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SPECIAL REPORT

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Overcoming Humanitarian Dilemmas in the DPRK (North Korea)

About the Report

This report examines the diversity of humanitarian agency responses to working in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)—north Korea—and proposes a set of recommendations for agencies and governments.

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The information in this report comes from United Nations, governmental, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports on humanitarian activity in the DPRK and the results of an e-mail and telephone survey of major humanitarian actors that have operated and continue to operate in the DPRK. The survey was carried out by the author in October and November 2001.

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Briefly . . .

- In 1995 the DPRK (north Korean) government appealed to the international community for assistance to cope with gross food shortages, which threatened starvation for its people.
- UN humanitarian agencies that had had some relationship with the DPRK since the 1980s—the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Food Program (WFP)— responded to these appeals and became fully operational and resident in the country after 1995.
- Prior to the crisis of the mid-1990s, the DPRK had no experience of working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) except for periodic links with the Red Cross and through its hosting of small delegations such as the American Friends Service Committee.
- The UN agencies and the NGOs had little knowledge of the politics, economy, culture, or society of the DPRK prior to their involvement in emergency assistance to the country.
- The DPRK government had a parallel lack of knowledge and understanding of the conventional requirements for international humanitarian assistance.
- Humanitarian agencies found common difficulties in the constraints placed by the government on monitoring, assessment, and evaluation and faced a dilemma about whether or on what terms to continue.
- Agency responses varied considerably, according to a multiplicity of factors, including country of origin, mandate, and type of donor.
- The majority perspective was that confidence building and a process of mutual comprehension had taken place and continues to evolve between the DPRK government and the humanitarian agencies.

- Although difficulties remain, the process of dialogue has facilitated an improvement in humanitarian agency working conditions.
- Humanitarian assistance continues to save lives and therefore multilateral and bilateral humanitarian agencies should continue to supply much-needed assistance.
- Donor governments should build on the channels opened by humanitarian assistance to further develop policies of constructive engagement, confidence building, and the slow but essential formation of trust that is crucial for bringing human and international security to the Korean peninsula.

Introduction

International humanitarian agencies have been working in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)—north Korea—since 1995. Working conditions have not been easy and some of the agencies that have chosen to end operating in the DPRK, as a reaction to the constraints on their operations, have generated widespread publicity for their position. This publicity has generally masked the fact that only a tiny minority of international agencies supported the withdrawal approach. Many more have chosen to carry on delivering assistance—arguing that they are meeting humanitarian need, that conditions for humanitarian work in the DPRK are improving, and that a process of confidence building is occurring with the DPRK government.

The focus of this paper is not the case for or against humanitarian assistance, but the core humanitarian dilemma for those working in the DPRK. Given the acceptance by all agencies of widespread humanitarian need, 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?

The Crisis

In the mid-1990s the DPRK suffered from a series of natural disasters that both destroyed food crops and exacerbated the structural economic decline that had been taking place since at least the late 1980s. By the early to mid-1990s the DPRK could not feed its population by its own production, and did not have the resources to purchase food from abroad. In addition, lack of locally produced inputs and the wherewithal to purchase them contributed to nationwide deterioration in the socioeconomic infrastructure, including (although not confined to) the transport, energy, health, education, and welfare sectors.

The Government's Response

The DPRK government had initially responded to the growing crisis with various self-help initiatives that included encouraging innovation in the workplace, recycling of all used material, the cultivation of marginal agricultural land, the organization and support of population movement toward land where food could be obtained, and the ever more extensive use of human labor in place of equipment and machinery that was no longer available in the country. In 1995, after massive floods destroyed up to three million tons of emergency grain reserves, the government was forced to appeal to the United Nations humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations for assistance.

According to figures produced jointly by the government and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), gross domestic product (GDP) declined by about 50 percent between 1993 and 1996, representing a drop in per capita income to $481. Acute

food shortages threatened the lives of millions, particularly the most vulnerable—children, women, the elderly, and the sick. Starvation followed for hundreds of thousands. It is impossible to obtain accurate information on the number of "excess deaths" (deaths in excess of normal mortality) due to starvation, malnutrition, and related causes during what is now understood as the worst years of crisis, between 1995 and 1998. Figures have been cited ranging from 220,000, which was a number calculated from governmental statements on changing death and birth rates, to three million, which appears to have been arrived at by combining worst case scenarios. Whatever the number, the scale of death and suffering was evidence of a humanitarian disaster. The crisis was nationwide and severe malnutrition among children was observed everywhere, including in Pyongyang.

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From the late 1990s, the government has prioritized for food distribution the military and workers engaged in industries designed to rebuild the economy. What is left of the main October harvest is shared through the remnants of the public distribution system until the harvest runs out, usually by December or January of each year. The population in provinces with less arable land, such as in the northeast, have been in the main more vulnerable than others, except where they have access to alternative coping strategies such as formal and informal trade with China and access to the sea for fishing.

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Agricultural Policy

Since 1995, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has carried out, in conjunction with the government and the UN World Food Program (WFP), biannual food and crop assessments in the DPRK. The FAO/WFP surveys, compiled from satellite data, government information, discussions with humanitarian agencies, and field visits, have shown that annual food production is insufficient to meet needs. Annual cereal production remains at a low level with a decline in production since the start of the FAO/WFP surveys in 1995. On the more positive side, the most recent FAO/WFP crop assessment, of October 2001, indicates a 38 percent increase in cereal production compared to the very difficult previous year, with some indication of structural improvements, although the report also indicates a continuing large aggregate food deficit. The report states that a grave food crisis can only be averted in 2002 through continuing international assistance.

