴²⁰ Parts of this chapter are based on Van der Hoog 2022d.

⁴²¹ Rodney 1972, p. 285. I want to thank Moe Taylor for bringing this to my attention.

⁴²² [UNAM] PA3/6/121.

⁴²³ Cumings 1997, p. 423.

⁴²⁴ Robinson 1965.

⁴²⁵ [NAUK] FCO 31/948.

⁴²⁶ For literature on Sino-Soviet rivalry in Africa and other places during the Cold War, see Friedman 2015; Brazinsky 2017.

⁴²⁷ Lankov 2013, p. 19.

⁴²⁸ [NAUK] FCO 21/3213.

⁴²⁹ Mytelka 1989.

North Korea ascribed its own agricultural success in terms of Juche Thought. Juche agriculture was ‘the poster child’ for the successful socialist modernisation of the DPRK. Chong-Ae Yu argues that soon after North Korea was established, the state ‘embarked on a modernisation project that fundamentally transformed its society from agrarian to industrial, with the aim of achieving food self-sufficiency’. The key to this project was the perception of agriculture as a matter of national security. In practice, Juche agriculture consisted of rescaling the land through collectivisation and heavy technological intervention. The use of capital-intensive, mechanised production, the heavy application of agrochemicals, an extensive system of irrigation, and mono-cropping were essential.⁴³⁰

In the 1950s, North Korean agricultural production was, in the words of the historian Balázs Szalontai, ‘very low’ and techniques were ‘quite primitive’. Severe food scarcity led to a crisis in 1955.⁴³¹ In 1978, however, the CIA reported that the North Korean ‘grain production may have grown at a more rapid pace’ than South Korea, due to its advances in agriculture.⁴³² A few years later, in 1984, the DPRK celebrated a record grain production that exceeded the consumption requirements of its population. Its ability to supply the daily caloric requirements to its population was ‘consistently higher’ than that of China.⁴³³

The high point of North Korea’s development aid in Africa was during the 1980s, a period marked by two important conferences in Pyongyang. These meetings – held in 1981 and 1987 – were ideal opportunities for North Korea to market its experience to African states.

In 1981, Kim Il Sung invited several African agriculture ministers to the ‘Symposium of the Non-Aligned and Other Developing Countries on Increasing Food and Agricultural Production’, which can be viewed as the kick-off for the North Korean agricultural campaign on the African continent. Kim treated his African audience to an eloquent speech, titled ‘For the Development of Agriculture in African Countries’, in which he argued that symposia and declarations were not enough – action was necessary. Kim vowed to increase agricultural production in East and West Africa by providing farm machinery, irrigation projects, and experts.⁴³⁴

The North Korean aid crusade was framed as ‘South–South cooperation’, a phrase coined for the ‘building of independent economies based on self-reliance’ that implies the central role of Juche ideology in North Korean development aid. Kim believed that African countries had won political independence, but were yet to gain economic independence. The North Koreans were convinced that South–South cooperation would ultimately lead to the establishment of a New International Economic Order.⁴³⁵ Their African allies offered vocal support. Ultimately, the North Korean strategy aimed to rally support within the Non-Aligned Movement, with the ultimate objective being to diminish South Korea’s standing in the world.⁴³⁶

African enthusiasm for Juche agriculture is also evident in issues of the journal *Study of the Juche Idea*, which contain several submissions from African writers on this subject. A school principal from Madagascar argued that North Korea ‘is giving vital assistance towards solving the food problem in many African countries’. African states were instructed in ‘Juche farming methods created by President Kim Il Sung’, through the secondment of North Korean ‘agricultural scientists, technicians, and irrigation experts’.⁴³⁷ A contributor from Tanzania,

⁴³⁰ Yu 2007.

⁴³¹ Szalontai 2005, p. 63–65.

⁴³² CIA 1978. However, it must be noted that higher production levels did not automatically result in higher living standards. I want to thank Bill Brown for his helpful suggestions on this matter.

⁴³³ Yu 2007.

⁴³⁴ Kim 1990, p. 218–230.

⁴³⁵ Agarwala 2014.

⁴³⁶ [NAUK] FCO 21/2876.

