



# Adapting the South Korean Development Model to Morocco: Opportunities, Constraints and Policy Implications

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**Abstract.** This article presents a literature review of the South Korean and Moroccan economic development models, to assess the relevance and feasibility of adapting South Korean strategies to the Moroccan context. This review examines the core elements of the "Miracle on the Han River," including the role of the developmental state, export-led industrialization, the development of human capital, and the rise of chaebols. It identifies parallels and differences with Morocco's economic trajectory and the ambitions of its New Development Model. The conclusions highlight transferable lessons, while emphasizing the structural and contextual challenges specific to Morocco. The article proposes leads for strategic adaptation, emphasizing governance, inclusive innovation, and human resource management.

**Keywords:** Developmental state, Policy transfer, Institutional capacity, Export-led industrialization, Human capital development, Industrial policy, Morocco.

## 1 Introduction

South Korea's transformation from a low-income agricultural society and war-torn economy in the early 1960s into a globally competitive industrial and technological powerhouse is often referred to as the "Miracle on the Han River." South Korea's experience has attracted considerable interest from both academia and policy circles, particularly among developing countries seeking to accelerate and sustain their growth [1].

Against this backdrop, Morocco has embarked on an ambitious process of economic diversification, industrial modernization, and institutional reform, notably through the launch of its new development model [2]. Despite significant progress in infrastructure, industrial policy, and macroeconomic stability, the Moroccan economy has yet to overcome structural challenges, including high youth unemployment, skills mismatches, regional disparities, and persistent informal work [3].

Although extensive literature examines South Korea's development experience, limited attention has been paid to assessing its applicability to North African

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economies, and Morocco in particular. The present article addresses this gap by exploring the following question: To what extent can key elements of South Korea's development model be adapted to Morocco's institutional and socio-economic context?

To address this, the study is informed by the policy transfer framework, which examines how development strategies are adapted across national contexts. Rather than assuming direct replication, this framework stresses selective adaptation, institutional compatibility, and contextual constraints. Consequently, this article contributes to comparative development studies by identifying transferable principles in lieu of advocating direct replication. It advances the adaptive development paradigm by emphasizing institutional capacity, reform sequencing, and contextual compatibility as central determinants of successful policy transfer.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 The South Korean Economic Model: Key Pillars and Evolution

Known as the "Miracle on the Han River," the South Korean economic model combines substantial strategic investment in human capital, export-oriented industrialization, and robust state intervention [1]. The government played a strong and centralized role during the period of rapid industrialization, leading economic transformation through a meritocratic bureaucracy. While the state exercised direct intervention in the early 1960s, its role gradually evolved toward that of an active facilitator, adapting to increasing market sophistication [4].

**Development State and Industrial Policy.** South Korea's economic reconstruction began under adverse conditions. In the early 1960s, the country was predominantly agricultural, facing food shortages and poverty rates exceeding 40% in the aftermath of the Korean War [5, 6]. Emphasis was placed on domestic production and the rapid accumulation of both physical and human capital.

Guided by five-year economic development plans from 1962 to 1997, the economy transitioned from an agrarian base to an industrial powerhouse. The inaugural plan (1962–1966), grounded in a 1961 reconstruction strategy, targeted 7.2% growth through import-substitution industrialization in sectors such as cement, fertilizers, steel, and oil refining [1, 7]. It surpassed expectations, achieving 8.9% growth and 29% annual export expansion. This early overperformance reinforced state credibility and consolidated the developmental state's authority in coordinating industrial transformation.

Subsequent plans progressively shifted from import substitution to export-oriented industrialization, prioritizing heavy and chemical industries, infrastructure development, and technological upgrading [5]. The sequencing of these plans illustrates a strategy of gradual industrial upgrading, moving from labor-intensive sectors toward capital- and technology-intensive industries.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the authoritarian regime exercised strong control over economic actors, enabling close collaboration between the government and large conglomerates (chaebols) [5]. Government support was conditional upon export performance, creating a reciprocal discipline mechanism that strengthened competitiveness and accelerated industrial deepening [8].

**Human Capital and Innovation.** Commitment to human capital development was a key element of South Korea's success. Considerable investments in education contributed to economic growth by enhancing adaptability to rapid technological change, encouraging entrepreneurship, and improving access to new opportunities [9]. Universal compulsory primary education was achieved within a decade, followed by the rapid expansion of secondary, vocational, and higher education [7].