The improvements in agriculture evidenced in 2001 came about through the coordinated action, since 1998, of the government and the international community, including donor governments and international development and humanitarian agencies, which have been jointly implementing the UNDP-led Agricultural Recovery and Environmental Plan (AREP). The plan involves more use of double cropping; the diversification of cereal crops, notably through greater use of potato as a staple; and international technical cooperation. Also important has been the provision of fertilizer by south Korea, since the DPRK has a small amount of agricultural land (18 percent of the total) and is heavily dependent on the use of fertilizer, chemicals, and, given the difficult topography, electricity-fed irrigation, which requires scarce fuel.

Food Security Policies

Humanitarian agencies, donors, and government share the broad conclusions of the FAO/WFP that food security cannot realistically be obtained only through the reorientation of agricultural policy, although marginal improvements can continue. Food security will only come about if the economy is revived so the country can both buy the inputs it needs to produce food and earn the hard currency it needs to buy food on international markets. Currently, export earnings remain minimal—around $500 million dollars a year. In addition, the scale of the capital necessary to resuscitate the economy will entail foreign capital investment, which will have to come from the multilateral financial institutions and the neighboring countries of Japan or the Republic of Korea (ROK). Neither China nor the European Union has a major interest in providing signifi-

cant investment in the DPRK. The United States, even given more harmonious political relations, is also unlikely to be a major provider of support for economic recovery.

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Support from multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, which would effectively require United States approval, would be contingent on a change of policies by the DPRK government in the direction of more political freedom and more transparency. Another major source of potential export earnings is from reparations that Japan will pay on a similar basis to those paid the Republic of Korea in the 1960s, as recompense for the destruction and suffering caused by the Japanese occupation of the first half of the 20th century. The amount and timing of such payments is entirely related to the outcome of normalization talks between Japan and the DPRK, currently stalled owing to a lack of agreement on missiles and the broader security environment including the alleged kidnapping and abduction of Japanese nationals. South Korean business continues to invest in the DPRK—mainly for reasons of national pride and as an aid to peacebuilding—but only in relatively small amounts. Significant investment from south Korea is likely to occur only when the political relationship between North and South becomes more stable.

Another source of export earnings for the DPRK is missile technology, although the United States, Japan, and other countries are anxious to prevent the proliferation of both missiles and missile technology and are working to prevent such exports. In October 2000, DPRK-U.S. talks on security issues, including a missiles agreement, which would likely have opened the doors to cautious western economic involvement in the DPRK, developed to the extent that Secretary of State Madeline Albright visited Pyongyang, but the talks have since broken down. Until international talks on a non-proliferation agreement are revived and an agreement on missiles and security obtained, it seems unlikely that the external investment that is necessary to revive the economy will be forthcoming.

The Scope and Scale of the Humanitarian Effort

Few external observers are aware of the sheer immensity and diversity of the humanitarian effort.

In 1995, multilateral, bilateral, and non-governmental humanitarian agencies responded to the crisis through the provision of large-scale assistance, and they continue seven years later to provide "emergency" or humanitarian assistance, although in 2002 most of the agencies are attempting to incorporate some form of development or rehabilitation into their humanitarian programs. Few external observers are aware of the sheer immensity and diversity of the humanitarian effort. Total U.S. food aid since 1995, for instance, amounts to 1.8 million metric tons, valued at $591 million, with the United States donating around 40 percent of total food aid in 2001.

The wide variety of organizations helps to explain the diversity of perspectives on humanitarian involvement in the DPRK.

Since the first international humanitarian responses to the crisis, the composition of the international humanitarian community in terms of the types of agencies and their geographical provenance has been diverse. In addition, some agencies are resident while many more are non-resident. The wide variety of organizations helps to explain the diversity of perspectives on humanitarian involvement in the DPRK. On the other hand, if methods of operation and mandates have varied, sectors of assistance have remained more or less the same. The most substantial sector of foreign assistance remains that of direct food aid, although agriculture and health are now also supported.

A Changing Humanitarian Community

There have been two main changes in the composition of the international humanitarian community between 1995 and 2002. The first is the move from a negligible in-country presence to, relatively speaking, a substantial residential presence, including governmental, multilateral, and non-governmental agencies. The second and related change is the start of work by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the DPRK. NGO methods

of operation differ according to geographical origin. South Korean and Japanese NGOs are non-residential. United States NGOs have been mainly non-residential (with the partial exception of health and food aid monitors in-country in parts of 1998, 1999, and 2000). European NGOs have been mainly residential. (It is a condition of funding of the European Community's Humanitarian Office that there is a resident presence.) So far the Canadian NGOs have operated as non-residents.

Multilateral and Bilateral Agencies

From 1995, UN resident missions were consolidated, expanded, and shifted in focus from non-residential to residential. The key agency for development assistance was UNDP, the "oldest" of the resident agencies, having established an office in 1980, which also helped, among other things, to organize and implement humanitarian assistance in the "cross-over" from relief to rehabilitation. WFP established an office in November 1995, UNICEF in January 1996, and the World Health Organization (WHO) in late 1997. UN agencies in DPRK have expanded their presence since 1995 with, by 2002, in-country international representation from the UN Family Planning Association, a national officer employed by FAO in-country, and regular visiting missions from smaller UN agencies, for example, the World Tourism Organization.

In July 1997, the Swiss Disaster Relief Unit (SDR) opened an office in Pyongyang, followed in August by the European Commission, which established an office with six international staff members (four from the commission's Food Security Unit and two from ECHO, the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office). The major bilateral agency operating in the DPRK in 2002 is SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (under which the old SDR is now subsumed). In addition, the Italian Development Cooperation has had a resident presence in Pyongyang for a couple of years.