⁴³⁷ [UNAM] PA4/5/421.

who had also joined the 1981 conference in Pyongyang, celebrated ‘the great successes achieved in the agricultural field through the cooperation between Korean and Tanzanian agricultural scientists and experts’. The North Korean–Tanzanian development experiences and techniques were a ‘shining example of south-south cooperation’.⁴³⁸

The orchestrated campaign to woo African allies through agriculture reached its pinnacle in 1987 in Pyongyang with the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference of the NAM on South–South Cooperation, which I already touched upon in Chapter 2. Kim Il Sung’s keynote speech summarised his views on North Korean development aid in Africa. ‘The developing countries must advance agriculture’, said Kim. As non-aligned countries, he believed they should undertake joint ventures for ‘the construction of irrigation works, the improvement of farming methods, research on agricultural science and the production of farm machinery’. The aim should be ‘complete self-sufficiency in food as soon as possible’.⁴³⁹ North Korea considered it ‘a sacred duty to fight for ... the success of South-South cooperation’. Kim proudly announced that ‘we have set up institutes of agricultural science and experimental farms in some African countries’ and promised to ‘expand cooperation with African countries’ in the future.⁴⁴⁰

Kim’s ambitious agenda notwithstanding, North Korea’s dream of leading the developing world in the quest for South–South cooperation would disappear in a few years’ time. The end of the Cold War and North Korea’s subsequent economic crisis resulted in the discontinuation of many North Korean aid projects.⁴⁴¹ Kim Il Sung simply no longer had the money to spend on technical advisors and it was no longer considered a priority by his son, Kim Jong Il.

The pinnacle of North Korean aid in Africa thus came to an end in the 1980s. Approximately twenty African states benefited from North Korean aid, and I suspect this number will even be higher if more research is dedicated to this history.⁴⁴² A careful reading of the archival record reveals a flurry of different projects in Southern Africa alone. In Lesotho, a North Korean team rebuilt the national stadium, ran vegetable farms, and experimented with maize production and irrigation, although frustration arose due to the North Koreans’ language difficulties and their failure to submit reports to the Ministry of Agriculture.⁴⁴³ The Seychelles benefited from the donation of thousands of tons of cement for housing projects, tractors for agricultural development, and the supply of rice for a reduced price.⁴⁴⁴ In Angola, the North Koreans ran an irrigation project and were involved in the production of cotton and the construction of a dam. The Angolans turned down the offer to establish state farms.⁴⁴⁵ Mozambique and North Korea cooperated in the fields of irrigation and agriculture.⁴⁴⁶ During a visit to Zimbabwe in 1981, North Korea promised ‘total assistance’ in the agricultural development of Zimbabwe when a government delegation toured a farm.⁴⁴⁷ The Zambian government asked for North Korea’s help with a rural development programme, which included manpower and cash. A Zambian official commented upon the news by saying that ‘we value our friendship because we share common ideals’. In turn, a North Korean official praised the

⁴³⁸ [UNAM] PA4/5/421.

⁴³⁹ [DARK] 25182.

⁴⁴⁰ Kim 1987, p. 10.

⁴⁴¹ Lankov 2013, p. 75.

⁴⁴² [NAUK] FCO 31/3922.

⁴⁴³ [NAUK] FCO 105/1889; FCO 105/2183.

⁴⁴⁴ [NAUK] FCO 31/2433.

⁴⁴⁵ [WCDA] MOL, XIX-J-1-j 1977, 24; [NAUK] FCO 21/3884.

⁴⁴⁶ [UWC] *Você da Revolução*, July 1978.

⁴⁴⁷ [UNISA] Spotlight on Zimbabwe, 1981. I want thank Brooks Marmon for sharing this file with me.

‘identical views’ of both parties.⁴⁴⁸ Zambia expressed gratitude for North Korean assistance in paddy rice growing.⁴⁴⁹

Two Case Studies of Strategic Hubs

In order to analyse the success and failure of North Korean development aid in Africa, this book presents two detailed case studies of aid projects in Tanzania and Ghana. North Korea invested considerable energy in these places because of their strategic importance. Although Tanzania is located in East Africa and Ghana is located in West Africa, both states were crucial for the liberation of Southern Africa. As mentioned before, Tanzania hosted the OAU Liberation Committee while Ghana was home to the Bureau of African Affairs – two organisations that provided financial assistance and military training to Southern African liberation movements.⁴⁵⁰ Ghana and Tanzania thus were strategic hubs, not just in a practical sense, but also in ideological terms: Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah were influential thinkers on African decolonisation.

