

**UNLIKELY PARTNERS IN THE QUEST FOR *JUCHE*:
HUMANITARIAN AID AGENCIES IN NORTH KOREA**

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ABSTRACT

Since 1996, elements of the humanitarian aid community have attempted to respond to the call by the North Korean government for assistance in the face of severe food shortages and related human suffering. However, in North Korea aid agencies have encountered the unique emergency situation of a garrison state in total control of its population, information, and distribution systems and that is confronting a hostile international environment. Delivering emergency aid with accountability under these conditions has been difficult, while assisting affected populations to regain food security and address underlying problems has been almost impossible. The widely held consensus is that fundamental changes in the North Korean system are essential for attaining humanitarian goals, and yet systemic change is dependent on internal and external political factors beyond the control of aid agencies. As demonstrated by the creativity of a number of agencies, this conundrum actually opens the space for aid agencies to play a critical, if limited, role in saving lives, introducing new ideas, encouraging risk taking behavior, and building stand-by capacity for more rapid change when the situation allows. In order to make this contribution, aid agencies must negotiate interventions that are development-oriented, while at same time employing an operational style that builds the institutional and personal trust on which acceptable levels of accountability are based.

One of the most unsettling aspects of humanitarian work in North Korea is the disconnect between the country's proud official face and its desperate reality. For me, 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 drip fed from discarded beer bottles. An elderly woman was collapsed at the roadside under a large brown bundle, clearly exhausted. Above her one of the ubiquitous arches across the road proclaimed in large letters: "The Victory of Socialism is in sight!"

North Korea (or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) first appealed for international help in 1995 after devastating floods pushed its already faltering economy over the brink. Since then the government has hosted multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental aid organizations that have responded to its call. However, providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea has posed unique challenges to aid providers. 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,¹ proclaims that North Korea can build a socialist paradise for its people based primarily on its own resources and ingenuity under the genius leadership of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Acknowledging problems – not to mention failure – which is the starting point for seeking solutions, goes against the national ethos, pricks the personal pride that has been deeply instilled in all DPRK citizens, and borders on treason.

In addition to this fundamental contradiction that aid agencies have had to deal with, there are other elements in North Korea that differentiate it from other humanitarian crises of recent years:

- While 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 non-governmental counterparts. In the DPRK 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 engage.
- Though open conflict is absent, North Korea considers its very survival threatened by hostile states and 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, where an atmosphere of mistrust pervades on both sides: in the states where those agencies are based, and in North Korea where they seek to deliver aid.
- Though reliable sources have reported starvation and death on a massive scale, even at its peak it was a famine largely invisible to outsiders. There has been little 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 their own assessment that the country is facing a major crisis and not insist on details. As one official remarked to me when we pressed to visit affected households: “We have lowered our pants; do you want us to strip naked?”
- Media coverage that has provoked public response to other crises continue 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 (e.g., torture and execution for political crimes; a system of camps holding political offenders and their families under extreme conditions; distribution of food and other necessities according to political loyalty)², and the fact that aid agencies must work in close collaboration with the government, confront aid agencies with a serious moral dilemma.

Other humanitarian crises that reflected to some degree similar challenges include Iraq between the 1991 Gulf War and the recent 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. (Barrow, 2001; Clay and Holcomb, 1986) 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). (Terry, 2002, pp. 114-154) 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. (Graham-Brown, 1999) 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 (as United Nations representative) 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. In this paper I will attempt to assess the experience of aid agencies in addressing both of these challenges and to draw out lessons that might suggest an effective way for future engagement with North Korea.³