The Resident NGO Community

A number of NGOs including Caritas and Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) visited the DPRK from 1995 on to provide immediate aid and make assessments of need. The first NGO residency was established in 1997 when the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) set up an office in Pyongyang along with six other non-governmental agencies. These were Children's Aid Direct (CAD), Concern Worldwide, Cooperazione e Sviluppo (CESVI), Deutsche Welthungerhilfe—known in English as German Agro Action (GAA), Medecins du Monde (MDM), and MSF. In 1998 Action Against Hunger, Help Age International, Oxfam, and Cap Anamur also became resident.

The NGO community has fluctuated in number since then. Five have left and six have arrived. Since 1997, additions to the resident NGO community have been Adventist Development Relief Agency or ADRA (Switzerland), PMU Interlife (the Swedish Pentecostal mission, Pingst Missionens Utveck), Campus fur Christus (Switzerland), and in 2000, two new French NGOs, Handicap International and Triangle. In 2001 Hungarian Baptist Aid established what it calls "semi-residential" status.

Of the five resident agencies that decided to leave DPRK, three voiced concerns that they were not reaching the most vulnerable children and that the difficulties and constraints they faced prevented adequate assessment, monitoring, and evaluation. One agency, Oxfam, was particularly concerned with constraints on adequate monitoring and assessment, not of beneficiaries, but of the water facilities it was testing. There were also problems for some programs in obtaining funds for the DPRK operations.

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The Non-Resident NGOs

At least four groups of non-resident NGOs have also assisted DPRK, none of these groups being mutually exclusive. Two groups (with overlapping membership) operate through a

semi-resident presence in the DPRK. The first are those who coordinate their activities through the NGO-funded Food Aid Liaison Unit (FALU) of the WFP. The second are those NGOs from the United States that have coordinated their activities through the Private Voluntary Organization Consortium (PVOC). A third group operates through sister NGOs, some of which are resident in the DPRK and some of which are not. A fourth group operates bilaterally, directly with the DPRK government, and includes south Korean, Japanese, and United States–based NGOs.

FALU was set up in 1997 by Caritas, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), Action for Churches Together (ACT)/Church World Service, World Vision International (WVI), ADRA, Food for the Hungry, and Mercy Corps International. In 2002, members are Caritas, CFGB, ACT, and WVI. FALU currently employs one DPRK-based international officer and two national officers who undertake monitoring, evaluation, and reporting on behalf of its constituent NGOs.

PVOC was established in 1997 and was comprised of ADRA, Amigos Internacionales, CARE, Catholic Relief Service, Church World Service, Korean-American Sharing Movement, Latter Day Saints Charities, Mercy Corps, and World Vision. PVOC monitors were based in DPRK in 1998 with UNICEF, and in 1999-2000 with WFP. Three Korean speakers were employed in a team whose numbers changed but comprised around eight people. The PVOC team exited the country when the potato seed project and the Food for Work activities, which its member NGOs had supported, came to an end in 2000.

The third group of NGOs—mainly of U.S. origin—work with international counterparts, for instance the American Red Cross supports the IFRC. U.S. agencies like the Eugene Bell Foundation and the Institute on Strategic Reconciliation work in tandem with south Korean counterparts as well as the DPRK authorities.

Some non-resident NGOs choose to work bilaterally. These include AmeriCares, the American Friends Service Committee, and Mercy Corps (in addition to its work within the PVOC).

Japanese NGOs, which have been assisting the DPRK since 1995, have tended to work closely with the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, a long-established organization with close ties to the DPRK government. Japanese NGOs include the Association to Send Eggs and Bananas to the Children of the DPRK, Caritas-Japan, the Relief Campaign Committee for Children, and the National Christian Council in Japan.

South Korean NGOs have also assisted the DPRK and their numbers and activities have grown since they first started work in late 1995. Agencies include the Korean Sharing Movement, Iussaran Association, World Vision, Join Together Society, and the Korean People's Welfare Foundation. In June 2001, 26 south Korean NGOs were donating humanitarian assistance to the DPRK.

Of the non-resident NGOs, two U.S.-based NGOs have decided that they will no longer operate in the DPRK, citing operational constraints including the inability to conduct adequate assessment, monitoring, and evaluation. These are CARE and Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In contrast, south Korean NGOs have tried to encourage a greater participation from international non-governmental agencies in the DPRK.

A Background of Mutual Incomprehension

Principles of transparency and accountability demanded by agencies were therefore antithetical to the operating of the state.

The DPRK is probably the most closed society in the world and prior to the food emergency of the 1990s very little reliable information was available about the country. The government viewed all data through a national security prism which considered that even basic micro socio-economic statistics could be useful to its adversaries. The agencies thus had a double handicap. First, they had no basic information other than that provided by the government or that could be gleaned from the rare publication that attempted to offer some objective analysis of the country from the little data available.

Second, requests for what was seen by the agencies as standard baseline data were often seen by the government as unnecessarily intrusive, and as seeming to ask for information that could be made available to enemy states. Principles of transparency and accountability demanded by agencies were therefore antithetical to the operating of the state.

Humanitarian Agency Concerns

The DPRK did not present the classic problems for humanitarian agencies in that personal safety for workers has never been an issue. Instead, from early 1997, NGOs and the key UN agencies of WFP and UNICEF began to express concerns that they were not permitted unimpeded access to beneficiaries to assess need and impact of assistance, and to monitor the distribution of aid. Agencies were also concerned with the reliability and quality of information they received from the government. The substantive concerns of many humanitarian agencies focused on two related areas—whether aid was reaching the most vulnerable of the population, and the restrictions on direct access to beneficiary or potential beneficiary groups. Not all the agencies have voiced these concerns and the agencies that have voiced these concerns have not shared them to the same degree.

