The DPRK as an Aid Recipient: From Fraternal Assistance to Emergency Aid and Beyond

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Abstract
The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) made its first call for international humanitarian assistance in 1995, in the midst of famine. In the nearly 20 years since, at least 180 international organisations (IO) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from across the globe have worked to deliver aid - including food, materials, agricultural support, training, and development projects. However, the DPRK was no stranger to international assistance before the 1995 appeal – for decades the DPRK received aid from China, the Soviet Union, and ‘fraternal’ eastern European states. The DPRK even played the role of donor on at least two occasions in Ethiopia and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

This paper explores the DPRK’s history with international aid, from the economic, technical, and medical assistance during the Cold War to the current aid landscape where basic humanitarian programmes run alongside development projects. Surveying the DPRK’s experiences provides not only a historical background, but also serves as a starting point for better understanding why the DPRK acts the way it does towards humanitarian and development groups. I reject the notion that the DPRK is irrational. This paper argues in favour of understanding historical experiences for better comprehension of DPRK perspectives.

Tags
DPRK, humanitarian aid, history of aid

Introduction
The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea, issued its first large-scale appeal for international humanitarian aid in 1995. The country suffered from the collapse of the Soviet Union and resulting loss of economic aid and markets since the early 1990s. A series of natural disasters, including floods and droughts, in the mid-1990s followed. The economic downturn, ineffective
policies, and the disasters compounded to result in famine. Scholarly estimates often claim that one million DPRK citizens perished, or about five percent of the population (Haggard and Noland, 2005; Liang-Fenton 2007; McCurry 2012), though estimates can range from 220,000 to three million deaths (Smith 2002).

While the 1995 appeal is notable for being the DPRK’s first widespread call for foreign humanitarian assistance, it should not be considered the DPRK’s introduction to being an aid recipient. Since its inception, the DPRK received large amounts of economic aid from fraternal sources. Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China provided the DPRK with a range of assistance, from Chinese manpower during the battles of the Korean War to the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR) heavy involvement in the rebuilding of Hamhung, a North Korean city, to Soviet friendship prices and loan forgiveness.

This paper presents a survey of the DPRK’s experiences with international aid, from the Cold War to the start of humanitarian aid through to the present. This overview is by no means exhaustive, but aims to illustrate overall trends in the DPRK’s history as an aid recipient. Examining the DPRK’s past interactions with international assistance is useful for several reasons. First, looking at the DPRK’s aid interactions before 1995 sheds some light onto why relationships between the authorities and international humanitarian/development groups have been fraught with misunderstanding and tension. Second, this approach allows for a greater consideration of DPRK perceptions. Like other states, the DPRK’s history has affected its worldview and affects its interactions with foreign parties. Finally, this historical overview contributes to the body of knowledge on the DPRK while also demonstrating the utility and richness of available information on the country.

The following five sections review five different periods and/or facets of the DPRK’s relationship with international aid. The first section on Cold War-era fraternal assistance demonstrates that the DPRK viewed aid as political and tied to ideology. The second section outlines the DPRK’s experience as a donor to the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Ethiopia, with both instances supporting the notion that the DPRK viewed aid as political. Next, the third section considers the 1995 appeal
and the arrival – and departure – of international organisations (IOs) and non-governmental groups (NGOs). This is followed by a section on the relationship between humanitarian to development aid, and the final section overviews the current aid landscape.

Fraternal assistance during the Cold War

The DPRK has been historically unable to achieve self-sufficiency. The country has one of the lowest ratios of arable land to population in the world, frosts in the northern regions for half the year, and employed poor agricultural techniques such as excessive use of chemical fertiliser and no system of crop rotation (Weingartner 2001, 9; Oberdorfer 2014, 291). Thus long before the international humanitarian appeals of the mid-1990s, the DPRK was reliant on bringing food, energy, and other resources in from external sources to help sustain its population. Economic and energy assistance particularly played a key role in keeping the DPRK afloat in the decades before the famine. Between 1946 and 1984, the DPRK received approximately USD 4.75 billion in aid from fraternal socialist states – approximately 36 percent from Eastern Europe, 46 percent from the Soviet Union, and 18 percent from China (Kim 2012, 461).