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The story of the decline of the North Korean economy is now well known. A quick summary will indicate some of the factors that made this situation different from that faced by aid agencies in other crisis settings. Under a socialist-style command economy North Korea quickly reconstructed its core industries after the Korean War (1950-53) and began a steady economic expansion. Focused on heavy industry and large-scale, collectivized agriculture, with only later attention to consumer goods, North Korea was able to feed its growing population and provide them with a modest standard of living. Housing, education, medical care and employment were guaranteed for all citizens at different levels of quality depending on job assignment and political status. This quick start pushed per capita GDP of the North ahead of South Korea until the early 1970s. However, most observers agree that by the mid-1980s, the North Korea economic system had reached a plateau and begun a gradual decline. As with other command systems, the demands of a more complex economy overwhelmed the central planning bureaucracy. Furthermore, the *juche* ideology discouraged accessing needed new technology from more advanced countries. In agriculture, the push for self-sufficiency began to exhaust 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 breakup of the Soviet Union ended the special barter and friendship pricing arrangements that had supplied North Korea with essential industrial inputs, most importantly oil products. This was followed by China's shift to trade based on convertible currencies. Oil imports fell to one-fourth of needed supply leading to widespread closings of industries, including those producing fertilizers, chemicals and other inputs for agriculture. Today one can drive past miles of rusting steel, chemical and other factories and mills that have been closed for years. Electricity, generated primarily by coal-burning thermal plants, is a rare and rationed commodity. On the farms three-fourths of the tractors, trucks, pumps and other equipment sit idle and discarded.

Floods and drought in 1995-97 were the final straws on the camel's back, but they also provided the politically acceptable rationale for requesting international assistance.

The depth of the plunge in the DPRK economy can be seen in the estimated GDP figures. Growth rates were negative from the beginning of the decade, and between 1993 and 1996 economic activity apparently fell by about 40-50%, reducing GDP per capita from around \$1000 to \$500-\$600. Growth continued to be negative until 1999, after which observers have estimated the beginning of modest positive growth. Much of this growth has been due to stabilization of the agricultural sector using international assistance. International trade volume has followed a parallel precipitous decline (from a very modest level), with exports (needed to generate foreign exchange in the new non-socialist world) dropping to half of early 1990 levels.⁴ Thus, what we have is not an underdeveloped economy or "third world" society, but rather the collapse of an economy that had met many humanitarian goals, but within an international system that has disappeared, and following a model that could not be sustained. Nevertheless, many of the key factors of a modern economy are still scattered around, most importantly critical human resources, and secondarily, some institutions that could be rehabilitated.

HUMAN IMPACT OF ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

Aid agencies have been confronted with multiple repercussions deriving from the general collapse of the North Korean economy. The impact of food shortages caused by falling production and lack of imports has been well documented. Observations by aid workers and interviews with refugees have led to the widely accepted figure of one to two million deaths between 1995 and 2000, directly attributable to the food shortage. The victims were disproportionately infants, the elderly, young mothers, and those living in urban areas of the northeast. Though shortages were felt throughout the population, it is clear that some segments were protected: the ruling elite, 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 over the past two or three years.

North Korea is primarily an urbanized society; about three-fourths of the population lives 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 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 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. The 1998 nutritional survey, conducted with the cooperation of UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP), revealed that 15.6% of children under seven years old suffered from acute malnutrition (wasting) and 65.4% from chronic malnutrition (stunting). These figures only confirmed what aid workers observed everywhere outside of Pyongyang. A second survey 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%, and stunting to 39.2 %. These indicators support the conclusion that food is getting to targeted children. Nevertheless, continued high levels of child as well as maternal malnutrition, and geographic discrepancies (e.g., wasting was found in 12% of children in South Hamgyong Province but in only 3.7% of Pyongyang children) indicate not only that conditions remain extremely bad, but that supplies are being rationed to benefit certain parts of the country over others. (DPRK, 2002)

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.

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 whole new category in need of emergency assistance.

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 serving the regime is hard to estimate. While it is, no doubt, a source of shame, it also reveals the fragility of the *juche* system that is at the core of the regime ideological grounding.

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 within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to handle relations with all non-Korean aid agencies.⁵

By 1997, some order began to emerge on both the helping and receiving ends. Initially almost all agencies focused on emergency food aid. However, as the scope of the emergency and the problems associated with delivering food aid to North Korea became clearer, delivery of food aid was left primarily to WFP while most agencies attempted to focus on assisting specific locales through smaller scale interventions. Other UN agencies expanded their operations in the country so that other sectors began to receive attention. UNDP and FAO focused on agricultural rehabilitation; WHO and UNICEF on health, especially of children. A number of European NGOs were able to establish modest resident programs as part of diplomatic negotiations between the 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 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 IFRC. Under President Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy, beginning in 1998, this policy was later relaxed allowing South Korean NGO representatives to visit the North, but under fairly close restrictions.⁶

All aid agencies were quickly confronted with a number of sobering realities. Though 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 or hospital wards crowded with malnourished children. There were few indicators – common in emergencies elsewhere – of widespread famine (e.g., 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 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 cause that North Korea admitted or discussed was flooding and other natural disasters. It also became quickly 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.

