

# A NEW INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR NORTH KOREA?

**Contending Perspectives**

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## Unlikely Partners: Humanitarian Aid Agencies and North Korea

Edward P. Reed

One of the most unsettling aspects of humanitarian work in North Korea (or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) is the disconnect between the country's proud official face and its desperate reality. A scene I witnessed along a dusty road in North Hwanghae province in 1997, when I directed an NGO aid program, was emblematic of this apparent state of denial. Our team was returning to Pyongyang after visiting a hospital where severely malnourished children were being rehydrated with drips fed from discarded beer bottles. An elderly woman, clearly exhausted, was collapsed at the roadside under a large brown bundle. Above her one of the ubiquitous arches across the road proclaimed in large letters: The Victory of Socialism Is in Sight!

North Korea first appealed for international humanitarian assistance in 1995 after devastating floods pushed its already faltering economy over the brink. Since then a number of multilateral, bilateral, and nongovernmental aid organizations (NGOs) have responded to its call. Providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea has posed unique challenges to aid providers, however. Underlying the problem is the fact that the very act of requesting aid contradicts the bedrock ideology of *juche* on which the North Korean state is built. *Juche*, or self-reliance, proclaims that North Korea can build a socialist paradise for its people, relying primarily on its own resources and ingenuity under the "genius leadership" of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging problems and mistakes is the starting point for seeking solu-

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1 A number of writers have attempted to interpret *juche* to non-Korean audiences; see, for example, Park (2002), Oh and Hassig (2000), and Cumings (1997). As recently as the official new year's editorial for 2004 (the year of Juche 93 in the DPRK), the centrality of the *juche* concept was reemphasized: "It is necessary to intensify the education in the *juche* idea, strengthen the driving force of the revolution in every way and consolidate the politico-ideological position of socialism as solid as a rock this year. . . ."

tions, but this goes against the national ethos and pricks the personal pride that has been deeply instilled in all DPRK citizens. Indeed, doing so may even border on treason.

In addition to this fundamental contradiction confronting aid agencies, other elements in North Korea differentiate crises there from other humanitarian crises of recent years:

- Although almost all other crises of this magnitude have unfolded in the context of conflict or failed states, the rigid North Korean state is very much intact, compelling all aid providers to negotiate with the government on the terms under which aid will be provided.
- In other crises, aid organizations have usually planned and directly implemented aid distribution to those in need and have also worked with local nongovernmental counterparts. In the DPRK local distribution of aid has been handled, for the most part, by and through government channels, and there is no civil society with which international NGOs can collaborate.
- Although open conflict is absent, North Korea considers its very survival threatened by hostile states, and it is in a constant state of war mobilization. Ironically, it feels most threatened by some of those very states from which it has solicited and received the most aid. Aid agencies must work in this politicized context—in the states where those agencies are based, and in North Korea where the agencies seek to deliver aid—in which an atmosphere of mistrust pervades on both sides.
- Although reliable sources have reported starvation and death on a massive scale, even at its peak this was a famine largely invisible to outsiders. There has been little visible population movement and no gathering in camps by refugees or displaced persons (though thousands have gone into hiding across the border in China), and agencies have had limited direct contact with the affected population inside the country.
- The most basic data on the crisis and its human dimensions have been difficult if not impossible to obtain or verify with any degree of reliability. Government officials insist that agencies accept the government's assessment that the country is facing a major crisis and not insist on details. When we pressed to visit affected households, one official remarked to me, "We have lowered our pants; do you want us to strip naked?"
- Media coverage that has provoked public response to other crises continues to be banned in North Korea. Images of starving children have been rationed to the outside world, and the government insists on carefully controlling all publicity.

- Human rights abuses are not unique to the DPRK; however, the extreme nature of the alleged abuses (for example, torture and execution for political crimes, a system of camps holding political offenders and their families under extreme conditions, and distribution of food and other necessities according to political loyalty<sup>2</sup>) and the fact that aid agencies must work in close collaboration with the government confront aid agencies with a serious moral dilemma.

Other humanitarian crisis spots that reflected to some degree similar challenges include Iraq between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion; Cambodia under the Vietnam-backed government (after 1979); and Ethiopia during the 1983–85 famine. In each of these cases, aid agencies were compelled to negotiate the terms of assistance with a generally repressive state apparatus that controlled access to the affected population and the distribution of aid. Ethiopia was a major learning experience for many agencies; some claimed only after the fact to have realized the extent to which their aid was being manipulated for political purposes. Cambodia forced agencies to decide between assisting the majority population inside the country (under the strict control of the government) or helping refugees on the Thai border (infiltrated by the Khmer Rouge). Assisting Iraqis devastated by a decade-long embargo exposed agencies to the charge that they were prolonging suffering by strengthening the regime of Saddam Hussein. What may be unique about North Korea is that all of these issues simultaneously confront aid agencies, and in spades. Furthermore, the existence of a thriving rival Korean state on the peninsula and the formal state of war that persists between North Korea and the United States (under the United Nations flag) greatly complicate the security environment.

This uniquely difficult environment has challenged aid agencies on two levels: first, the widely held humanitarian principles that govern provision of aid by NGOs and other agencies are severely tested in the North Korean context; and, second, the ability to plan and implement effective humanitarian and developmental aid projects is critically limited.<sup>3</sup> Humanitarian assistance for North Korea is not only justifiable, however, but it can be provided with integrity. There are many other places in the world where human suffering deserves an international response and where access is not hindered by the government. Nevertheless, the determined focus on North Korea by United Nations (UN) and NGO agencies should remain a high priority. The impact of aid agencies in North Korea goes beyond the relief of human suffering. As

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<sup>2</sup> Human rights concerns in relation to North Korea range from total control of information, to restrictions on movement, to harsh punishment of border crossers, to cruelties more extreme than those mentioned in the text (Hawk 2003; Amnesty International 2003; OHCHR 2003).

<sup>3</sup> I have benefited greatly from Flake and Snyder (2004), a comprehensive study of the experience of U.S., European, and South Korean NGOs operating in North Korea. Articles that attempt an overview of NGO experience in North Korea include Lautze (1997), Bennett (1999), Smith (2002), Weingartner (2003), and Lee J. (2003, 77–93).

a community, the agencies contribute to building an environment and a model for constructive international engagement at a time of serious tensions and dangers. Careful use of this opening for engagement can help forestall a much greater humanitarian and political disaster in a highly charged part of the world.

## Human Impact of Economic Collapse

Following the Stalinist economic model, and in spite of supporting a massive military establishment, North Korea was able to feed its growing population and provide for a modest standard of living in the years following the Korean War. Housing, education, medical care, and employment were guaranteed for all citizens at different levels of quality depending on job assignment and political status. However, most observers agree that, by the mid-1980s, the North Korean economy had begun to decline because of systemic constraints. In agriculture, the push for self-sufficiency had exhausted the fragile ecosystems. By the late 1980s, food shortages began to appear. In the early 1990s, North Korea was hit by shocks that sent the economy over the edge. The end of special subsidized trade arrangements with the Soviet Union and China crippled the economy. Oil imports fell to one-fourth of needed supply, leading to widespread closing of industries, including those producing fertilizers, chemicals, and other inputs for agriculture. Floods and drought in 1995–97 were the final straws on the camel's back, but they also provided a politically acceptable rationale for requesting international assistance.