Before examining fraternal aid, it is worth considering how the DPRK promoted its Juche ideology while simultaneously receiving foreign assistance. Juche is often translated as ‘self-reliance,’ though other interpretations include ‘a rejection of servile imitation of foreign examples’ (van Ree 1989, 50), a combination of intense nationalism, Stalinism, and Confucian dynasticism (Haggard & Noland 2007), and a mindset built around the leadership’s personality cult, self-reliance, and prioritising the military (Bellamy 2015, 230). It is not within the scope of this paper to explore the meaning of Juche, but it is evident that the acceptance of external aid contradicts prevailing interpretations. How was the DPRK able to justify aid from foreign sources while also championing Juche? Noland (2003) argues that the DPRK presented aid not as help, but as a symbol of respect and praise. This justification would have been more persuasive during the Cold War, when all aid flowing in to the DPRK came from fraternal socialist countries.
The bulk of aid from Eastern Europe came during the 1950s and early 1960s, during the Korean War and the ensuing reconstruction effort. Romania, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Bulgaria, Poland, Albania, and Czechoslovakia supplied the DPRK with technical assistance, medical aid, and favourable trade terms for the DPRK. The city of Hamhung was the site of a special reconstruction project by the GDR that ran from 1955 to 1962. The DPRK’s attitude towards the project shifted from initial appreciation towards the Germans to an official proclamation in 1961 that the DPRK had received no international help whatsoever since 1957 – a blatant lie that indicates the DPRK was not proud of receiving assistance (Frank 2008).

Soviet aid came in the form of low-cost technical information sharing, grants, credits, technical guidance, fertiliser, goods, refined oil, coal, and steel (Kim 2012; Haggard and Noland 2005; Noland 2003). One humanitarian arena in which the benefit of Soviet aid was significant is healthcare. The Red Cross hospital in Pyongyang, which is still in use today and home to collaborations with several NGOs/IOs, was built with Soviet aid (Kuark 1963). In 1991, one year after establishing diplomatic relations with the ROK, the Soviet Union began to demand hard currency for trade with the DPRK. Eberstadt et al. (1995) reported that exports from the Soviet Union to the DPRK fell from USD 2 billion in 1990 to less than USD 750 million in 1991. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these numbers continued to fall under trade with the newly established Russian Federation. Eberstadt et al. (1995) put total Russian exports to the DPRK in 1993 at less than USD 250 million. One arena greatly affected by this dramatic decrease was energy – oil, coke, and coal exports all dropped significantly. As the DPRK was dependent on Soviet energy sources to help sustain its highly mechanised agricultural system, this decrease had devastating implications for DPRK food production. Ford and Kwon (1998) argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the largest single event that lead to the famine – a view that demonstrates how valuable Soviet assistance was to the DPRK.

China had supported the DPRK throughout the Korean War, and after the signing of the armistice agreement in 1953 began its official aid programme. Early components of the programme included large grants, the cancellation of debts accrued
during the war, and 500,000 soldiers providing free labour in agriculture, reconstruction, and medical services (Reilly 2014, 1162). China also exported large quantities of grain to the DPRK. Even at the height of their own devastating famine in 1960, China sent the DPRK 230,000 tonnes of grain (Shen and Xia 2012, 31). Reilly (2014) divides Chinese aid to the DPRK during the Cold War into three pillars: training, managed barter trade (which tended to favour the DPRK), and concessionary loans (which were often forgiven). Though Chinese aid fluctuated, it never outright ceased. Shen and Xia explain, ‘China never suspended its aid to the DPRK, even when the Sino-North Korean relationship became strained or China was in a very difficult economic situation.’ (2012, 38). Thus Chinese aid, like Soviet aid, came to be taken as a given by the DPRK.

China also opened diplomatic relations with the ROK in 1992 and ended its previous bilateral barter system in favour of requiring hard currency from the DPRK. Trade declined throughout the 1990s, from a 1993 peak of USD 899 million to USD 370 million in 1999 (Ming 2004, 341). Haggard and Noland contend that ‘If there was a single proximate external trigger to the North Korean famine, Chinese trade behaviour during these crucial years is a plausible candidate’ (2007, 32). Their view differs from that of Ford and Kwon (2008), who posit that it was the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent loss of aid that was the single largest outside trigger of the famine. Both views are testament to the dependence the DPRK had on foreign aid.