As the names already reveal, the establishment of a Chollima Agricultural Science Institute in Tanzania and the Ghana Juche Farm were highly symbolic places of cooperation that were meant to advertise the benefits of North Korean-style development. *Ch’öllima* refers to a mythical winged horse that became a symbol of socialist transformation in North Korea, and Juche naturally references Kim’s ideology of self-reliance.

Tanzanian and Ghanaian politicians encountered their North Korean colleagues at multilateral fora where they discussed postcolonial politics. A prime example is AAPSO, which, as Chapter 2 highlights, considered the struggle in Southern Africa to be one of its main priorities and, at the same time, was an avid supporter of the North Korean regime.⁴⁵¹ North Korean delegations attended the AAPSO conferences that were held in Tanzania in 1960 and 1963, and in Ghana in 1965.⁴⁵² Years later, in 1987, African diplomats attended an AAPSO conference in Pyongyang.⁴⁵³

In addition, North Korea invested heavily in fraternal bilateral relations with both states. As a result, large numbers of local elites were exposed to North Korean notions of development. Tanzanian politicians were schooled in the wonders of North Korean ideas through regular invitations to study party organisation in Pyongyang. In the 1970s, North Korea even established a political school in Zanzibar that offered three-month ideological courses.⁴⁵⁴ North Koreans who visited Tanzania received ‘the red carpet treatment’.⁴⁵⁵ The Tanzania–Korea Friendship Society (*‘Chama cha urafiki kati ya Tanzania na Korea’*) organised monthly meetings in the North Korean embassy in Dar es Salaam.⁴⁵⁶ The opening of the Society attracted high-ranking Tanzanian officials, including the speaker of the national assembly, the minister of foreign affairs, and the commissioner of culture.⁴⁵⁷ Ghanaian newspaper editors

⁴⁴⁸ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2420, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 16 KOR N: Lusaka to Department of State, 24 March 1972.

⁴⁴⁹ This probably concerned a rice-production scheme near Mumbwa. [NAUK] FCO 21/4124; FCO 106/850.

⁴⁵⁰ Grilli 2018.

⁴⁵¹ [NAI] PC Regional Cooperation AAPSO. The AAPSO ‘fully supported’ the plans of Kim Il Sung for the reunification of the Korean peninsula and condemned the ‘fascist rule’ of the US government and the ‘puppet clique’ of the South Korean government.

⁴⁵² [DARK] 1448.

⁴⁵³ [DARK] 25146.

⁴⁵⁴ [NAUK] FCO 31/3263; FCO 31/3674; [DARK] 8253.

⁴⁵⁵ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2420, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 16 KOR N: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 22 March 1973.

⁴⁵⁶ [TNA] ACC 622 S/10/16: Ntiro, 30 May 1970 (I wish to thank Yasmina Martin for sharing this file with me); [NAUK] FCO 31/692.

⁴⁵⁷ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2616, POL 19 TAIWAN -- POL 6 TANZAN: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 7 April 1970.

were similarly invited stay in Pyongyang, sometimes for months at a time, in exchange for positive coverage back home.⁴⁵⁸ Ghanaian citizens learned about Korea through the Ghana–DPRK Friendship Society and events such as the ‘month of solidarity with Korean people’.⁴⁵⁹

North Korea used the political capital that resulted from these long-term engagements to propose aid projects in the 1980s. The ensuing programmes were meant to showcase South–South cooperation to the wider world.

In 1967, Nyerere announced the Arusha Declaration and TANU’s Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance. This policy was Tanzania’s philosophy of self-reliant development and one of multiple examples where African postcolonial political ideologies aligned very well with Juche. The seminal declaration stated that ‘agriculture is the basis of development’, and stressed that ‘Tanzanians can live well without depending on help from outside if they use their land properly’.⁴⁶⁰