Thus, what has confronted aid agencies is not an underdeveloped economy or third-world society but rather a collapsed industrialized economy that had once met many humanitarian goals, albeit dependent on external subsidies and following a model that could not be sustained. Many of the key factors of a modern economy—most important are the critical human resources and, secondarily, some social institutions—are still scattered around and could be rehabilitated.

Aid agencies have also been confronted with a complex humanitarian crisis. Food shortages caused by falling production and lack of imports have resulted in hunger, malnutrition, and increased mortality throughout the country. Observations by aid workers and interviews with refugees have led to the widely circulated figure of about one million deaths between 1995 and 2000 directly attributable to the food shortage.<sup>4</sup> The victims were disproportionately infants, the elderly, young mothers, and those living in urban areas of the Northeast. Although shortages were felt throughout the population, it is clear that some segments were less affected: the ruling elite,

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4 Noland (2000, 191–4) summarizes the widely varying estimates of famine-related deaths; they range from 220,000 (by a DPRK official) to 3.5 million (by a South Korean NGO). Goodkind and West (2001) use models and the 1998 nutritional survey to reduce uncertainty, and they estimate between 600,000 and one million deaths can be attributed to famine between 1995 and 2000.

citizens of Pyongyang where the most politically loyal reside, and the military. Massive food aid, stabilization of food production (though at much lower levels than before), and various coping mechanisms led to a precarious and minimum level of food security since 2001 (Natsios 2001, Noland 2003).

North Korea is primarily an urbanized society; about three-fourths of the population live in cities where they are dependent on rations or markets of some kind to obtain food. Unlike the Great Leap famine in China, the farming population in North Korea was less affected than the large urban populations in outlying parts of the country. While rations for cooperative farms were reduced, the government wisely refrained from squeezing the farms to the extent of further depressing production. Also, farm families had access to more coping mechanisms than did urban dwellers, including expansion of private farming, hoarding production, and harvesting wild plants in the mountains.

Most of the population of North Korea today can be considered traumatized survivors of this catastrophe and, no doubt, fearful that the worst is not over. One county official told me, in 1998, that those who could quickly adjust and cope survived, while those who could not, died. The manager of a collective farm wept as she told me of women coming to her begging for a little extra ration for their children that she could not give. It is no exaggeration to say that a large segment of an entire cohort of North Korean children has been permanently damaged physically and mentally by malnutrition.<sup>5</sup>

A nutritional survey (UNICEF 1998), conducted with the cooperation of UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP), revealed that 15.6 percent of children under seven years old suffered from acute malnutrition (wasting), and 65.4 percent from chronic malnutrition (stunting). These figures seemed consistent with what aid workers were observing at the time outside of Pyongyang. A second survey (CBS 2002) conducted in the fall of 2002 (after several years of sensitive negotiations), indicated a fairly dramatic improvement in most categories. Wasting fell to 8.1 percent, and stunting to 39.2 percent. Although these survey data must be used with caution, they appear to support the conclusion that food is getting to targeted children. Nevertheless, continued high levels of child as well as maternal malnutrition and geographic discrepancies (for example, wasting was found in 12 percent of children in South Hamgyong province but in only 3.7 percent of Pyongyang children) indicate not only that conditions remain extremely bad, but also

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5 The collection edited by Lim and Chang (2003) compares the nutritional status of North Korean children with that of children in developing countries and assesses the probable impact of widespread malnutrition on human and social development in North Korea. The chapter by M. Elizabeth Hoffman (Lim and Chang 2003, 117) concludes: "Children lacking the essential assistance for physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological maturation leaves North Korea with at least one generation of children who will enter adulthood fully underdeveloped."



that supplies are being rationed to benefit certain parts of the country over others.<sup>6</sup>

The health system, once a source of pride for North Korea, was itself a victim of the crisis. Local pharmaceutical plants closed and imports of medicines slowed to a trickle. Hospitals had no medicines, supplies, equipment, or electricity and so could not adequately treat those most in need of care. At one hospital outside of Pyongyang, the highly trained doctors and technicians confessed their feelings of helplessness and frustration, and welcomed all outside support. Lack of supplies for water treatment facilities has created a sanitation crisis, while lack of fuel for heating has further undermined the health of vulnerable populations.

A severe shortage of electricity hobbles every sector of this urbanized and industrialized society: food production, industry, transportation, urban homes and workplaces as well as medical facilities. The largely electrified rail system has been reduced to a crawl.

Assessments by outside observers of the prices, wages, and foreign exchange adjustments introduced by the North Korean government in August 2002 have varied widely from dismissive to optimistic. However, the impact on ordinary North Koreans seems fairly clear. The availability of food and other commodities in newly established local markets has increased. However, inflation has also set in, and a large segment of the population without access to cash income may be falling into even more difficult circumstances. The WFP has identified this group of unemployed and underemployed urban families as a new category in need of emergency assistance (UNOCHA 2003a).

One impact that is profound in its implications is that North Korea, for all its trumpeting of self-reliance, has become fundamentally dependent on the charity of the international community for the survival of a large portion of its population. How this fact affects ordinary North Koreans who are aware of it and officials who serve the regime is hard to estimate. While no doubt a source of shame, it also reveals the fragility of the *juche* system that is at the core of the regime's ideological grounding.

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6 These dramatic improvements between the 1998 and 2002 nutritional surveys have not gone unchallenged. In particular, an extremely small percentage of low birth weight (LBW) children, even by international standards, has been cited by some as an indication of conflicting and therefore unreliable data. This problem and the general issue of reliability have been thoroughly assessed by Shrimpton and Kachondham (2004, 12), and they conclude: "The verification processes carried out by the authors and international observers support the veracity of the survey results, ruling out the likelihood of false data or manipulation of data." The LBW issue is complicated by the fact that birth weight is based on mother's recall, but the reported weights strongly correlate with measurements of later malnutrition of the same children. International technicians trained North Korean field teams and observed all measurements and interviews in the context of a tightly drawn survey design.

## Humanitarian Response

After negotiating quietly with Japan and South Korea for emergency food shipments, the North Korean government issued a general call for international food aid in the fall of 1995. The WFP issued its first appeal for food contributions and opened a small office in Pyongyang in 1996. International NGOs also mobilized to respond but were encouraged by the North Korean government to ship commodities (especially food) rather than set up in-country programs. North Korea established the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to handle relations with all non-Korean aid agencies.<sup>7</sup>

Almost all agencies focused initially on emergency food aid. As the scope of the emergency and the problems associated with delivering food aid to North Korea became clearer, however, delivery of food aid was left primarily to the WFP while most agencies attempted to focus on assisting specific locales through smaller-scale interventions. Other sectors began to receive attention as specialized UN agencies expanded their operations in the country. UNDP and FAO focused on agricultural rehabilitation; and WHO and UNICEF concentrated on health, especially of children. A number of European NGOs were able to establish modest resident programs as part of diplomatic negotiations between the European Union (EU) and the North Korean government. U.S. NGOs were forced to manage as best they could through one- and two-week visits to the country two or three times a year, coinciding with the arrival of commodities. NGOs in South Korea also emerged to advocate for helping North Korea; however, the South Korean government required that the substantial aid they collected be channeled through the Korean Red Cross and delivered through the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC). Under President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, beginning in 1998, this policy was relaxed to allow South Korean NGO representatives to visit the North, but under fairly close restrictions.<sup>8</sup>

All aid agencies were quickly confronted with a number of sobering realities. Although North Korean officials urged immediate and maximum food aid to stave off disaster, the only clear evidence offered of severe hunger or starvation were brief and carefully orchestrated visits to selected baby homes

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7 The FDRC has been the hosting unit for all UN and bilateral agencies and for most NGOs. In early years, direct contact with line ministries was rare, which further complicated assessments, planning, and coordination. Recently there seems to be some relaxation of this restriction and more direct cooperation, especially in agriculture and health. A few NGOs have had different hosting units. American Friends Service Committee continues to work with the Committee for Solidarity with the World's People, a relationship established more than a decade before the crisis. World Vision for some time worked with the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (APPC). The APPC and its "family" of Workers' Party units have also hosted all contacts with South Korean NGOs and companies. Organizations representing ethnic Koreans from outside the peninsula are usually hosted by the Committee for Support of Overseas Compatriots and related units.