**DPRK as a donor**

The DPRK also has experience as an aid donor. In the 1970s and 1980s, the DPRK sent agricultural experts and engineers, as well as military advisors, to Ethiopia. Their agricultural project of planting rice in the south of the country was a failure (Armstrong 2013, 196). This experience is notable for two main reasons. One, Ethiopia did not deliver aid to the DPRK after the Korean War, so the DPRK’s participation in aid projects demonstrates that it did not view aid as a measure-for-measure exchange. Rather, aid was to be linked to ideology and socialist solidarity. Second, the DPRK has been on the side of aid deliverer during a failed project. Thus the DPRK authorities have first hand knowledge from the perspective of an aid implementer that despite best intentions, projects may not always succeed.
In 1984, the ROK suffered from heaving flooding. The DPRK responded by delivering relief supplies such as rice, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and cement (Aaltola 1999). DPRK authorities were reportedly surprised that the ROK had accepted their offer, but went through with the aid delivery. However, the materials they sent, which included textiles, rice, and cement, were ‘of such poor quality as to be almost unusable’ (Becker 2005, 157). This seems to indicate that the DPRK did not deliver aid out of a humanitarian imperative – the materials were sent for show, not for use. Additionally, Aaltola (1999) explains that this experience made DPRK authorities eventually come to expect that ROK aid be offered under the same ‘no strings attached’ conditions. Aaltola also offers an instance of how this line of thinking backfired for the DPRK when it came to discussing transportation of aid. In 1984, the DPRK sent aid through the DMZ in trucks with DPRK symbols – a style the authorities were not willing to let the ROK use in delivering aid north.

The DPRK’s experience as a donor is notable not for the size of its programmes or the breadth of its aid, but for its links to political motives. In the case of Ethiopia, the DPRK attempted to take on a similar role that China and the Soviet Union played – that of the fraternal socialist state, extending aid in an act of international solidarity. The assistance that followed the ROK floods is puzzling in that the materials sent were of extremely poor quality. Rather than show off or try to demonstrate superiority to the ROK by sending higher quality materials, the DPRK authorities chose to send shoddy supplies. This suggests that the process of delivering the aid was deemed more valuable to the DPRK than the actual reception and use of the aid. This is supported by the method in which the aid was delivered – across the DMZ, in trucks emblazoned with the DPRK flag. Though the motivations between Ethiopia and the ROK aid programmes differed, both instances support the argument that the DPRK viewed aid not through the lens of a humanitarian imperative, but as a political apparatus.

The 1995 appeal

The 1995 appeal came on the heels of a substantial drop in imports from China and the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The DPRK was unable – or unwilling – to make
economic and agricultural policy changes to adjust and find ways to feed its population. In July and August 1995, heavy floods damaged crops, destroyed grain stores, and according to the DPRK authorities, displaced 5.4 million people (Noland 2003, 6; Robinson et al. 1999, 291). The floods brought devastation, but also an avenue for the DPRK government to make wider appeals for international aid without admitting to any economic wrongdoing or distress. The launch of the international appeal brought United Nations (UN) agencies and NGOs from North America, Europe, and the ROK into the country to devise their programmes. The World Food Programme (WFP), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) were among the first IOs to respond to the DPRK’s appeal, with the WFP opening an office in Pyongyang in October 1995 (Quinones 2002, 2). The first European NGO to work in the DPRK was Medécins sans Frontières (MSF, also known as Doctors without Borders), who began programmes in 1995 (Schloms 2003, 47). American groups followed not long after, with Mercy Corps, World Vision, and the Latter Day Saints Charity – all religious groups – having visited by February 1996. The DPRK quickly transformed from the recipient of declining fraternal assistance to the recipient of a large-scale, multilateral, international aid effort.

Six UN bodies were present in the DPRK by 1997 – United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), WFP, UNICEF, World Health Organisation (WHO), and FAO. The presence of these UN groups is significant for several reasons. First, they marked a shift from the DPRK as a solely bilateral aid recipient to a state that was receiving multilateral assistance. Second, the UN bodies are diverse and deal with a range of humanitarian and development issues. The DPRK’s acceptance of these groups was an acknowledgement that food aid alone was not enough to solve the problems facing the population. Third, the UN bodies came to construct a system through which not only multilateral government aid was channelled, but also influenced the work of NGOs. As the UN bodies are typically in possession of the most funding and staff, they have a more prominent and steady position than NGOs. Fourth, UN bodies were instrumental in gathering information related to the humanitarian needs in the DPRK. The WFP, for example, conducted the first survey on food shortages and their effect
on children’s institutions in 1996. However, the WFP and other UN bodies were not allowed the degree of access required for truly random, unbiased results. Finally, both the UN and NGOs brought a new set of challenges for the DPRK. Unlike their previous experiences as an aid recipient during the Cold War, they were now confronted with ideas and standards about needs assessments, monitoring, evaluation, and access to their population. This was a two-way issue: as Smith states, ‘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’ (2002, 1).

In addition to forging new relationships with IOs, the DPRK also began inviting NGOs to work in the country. NGOs brought additional challenges to the DPRK, which further shaped the DPRK’s experience as an aid recipient. These challenges include coordination, trust, and access. Information sharing internally amongst DPRK institutions was not a norm, and this carried over to the DPRK’s dealings with humanitarian groups. The DPRK told NGOs not to share information, and some took heed – the Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF) reportedly told Japanese NGOs to avoid sharing information or joining coalitions (Weingartner 2001). Confronted with this new frontier of coordination and information, the DPRK appears to have chosen to resist as much as possible in attempts to maintain control.