Agricultural aid from North Korea was thus a logical way to strengthen the ties between both countries. One year after the Arusha Declaration, in 1968, Nyerere visited Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang.⁴⁶¹ In subsequent years, North Korea proposed ambitious plans for irrigated farmlands, promised machinery and technical support, developed plans for brick and tile production, medical training, a national irrigation programme, and offered 700 technical drawings for parks, gardens, and playgrounds.⁴⁶² Tanzania received hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of building material as a gift from North Korea, such as cement, iron bars, and glass sheets.⁴⁶³ As a way to showcase its own development, North Korea organised a trade show in Dar es Salaam. The goods on display featured machine tools, textiles, liquor, one large orange farm tractor, and other products. In his opening speech, the Tanzanian minister for commerce and industry ‘praised North Korea’s industrial progress’ and advocated for closer relations with Pyongyang.⁴⁶⁴

The first North Korean agricultural project in Tanzania was the Chollima Agricultural Science Institute, otherwise known as the Dakawa Rice Irrigation Project. Located 200 kilometres from Dar es Salaam, this 260-million-shilling project comprised 2000 hectares of rice fields and facilities to process paddy cultivation and store 10,000 tonnes of rice.⁴⁶⁵ The project commenced in 1975. While it was funded primarily by the African Development Bank and the Tanzania Development Bank, North Korean experts supported the practical day-to-day execution.⁴⁶⁶ The Tanzanian government paid for the accommodation, international transport, leave, and salaries of the North Korean advisors. However, disagreements between the North Korean team and other labourers resulted in significant delays to the work. The Chollima Agricultural Science Institute was dissolved in 1982.

⁴⁵⁸ [SNU] 17450.

⁴⁵⁹ [DARK] 26593.

⁴⁶⁰ [NAI] PC Tanzania NLM TANU: Arusha Declaration, 1967.

⁴⁶¹ [DAF] 193PO/1-26. I want to thank Eric Burton for sharing this file with me.

⁴⁶² [DARK] 23558; [NAUK] FCO 31/3674.

⁴⁶³ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2616, POL 19 TAIWAN -- POL 6 TANZAN: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 6 November 1973; RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2001, POL COM BLOC N -- POL 2-3 COM BLOC-ZAMBIA: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 25 January 1968.

⁴⁶⁴ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-C, Box# 2263, POL KOR N-AFR -- POL 31-1 KOR N-US: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 5 August 1967.

⁴⁶⁵ [DARK] 23558.

⁴⁶⁶ British diplomatic staff observed that ‘the North Koreans will no doubt continue to gain cheap credit here by providing experts to superintend projects financed from other sources’. [NAUK] FCO 21/1879.

Despite this obvious setback, cooperation between the two nations deepened throughout the 1980s. The Chollima Agricultural Science Institute was, in a way, succeeded by the Agro-Scientific Research Centre, a place that would showcase Juche agriculture in the whole of East and Central Africa.⁴⁶⁷ The construction began in 1982 and took two years. Valued at approximately 2.4 million British pounds, the project was financed and executed by North Korea.⁴⁶⁸

Frequent exchanges between Tanzanian and North Korean delegations resulted in dozens of other projects. Around the time of the problems at the Chollima Institute, another 105 North Korean advisors were dispatched to eight regions in Tanzania. They worked on maize production, vegetable gardens, and mini-hydroelectric power stations. More and more would follow over time.⁴⁶⁹ Some teams stayed in Tanzania for multiple years, for example on a farm in the Iringa region, where North Korean advisors supervised farm work and established a weather forecasting station.⁴⁷⁰ Even President Nyerere's home village became a hotspot for North Korean agricultural experts and town planners, who were naturally attracted to the symbolism of this location.⁴⁷¹ In 1970, the village was toured by a North Korean minister of culture, who was greeted by Nyerere's brother. Wangazi Nyerere asked the minister to convey the villagers' 'warm greetings' to Kim Il Sung.⁴⁷²

While archival evidence suggests that the aid projects were hindered by practical problems, as was the case with the Chollima Institute, the Tanzanian elites continued to publicly praise North Korea's help. In 1973, Prime Minister Rashidi Kawawa celebrated the 'exemplary' work of the Koreans in his country, which he said was an example of 'that spirit of hard work and dedication which has made Korea a strong and prosperous nation'.⁴⁷³ Kawawa also 'reiterated CCM's firm support to efforts by the DPRK to bring about the re-unification of Korea'.⁴⁷⁴ Over the years, the Tanzanian politician had developed close relations with his North Korean counterparts, whom he had visited in Pyongyang as early as 1965.⁴⁷⁵

When Nyerere attended a banquet in Pyongyang in 1985, he took the opportunity to thank the Great Leader in person: 'We greatly appreciate the work which Korean citizens have done, and are doing, to help in our agricultural development'. He continued by saying that the North Koreans 'encourage by example and practical action the development of our self-reliance. I can only say thank you'.⁴⁷⁶ A similar disconnection between practical realities and political objectives can be identified in the Ghanaian case study.