8 Flake and Snyder (2004) provide additional detailed descriptions of the activities of the various NGOs.

or hospital wards crowded with malnourished children. There were few indicators—common in emergencies elsewhere—of widespread famine such as large population movements, large numbers of obviously weakened adults, bodies of those who had succumbed. This led to a debate among agencies and governments about the extent and severity of the problem, a debate that lasted at least a year and deeply politicized the international response (Becker 1998). In addition, aid workers used to assessing the cause of an emergency in order to design an appropriate response quickly learned that, in spite of clear evidence to the contrary, the only causes that North Korea admitted or discussed were flooding and other natural disasters. It also quickly became clear that North Korean counterparts were under a mandate to obtain the maximum amount of commodity aid with the minimum amount of intrusion by foreign aid workers. The aid agencies had entered the world of *juche* and quickly had to adjust their *modus operandi* or withdraw.<sup>9</sup>

## Dilemmas for Humanitarian Aid in North Korea

North Korea's plea for assistance came at a time when international aid agencies were debating what was frequently referred to as "the crisis of humanitarian aid." In the wake of the Rwanda genocide and its aftermath and then the militarized humanitarian interventions in the Balkans, aid agencies were reevaluating their role and their operational guidelines. Complex humanitarian disasters, characterized by massive human suffering and vulnerability as well as armed conflict, challenged the ability to effectively actualize the simple motive of saving lives. In retrospect it became clear that well-intentioned aid could do great harm as well as great good. Humanitarian intervention in the context of conflict could actually exacerbate the conflict and prolong suffering. A narrow focus on saving lives without attention to the root causes of a crisis could result in dependency that postponed solutions. Strictly separating assistance from attention to human rights abuses could be the equivalent of not seeing the forest for the trees (Rieff 2002; Anderson 1999).

In light of the sobering experience of the 1990s, new emphasis was placed on delivering aid with integrity while avoiding doing further harm. Agencies were urged to go beyond providing relief by working with local communities to rebuild food security and reduce future vulnerabilities. Most aid agencies approached North Korea with a heightened sensitivity to complying with these principles, while major donors and the media were looking over their shoulders (Minear 2002; Terry 2002; Humanitarian Studies Unit 2001).

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9 This paper addresses the operating environment that faces multilateral, bilateral, and nongovernmental agencies operating in North Korea; however, the primary concern is with the experience and potential contribution of NGOs. The special circumstances under which South Korean NGOs operate make them a particular case, and their experience will be addressed only to the extent the issues are relevant to them. The experience of efforts by South Korean NGOs to deliver aid to North Korea is described in English in Chung (2004) and Kwon and Kim (2003).

## Should We Help North Korea?

The most fundamental question for aid agencies considering helping the people in North Korea is whether aid actually prolongs their suffering by prolonging the life of a repressive and ineffective regime. As I worked in North Korea, I framed the question: "When the day comes when they can speak freely, will the farmers, workers, and prisoners of North Korea thank me or condemn me for having collaborated with the state to deliver aid?" Until that day we must make our decision by balancing the positive impacts of aid on individuals as well as on the North Korean system against any negative impacts aid might have.

There can be little doubt that the policies of the North Korean regime have contributed directly and indirectly to the humanitarian crisis in the country. The absolute control over citizens' lives, the distribution of benefits according to political loyalty, and the ultimate threat of banishment of whole families to prison camps for political offenses all point to human rights abuses of the most egregious nature. Many of those who have successfully fled the regime, including the former Workers' Party secretary, Hwang Jang-yop, refer to the North as one large prison camp and suggest that the sooner the regime falls, the sooner relief will come to the people.<sup>10</sup> Others point to the massive misallocation of resources by the regime. Scarce funds and resources are poured into military programs and Kim cult monuments while hospitals lack heat, basic equipment, and medicines. Another argument is that only fundamental changes in economic structure and policies will bring an end to the crisis, and observers find little evidence that the Kim Jong-il regime is willing or able to implement such reforms. So, should aid agencies simply hold back and let nature take its course?

One reply to this position is that in the case of authoritarian regimes nature seldom takes the course that outsiders expect. Sue Lautze (1997), who has studied many famine situations, has noted: "History teaches us that famine may threaten the survival of the people of a communist nation but it will not threaten the dominant political regime." It is impossible to say what the internal political impact would have been if North Korea had not received almost a million tons of food aid per year since 1996. However, the degree of social and political control in North Korea is so total and the level of indoctrination so complete that it is easy to imagine that the Kim Jong-il regime would have survived even under harsher conditions than have prevailed. Furthermore, the most likely result of a breakdown of order would be mass population movements toward the Chinese border and perhaps on the high seas. As other cases have shown, the human costs of such movements

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10 Hwang made a number of statements during his visit to the United States in November 2003. See, for example, his interview, "Hwang Jang-Yop Calls for Regime Change," with Rebecca Ward on the Voice of America on 4 November 2003.

are staggering, not to mention the potential for dangerous political destabilization in the region.

The primary rationale for intervention provided by aid agencies is the humanitarian imperative: all persons in life-threatening need should be provided assistance no matter what the political environment; in the simple terms attributed to former U.S. president Ronald Reagan, "A hungry child knows no politics." This is a comforting but not entirely satisfying answer. One of the major lessons of recent history is that, under some circumstances, aid intervention can actually make people worse off. Sooner or later most aid agencies have had to add the argument that, rather than bolstering the North Korean regime and its policies, aid has in fact contributed to a gradual process of opening and policy change. What is the evidence of such impact?

Backhanded evidence is provided by the North Korean regime itself. In the now infamous "yellow wind" editorial of January 1998 and in several official statements since, regime spokespersons have starkly warned the North Korean people that international aid is part and parcel of the imperialist plot to undermine the regime through reform and that aid comes mixed with capitalist poison (Weingartner and Weingartner 1999). Meanwhile, other official statements have periodically been issued thanking the United Nations and other agencies for their assistance and urging its continuation. The most obvious explanation for these conflicting statements is that aid and aid workers have introduced a new element into North Korea that, purposely or not, threatens the reigning orthodoxy. Continued acceptance of aid agencies in the country points up the desperate need for assistance that so far has outweighed these concerns in the minds of North Korean decision makers.