This accumulation of human capital was achieved through three pillars: general education, vocational education and training, and the promotion of intellectual talent in support of national innovation [9]. Vocational education received strong support, attracting talented children even from disadvantaged backgrounds, opening up new career opportunities for technicians [10]. This not only provided a skilled workforce for manufacturing and heavy industry but also expanded the middle class and helped society value specialized professions [10].

Greater emphasis on human capital created a workforce that was not only highly skilled but also extremely adaptable to market needs, ready to adopt new technologies and attract investments [10].

**Export-Led Growth.** The South Korean model relied on international trade as a catalyst for economic transformation [5]. Export-led industrialization began in 1961, and export growth became a major game changer, driving GDP much more than import substitution from 1963 to 1973 [1]. Following a currency devaluation in 1960, exports accelerated rapidly, with new promotional efforts launched in 1964–1965 [5].

Foreign trade played a central role in encouraging innovation, accelerating resource allocation, facilitating learning from advanced countries, and taking advantage of rapid global market expansion [11]. The international stage acted as a neutral standard to measure the competitiveness of companies benefiting from industrial policy support [11].

This strategy led to a dramatic transformation in the composition of production, which shifted from primary products and natural hair wigs in 1963 to manufactured goods such as textiles, electrical products, iron and steel, and later motor vehicles and telecommunications equipment [5]. The government's ability to adapt its strategies to changing economic conditions and global market dynamics was crucial to the country's rapid growth [5].

**Adaptive governance.** A key feature of South Korea's approach to development was the adaptive and pragmatic transfer of its policies. Korean policymakers avoided rigid adherence to any single economic doctrine [12]. Instead, they demonstrated flexibility, using market mechanisms when they were effective, employing "extraordinary measures" when necessary to achieve national goals and strengthen market functions. This adaptability enabled the country to manage economic shocks and crises, emerging stronger as a result. The blend of cultural influences, such as socio-cultural norms and collective values, and institutional structures, such as the chaebol system, further underscored that Korea's success was not a universal formula, but a tailor-made approach, offering adaptable generalities rather than direct models [12]. This pragmatism allowed policies to be adjusted in line with changing comparative advantages in international markets.

## 2.2 Morocco's Economic Context: Historical Development, Current Landscape, and Reform Efforts

Since its independence, Morocco's economic journey has been a dynamic process marked by significant progress in development, changing economic structures, and ongoing reform efforts. After initially focusing on fundamental sectors and human capital, the country has gradually diversified its economy, embracing modern industries while facing persistent socioeconomic challenges [13].

**Historic Development.** Since independence in 1956, Morocco has pursued diverse economic models for modernization. King Mohammed V initiated early reforms in agriculture, industry, education, and infrastructure [14]. Post-independence liberal policies, starting with 1958 development plans, included a 1960–1964 five-year reorganization plan for economic independence and sector reforms, followed by a 1965–1967 three-year plan emphasizing private investment in light export industries though challenged by rising debt, agricultural stagnation, and instability [14].

A major shift came with the 1983–1993 structural adjustment program, featuring demand management, liberalization, and reforms in trade, budgets, taxes, foreign investment, and privatization. From 1999–2009 under King Mohammed VI, robust growth diversified the economy, mitigating climate vulnerability through emerging

industries, increased public investment, and major infrastructure, reducing reliance on traditional sectors [15].

**Current Economic Structure.** Morocco's current economic landscape is characterized by ongoing diversification and a focus on key sectors. The agricultural sector remains essential, employing 30% of the workforce and contributing 11.1% to GDP. Despite its importance, agricultural production is highly sensitive to climatic conditions, leading to variability in cereal production; for example, the persistent drought of 2023/2024 reduced national cereal production by 42%. Morocco is a net importer of agricultural products [2].

The industrial sector accounts for 24.6% of GDP and employs 24% of the workforce. While traditional sectors such as textiles, leather goods, agri-food, and oil refining are present, new and rapidly growing sectors include chemicals, automotive parts, IT, electronics, and aerospace [2]. The automotive industry in particular has become the country's main export sector and Africa's leading automotive hub. The service sector is also important, employing 46% of the workforce and contributing 54.3% to GDP value added, with dynamic sub-sectors such as real estate and tourism. However, growth in international trade in traditional export specializations such as agri-food and textiles has been relatively slow, and manufacturing remains underdeveloped [15].