This paper addresses the operating environment that faces multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental 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 only be addressed to the extent the issues are relevant to them.⁷

DILEMMAS FOR HUMANITARIAN AID IN NORTH KOREA

North Korea's plea for assistance came at a time when multilateral and 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, the old principles on which humanitarian aid was based were revisited, re-analyzed, and amended. Existing humanitarian principles were reaffirmed and new emphasis placed on holding aid agencies responsible for meeting them. Some of these principles address the issue of delivering aid with integrity while avoiding doing further harm. Others deal more with improving the chances for effectiveness 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 and with major donors and the media looking over their shoulders. (Minear, 2002; Terry, 2002; Humanitarian Studies Unit, 2001)

Should We Help North Korea?

The most fundamental question for aid agencies considering helping the people in North Korea is whether or not 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 this way: "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 multiple positive impacts of aid on individuals as well as the on 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, 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 former Workers Party Secretary Hwang Jang Hyop, 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.⁸ 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 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 cost of such movements are staggering, not to mention the potential for dangerous political destabilization in the region.

The primary rationale for intervention given by aid agencies is the humanitarian imperative: all persons in life-threatening need should be provided assistance no matter what the political environment. Or, to put it in the simple terms attributed to former President 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 people can be made worse off by aid intervention. 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. First in the now infamous “yellow wind” editorial of January 1998, and repeated 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, 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 one hundred U.N. and other agency workers resident in the country and many others making frequent and extended visits over the past eight years, a large number of the North Koreans has

been exposed to information and ways of thinking that fundamentally challenge the regime. To begin with, Pyongyang-based North Korean personnel and 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. There are also more subtle impacts. A driver once took me aside and said 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. On a more practical level, 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 it would take twenty years to rebuild them. It is clear that many North Korean officials at the program level have gained a very clear idea of the nature of their problems, and value the interaction with foreign aid workers who have opened new space for analyzing and addressing them.⁹ And, since these officials are under incredible pressure to show results, many have welcomed such help no matter what the source.

There is a fairly wide consensus in the international aid community that, even though operating conditions are problematic, the nature of the regime itself should not be an obstacle to providing humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ Even Hwang Jang Hyop 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 or not 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. As Hazel Smith, who has evaluated several aid programs in North Korea, has phrased it: “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.” (Smith, 2002, p. 14)

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 based on 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 (or monitor the collection of) 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, distribution of social benefits according to political loyalty, and its official “military first” policy, most donors have pressured aid agencies for stronger than usual assurances that aid is not being diverted.¹¹

No one claims that conditions in North Korea come near meeting these international standards. Though things have improved somewhat since the early years, and the experience of agencies differ, 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 aid distribution or delivery is rare. Random checking of delivery points, institutions or households is not allowed. And, unmonitored interaction with the affected

population is also prohibited. In a public statement issued just a few weeks ago 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. "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." (Harmsen, 2003.)

Given the practical and moral dilemmas and the sheer frustration associated with operating in North Korea, it will not be surprising if some, if not all, aid agencies have considered withdrawing at one time or another. Several have actually terminated their programs, citing these and other constraints on their operations. Four European NGOs, Medecins du Monde (MDM), Medecins sans Frontieres (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 childcare 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.¹² Oxfam UK discontinued its water treatment project in 1999 following a dispute over the collection of water quality data. CARE withdrew from a US PVO (NGO) consortium in 1998 saying that conditions did not allow implementation of "sustainable rehabilitation and development programs." (Flake and Snyder, p. 31)

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, reconsideration, adjustment, and rationalization. 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:

- Most agencies have adjusted their programs to fit the operational conditions. For example, they have limited operations to selected locations or institutions that can be visited repeatedly, supplied materials that are targeted for specific projects and can be more easily identified during field visits, and selected entry projects that do not require direct or frequent contact with the general population. Distribution of large amounts of food aid raises very difficult monitoring challenges, and so this has been left for the most part to WFP. Likewise, as they have become more active and are in a stronger position to negotiate with the authorities, UNICEF, WHO and the IFRC have carried out direct health interventions.
- Some agencies have found more flexibility when they have focused their initial interventions in areas identified as high priorities by the government. (Even more so if it is an area that Kim Jong Il himself has targeted, such as goat raising, multiple cropping, potato cultivation, or alternative energy.) Once their credentials and capacity to deliver have been established in these areas, agencies find that doors open more easily. 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, p. 161) When access to the northeastern provinces became more restricted, World Vision shifted its agricultural projects to other locations where adequate monitoring was possible. Most agencies have had the experience of delaying a subsequent delivery of supplies until monitors can verify onsite the distribution of an earlier delivery.
- There has been a mutual learning experience 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 is essential for good planning and continued donor response. The two nutrition surveys provide a good example, and may have had impact on attitudes beyond the health sector. 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 in information used for fundraising campaigns.
- Above all, agencies point to the importance of building trust over time 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, provincial officials) to exhibit ownership of a project and jealously guard supplies provided by the agencies.¹³
- An additional positive factor is the unusually close cooperation among 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. They have sought to maximize inter-agency collaboration and support, including using opportunities to monitor one another'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. What all this means is that aid agencies are not operating in isolation but sharing information, pressing for consistent operational practices, and to some extent pooling their influence with the North Korean authorities.

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, the significant increase in the number of monitoring visits to institutions and homes, among other things. Actually, the

WFP system of planning the distribution of each food delivery (based on numbers of eligible targeted individuals in each county) and tracking transport from the ports to the county level is much tighter than most critics acknowledge. The missing piece that WFP has pressed for is the names of the institutions at the county level to which the food is allocated. Monitors do visit selected institutions in each county after distribution to confirm delivery. (United Nations, 2002 and 2003)

NGOs have also reported improvements especially at the local level. 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). Interestingly, the last two NGOs 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 11 residential NGOs, four bi-lateral 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 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 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 be tided over with supplemental food aid. Also, it was not simply a food or agricultural problem. Hunger and starvation were the indicators of a thoroughly broken system, from top to bottom. This assessment was starkly stated in the UN's "Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal" for 2003:

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. (United Nations, 2002)

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 the institutions necessary to promote and facilitate international trade and investment, and also creating market signals where none existed before. In other words, development requires system-wide 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 effectively used. The North Korean authorities, meanwhile, have resisted all but marginal changes since 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 programs 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, re-starting local food processing, or re-equipping 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 inter-cooperative 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 makes them appear less threatening (and more easily controlled) 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.

EXAMPLES OF DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED PROJECTS

Campus fur Christus (CfC)

Campus fur 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 Hwanghe Province and the Pyongyang area. The project directly impacts an estimated 20,000 people but reaches many others through the trainings 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, 2003, p. 161)

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

AFSC is the international service agency of American Quakers. Under an exchange program that began in 1980, in partnership with the (North) Korean Committee for Solidarity with World’s People, AFSC has hosted a number of North Korean goodwill and technical delegations to the United States. A separate program to support agricultural rehabilitation began in 1998 and has focused on improving soil fertility, upgrading irrigation systems, and reducing post-harvest losses. The project is implemented on several cooperative farms and there is a research component pursued in collaboration with the Academy of Agricultural Sciences (KASS). AFSC does not have an office in the country but an agriculturalist coordinates the program through regular visits. 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. These efforts have been welcomed at the farm level and at KASS, but the host Committee has been less enthusiastic, preferring an inputs-heavy approach. Nevertheless, the local and national scientists have run selection trials with a variety of leguminous crops that can be planted in paddy and rainfed 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 KASS rice breeders and rice scientists in Vietnam. In fall 2003, three North Korean rice breeders traveled to Vietnam where they will live for six months in order to grow a range of rice varieties (actually 996 different experimental lines) to speed up varietal selection processes. Using the winter season could conceivably cut in half the time needed to identify improved varieties. The Rice Institute of the Vietnam Agriculture Science Institute is hosting the North Koreans and is arranging field trips to national and regional agricultural research centers. (Ireson, 2003, and personal correspondence)