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Humanitarian Principles

In 1998, in an attempt to clarify with the government what the humanitarian agencies viewed as appropriate and essential principles for humanitarian operations in the DPRK, humanitarian agencies issued a collective set of "humanitarian principles." These were initially worked out with DPRK officials and were first issued in November 1998 and amended in April 1999 and March 2001:

- knowledge about the overall humanitarian situation in the country according to assessed needs
- assurance that humanitarian assistance reaches sectors of the population in greatest need
- access for assessment, monitoring, and evaluation
- distribution of assistance only to areas where access is granted
- protection of the humanitarian interests of the population
- support to local capacity building
- beneficiary participation in program planning and implementation
- adequate capacity in terms of international staff
- meet the health and safety needs of the international humanitarian community

Humanitarian agencies have also issued three consensus statements on humanitarian operations in the country. The humanitarian principles are monitored through a series of benchmarks developed by the in-country humanitarian/development working group comprised of all the resident humanitarian agencies. Progress on the benchmarks is regularly recorded in reports on implementation of the United Nations' annual Common Humanitarian Assistance Plan, which is coordinated by the UN Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The nine humanitarian principles express broad areas in which the agencies wish to see progress and serve as a baseline for individual and collective agency negotiations with the government. A set of indicators has been developed by OCHA in order to record, in detail, achievements and constraints in respect to the implementation of the humanitarian principles. These are regularly updated, and the most recent report shows gradual improvements in some areas, continuing constraints in others, and some deterioration in a small number of areas.

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Agency Responses to Working Conditions

Agency responses to working conditions in the DPRK varied considerably according to a multiplicity of factors, including type of agency and country of origin, agency mandate, and type and nature of donor. In so far as generalizations can be made, differing views were held by the multilateral and bilateral governmental agencies; the south Korean and Japanese NGOs; U.S. NGOs; European, Canadian, and Australian agencies; and the two international federations of NGOs, Caritas and the IFRC. European agency reactions showed a range of views and these are discussed in some detail in this report because of the publicity some of them generated, not because they are the most substantial providers of assistance to the DPRK.

Governmental Agencies: Bilateral and Multilateral

The bilateral and multilateral organizations engage in continuous negotiations with the DPRK government to try to improve the standard and quality of humanitarian operations in the DPRK. SDC, for instance, which operates in specified counties to support agricultural recovery, tries to include capacity building and training in all its projects and has been successful in implementing training programs in and out of the country. Full-time international staff work with farmers, the Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Commission (FDRC) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SDC has also engaged in food distribution, most recently of frozen beef, and its monitors claim to have had exceptional access to institutions and beneficiaries.

The UN World Food Program has responded to the information challenges by developing an elaborate monitoring and assessment system based on the county as the unit of analysis. The new WFP county database allows for systematic collection, organization, and comparison of population, agricultural, nutritional, and gender-based data—using qualitative and quantitative inputs from government as well as staff observations and interviews. The continuing problem here remains the accuracy of the data supplied. WFP has five sub-offices that are more or less permanently staffed throughout the year and, although monitoring visits still require a week's notice and are still sometimes cancelled without adequate explanation, some flexibility has been achieved in the ability of emergency officers in the field to vary schedules. Geographical access has increased to 163 counties out of 206, with the most recent becoming open in October 2001. About 400 visits take place a month to county officials, children's institutions, hospitals, Food for Work sites, and beneficiaries' homes.

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The quality of information from visits is variable. Many county officials and institution directors are keen to share information with international staff but there are also those who either offer minimal information or information that does not appear accurate. Very often the quality of the information correlates directly to the quality of relationship the international officer has developed over the months or years with the Korean counterparts with whom they are working. Generally, conversations with beneficiaries appear less open than conversations with officials. Since family visits tend to involve up to seven or eight visitors, and the beneficiary is unlikely to have had any previous contact with foreigners (and since many adult beneficiaries are women), it is inhibiting to talk to strangers, particularly men, about personal issues such as breastfeeding or nutrition habits. It could also be because they are prevented from responding freely by DPRK officials.

WFP and UNICEF have a high proportion of female emergency officers, which helps in this environment because of the need to gear aid toward pregnant and nursing women and small children and the consequent high preponderance of beneficiary interviewing that necessitates inquiry into women's private affairs. Agencies need to continue to ensure that sufficient female staff are employed. WFP has also held a number of work-

shops on nutrition and food for provincial medical personnel, care workers, and officials that were widely commended by Korean and international participants.

Conditions for staff in the field are still difficult, as they are for all agency staff. Outside Pyongyang, staff may not leave their accommodation unaccompanied. Visa restrictions and delays in visa processing also remain a problem for WFP. WFP is involved in continuous negotiations with the government, almost on a daily basis, to try to reduce constraints to the humanitarian program. The view of the WFP representative, who is also UN humanitarian coordinator in the DPRK, is that "at the beginning, knowledge about the DPRK in general and of the humanitarian situation in particular was extremely limited. Also, knowledge by the DPRK of international agencies and NGOs, and how they worked and raised resources, was also extremely limited. I believe that the dramatically increased knowledge that we have gained about the country, its situation, and our understanding of the reasons underlying the crisis are very valuable in itself, together with the increased understanding from the DPRK side, and the lessening of mutual suspicions. Our knowledge of the coping mechanisms and of the relative vulnerabilities of people in both geographic terms as well as urban/rural, has increased the effectiveness of our programmes" (David Morton, UN humanitarian coordinator, e-mail to author, October 2001).

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UNICEF found "significant improvements . . . in the partnership with the government" but still noted constraints, including restricted movement and limited access to target population, indirect access to counterparts, limited feedback on end use of supplies, inadequate focus on skills development by the government, and lack of disaggregated data on children and women (UNICEF, "UNICEF Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in DPR Korea," Report to 3rd International NGO Conference, Seoul, June 2001).