Aid workers who were familiar with North Korea before or in the early stages of the crisis speak of the changes they have observed in the openness of North Korean counterparts, assessment of problems, and access to affected areas (Morton 2002; Zellweger 2002). With approximately 100 U.N. and other agency workers resident in the country and many others making frequent and extended visits over the past eight years, many North Koreans have been exposed to information and ways of thinking that fundamentally challenge the official line of the regime. Pyongyang-based North Korean officials, when accompanying aid workers to the field, have learned the extent of the suffering and the depth of the problems in their own country. North Korean program managers have gained a clearer idea of the nature of their problems and seem to value the interaction with foreign aid workers who have opened new space for analyzing and addressing the problems. For example, a senior agricultural official once told me that after an overseas study tour he realized that centrally mandated government policies on fertilizer application had destroyed North Korean soils, and that it would take 20 years to rebuild them. And, because officials and managers are under incredible pressure to show results, many have welcomed assistance no matter what the source.<sup>11</sup>

The information flow is two-way. Aid workers have provided first-hand, ground-level information on conditions throughout North Korea. This has proved to be a reliable basis for assessing humanitarian conditions and has given a human face to the crisis. Indirectly, this information has also assisted analysts seeking to understand social and economic dynamics inside the country. A more accurate and balanced assessment of North Korean society can only be helpful in seeking a peaceful solution to the political issues that separate North Korea from the international community.

Though the debate continues, the predominant view in the international aid community is that, even though operating conditions are problematic, the nature of the regime itself should not be an obstacle to providing humanitarian assistance.<sup>12</sup> Even Hwang Jang-yop has expressed support for food aid as long as there is certainty that it goes to those who need it. The issue then becomes whether the conditions under which agencies operate in North Korea allow for delivery of aid to those in need and enable underlying causes of the problems to be addressed. Hazel Smith (2002, 14), who has evaluated several aid programs in North Korea, has written: "The humanitarian dilemma for the agencies has been, given the acceptance by all agencies of the widespread need for humanitarian aid but given also the constraints placed upon humanitarian operations, on what terms should the agencies continue with humanitarian assistance to the people of the DPRK."

### **Do Agencies Know Where Their Aid Is Going?**

Basic principles governing delivery of humanitarian aid are impartiality and accountability. Aid should go to those in greatest need on the basis of objective and systematic assessment. Aid delivery should be transparent, enabling agencies to confirm that it is distributed to the target group and to assess its impact. These processes require that aid agencies have direct and ongoing contact with the affected populations, are able to collect data on the status of the populations, and are able to monitor directly the distribution of aid. From the beginning these have been sticking points for the North Korean government. Given the state's absolute control over its population, its distribution of social benefits according to political loyalty, and its official mili-

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11 After a particularly difficult and tense period of interaction with higher officials over issues related to project monitoring, a ministry official took me aside and said: "I know that it is very difficult to work with my government, but please do not give up. We need your help." There are also more subtle impacts of outside contact. A driver once told me that he had been taught that Americans were cruel and evil people who had committed unspeakable atrocities against Koreans during the Korean War, but that he found me to be a good person and wondered about other Americans.

12 There are those who dissent. Sophie Delaunay, the regional coordinator for North Korea for Médecins Sans Frontières testified that "MSF would like to reiterate that access by the population to the aid it needs can only be improved if there are independent needs assessments, independent distribution mechanisms, and independent monitoring by operating agencies (Delaunay 2002)." Fiona Terry (2001), a researcher for MSF, put it more bluntly: "The purpose of humanitarian aid is to save lives. By channeling it through the regime responsible for the suffering, it has become part of the system of oppression."

tary-first policy, most donors have pressured aid agencies for stronger-than-usual assurances that aid is not being diverted.<sup>13</sup>

No one claims that conditions in North Korea fully meet these international standards. (It is unlikely that they are fully met in any crisis intervention.) Although things have improved somewhat since the early years, and the experience of agencies differs, in general North Korea continues to restrict aid agency operations in various ways. Collection of data on affected populations as a basis for operational planning is severely limited. Real-time observation of local aid distribution or delivery is rare. Random checking of delivery points, institutions, or households is seldom allowed. Unmonitored interaction with the affected population is prohibited as well. In late 2003 the executive director of the WFP, after a visit to Pyongyang, urged more openness on North Korea's part in order to satisfy demands of major food donors (Harmsen 2003). "It's important that North Korea be as transparent, accountable and accessible as is humanly possible," he was quoted as saying. "We simply want a list [of hospitals, orphanages, and schools] of where the food is going. For two years now they have not been able to give us that list."

Given the practical and moral dilemmas and the sheer frustration associated with operating in North Korea, it would not be surprising if some, if not all, aid agencies had considered withdrawing at one time or another. Several have actually terminated their programs, citing these and other constraints on their operations. Four European NGOs, Médecins du Monde (MDM), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Action Contre la Faim (ACF), and Cap Anamur, were implementing direct emergency health delivery programs following models they used in other crisis situations. These programs required ongoing presence in medical or child care institutions, direct contact with patients, and intensive training of medical personnel. This approach clearly challenged North Korea's policy of minimizing interaction between foreign aid workers and the general population, and the authorities moved to limit their access or redirect their programs. As they withdrew, some of the agencies also asserted that assistance was not being delivered according to need but perhaps based on political calculations.<sup>14</sup> Oxfam UK discontinued its water treatment project in 1999 following a dispute over the collection of water quality data. CARE withdrew from a U.S. private voluntary organization (PVO) consortium in 1998 (Flake and Snyder 2004, 31), saying that

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13 The Bush administration has increased pressure on WFP to show improvement in the monitoring of food delivery as a condition for further U.S. contributions (Natsios 2003).

14 See Schloms (2004, 54–7). MSF was most vocal in its criticism of the operating conditions in North Korea. According to MSF's 30 September 1998 statement ("MSF Calls on Donors to Review Their Aid Policy towards DPRK," [www.msf.org/countries/page.cfm?articleid=712831EF-EC70-11D4-B2010060084A6370](http://www.msf.org/countries/page.cfm?articleid=712831EF-EC70-11D4-B2010060084A6370)), "MSF is convinced there are serious medical and humanitarian needs in DPRK which need to be addressed, but adheres to the international humanitarian principles of impartiality and of freedom to assess needs, to assist the most vulnerable, and to assess the effectiveness of that assistance."

conditions did not allow implementation of “sustainable rehabilitation and development programs.”

Nevertheless, most agencies (UN, bilateral, and NGOs) that initiated programs have continued to work in North Korea. All have engaged in an endless process of negotiation, reevaluation, and adjustment. They have also been buffeted by political and military developments that have affected both North Korean openness and donor generosity. They grapple with the humanitarian dilemmas but cite a number of factors that convince them to stay:

- Many agencies have adjusted their programs to fit the operational conditions. For example, they limit operations to selected locations or institutions that can be visited repeatedly, they supply materials that are targeted for specific projects and can be more easily identified during field visits, and they select entry projects that do not require direct or frequent contact with the general population.
- Some agencies have found more flexibility when they have focused their initial interventions in areas identified as high priorities by the government (e.g., potato cultivation, alternative energy, or information technology [IT]). When an established high-priority project requires wider access to areas and populations, access has usually been provided.
- Agencies have learned how to communicate specific requirements or conditions and, if necessary, cancel or delay delivery of specific shipments or activities (short of canceling the whole program) if these are not met. PMU Interlife, a Swedish NGO, closed an agricultural assistance program when staff access was restricted but has since negotiated a new program in another part of the country (United Nations 2003, 161). Most agencies have had the experience of delaying a subsequent delivery of supplies until monitors can verify on-site the distribution of an earlier delivery.
- A mutual learning experience has occurred when agencies have persisted. North Korean counterparts who, no doubt, were instructed to resist all intrusions as a form of spying have observed that some basic data are essential for good planning and continued donor response. Some agency workers have realized that, given the continuing political and military pressures on the country, it is not unreasonable for North Koreans to be cautious about release of certain information or access to sensitive areas. In particular, agencies have lowered their profiles in the media and become more sensitive regarding information used in fund-raising campaigns.
- Above all, agencies point to the importance, over time, of building trust with counterparts based in Pyongyang and with project partners at the local level. It is not uncommon for counterparts to begin to share, at least partially, the perspective of the aid workers and to take the risk of



pleading the agency's position in relation to monitoring. It is even more common for local partners (farm managers, hospital administrators, and provincial officials) to exhibit ownership of a project and jealously guard supplies provided by the agencies.<sup>15</sup>

- An additional positive factor is the unusually close cooperation among almost all agencies operating in North Korea. NGOs have recognized and relied on the UN agencies to advocate with the North Korean authorities on behalf of the entire aid community and to coordinate and track aid efforts in the various sectors. NGOs have sought to maximize interagency collaboration and support, including using opportunities to monitor each other's projects during field visits. The entire aid community has issued periodic consensus statements that objectively assess the operating conditions and commit themselves to striving to hold as closely as possible to basic humanitarian principles.