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 KASS 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 Rural Development Administration. South Korean scientists regularly visit the North (under World Vision International auspices) 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-B, 2003)

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 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 hydro-electric 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, adopting 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)

Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF)

The Eugene Bell Foundation, a non-resident NGO based in the US and South Korea and working only in North Korea, has selected and focused on one serious health problem, the re-emergence 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 for the disease and inculcating new attitudes among medical staff and patients. EBF enjoys good access and is able to document its work carefully. This special relationship is due largely to the fact that EBF's founder, Dr. Stephen Linton, has developed a high level of trust with senior North Korean officials beginning with his first trip to the country in 1979. He also belies the claim that North Korea will not work with foreign Korean speakers, since Dr. Linton is fluent in the language. (EBF reports and personal correspondence)

International Federation of Red Cross & 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 advisors and technical assistants, but works primarily through the national Red Cross. Projects include provision of essential drugs and supplies to 1,762 or so hospitals and clinics, improving 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 trainings 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, 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 enjoying 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 information technology 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 fur Christus goat project. Underpinning all of these initiatives is an ambitious program of human and institutional development. In addition to technical training for participants in the projects outlined above, SDC has recently begun implementing modular trainings for Korean counterparts and Korean technical staff in all aid agencies on Project Cycle Management and on the Transition from Humanitarian Aid to Development Cooperation. (UN OCHA, 2003)

Other agencies and projects could be cited, including those in the areas of water and sanitation, reforestation, and large and small-scale irrigation. However, these examples are sufficient for making a number of observations. Though all of them have encountered many problems and obstacles in operating in North Korea, they have persisted and achieved some level of success. Most share a number of points in common. They start small, usually in a niche identified as a priority by the government. They build on success in small-scale initiatives to expand in scope and coverage. They introduce technology that is new in North Korea. They include capacity building. They promote linkages and collaboration with other aid agencies. It is not coincidental that most of the NGOs are faith-based organizations that have made a long-term commitment to assisting North Koreans eschewing political motives or connections.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What lessons can be learned from the experience of these aid agencies and other experience in North Korea? How can agencies operate in such a way to maximize the potential for achieving development-oriented impact and to minimize the problems with transparency and accountability? There are 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 above, but are also based on consultations with aid workers currently in the field and 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. Some examples have been given above, but the needs are vast and the opportunities for creative programming considerable. The essential point is to model, to the extent possible, 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 policy makers and receives direct attention from Kim Jong Il himself. As described above, World Vision and others have 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, AFSC and others have aligned with the “seed revolution.” Campus for Christus built on the national call for goat raising that threatened to result in further ecological damage by demonstrating less damaging foraging systems, but then going on to introduce new products and even start a new export industry. More recently rehabilitation of irrigation has received official attention and a number of NGOs are working in this area.

There are **priorities outside of agriculture.** NGOs cannot solve the energy crisis in North Korea, but officials have welcomed small-scale innovations on the local level. ADRA is assisting with enhancing and expanding the use of biogas, and Nautilus is introducing wind power technologies. Challenging the image of a closed society, Kim Jong Il has made information technology a high priority as a means of modernization leapfrogging. The UNICEF/WFP nutritional survey projects incorporated new data processing technology and skills training on a large scale. Examples could also be given in the health field, though reluctance to allow direct interaction with affected populations continues to make this a more difficult sector for the small-scale efforts of NGOs. This approach does not mean that all of North Korea’s problems will be solved by waiting for official campaigns. However, it is hard enough to work in North Korea when swimming with the current; it is near impossible to succeed 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 obstacles have frequently been raised by the more conservative and cautious Pyongyang-based officials, but this attitude appears to be changing. 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) There are many examples of recent NGO capacity-building activities at the local level. Triangle and Concern 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; SDC has set up a training center for farm mechanics in one county. Until some years ago exposure trips outside the country seemed to have limited impact potential. Composition of the groups was often inappropriate, the focus was on top-of-the-line technology and facilities, and there appeared to be ineffective dissemination or use of information upon return home. However, there appears to be a definite shift. As noted above, both AFSC and Campus fur Christus have arranged long-term overseas training programs for

North Korean technicians and farm managers. Such activities are indications of change and opportunities for a greater NGO role in capacity building.