South Korean and Japanese NGOs

In general, south Korean and Japanese agencies consider that they are responding to humanitarian need and at the same time are contributing to the peace process on the Korean peninsula. This is different from the approach of some of the European NGOs, which want to address humanitarian needs but argue that humanitarian work should be separated from political or stability concerns. South Korean and Japanese agencies argue that they are responding to a demonstrated overwhelming need for emergency assistance—and they place less emphasis upon detailed in-country monitoring of distribution and rigorous assessment of impact. Some south Korean NGOs working in the agricultural sector, however, have been able to follow up on projects with counterparts in the Ministry of Agriculture, the Academy of Agricultural Sciences, county officials, and farm management committees.

Of the 8,000 south Koreans who visited the DPRK in 2000/2001, many were involved in humanitarian support to the DPRK. Obvious advantages arise to south Korean counterparts because of language facility, although one negative aspect is that it is sometimes difficult for south Koreans to travel outside Pyongyang. South Korean and Japanese agencies have more or less accepted that it is impossible to have a resident presence until political agreements are reached between their governments and the DPRK government. Some of these agencies work bilaterally and some coordinate with multilateral agencies.

United States NGOs

United States NGOs have stated that they are responding to humanitarian need although there has been widespread discussion in and out of humanitarian circles about how U.S. humanitarian assistance can also contribute to improving the general atmosphere of relations between the DPRK and the United States. U.S. NGOs, through the PVOC, had resident monitors for lengthy periods of time in 1998, 1999, and 2000. In 1998 and 1999 these monitors stayed in hotels along with other international visitors, but in 2000 U.S. monitors had to stay in a government guest house separate from the rest of the inter-

national community. The U.S. NGOs were permitted to employ Korean speakers. Travel plans had to be approved a week in advance but once on site, according to a U.S. General Accounting Office paper ("U.S. Bilateral Food Assistance to North Korea Had Mixed Results," June 2000), on-the-spot visits to projects, distribution centers, project participants, and homes were normally permitted.

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The PVOC responded to the concern of having to give one week's notice of visits by increasing the number of monitoring activities, reporting to the General Accounting Office that their monitoring activities exceeded those in other countries. While the PVOC was in-country it continued to negotiate with the DPRK government on ways of improving access, having more security over visas, and improving the ability of the PVOC to conduct needs assessments. In 2000 at the close of the PVOC program, one PVOC agency, CARE, decided to withdraw from the consortium. It stated that the food crisis was not as severe as previously and it would have chosen to work in rehabilitation efforts except that, "despite a nearly four-year dialogue with the north Korean government regarding the importance of access, transparency and accountability, . . . the operational environment in north Korea has not progressed to a point where CARE feels it is possible to implement effective rehabilitation programs. For that reason, CARE will withdraw from the consortium by June 30, 2000" (CARE press release, April 4, 2000).

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)—which is involved in the agricultural sector and works bilaterally in the DPRK—monitors its assistance by making visits to farms two or three times a year. AFSC works directly with local farm managers and views this method as part of trust-building between the two partners—concluding that, as a result of this approach, positive relationships with Korean counterparts have developed and grown over time. AFSC also found this to be the experience of other NGOs working in DPRK over a long period of time. ACT remarks that "the minimum conditions for humanitarian aid should always be based in the Code of Conduct [for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and NGOs]."

Other NGOs such as the American Red Cross work through international affiliates, which take the lead in monitoring and evaluation. The United Methodist Committee for Relief Work (UMCOR), which also works with international partners, remarks that "we do not have a policy or a standard that we've established to measure situations against. Our giving to the DPRK is pushed mainly by donors (as is most of our giving)" (Rev. Kristen L. Sachen, e-mail to author, October 2001).

U.S. NGOs have also received some criticism, discussed in the General Accounting Office report of June 2000, for poor management of programs and failure to respond to DPRK willingness to actively engage in monitoring and evaluation of seed potato production at eight farms. The DPRK government also had some difficulty in discerning why the donated food for Food for Work programs from the U.S. government was channeled through the PVOC, when the vast majority of United States assistance was channeled through WFP and when the PVOC still had to continue to use WFP logistical support to implement its nominally separate Food for Work projects. In this respect, DPRK representatives were reported as saying that they accepted monitoring for the sake of food assistance but were less happy with food assistance for the sake of monitoring.

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European, Canadian, and Australian Agencies

There have been a wide variety of responses from European, Canadian, and Australian agencies to concerns that agencies are limited in their activities in the DPRK. Some agencies choose to continue to negotiate with the DPRK government and to try to build long-term relationships in order to facilitate cooperation. These include GAA, Children's Aid Direct, CESVI, Campus fur Christus, Concern Worldwide, and PMU Interlife. Cap Anamur was involved in a major conflict with the government when its country director accused the government of human rights violations in December 2000—although the agency itself decided to stay in the DPRK and disavowed its outgoing country director.

ADRA has sometimes had confrontational relations with the government but remains in the DPRK despite funding shortages for its DPRK program. Other agencies, including MSF, Action Against Hunger (Action Contre la Faim), and Oxfam, have withdrawn from operating in the DPRK, citing restrictions on activities. MDM and Help Age International also withdrew, although funding difficulties reportedly contributed to their decisions. Save the Children also had a presence in the DPRK via nutritionists seconded to UNICEF but withdrew because they were concerned about the manner in which UNICEF distribution of high-energy milk was taking place. Canadian and Australian agencies have been non-resident and they have reported relatively good cooperation with the DPRK government.

Diverse Perspectives

Children's Aid Direct reports an improvement in the conditions of humanitarian involvement in the DPRK, they describe "the minimum conditions for humanitarian involvement in the DPRK as an evolving situation. We accept that to date these conditions have not fully been met, but we see a slow but continuing move towards meeting these conditions. Our levels of access, a fundamental issue, have increased during the time that we have worked in the DPRK, as has the level of cooperation we have received from the FDRC" (Tim Bainbridge, e-mail to author, November 2001).