Morocco faces challenges related to sustaining economic growth and diversifying its economy further to create more sustainable jobs outside agriculture [16]. A significant challenge is meeting the rising demand for energy, as Morocco is almost unique among North African countries in lacking proven oil and gas sources, making it the largest energy importer in the region. These structural features shape Morocco's capacity to adopt development strategies inspired by external models [15].

**Challenges.** Despite the progress made, the country continues to face persistent socioeconomic challenges [2]. Significant social and spatial inequalities remain, particularly in rural areas, where health and other services lag behind. Regional disparities are also evident in the labor market, with varying activity and unemployment rates across regions due to differences in development between urban/coastal areas and rural/mountainous regions. Unemployment is high, particularly among young people aged 15-24, reaching 26% nationally and 43% in urban areas in 2017 [13]. The omnipresence of the informal economy, accounting for up to two-thirds of jobs, perpetuates a pattern of poor-quality jobs, low wages, and inadequate social protection [16]. Furthermore, despite efforts in the field of education, qualitative gaps remain in terms of the relevance of school curricula and the equitable distribution of resources. [15] The vulnerability of the agricultural sector to drought conditions continues to challenge the economy significantly [2].

**Reform Initiatives.** The Moroccan authorities have undertaken extensive reforms to address these issues, guided by a national dialogue around the New Development Model [17]. A key initiative is the new Investment Charter, adopted in 2022, which aims to attract substantial investments and create jobs by reforming incentives and improving governance [15]. This charter specifically targets increasing private investment to two-thirds of total investment, up from one-third currently [15]. Efforts are also focused on improving the business climate, strengthening competition regulations, and reforming public sector enterprises [2, 15]. The government is also engaged in a comprehensive reform of the social protection system, moving towards universal coverage. Measures to combat corruption and foster entrepreneurship are also part of these broader strategies.

These reform efforts reflect Morocco's ambition to modernize its institutional landscape while managing structural vulnerabilities such as energy dependence, regional disparities, and labor market informality. The dynamics between these structural constraints and ongoing reform efforts are key to assessing the feasibility of external policy inspiration.

This comparative literature review provides the analytical basis for assessing the conditional applicability of the South Korean development model to Morocco.

### 3 Methodology

This study adopts a narrative comparative literature review approach to synthesize insights from development economics and policy transfer studies. This methodology suits analyzing complex development trajectories in distinct historical, institutional, and socio-economic contexts. The analysis is conceptual and does not empirically test policy outcomes, but assesses the conditional adaptability of South Korea's development model to Morocco.

The analysis relies on the policy transfer framework, considering that strategic changes from one context to another are mediated and conditional: it is not a matter of reproduction, but of selective adaptation influenced by institutional compatibility, administrative capacity, political context, and economic structures.

The research design follows three analytical steps: first, identification of the core pillars of South Korea's development model through the developmental state and industrial policy literature; second, examination of Morocco's economic structure, institutional configuration, and reform trajectory; and third, comparative assessment of convergence, divergence, and transfer feasibility under contextual constraints.

This approach provides a framework for examining similarities, differences, and contextual constraints.

### 3.1 Search Strategy

The literature review was conducted through a targeted selection of peer-reviewed academic publications and institutional reports directly related to South Korea's development experience and Morocco's economic trajectory. Rather than relying on general database searches, the review focused on key scientific contributions and policy-oriented studies deemed relevant to development models and reform dynamics.

In addition, official reports and analytical documents were collected from major international and national institutions, including the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Special Commission on the Development Model. These sources provided empirical data and complementary policy insights, enabling comprehensive coverage of theoretical perspectives.

The search query was based on combinations of keywords including “South Korean development model”, “Developmental state”, “Export-led industrialization”, “Industrial policy and economic transformation”, “Morocco economic development”, “Policy transfer and institutional adaptation”, “Comparative development strategies”. Boolean operators (e.g., “South Korea” AND “industrial policy” AND “export-led growth”) were used to refine relevance and ensure conceptual consistency across the selected literature.