Bring new technology: North Korea is in the unusual position of needing both low-end (appropriate) technologies and high-end (state-of-the-art) technologies. This is because it represents a collapsed industrialized economy and infrastructure rather than a third world economy. So, side by side, we see effective projects to introduce integrated pest management, green manures, village water systems, 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. There is no single answer to North Korea's problems, and a mix of technologies in each sector is welcomed and can be appropriate. 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 use of critical 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. Of course, this is an extremely sensitive issue for North Korea since all information is considered secret and for use toward political goals. However, this is another area where change can be seen and where aid agencies can quietly contribute to a shift in thinking. At the national level, the two nutritional surveys, as difficult as they were to organize and push through, have on doubt provided the North Korean government with a clearer picture than ever before of the status of their children's health and have created a fairly large cohort of health specialists and data collectors around the country who understand and appreciate the role of good data in understanding the problems they face. Earlier, the UNDP worked with the North Korean Ministry of Agriculture to produce the Agricultural Rehabilitation and Environmental Protection 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 since IT is one of the leadership's highest priority.

Promote sustainability: Ensuring the sustainability of the changes and improvements introduced by aid agencies is a particular challenge in North Korea. Sustainability requires administrative support, ongoing skill transfer, availability of inputs, maintenance, replication, and ultimately a sense of local ownership and responsibility. Following directives from above, officials have sometimes pushed for a particular initiative only to drop it when the winds from above change. This risk can be reduced by linking projects with established national priorities and by cultivating as many stakeholders from the local level up as possible. Emphasizing capacity building and expanding it to as many locations and levels as possible may help prevent dependence on a few skilled persons. Many projects require inputs (e.g., energy, agricultural chemicals, machinery and parts, medicines and medical supplies) that are not produced in the country, and cannot be imported due to lack of foreign exchange. There will be no thorough solution to this obstacle until the overarching problem of integrating North Korea into the world economy is solved. However, the project approach itself can limit dependence (e.g., 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 (e.g., food processing, farm machine shops, IV fluid production, irrigation hose or piping manufacturing). Creating as many backward (through local procurement) and forward linkages (e.g., goat cheese and hides) to the core project is a way to increase the likelihood of that the initiative will be sustained. Finally, the North Korean tendency to build a showcase project should be resisted, and emphasis consistently placed on the replicability of the change over a wide area.

Respond to new opportunities: Though the pace is slow, changes are happening in North Korea. To a limited extent, market forces have come into play creating new opportunities for some Koreans and perhaps opening new areas for external assistance. As farmers become at least 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. Another area that aid agencies might give attention is the role of women. 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 SDC, may be another way of responding to the new situation that is emerging.

Operational 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. The key Korean concept is “sincerity” on the part of the organization and its representatives. 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 displaying genuine interest when visiting national shrines and monuments; by entertaining requests for meeting special personal or departmental needs that may not be directly related to the project; by being flexible in project implementation when possible; by inquiring respectfully about customs and way of life in the North Korea; by sharing personal information (about family, for example) when appropriate. None of this is different from ways of building trust in other cultures; it is just extremely important in North Korea 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 or regularly visit North Korea is critical to success. Staff should have the personal qualities that suit living 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. More than in many other countries, in the DPRK it is important to maintain the same organizational representatives over an extended period of time. This allows building of personal trust on the part of the Korean counterparts (and the Korean security services) and the acquisition of 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 non-resident) 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, denial of reasonable requests, etc. One must always keep in mind that North Korean counterparts are under extreme pressures that we can hardly imagine. They have been trusted to have intimate dealings with foreigners with whom the general population is prohibited to have any contact. It is a very risky position since 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.

Prove yourself: Many international organizations are asked to make a substantial donation of material assistance (e.g., food, fertilizer, computers) either before or during early visits to the country in order to demonstrate their good will and their resources. North Korea does not have time or resources to deal with an organization with little to offer, and they want early evidence of what might be forthcoming. An initial contribution of commodities to a particular community or institution can open the way to discussing underlying problems and developing projects to address them. Some NGOs continue to contribute relief commodities even after rehabilitation or development projects have become established in order to keep the door open. This also makes it easier for North Korean counterparts to justify to higher-ups continued cooperation with the aid agency.