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German Agro Action, in a paper reviewing European NGO activity in the DPRK between 1995 and 2000, noted that, while conditions were difficult, in terms of access to reliable information and access to target groups for monitoring and evaluation, there had been noticeable improvements over the period. Freedom of movement had increased and, compared to 1997 [the first year of GAA residence], "a definite positive difference for our work can be noted." The GAA paper went on to say that the "confidence that has been carefully built up by all sides involved through the years is an asset too valuable to be given up even in times of difficulties of finding funds for innovative approaches" (Andreas von Ramdohr, German Agro Action, "Experiences in Agriculture in DPRK: Perspectives from European NGOs," Report to 3rd International NGO Conference, Seoul, June 2001).

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Speaking on behalf of Concern Worldwide, CAD, and GAA to an international conference of NGOs working in the DPRK in 2000, CAD emphasised that "it is easier to leave than to stay on," adding that "we have a presence on the ground and are learning and understanding ourselves the system and culture that people we work with live in. We accept the constraints but we are also looking for ways to overcome them. . . . Difficulties can be worked through and we need to continue to work along the path of mutual understanding and cooperation" (Rebecca Sinrell, Children's Aid Direct, "The Relationship between European Non-Government Organisations and the European Union in the Context of Aid Assistance and DPR Korea," Report to 3rd International NGO Conference, Seoul, June 2001).

MSF was resident in the DPRK from July 1997 until September 1998. MSF was concerned that it was not reaching the most vulnerable children and was not able to conduct a nutritional survey in the counties in which it worked. The current MSF position is that there is "no humanitarian space whatsoever" for work in the DPRK. MSF currently is working with Korean refugees inside China along the DPRK border and also looking at the work of the humanitarian agencies that continue to work in the DPRK. From their interviews with DPRK citizens in China, MSF is concerned that international food assistance is not reaching any of the vulnerable in the northern province of North Hamgyong, a remote mountainous province with little arable land that is generally considered the worst-off in terms of food and other shortages and in terms of the population's coping strategies. MSF commented that it is difficult for them to assess change in the conditions of working within the DPRK because they have not worked in the country for over three years. In September 1998, when MSF left the DPRK, they called for "all donor governments to review their aid policies towards DPRK to demand that it is more accountable and that the north Korean government ensures that humanitarian agencies can freely and impartially assess needs, deliver aid, have direct access to the population

The current MSF position is that there is "no humanitarian space whatsoever" for work in the DPRK.

and assess the effectiveness of their programs" (MSF, "MSF Calls on Donors to Review Their Aid Policy towards DPRK," press release, September 30, 1998).

The Action Against Hunger view as of February 2000 was that information, particularly related to numbers of beneficiaries, could not be verified and food aid was not reaching the most vulnerable.

Action Against Hunger worked in the DPRK for just over two years, from January 1998 to March 2000. They carried out nutritional support programs and a water rehabilitation program in North Hamgyong. Action Against Hunger also carried out support for cereal production in farms in the "breadbasket" provinces of South Pyongan and South Hamgyong. Action Against Hunger carried out detailed agricultural surveys on the farms in South Pyongyan, detailed nutritional and attendance surveys in nurseries in North Hamgyong, and a survey of water quality in North Hamgyong.

Action Against Hunger results showed that the incidence of malnutrition was not high in the nurseries and attendance was low compared to the number of registered children. On the other hand, malnutrition was high in the provincial residential children's institutions (baby homes and orphanages). This led Action Against Hunger to be concerned about the existence of a group of children who were not attending children's institutions and were not therefore receiving international food. In order to reach these children, Action Against Hunger proposed setting up soup kitchens in Chongjin, the provincial capital. The government agreed to this but did not agree to the monitoring protocol proposed by Action Against Hunger. The Action Against Hunger view as of February 2000 was that information, particularly related to numbers of beneficiaries, could not be verified and food aid was not reaching the most vulnerable. They called for another international nutritional survey to be carried out, similar to that conducted in 1998.

Oxfam left the DPRK in December 1999, after a series of negotiations with the government on monitoring water quality. The country director of the Oxfam program felt that the government finally had agreed to almost all that Oxfam had requested by the time Oxfam left the DPRK but the decision to allow access was too late to make a difference to the decision taken (author's interview with Oxfam country director, Pyongyang, December 1999).

"The provision of humanitarian assistance is [a] messy business which requires the weighing of options between 'less than ideal' approaches. . . . In comparison with some other contexts, the concerns in the DPRK do not come close to the diversions and human rights violations of other contexts."

The major Canadian humanitarian agency involved in the DPRK, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, which has supplied assistance since 1996, argues that monitoring works relatively well in the DPRK and finds that the quality of monitoring "would exceed the average monitoring of CFGB program[s]." A priority for CFGB is for the international humanitarian community to carry out another nutrition survey similar to the one carried out in 1998, so agencies can gain accurate information about the nutritional status of children and make some assessment of the impact of food aid donated since 1998. Although noting the inherent danger in comparisons to other operations, CFGB says that "the provision of humanitarian assistance is [a] messy business which requires the weighing of options between 'less than ideal' approaches. . . . In comparison with some other contexts, the concerns in the DPRK do not come close to the diversions and human rights violations of other contexts" (Marv Frey, e-mail to author, November 2001).

Australia's involvement with the DPRK is via the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. This agency funds training for DPRK scientists and administrators in Australia, and its programs do not involve "cash injections" into the DPRK. The agency reports that "so far we are optimistic that the minimum conditions for assistance obtain." The agency adds, "The most critical 'minimum condition' for us is a preparedness on the part of the DPRK to exchange agricultural research knowledge freely and to have unfettered access to all agreed sites, facilities, information, equipment and records pertaining to agreed agricultural R and D projects. So far we have plenty of positive indications that this will be achieved, and only one or two minor negative indications" (Michael Brown, e-mail to author, November 2001).