In the early 1980s, North Korea provided technical aid and expertise to develop 13,200 hectares of farmland in Ghana. Three agricultural research stations were established in the vicinity of the capital city of Accra to train Ghanaian farmers. In return, Ghana promised to export farm

⁴⁶⁷ [DARK] 23558.

⁴⁶⁸ [NAUK] FCO 31/3674.

⁴⁶⁹ [NAUK] FCO 21/1879; [NAUK] FCO 31/3674; [DARK] 23558.

⁴⁷⁰ [DARK] 23558.

⁴⁷¹ [NAUK], FCO 31/3674.

⁴⁷² [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2616, POL 19 TAIWAN -- POL 6 TANZAN: Dar es Salaam to Department of State, 7 April 1970.

⁴⁷³ [DARK] 6029; [UDSM] Sunday News, 1 March 1973. I wish to thank Yasmina Martin for sharing this file with me.

⁴⁷⁴ [UDSM] Daily News, 5 December 1988. I wish to thank Yasmina Martin for sharing this file with me.

⁴⁷⁵ [DAF] 193PO/1-26.

⁴⁷⁶ [DARK] 23558.

produce to North Korea as payment.⁴⁷⁷ The flagship Ghanaian-North Korean cooperation was the Ghana Juche Farm.

A North Korean team of agricultural experts developed the Ghana Juche Farm in Akatsi, near the Ghana-Togo border, between 1982–83. The team consisted of a rice specialist, a mechanical engineer, an irrigation engineer, an interpreter, and a group leader. They brought fertiliser, a bulldozer, four ‘Chollima tractors’, a plough, and ambitious plans to revolutionise the Ghanaian agricultural industry.⁴⁷⁸ The fifty-hectare farm was designed to produce rice, corn, and other vegetables. In subsequent years, the farm would be enlarged to about one hundred hectares and the lessons learned would, in time, be applied to other projects across Ghana.⁴⁷⁹ However, poor results led to the decision to move the North Korean team to Aveyime, a rice farm some ninety kilometres from Accra. They arrived there in 1984.⁴⁸⁰

The Aveyime Rice Project was run by the Ghanaian Development Authority. The decision to transfer the North Korean team was not requested by the Ghanaian Development Authority, nor were they informed about the details of the cooperation.⁴⁸¹ Instead, the project was discussed during a visit of a high-level Ghanaian minister to Pyongyang for Kim Il Sung’s birthday.⁴⁸² Despite the Ghanaian Development Authority’s opposition, the Ghanaian government keenly accepted North Korean aid. The administration provided air transportation (including an annual holiday trip to the DPRK), local transportation, accommodation, food, and a living allowance. The South Korean embassy in Accra cynically remarked that costs were ‘bigger than the aid itself, and their purpose is to advertise their propaganda rather than to help’.⁴⁸³

At Aveyime, the North Koreans executed a field survey and repaired an irrigation pump, but their agricultural yields were disappointing. The North Koreans requested twenty hectares to conduct rice-growing trials but were only granted one by the suspicious Ghanaian staff. Despite their heavier use of fertiliser, the yield on this hectare was half the usual average yield of the rest of the farm. It is fair to say that despite the high expectations of the Ghanaian and North Korean governments, the practical results were dismal. The local Ghanaian staff did not want North Korean assistance and contact between the two groups was limited because of the language barrier. Social relations between the two groups ‘were poor, and at times appeared overtly hostile’.⁴⁸⁴ The Korean equipment broke down on the unfamiliar terrain and was difficult to repair because spare parts were unavailable.⁴⁸⁵

It was difficult for the political elites to deny this reality. During a 1986 visit of North Korean Vice Premier Jong Jun Gi (Chŏng Chunki) to the farm, Ghanaian officials explained the need to reappraise the project.⁴⁸⁶ Nevertheless, political will prevailed. Three years later, in 1989, another team of North Koreans – consisting of seven irrigation experts – arrived in Ghana and worked at the Aveyime Rice Project. Again, Ghana paid the accommodation, feeding, and logistical costs of the team, which stayed in the country for fifteen months.⁴⁸⁷

Conclusion: Failure and Success

⁴⁷⁷ [SNU] 17450.