### 3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of references was based on general criteria in order to ensure their relevance and quality while maintaining their comprehensiveness:

**Inclusion:** peer-reviewed academic articles, books, case studies, and reports published by reputable international organizations and government agencies focused on economic development, industrial policy, institutional reforms, and comparative development models.

**Exclusion:** Publications that were opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical basis, articles not related to economic development or institutional reform, and sources whose authors were not credible or came from unofficial sources were omitted in order to ensure the quality and relevance of the narrative synthesis. This screening process ensured coherence with the research objective and strengthened the reliability of the narrative synthesis.

## 4 **Results: South Korea's Economic Model and Its Applicability to Morocco**

South Korea's economic transformation is a very interesting case study for developing countries such as Morocco. Its progress has largely been attributed to its unique economic model, which emphasizes export-oriented industrialization, government investments in education and infrastructure, and a strong focus on innovation and technology.

### 4.1 **Key Divergences: A Look at Historical and Institutional Differences**

South Korea's journey began in the aftermath of a devastating war, when the country was essentially agricultural and poor. Its development was led by a centralized and authoritarian state in the 1960s and 1970s. The government exercised significant control, intervening directly in the market and forging close and strong relationships with private sector conglomerates (chaebols) in order to accelerate industrialization. South Korea's economic policies were clearly market-oriented, with a strong state influence to achieve specific industrial and export objectives.

In contrast, Morocco's historical trajectory was shaped by its past as a French protectorate and its more recent evolution toward a liberal economic policy focused on reconstruction and development. Morocco's institutional framework is not a centralized, development-focused state, but a more complex, multi-level system of governance. While the country has made progress in governance reform, it still faces challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiency and the need to strengthen regulatory frameworks. Morocco's integration into the global economy is also different, influenced by its strategic location between Europe and Africa and its dependence on various regional trade agreements, rather than by a single, aggressive export-oriented strategy born of a position of historical isolation.

### 4.2 **Socio-Cultural Factors and the Human Capital Challenge**

Another major difference lies in the socio-cultural context, particularly regarding human capital development. South Korea's success is linked to its unwavering commitment to education. The country has implemented a comprehensive strategy to build a highly skilled workforce. This deliberate effort has created a workforce capable of adapting to technological change and driving innovation. Morocco has also prioritized education and made significant progress in terms of school enrollment however, it still faces qualitative deficits. Challenges such as the relevance of school curricula and unequal access to education among different socioeconomic groups and geographic regions persist. This affects the country's

ability to fully use its human potential and leads to high youth unemployment. Tackling these educational and social gaps is key for Morocco to move forward.

### 4.3 Adapting South Korea's Core Pillars to Morocco's Context

Despite structural differences, Morocco may strategically adapt key principals: industrial policy orientation, human capital development, macroeconomic stability, and export diversification. However, adapting depends on sequencing reforms according to institutional capacity and ensuring coherence between industrial ambition and administrative readiness.

**Industrial Policy and Strategic Sectors.** South Korea's success in identifying and developing strategic sectors offers a clear lesson. Morocco, which has experienced growth in the automotive, electronics, and aerospace sectors, can draw inspiration from this approach. It could focus on moving from traditional sectors such as textiles to higher value-added industries, increasing the complexity of its economy, and integrating more into global value chains. Ensuring equal access to education for all citizens would be a crucial step to unlock the full potential of human capital.

**Human Capital Development.** Morocco may undertake a comprehensive reform of education. This involves reforming technical and vocational training in order to align curricula with labor market needs and promote a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. Bridging the education gap and ensuring equitable access for all citizens is a crucial step in unlocking the full potential of human capital.

**Macroeconomic Stability and Governance.** South Korea's steady economic growth has been supported by both sound macroeconomic policies and a robust institutional framework. Morocco has made efforts to improve its business climate, but it may continue to enhance governance by fighting corruption, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and ensuring regulatory clarity. A stable and transparent environment is essential for attracting private investment and fostering innovation.

**Export-Oriented Growth.** South Korea's export-driven strategy fueled its integration into the global economy. Although Morocco is already integrated into the global economy, it can strengthen its position by diversifying its exports and moving up the value chain in key industries. Supporting micro and small enterprises to establish themselves in international markets is also essential to promote broader-based economic growth.