According to aid agencies, these factors have led to gradual improvement in transparency and in the ability to monitor aid projects. WFP points to the opening of five field offices outside of Pyongyang, the presence of about 45 full-time food delivery monitors, and the significant increase in the number of monitoring visits to institutions and homes, among other things. Some resident NGOs now have staff based in the localities where they work. Others report more frequent visits to project sites. Training of local workers and technical staff is being integrated into many projects, allowing closer interaction with affected populations. Another indication of a more positive aid delivery environment is that a number of NGOs have newly initiated residential programs in North Korea over the past two years. This includes Save the Children-UK, AFMAL-FBF (Italy), and Premiere Urgence (France). AFMAL-FBF and Premiere Urgence have initiated programs in the health sector that include rehabilitation of hospitals and training of medical personnel.

None of this means that the operating environment in North Korea yet allows NGOs and other agencies to meet all international standards for delivery of humanitarian assistance. The entire aid community continues to call for further improvements, especially in access to the affected populations. However, it would be fair to say that those eleven residential NGOs, four bilateral agencies, and seven UN agencies operating in North Korea today feel that, with attention to trust building, careful planning, appropriate project choice, clear definition of expectations, and standing on principle when necessary, humanitarian assistance projects can be implemented with sufficient transparency and accountability. In other words, aid agencies are

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15 After successful overland delivery of a large food shipment by one NGO, a senior official of the remote province informed me that, in order to prevent diversion by officials along the route, he had sent local staff to the border to ride on each rail car until it reached its destination. Such action does not answer all monitoring questions but does reveal a lot about how the system actually works and the role of local officials.

able to claim that they do know whom their programs are helping, they can see the general impact of their work, and they can collect sufficient information to meet accountability expectations of their donors.

### **What Aid Is Needed? What Is Possible?**

In the early days of the crisis, the attention of aid agencies was focused on saving lives. This meant getting as much food as possible into the country. This is the response that the DPRK authorities sought, and this is what governments were willing to provide. There is no doubt that these efforts saved lives, but it quickly became clear that emergency aid was no solution. As more information became available, it was clear this was no short-term emergency to tide over with supplemental food aid. Also, it was not simply a food or agriculture problem. Hunger and starvation were the indicators of a thoroughly broken system, from top to bottom. This assessment was starkly stated (UNOCHA 2002, 7):

The current humanitarian approach alone cannot lead to sustainable development given the complexity of the country's underlying problems. Unless humanitarian assistance is accompanied by development leading to economic recovery/growth, there will be no end to the emergency.

Full-scale development requires addressing systemic problems that have brought the economy to its knees, including reconstruction of infrastructure, investment in whole new industries, putting agriculture on a sustainable basis, creating institutions necessary to promote and facilitate international trade and investment, and also creating market signals where none existed before. In other words, development requires systemwide reform.

The logic of emergency food aid was to buy time for these underlying problems to be addressed. In fact, the largest single food aid program in modern history is now entering its ninth year, and yet only marginal progress has been made toward rehabilitation and even less toward development. The obstacle to shifting to developmental efforts is a monumental chicken-or-egg problem. Donor countries have refused to provide the massive levels of developmental aid needed without evidence of the systemic changes necessary for such aid to be used effectively. The North Korean authorities, meanwhile, have resisted all but marginal changes because they view these prescriptions as the recipe for destabilization and even regime change. Add to this the increased levels of distrust between North Korea and potential donors created by the renewed nuclear dispute, and the result has been near gridlock. So, with a reform program that would address the systemic problems underlying the human suffering not yet in sight, how can aid agencies justify continuing their relatively small-scale, incremental programs?

My response is that aid agencies must do everything they can to encourage and demonstrate, even on a small scale, what development-oriented pro-

grams look like. This can begin with rehabilitation, but every opportunity should be sought to build in activities that prepare for sustainable development, at least at the institutional or sectoral level. Rehabilitation aims to repair or improve elements of the system that can still contribute to meeting human needs and reduce the need for external aid. This could include, for example, providing spare parts for farm machinery, repairing irrigation systems, restarting local food processing, or reequipping hospitals. Development-oriented projects build new local productive and human capacity and introduce new attitudes. Examples would be local production of program inputs, spreading improved agricultural practices through intercooperative workshops, training technicians in new research methodologies, and introducing results-oriented planning tools.

The continuing political standoff actually enhances the importance of NGOs and other aid agencies. Until the large-scale internationally funded development projects can begin, NGOs have shown that they are in a position to pursue rehabilitation and development-oriented projects. The small scale and localization of NGO projects make them appear less threatening than larger projects. Working on a long-term basis in selected locations allows them to build better working relationships. Also, some donors (the EU, for example) are willing to fund small-scale NGO projects in advance of systemic change.

## **Lessons from Operational Experience**

Although all aid agencies face a similarly difficult operational environment in North Korea, some have operated with more success than others. The Appendix provides a summary of the experience of seven resident and non-resident agencies that have had some success in implementing projects with development-oriented impact while minimizing problems with transparency and accountability. Their experience has implications for both the approach to programming and for operating style.

### **Programming**

The community-based, participatory approach to development that NGOs seek to implement elsewhere is not yet possible in North Korea. Nevertheless, years of patient persistence and of trial and error on the part of a number of NGOs have generated important programming lessons. The following recommendations flow from the examples described in the Appendix, but are also based on consultations with aid workers currently in the field as well as my own personal experience. They suggest an approach to NGO programming in North Korea that is most likely to advance the transition from relief and welfare to locally sustainable development.

**Focus on development-oriented projects.** NGOs and bilateral assistance agencies should continue to focus their efforts primarily on rehabilitation and development programs. The essential point is to model a process based on problem assessment, local participation, impact evaluation, and rapid follow-through on success. Projects should be planned in such a way as to maximize the need for involvement at multiple levels and across administrative lines. Such an approach plays to the strengths and flexibility of NGOs and helps break down barriers to communication and learning across North Korean political and administrative units.

**Link with national priorities.** NGOs can increase their chances for success by selecting project interventions that can be linked in some way to official North Korean priorities. Rehabilitation and adjustment of agriculture is clearly the top priority for policymakers and receives direct attention from Kim Jong-il himself. World Vision, for example, has responded to the official call for a “potato revolution” through technical and training programs that addressed some of the early problems in a way that ensures greater impact and accomplishes technology and skill transfer. Similarly, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and others have aligned with the “seed revolution.” Campus für Christus built on the national call for goat raising that threatened to result in further ecological damage by demonstrating less damaging foraging systems; it then went on to introduce new products (cheese and yogurt) and even start a new export industry (goat hides). More recently, rehabilitation of irrigation has received official attention, and a number of NGOs are working in this area.