⁴⁷⁸ Bobiash 1992.

⁴⁷⁹ [SNU] 17450.

⁴⁸⁰ Bobiash 1992.

⁴⁸¹ Bobiash 1992.

⁴⁸² The project was further discussed during high-level meetings between the North Korean Foreign Economic Business Department and the Ghanaian State Committee for Economic Cooperation. [SNU] 17450.

⁴⁸³ [SNU] 17450.

⁴⁸⁴ Bobiash 1992.

⁴⁸⁵ Bobiash 1992.

⁴⁸⁶ [DARK] 23558.

⁴⁸⁷ [DARK] 28215.

The examples of Tanzania and Ghana offer a number of observations that are relevant to DPRK development assistance in Africa. North Korea was keen to offer aid and tried to push their expertise on their African allies. Even if the envisaged host countries were initially reluctant to accept help, North Korea persisted and repeated their offers multiple times.⁴⁸⁸ The invitation diplomacy of North Korea often resulted in the signing of large and vague friendship treaties that covered technical assistance and agriculture. Local Juche Study Centres in Africa already laid the groundwork for the ideological underpinnings of North Korean aid.

The ensuing projects were framed as South–South cooperation, but as the stories of the Tanzanian Chollima Institute and the Ghana Juche Farm illustrate, North Korean aid projects were not particularly successful venues for promoting Juche Thought. Perhaps Juche is the reason for these failures – it was, after all, a one-size-fits-all ideology that cared little for local nuances. North Korea saw all African countries as more or less the same: anti-imperialist nations with a desire for self-reliance. In truth, the North Korean experience could not easily be replicated in Africa.

The South–South cooperation between African states and North Korea was characterised by top-down decisions made in Pyongyang, with little consideration for local realities. The Tanzanian and Ghanaian case studies show that language barriers, cultural differences, and other practical problems disrupted genuine cooperation. As a result, exchanges between North Korean advisors and African staff were limited at best.

Yet, despite evidence of practical failure, African countries continued to accept new offers of North Korean aid and even offered to occasionally pay their salaries and other costs. The deployment of North Korean experts across a wide range of projects produced the image of success. In Tanzania, the British embassy reported that North Korea was able to maintain ‘a high profile at little cost’.⁴⁸⁹ In terms of diplomacy, the outsourcing of North Korean experts, the establishment of Juche farms in Africa, and the public praise from African leaders constituted major victories for the North Korean regime.

North Korean development aid must be seen in the light of the ideals of South–South cooperation. Agricultural aid benefited African efforts to transform colonial economies and become self-reliant, and it enhanced North Korea’s efforts to gain diplomatic prestige. Unfortunately, many idealistic projects of the 1980s became obsolete in the following decade, when African countries were hit by structural adjustment programmes and North Korea was plunged into an economic crisis following the end of the Cold War.⁴⁹⁰ This meant that many programmes could no longer be continued and Juche agriculture fell out of fashion.

Nevertheless, one should not disregard the legacy of African–North Korean development aid too hastily. Despite the tumultuous geopolitical shifts that obstructed the realisation of the Juche revolution, agricultural ties continued at a slower pace after the Cold War. In 2022, North Korea sent thirty technicians to Guinea, in West Africa, to support agricultural research at the Kim Il Sung Agricultural Research Centre in Kilissi.⁴⁹¹ This Research Centre was founded in the same year that the Chollima Institute in Tanzania was concluded and that the Ghana Juche Farm was established. It is a clear, albeit barely noticed, sign that joint African–North Korean projects in the field of agriculture continue into the present.

⁴⁸⁸ [SNU] 17450.

⁴⁸⁹ [NAUK] FCO 31/3674.

⁴⁹⁰ Buzo 1991, p. 204–223.

⁴⁹¹ NK News, 19 April 2022 (b).