In conclusion, the South Korean model is not one to be reproduced, but rather a set of valuable principles to be adapted. By strategically focusing on its unique strengths

while addressing its institutional and social challenges, Morocco can chart its own path toward sustainable and inclusive economic development.

## 5 Discussion: A strategic approach to adapting South Korea's economic model to the Moroccan context

While South Korea's economic transformation offers compelling lessons for developing nations, a direct replication of its model is neither feasible nor desirable for Morocco. The success of the South Korean model was deeply rooted in unique historical, political, and cultural contexts that cannot be simply transferred. Therefore, Morocco could adopt a nuanced, adaptive, and contextual approach to leverage these lessons for its own development.

### 5.1 Beyond Replication: Morocco's Unique Strengths and Challenges

Morocco needs to recognize its own competitive advantages rather than attempting to blindly copy a foreign model. Its strategic location as a gateway between Africa and Europe, its vast renewable energy potential -especially in solar and wind power- , and the opportunity to modernize its agricultural sector are all unique strengths [15]. Leveraging these assets is crucial for its economic future. However, Morocco faces significant challenges that were not present, or were handled differently, in South Korea's developmental phase:

**Political and Institutional Hurdles.** Morocco's complex, multi-layered governance system can make it difficult to implement the kind of centralized, swift planning seen in South Korea's authoritarian regime [18].

**Economic Constraints.** The country's reliance on energy imports and limited financial resources can hinder the large-scale, capital-intensive investments required for technological advancement and infrastructure [2].

**Socio-Cultural Context.** Morocco's distinct social norms, values, and historical experiences require a tailored approach to policy, particularly in areas like labor relations and educational reform [2].

**Changing Global Landscape.** The current global economy is far more competitive and technologically advanced than it was during South Korea's rapid industrialization period, presenting new challenges for trade and development [1].

## 5.2 Strategic Opportunities and Policy Recommendations

To effectively adapt the South Korean model, Morocco could focus on several key areas, emphasizing strategic adaptation over blind imitation.

**Human Capital and Innovation.** A critical lesson from South Korea is the importance of linking education to industry. Morocco may align its technical and vocational training with the demands of emerging sectors like renewable energy, automotive manufacturing, and IT. Fostering strong partnerships between academic institutions and the private sector is essential to ensure that educational outcomes meet market needs. Furthermore, investing in R&D and strengthening the country's capacity for technology transfer can be vital for long-term growth [15].

**Governance and Business Environment.** Establishing a business-friendly environment is paramount. This involves strengthening governance, increasing transparency, combating corruption, and streamlining bureaucratic processes to attract both domestic and foreign investment. An effective and reliable institutional framework is needed to support a modern, dynamic economy. Policy adaptation requires sequencing reforms according to institutional capacity, ensuring that ambitious industrial and innovation strategies are aligned with administrative readiness and regulatory consistency [15].

**Inclusive and Sustainable Growth.** A holistic development strategy is needed, one that goes beyond mere industrialization. This strategy could integrate agricultural development with industrial advancement and work to empower the population through better access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Policies promoting gender equality and addressing regional disparities are crucial for ensuring that the benefits of growth are shared equitably[2].

**Sustainable Development.** Morocco's commitment to transitioning to renewable energy is a significant opportunity. Investing in green technology not only addresses environmental concerns but also positions the country as a regional leader in a high-growth sector, unlocking new economic opportunities [15].

Morocco's development path does not lie in replicating South Korea's model but in strategically adapting its core principles, particularly state-led planning, human capital investment, and export promotion. By adopting an approach tailored to its unique strengths and addressing its specific challenges, Morocco can foster sustainable economic growth and development.

## 6 Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that, despite the fact that South Korea's development experience cannot be mechanically replicated, it still offers valuable strategic insights

for Morocco's development path. The South Korean experience provides strategic principles rather than a blueprint for development. Fundamental principles such as state-led coordination, sustained investment in human capital, export promotion, and adaptive policymaking can inform Morocco's reform agenda when carefully contextualized.

The outcome of such an adaptation ultimately depends on Morocco's ability to strengthen its institutional capacities, reduce social and regional inequalities, and align its education and training systems with labor market needs. Future research could elaborate on this analysis through sector-specific case studies or empirical modeling of policy transfer outcomes to further inform development strategies.

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