**Respond to priorities outside of agriculture.** NGOs cannot solve the energy crisis in North Korea, but officials have welcomed small-scale innovations on the local level. The Adventist Development and Rehabilitation Agency (ADRA) is assisting with enhancing and expanding the use of biogas, and the Nautilus Institute is introducing wind power technologies. Challenging the image of a closed society, Kim Jong-il has made IT a high priority as a means of modernization leapfrogging. Although not all of North Korea’s problems will be solved by waiting for official campaigns, it is hard enough to work in North Korea when swimming with the current, let alone when swimming upstream. Also, many agencies have found it possible to branch into new activity areas once their credibility in the priority area has been demonstrated.

**Include capacity building.** Training and other forms of capacity building should be a major element of every project. North Korean farmers, technicians, and managers are educated and have demonstrated openness to new ideas and new approaches. The IFRC’s efforts to upgrade the knowledge, skills, and educational materials of the North Korean Red Cross is an outstanding example of a long-term capacity-building program at the national

level (IFRC 2003). The UNICEF/WFP nutritional surveys incorporated new data-processing technology and skills training on a large scale. Triangle Generation Humanitaire and Concern Worldwide organized a two-day training for managers of 15 tree nurseries; Concern is also organizing a Farmer Field School for training in appropriate use of bio-pesticides; the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has set up a training center for farm mechanics in one county. AFSC and Campus für Christus have arranged long-term overseas training programs for North Korean technicians and farm managers.

**Bring new technology.** North Korea needs both low-end (appropriate) technologies and high-end (state-of-the-art) technologies in order to deal with a collapsed industrialized economy and infrastructure. Side by side, we see effective projects to introduce integrated pest management, green manures, village water systems, and biogas energy on the one hand and hydroponic seed potato production, IT projects, and the latest technology for detecting and treating tuberculosis on the other. Multiple technologies and processes will create a marketplace of ideas and possible solutions that will help break the rigidity of many years of top-down dictation of cookie-cutter solutions.

**Build an information base.** NGOs should try to incorporate collection, analysis, and useful data into their projects. Shifting the basis of project choice and assessment away from political considerations to a scientific basis is key to a development approach. At the national level, the two nutritional surveys, no matter their limitations, have no doubt provided the North Korean government with a clearer picture than ever before of the status of their children's health. Earlier, the UNDP worked with the North Korean Ministry of Agriculture to produce the Agricultural Rehabilitation and Environmental Protection (AREP) plan for rehabilitating the agricultural sector. The process included collection of the best estimates for agricultural sector indicators currently available. At the NGO project level, several agencies have reported careful data collection and analysis by farmers for field trials, and even testing of water quality for sanitation projects (once denied to Oxfam) is now accepted. Linking data collection and analysis to introduction of new IT concepts and technology can encourage acceptance because IT is one of the leadership's highest priorities.

**Promote sustainability.** Sustainability requires administrative support, ongoing skill transfer, availability of inputs, maintenance, replication, and ultimately a sense of local ownership and responsibility. It is clear that sustainability is a particular challenge in North Korea. Following directives from above, officials have sometimes pushed for a particular initiative only to drop it when the political winds shifted. Emphasizing capacity building and expanding to as many locations and levels as possible may help prevent

dependence on a few skilled persons. Many projects require inputs that are not produced in the country and cannot be imported because of lack of foreign exchange, an obstacle for which there will be no thorough solution until the overarching problem of integrating North Korea into the world economy is solved. However, the project approach itself can limit dependence (for example, green manure over chemical fertilizers, gravity-flow irrigation over pumps). Agencies can also include in project design the rehabilitation or construction of local manufacturing or processing facilities (including food processing, farm machine shops, intravenous-fluid production, irrigation pipe manufacturing). Creating as many backward (through local procurement) and forward (product marketing) linkages to the core project is a way to increase the likelihood that the initiative will be sustained. Finally, the North Korean tendency to build a showcase project should be resisted, and emphasis should be consistently placed on the replicability of innovations over a wide area.

**Respond to new opportunities.** Limited market forces have come into play in North Korea, creating new opportunities for some Koreans and perhaps opening new areas for external assistance. As farmers become partially oriented to markets, micro-credit projects could support expansion of production of farm animals and crops on private plots or in small groups. Farmer training could include management skills that the emerging individual farmers need to make a profit. The price and wage reforms have created a new and growing urban unemployed sector that does not have cash to purchase food and other essentials. Innovative programs aimed at creating small-scale handicraft or other export-oriented industries may be welcome by the government. As in other crises, women have borne the brunt of the economic collapse in North Korea. Livelihood projects targeting women, such as the project recently initiated by the Swiss development agency, SDC, may be another way of responding to the new situation that is emerging.

## Operating Style

Aid agencies still operate under objectionable restrictions on transparency and accountability. However, some agencies appear to fare better than others in this regard. The question is what approach to working in North Korea is most likely to enhance accountability and encourage a receptive response on the part of North Korean counterparts.

**Build trust.** In spite of the polite hospitality most aid agencies encounter, the DPRK considers all international agencies and individuals with which it works as potential security threats until proven otherwise. Sincerity on the part of the organization and its representatives is the key concept for Koreans. An agency demonstrates sincerity by following through on commitments, by appointing sensitive and well-trained staff to the program, by steadily

increasing the size of its commitment, and by avoiding negative publicity about the country. Personal sincerity on the part of agency representatives is demonstrated by showing respect for the North Korean system and its leaders, by recognizing the accomplishments of the society under very difficult circumstances, by being flexible in project implementation when possible, and by inquiring respectfully about customs and way of life in the North Korea. None of this is different from ways of building trust in other cultures; in North Korea, however, it is extremely important and it may take more time. Everyone may see things that they don't like about North Korea, but, as long as the commitment has been made to engage the government through humanitarian assistance, it is counterproductive to voice criticism openly.

**Appoint good staff.** Careful selection and preparation of staff to reside in or regularly visit North Korea is critical to success. Staff should have the personal qualities suited to living in and working in a closed, monitored, and stressful society with few distractions. Preparation should include orientations with others who have worked in North Korea as well as basic information on the modern history of the Korean peninsula. Maintaining the same organizational representatives over an extended period allows for building personal trust on the part of the Korean counterparts (and the Korean security services) and acquiring needed knowledge and insight on the part of the foreign representative. It is advisable to separate the roles of official agency representative/negotiator (who may be resident or nonresident) and project technical staff who bring specific skills to the program and work directly with counterparts. This will provide an important buffer between the day-to-day working staff and the political pressures inherent in the system.

**Cultivate counterpart relations.** The most important personal relationships are those with the political and technical counterparts with whom agency representatives work on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes this relationship can be strained by difficult negotiations, unexpected changes in plans, and denial of reasonable requests. One must always keep in mind that North Korean counterparts are under extreme pressures that we can hardly imagine. They have been entrusted to have intimate dealings with foreigners with whom the general population is prohibited contact. Theirs is a very risky position because serious missteps could bring disaster to them and their families. They are working under strict constraints and they deliver decisions rather than make them. Expressing sympathy for their situation, even when they deliver bad news, can help control frustration. Patience and an even temper are rewarded.