Caritas and IFRC

Caritas is a confederation of 154 Catholic-based agencies and IFRC is a federation of national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. Both raise funds through their constituent

organizations and therefore represent international constituencies in their work in the DPRK. Caritas is far and away the biggest NGO involved in the DPRK, having contributed some US$27 million between 1995 and 2001.

Caritas considers that while operating conditions can be difficult in the DPRK, they are much improved since the start of their operations in 1995, and part of that improvement is due to the process of building up trust through continuous dialogue. Caritas has experienced a good deal of flexibility on monitoring visits, including variations from schedules in the field. Within the Caritas network, Caritas-Germany argues for more beneficiary input but, after six years of involvement, the Caritas view overall is that, as articulated by Caritas–Hong Kong, the liaison agency for the network, continued engagement with the DPRK is necessary and appropriate. "Withholding aid would not only be morally wrong, it would also not solve any problems. Closing the door now means much greater difficulty in reopening it in the future—and with [an open door comes] the possibility of the same level of communication, or of gradually developing an even better [level of communication]" (Kathi Zellweger, "North Korea Continues to Be a Challenge for Aid Agencies," mimeo, Hong Kong, March 20, 2000).

"Withholding aid would not only be morally wrong, it would also not solve any problems."

IFRC must also give one week's notice of visits. IFRC has not found any evidence of diversion of its supplies and has found evidence of efficient and effective distribution of drugs and equipment. In 2001, the IFRC completed a review of its activities within the DPRK that has not yet been made public but that includes an assessment of monitoring and assessment capabilities. IFRC appears to be of the view that while the quality of information on different aspects of the program varies, much of the information provided is usable, although some areas could be improved in both data collection and organization and in monitoring (author's telephone interview with IFRC desk officer, November 2001).

Humanitarian Coordination

The agencies share their experiences and, where possible coordinate their negotiating positions with the government on the issue of the conditions for humanitarian work. Coordination tales place out of the country as well as inside the DPRK. Out of country, in 1997 a widely attended meeting, organized by UNICEF with a position paper written by Save the Children, was held in Geneva. The three international conferences organized by the NGOs working in DPRK were widely attended, by UN agency representatives as well as by other interested parties. In 2001, a meeting coordinated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue brought humanitarian agencies together to discuss these same issues. In country, all resident agencies participate in regular inter-sectoral meetings and inter-agency meetings take place weekly. Joint assessments of need and impact take place more regularly than previously, with agencies now also permitted to visit other agencies' projects.

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Change

There is a large area of agreement among the agencies as to the need for improved monitoring and assessment. The majority of those who continue to work in the DPRK and have worked there for some time note change in a positive direction. MSF, after having left the country in 1998, sees no room for improvement short of policy change, which in practice would probably amount to a change of government. A number of agencies consider that the DPRK is expected to operate to a higher standard in terms of aid distribution, assessment, and evaluation than most other governments where large-scale assistance takes place.

Some features of monitoring and assessment remain the same, particularly in that travel must still be organized one week in advance. One change is that there is more access to more institutions. In 1998, for instance, MSF was not permitted to see

children in the orphanages in Pyongsong. In 2000/2001, however, the humanitarian agencies were able to organize a working group that surveyed all the provincial institutions, including baby homes, orphanages, and boarding schools, and then collated and recorded information from all the agencies.

Agencies in 2000/2001 regularly shared information formally through the inter-sectoral working groups and informally through regular interaction.

Another change is in terms of the ability to share information. In 1997/1998 MSF had signed a protocol with the government where they agreed not to share information collected with other agencies. Agencies in 2000/2001 regularly shared information formally through the inter-sectoral working groups and informally through regular interaction.

The quality of information has also improved, although it still needs to improve further. An international/national nutrition survey took place in 1998 and the government has recently agreed that another will take place in 2002. In addition, the newly established WFP information base provides a potentially invaluable tool for the whole international humanitarian community.

The major concern not yet addressed, however, is the inability to assess whether the most vulnerable groups are receiving adequate assistance.

The major concern not yet addressed, however, is the inability to assess whether the most vulnerable groups are receiving adequate assistance. At present, 43 of the counties, which contain about 18 percent of the population, are not accessible to the humanitarian community. In addition, children not attending nurseries or schools would not necessarily receive international assistance, as food aid is channelled through children's institutions. There is still a concern shared by many agencies that unhealthy children observed in the country may not be receiving food through the international aid distribution.

Most of the agencies would agree with Action Against Hunger that malnutrition is not high in the children's institutions compared to 1997, when the agencies first entered the country. They would also agree that the worst cases of malnutrition are seen in the provincial residential children's institutions and that these are being used as nutritional rehabilitation centers for children. This is why many of the agencies—governmental and NGO—are concentrating activities in these institutions. The change in this respect is that resident agencies have continued to call for another nutritional survey, to which the government has now agreed.

In terms of the conditions for international staff, UN Humanitarian Coordinator David Morton points out that there have been some improvements. "Although there is a long way to go, we should recall that in 1995, the very few international staff were confined to the Koryo Hotel and field travel was undertaken by train. Nowadays we have over 100 UN and NGO staff, and WFP has five sub-offices outside Pyongyang, and staff are traveling by vehicle every day" (e-mail to author, October 2001).

Resolving the Humanitarian Dilemma

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.

The minority view on whether conditions permit humanitarian operations in the DPRK is that expressed by MSF, that there is "no humanitarian space whatsoever in the DPRK." This view is explicitly critical of the majority view that conditions need improving but that they are gradually moving in the right direction. The majority view, implicitly critical of the minority view, is expressed by the humanitarian coordinator when he argues that the process of continuing to try to engage with the DPRK is necessary.