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 allow developing working relationships with local officials and managers and allow general 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, since the authorities are not comfortable with agencies comparing notes and working together, though 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, etc. in order to create a current matrix on 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 that are already engaged there.

Persist: Compared to 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 (e.g., 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, multi-faceted, 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-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 situation?

First of all, 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 Korean children, mothers, old people, farmers, and even middle officials have suffered and endured. And many North Koreans know that we know. This brings them into the human family in the least political way possible. It encourages North Koreans to express their own humanitarianism. It creates an emergent solidarity and encourages 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 the 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 that they may be able to live in. In fact, it is my impression that very 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 and may smooth the psychological and societal transition.

Third, with negotiating and prodding, aid workers have pressed their North Korean counterparts, especially at the local level, to take practical approaches to problem-solving based on 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 what crops to plant, how much fertilizer to apply, and everyone waited for his solution to every problem (often by “on-the-spot guidance”). Now local units are told that they are on their own, solve your own problems however you can. But years of waiting for orders and direction has suppressed the North Korean’s native creativity, and created reticence if not fear about suggesting 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.¹⁴ Development-oriented projects, such as those described above, have introduced new ideas, new approaches, new skills, and new knowledge of how the world works. Due to this process, and parallel engagement with outside commercial companies, North Korea is 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, I am confident that change in North Korea will surge ahead building to a significant extent on the experience of many years working with aid agencies.

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 re-negotiate 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 extremely 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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END NOTES

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 2004 (Juche 93) Official New Year's Editorial 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...."

² 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; UN Commission on Human Rights, 2003)

³ I have especially benefited from the comprehensive study of the experience of U.S., European, and South Korean NGOs operating in North Korea edited by Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder (2004). Other articles that attempt an overview of NGO experience in North Korea include: Lautze, 1997; Bennett 1999; Smith, 2002; Weingartner, 2003; and Lee, 2003.

⁴ Estimates of economic data are taken from the National Statistical Office of the Republic of Korea, available on line at www.nso.go.kr. Noland (2000) has described the serious problems involved in estimating North Korean economic data. Nevertheless there is consensus among observers on the general movements of the economy over the past decade.

⁵ 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 further complicating 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 Worker's 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.

⁶ Flake and Snyder (2003) provide a detailed description of the activities of the various NGOs and I will not repeat that information here, except to provide representative examples of program operations.

⁷ The experience of South Korean NGOs' efforts to deliver aid to North Korea are described in English in Chung, 2004, and Kwon and Kim.

⁸ Hwang made a number of statements during his visit to the United States in November 2003. See, for example his interview by Rebecca Ward, “Hwang Jang-Yop Calls for Regime Change,” Voice of America (VOA), 4 November 2003

⁹ After a particularly difficult and tense period of interaction with higher officials over issues related to monitoring a project, a middle level official took me aside and said: “I know that it is very, very difficult to work with my government, but please do not give up. We need your help.”

¹⁰ There are those who dissent. MSF continues to maintain that the nature of the regime and the lack of transparency: “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, has 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.”

¹¹ The Bush Administration has increased the pressure on WFP to show improvement in the monitoring of food delivery as a condition for further U.S. contributions. (Natsios, 2003)

¹² See Schloms, 2004, pp. 54-57. MSF was most vocal in its criticism of the operating conditions in North Korea. According to the statement released at the time: “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.” (from “MSF Calls on Donors to Review their Aid Policy towards DPRK,” September 30, 1998, available at www.msf.org).

¹³ After successful overland delivery of a large food shipment by one NGO, a senior official of the remote province informed me that he had sent local staff to the border to ride on each rail car until it reached its destination, in order to prevent diversion by officials along the route. Such action doesn’t answer all monitoring questions, but does reveal a lot about how the system actually works and the role of local officials.

¹⁴ In the UN 2004 Consolidated Appeal for the DPRK (section 2.4) a similar point is made: “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*. (italics mine).