**Design transparent projects.** Negotiate projects that by their nature make accountability easier. Focus on a limited number of cooperative farms, institutions, or sites over an extended period of time. This will enable the development of working relationships with local officials and managers and al-

low impact to be observed. Provide material assistance in the form of equipment and supplies specific to the assessed needs of the project sites. Deliver material inputs in allotments allowing confirmation of delivery, installation, and use of one set before the next is ordered. Require cooperative evaluation in project phases, making it clear that continuation depends on favorable results.

**Collaborate with other agencies.** In a country where information is controlled, monitoring is constrained, and isolation is policy, it is essential that aid agencies cooperate and collaborate as much as possible. This does not happen easily because the authorities are not comfortable with agencies comparing notes and working together, although this seems to be changing somewhat. The Inter-Agency Forum and other structures already exist for UN-bilateral-NGO cooperation, and these should be continually strengthened. The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should continually collect and share data on aid agency projects by county, by institution, by cooperative farm, and other jurisdiction in order to create a current matrix of agency activity by location and by project sector. Agencies should continue to explore opportunities for collaboration in the field in order to make their limited resources go further. No agency should initiate work in North Korea without fully consulting with agencies already engaged there.

**Persist.** Compared with operations in most other countries, the early period of building trust and demonstrating credibility takes much longer in North Korea. It is frequently a bumpy road, subject to misunderstanding and changes in the international environment. It usually takes several years for an agency to arrive at the point where effective, development-oriented projects can be introduced. Senior decision makers in aid agencies must recognize these realities and be ready to make long-term initial commitments. It is no accident that those agencies with the longest history of engagement with North Korea (IFRC, Campus, Concern, Caritas, AFSC, Eugene Bell Foundation) have the best working relationships with the authorities and some of the most innovative programs.

## Conclusion

The human suffering in North Korea today is the result of a failed system operating in a hostile international environment. Humanitarian aid organizations cannot solve this problem. Only sustained, multifaceted, systemic change based on political decisions in Pyongyang can set North Korea on the path to building an economy that can meet the basic needs of its people. Change in the international political environment, especially reduction of tensions with the United States and acceleration in South Korean–North Korean rapprochement, are needed to encourage and facilitate this process.



So, what is the role of aid agencies in this constricted and wholly politicized context?

First, resident and visiting aid workers, even though they have limited direct interaction with ordinary Koreans, serve the critical role of witnessing and accompaniment. Imagine the tragedy of famine and the struggle for survival of the last nine years going on behind the old *juche* curtain, unseen by the world. Instead, at least to some extent, we know what North Koreans have suffered and endured. And many North Koreans know that we know. This has created an emergent solidarity that encourages Korean risk taking for the sake of helping their own people. The system may be cruel, but from my own experience I can say that there are North Korean humanitarians who are deeply encouraged by the presence of international aid workers.

Second, by engaging North Korea in cooperative aid programs, aid agencies explicitly or implicitly communicate that the best hope for the North Korean people is evolution of their system. While they must work within the parameters set by the regime, aid agencies do not necessarily strengthen the status quo. Through interaction with North Koreans at national, local, and institutional levels, they create new space and opportunities for many Koreans to consider an alternative future for their society. Most aid workers live and project a very different image of the outside world than that in the official propaganda. This is a world that North Koreans can sense they may be able to live in. In fact, it is my impression that many North Koreans are already dwelling in two worlds: the old, regimented world of "single-minded unity" and the new world of scrambling to sustain themselves by their own wits with openness to anything that might help. That this new world could be termed "authentic *juche*" makes this mental trick bearable.

Third, aid workers have pressed their North Korean counterparts, especially at the local level, to take practical approaches to problem solving on the basis of objective data. This direction happens to coincide with a subtle change in official policy. In the old days, Kim Il-sung (or those speaking for him) decided which crops to plant and how much fertilizer to apply, and everyone waited for his solution to every problem (often through "on-the-spot guidance"). Now local units are told that they are on their own and must solve their problems however they can. But years of waiting for orders and direction have suppressed the North Koreans' native creativity, and many are reticent, if not fearful, to suggest novel solutions. Aid agencies have supported local solutions, usually in dialogue with local administrators: "Instead of waiting for more fertilizer, let's try crop rotation and green manure. Instead of cutting trees from the hillsides, let's cultivate woodlots. Instead of waiting for fuel for old pumps, let's dig gravity flow irrigation systems." Official campaigns are still launched from above, but now many of these innovations originate from initial small-scale collaboration between aid agencies and local units.

Fourth, the work of aid agencies is creating stand-by development capacity.<sup>16</sup> Development-oriented projects, such as those described above, have introduced new ideas, new approaches, new skills, and new knowledge of how the world works. This process along with parallel engagement with outside commercial companies have made North Korea ready to move ahead much more quickly than current official policy allows. Other transitional experiences indicate that policy and its constraints lag behind change on the ground. This is illustrated by the catch-up policy to recognize open markets long after they appeared and to adjust prices closer to black-market realities. If and when a fundamental shift in official policy is rolled out, change in North Korea will undoubtedly surge ahead, building to a significant extent on the experience of many years of working with aid agencies.

Finally, North Korea's isolation from the outside world has contributed to the dangerous political and military confrontation that continues to threaten the region. Through the work of humanitarian aid agencies over the past 10 years more, North Koreans have had more contact with outsiders and their ideas than through any other channel. For all their flaws and mistakes, aid agencies represent some of the best impulses and values of the world community, and the interaction between them and Koreans at many levels can only have improved the environment for resolving the political issues. In this sense every aid program in North Korea is ipso facto a peace-building program. Though the scale of human suffering may be greater in other parts of the world, perhaps it is only in North Korea where a relatively small humanitarian effort can potentially have such a crucial impact on the overall situation.

For aid agencies to fulfill these roles, they must be committed to working in an unusual and difficult environment. They must continue to negotiate and renegotiate the terms of engagement and accept that they will be buffeted by political ups and downs. And they must be prepared to shift gears if the situation changes. Nevertheless, whatever the political future of North Korea might be, the knowledge and skills that the aid agencies impart will be useful in building a better future. Self-reliance is an honored concept in development work. One way of looking at the role of aid agencies is that they are joining with North Koreans to reinterpret *juche* so that it can be the basis for authentic self-reliant, but also participatory and liberating, human development.

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16 In the UN 2004 Consolidated Appeal for the DPRK (UNOCHA 2003a, sec. 2.4) a similar point is made (emphasis added): "Although aid agencies have been able to achieve significant results with well targeted assistance. . . , the limited sustainable improvements in the humanitarian situation has demonstrated the need for sustained efforts by all parties to create an *enabling environment for development*."

## **Appendix**

### **Humanitarian Aid Projects in North Korea: Selected Examples**

#### **Adventist Development and Relief Agency–Switzerland (ADRA)**

ADRA–Switzerland is the Swiss national branch of ADRA, a faith-based international organization. ADRA began operating on a small scale in North Korea in 1999, initially providing food aid and winter clothing. The program has expanded to include local production of enriched bread for schools, rehabilitation of hospitals including staff training, and alternative energy. Of particular interest is the project, in collaboration with the North Korean Thermal Institute (housed at the State University of Science), to promote alternative and efficient use of energy. This, of course, is a high-priority issue for the government, which has pushed for local power generation using small-scale hydroelectric generators. ADRA has focused on introducing improved biogas fermenters to produce gas as an energy source for operating farm machinery and trucks, warming homes, and cooking. In 2003, ADRA completed a test model of a family-size digester that makes use of local and imported technology. To enable year-round gas production, the digester is housed in an insulated greenhouse that can also be used to grow vegetables during the winter. After assessment of this trial, ADRA and the Institute plan widespread dissemination of the technology around the country (Wellinger 2003).