"We know that there is a very serious crisis that affects millions of people. We have no doubt that our aid has saved many, many lives."

"Essentially, the minimum conditions are not yet achieved here, but we know that there is a very serious crisis that affects millions of people. We have no doubt that our aid has saved many, many lives. We do not have the luxury of choice that allows us to say 'we will not operate because minimum conditions are not reached'—we have to remain engaged and persevere, and work towards achieving those conditions. The minimum conditions will certainly not be achieved if we all simply pull out" (David Morton, e-mail to author, October 2001).

In practice, the humanitarian dilemma is never fully resolved but instead humanitarian agencies, as they do in all countries in which they operate, make the best of the circumstances in which they work: continuing to deliver much-needed aid and at the same time continuing to negotiate with the government to improve operating conditions.

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Conclusion

This report has sought to draw attention to the variety of humanitarian agency involvement in the DPRK and the diversity of response to the difficult working conditions in the country. Most of the agencies, whether they are UN agencies or NGOs, have decided to continue providing humanitarian aid to north Korea—primarily for the simple reason that it saves lives. Second, although agencies cannot monitor all aspects of aid distribution, their assessment from impact and evaluation studies is that international assistance reaches hungry people and people in need. No agency, currently or historically, reports systematic diversion of humanitarian aid to the military.

Humanitarian assistance is also valued—explicitly by some and implicitly by others—because it facilitates an increase in knowledge and in confidence and trust building between the DPRK and the outside world. Knowledge of the country is increased because to fulfil their mandates most agencies must be transparent and accountable to their donors and therefore must both obtain information and report back to their constituencies. Public knowledge about the DPRK is thus generated, which can contribute to a more realistic and less stereotypical understanding of the DPRK, thus making for better informed, more nuanced, and more sophisticated policies. Confidence and trust building are developed as agencies and the DPRK government find ways of resolving conflict and of reaching compromise despite interests and priorities that are often difficult to reconcile. The opening of these channels of dialogue thus demonstrates that dialogue and negotiation can help to provide mechanisms for conflict resolution. In addition, while most agencies agree that humanitarian assistance should never be granted solely for diplomatic or political reasons—but only as a response to humanitarian need—once channels of communication have been established they can facilitate further engagement and dialogue. This is particularly pertinent in the case of the DPRK when its major donors (the Republic of Korea, Japan, and the United States) are also its main political adversaries.

Most humanitarian agencies have therefore concluded that they should remain engaged with the DPRK but that the DPRK government also has a responsibility to make improvements to the conditions for humanitarian work. Donors should explore ways of building on the trust established between agencies and the DPRK government to both help improve the conditions for humanitarian workers in the DPRK and to re-enter into wider processes of mutually respectful engagement about other economic issues. Donor governments might well learn some lessons about dealing with the DPRK in general from the success of humanitarian agencies in finding ways to resolve disputes through patient negotiations and through building a climate where dialogue, not bellicose rhetoric, becomes the modus operandi of conflict resolution.

Recommendations

To Humanitarian Agencies

- Continue to respond to the attested humanitarian need for food aid, agricultural rehabilitation, health sector support, and water and sanitation improvements.
- Continue to negotiate with the DPRK government to improve conditions for humanitarian operations, especially the field conditions for humanitarian workers.

For more information on this topic, see our web site (www.usip.org), which has an online edition of this report containing links to related web sites, as well as additional information on the subject.

- Reinforce the move toward incorporating capacity-building into programs and projects.
- Continue efforts to explain the reasons, techniques, and benefits of internationally acceptable standards for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting—including the differences between needs, outcome, and impact analysis.
- Share "best practices" in terms of the lessons learned from successful experiences of programs that have incorporated meaningful assessment and evaluation.
- Maintain a gender balance in the employment of international officers.

To the DPRK Government

- Improve the facilitation of professional assessment of needs and evaluation of the impact of humanitarian assistance through, for instance, joint (government/international) implementation of nutrition and health assessment surveys, provision of more accurate and timely data, and increased flexibility in permitting unscheduled visits to beneficiaries in the field.
- Improve working conditions for international humanitarian workers by permitting two-way radio communication between field workers in remote offices and Pyongyang headquarters and by permitting more freedom of movement for workers employed in these outlying offices.

To Donor Governments

- Continue to support humanitarian efforts in the DPRK.
- Explore the use of channels of dialogue opened through humanitarian agencies as a model for successful conflict resolution with the DPRK in other areas.

Abbreviations

ACT Acton for Churches Together
ADRA Adventist Development Relief Agency
AFSC American Friends Service Committee
AREP Agricultural Recovery and Environmental Plan
CAD Children's Aid Direct
CARE Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CESVI Cooperazione e Sviluppo
CFGB Canadian Foodgrains Bank
CRS Catholic Relief Service
DPRK Democratic People's Republic of Korea (north Korea)
ECHO European Community Humanitarian Aid Office
FALU Food Aid Liaison Unit, WFP
FAO Food and Agriculture Organization
FDRC Flood Damage Rehabilitation Commission (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
GAA German Agro Action (Deutsche Withungerhilfe)
IFRC International Federation of the Red Cross
MDM Medecins du Monde
MSF Medecins sans Frontieres
NGO non-governmental organization
OCHA Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN
PMU Pingst Missionens Utveck (Swedish Pentecostal mission)
PVOC Private Voluntary Organization Consortium
ROK Republic of Korea (south Korea)
SDC Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDR Swiss Disaster Relief (now subsumed under SDC)
UMCOR United Methodist
WFP World Food Program
WHO World Health Organization
WVI World Vision International
UNDP United Nations Development Program
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

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