#### **American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)**

AFSC, the international service agency of American Quakers, began a program in 1998 to support agricultural rehabilitation that has focused on improving soil fertility, upgrading irrigation systems, and reducing post-harvest losses. The project is implemented on several cooperative farms, and a research component is pursued in collaboration with the Academy of Agricultural Sciences (KAAS). The scarcity of chemical fertilizers has created a strong incentive in North Korea to find alternative methods for rebuilding soil fertility. AFSC has sought to introduce selection and wide dissemination of green manures plus crop rotation farming systems. Local and national scientists have run selection trials with a variety of leguminous crops that can be planted in paddy and rain-fed fields in late fall, and then plowed under in the spring before planting the main crop. Two of these green manures have been identified as hardy and compatible, and the scientists claim that if used in an integrated cropping system could provide at least half of the nitrogen needed for rice and corn production. KAAS is now ready to promote this system throughout the country.

AFSC has also facilitated a link-up between KAAS rice breeders and rice scientists in Vietnam. In fall 2003, three North Korean rice breeders traveled to Vietnam where they lived for six months in order to grow a range of rice

varieties (996 different experimental lines) to speed up varietal selection processes. Using the winter season could cut in half the time needed to identify improved varieties. The Rice Institute of the Vietnam Agriculture Science Institute hosted the North Koreans and arranged field trips to national and regional agricultural research centers. (Ireson 2003, and personal correspondence)

### **Campus für Christus (CfC)**

Campus für Christus, a non-denominational Christian organization based in Switzerland, began a project in 1997 to support the national call for raising goats. The project began on a small scale in one county of South Hamgyong province, focusing initially on improved fodder and animal care. Over the years the project has expanded to include introduction of modern breeding practices (including importing of frozen semen to improve herds), improved milk processing and preservation, cheese and yogurt making, and more recently tanning to produce high-quality hides for export. The tanning and hides export component has been developed in cooperation with the Ministry of Light Industry with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, Campus has expanded the project to nine sites including North Hwanghae province and the Pyongyang area. The project directly affects an estimated 20,000 people but reaches many others through training held at the nine project centers. Some 67 North Koreans have traveled to Switzerland, where they lived with farm families and learned modern herding methods. According to Campus, the project “concentrates on state-of-the-art technologies and methods which can be operated in the mid-term without dependence or support from abroad and which can be reproduced” (United Nations 2003a, 161).

### **Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF)**

The Eugene Bell Foundation, a nonresident NGO based in the United States and South Korea and working only in North Korea, has selected and focused on one serious health problem: the reemergence and spread of tuberculosis. Starting with donations of essential anti-TB drugs to a few TB clinics, EBF has now developed a full program at multiple sites throughout the country, including hospital and sanitarium rehabilitation, provision of fully equipped mobile diagnostic clinics, introduction of the DOTS treatment, and training of medical staff at all levels in the TB control sector. EBF estimates that its assistance now reaches one-third of all TB patients in the country, or 130,000 persons in 50 hospitals and clinics. Though the program will continue to rely on donated supplies, EBF has succeeded in introducing new treatments and inculcating new attitudes among medical staff and patients. EBF enjoys good access and is able to document its work carefully. This special relation-

ship is due largely to the fact that, beginning with his first trip to the country in 1979, EBF's founder, Dr. Stephen Linton, has been able to develop a high level of trust with senior North Korean officials. Dr. Linton's fluency in the language belies the claim that North Korea will not work with foreign Korean speakers.

### **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)**

The IFRC's primary goal in North Korea has been to strengthen the national Red Cross Society's capacity to respond to human needs caused by the systemic crisis as well as sudden onset disasters. IFRC maintains a small team in the country as advisers and technical assistants but works primarily through the national Red Cross. Projects include provision of essential drugs and supplies to approximately 1,762 hospitals and clinics, improvement of water and sanitation systems, disaster management, and organizational development for the national Society. The IFRC has probably done more than any other agency to demonstrate the possibility and potential impact of human capacity building in the health sector. The IFRC has integrated capacity building in all aspects of health delivery and care, especially in disaster preparedness and management. For example, in 2003 alone, the IFRC supported multiple workshops for health personnel from national to village level in the following areas: malaria prevention, safe delivery practices (for midwives), rational drug use, SARS response, HIV/AIDS, hospital infection control, community-based first aid, water sanitation and health, and disaster management. The IFRC (and ICRC) has helped link the North Korean Red Cross into the world movement by supporting many study visits and training in other countries, including China and Mongolia as well as the headquarters in Geneva. It is generally conceded that North Korea once had an impressive health infrastructure and a large supply of doctors and other professionals that provided cradle-to-grave health care. The IFRC's approach is to build on this foundation while introducing modern technology and management practices (IFRC 2000, IFRC 2003).

### **Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)**

SDC's broad program of assistance to North Korea illustrates the potential for bilateral aid from a country that enjoys normal diplomatic relations with North Korea. SDC's program explicitly supports the transition from aid to development assistance and internal economic reform. Its approach includes support for improved food security, strengthening the efficiency and autonomy of economic units, and building capacity to use aid effectively. There are several projects: a multi-pronged agricultural development project working with KAAS and 20 cooperative farms; a project (financed by UNIFEM) to build management and marketing skills among unemployed women in

Pyongyang and support them to take advantage of the emerging market economy; an IT seeding project that links Swiss companies with units in North Korea; and a program supporting small-scale projects of European NGOs focusing on sloping-land management, integrated pest management, mechanical training, and support to the Campus für Christus goat project. In addition to technical training for participants in the projects outlined above, for its Korean counterparts and Korean technical staff in all aid agencies, SDC has recently begun implementing training modules on project cycle management and on the transition from humanitarian aid to development cooperation (UNOCHA 2003b).

### **World Vision (WV)**

World Vision International and World Vision (South) Korea have worked together in North Korea since 1996 in a range of project areas including agricultural rehabilitation, medical assistance, and food delivery and processing. One project has focused on the national priority to increase rapidly the production of potatoes as a supplementary food source. Potatoes can be grown in less fertile soils and can be harvested in late spring, allowing a second crop to be planted. The fact that Kim Jong-il himself has called for a “potato revolution” has ensured that World Vision has received an unusual level of cooperation and access. The critical limiting factor in potato production is seed quality. World Vision, in close collaboration with KAAS scientists, decided to focus on the problem of producing, protecting, and distributing high-yielding, virus-free seed potatoes. In a major technology-transfer initiative, World Vision introduced an integrated program that includes large-scale hydroponic greenhouses in Pyongyang that supply virus-free minitubers to four regional seed production centers corresponding to the four major agro-geographical areas of the country. The model introduced in the North was developed in South Korea by the government’s Rural Development Administration. South Korean scientists regularly visit the North to work with, and provide training for, North Korean scientists at the national and regional levels. Several North Korean scientists have received training in Australia. Initially all the materials and chemicals needed for hydroponic farming were imported, but gradually local materials are being substituted wherever possible. It will take several more years to realize the full potential of this project, but major yield improvements have already been realized in local experiments (Lee Y. 2003).

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