The DPRK wanted to have control because it did not trust the humanitarian groups coming in from abroad. Weingartner explained, ‘Wary of foreigners in general, the DPRK was concerned that receiving aid made them somehow vulnerable to enemy spies’ (2001, 22). Some actions taken by humanitarian groups gave the DPRK cause to believe they were right – Weingartner (2001) reports that groups, including the WFP, shunned local staff by denying them access to password-protected computers and not including them in meetings. Without any comparable past experience, the DPRK had no reference point and thus moved forward cautiously. To the regime, NGOs were full of enigmas. How could they receive government funding, yet claim to be independent of the their governments? Why were some so eager to work in the DPRK? Why did they have so many demands when it would be easiest to just hand materials and resources over to the DPRK authorities?
A significant portion of these problematic demands dealt with access. NGOs and IOs were used to operating in situations where they collected information from local populations on their needs, then monitored distribution and sometimes evaluated measures like effectiveness and satisfaction. Donors often expected detailed reports justifying how their money was spent and demonstrating that there had been minimal waste. NGOs in the DPRK were in the unenviable position of having donors asking for information while the DPRK authorities did their best to withhold it. Flake goes so far as to posit that one of clearest lessons learned by NGOs was ‘the lengths to which the DPRK regime will go to try to keep foreigners from perceiving the reality, and the priority the government places on shielding that reality from the view of the outside world’ (2003, 44). As a general rule, foreign groups were not allowed to send Korean-speaking staff into the country (with the obvious exception being ROK groups). Entire counties were deemed off-limits by the authorities, and access to an area by one group did not guarantee access to the same area by other groups (Schloms 2003, 52). Issues of access were nearly universal, from large IOs like the WFP to smaller NGOs.

When the DPRK shifted to the role of international aid recipient, it had to create new mechanisms and retool old structures for dealing with the influx of foreign groups. The Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee was founded to act as the official DPRK government body to liaise with humanitarian groups. This institutionalisation demonstrates that the DPRK felt it advantageous to have structured, centralised controls over humanitarian groups, rather than having groups work with existing relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Agriculture.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the number of groups working in the DPRK in four different years, with groups divided into four general categories: resident NGO, non-resident NGO, resident IO, and non-resident IO. Resident groups maintain a full-time presence in the DPRK, with at least one foreign staff member. All resident groups, including those currently in the DPRK and those that have left, have been European (note that residential status is a requirement for European
Commission funding). Non-resident groups do not have a permanent presence on the ground in the DPRK. Instead, they work to deliver aid remotely. Most of these groups visit the DPRK either regularly or ad-hoc to conduct needs assessments, monitor projects, deliver goods, and/or meet with their DPRK counterparts. Tracking the presence of non-resident groups can be difficult, especially when it is not clear if a group’s activities are ad-hoc or regular, or if they experienced any periods of interruption, so the table presents an estimate based on information from NGO/IO websites, publications, and secondary sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Resident NGO</th>
<th>Non-Resident NGO</th>
<th>Resident IO</th>
<th>Non-Resident IO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1:** Estimated NGO/IO involvement in the DPRK

NGOs and IOs working in the DPRK came from many countries, including Switzerland, the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, ROK, Ireland, Italy, UK, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, and Germany. They worked in food aid, agriculture, health, and disaster relief. They ranged from large, well-known groups with projects all over the world like MSF to small groups that focused only on the DPRK, such as the EBF. Some groups were secular, whereas many others were faith-based. Even amongst the latter there was great diversity – Christian (including Lutheran, Catholic, Mennonite, Presbyterian, and Methodist), Quaker, Mormon, and Buddhist groups all worked in the DPRK during the famine era. There were groups that constantly pushed for more access – with some eventually leaving - that Schloms (2003) refers to as the ‘hard landing’ NGOs. He describes other groups as working under the belief of ‘change through rapprochement.’ This diversity almost certainly proved challenging as DPRK authorities struggled not only to understand NGOs as a whole, but also how groups could operate so differently.
Many NGOs and IOs struggled to negotiate access to aid recipients, access to information, and their ability to monitor their work, resulting in some groups withdrawing from the DPRK. Table 2 details some NGO/IO exits and interruptions. While it may appear that resident NGOs have higher rates of leaving the DPRK, this may not be entirely true. Because non-resident groups do not have a full-time presence, they can leave for a period of time quietly without needing to announce their exit. Resident NGOs either have staff in the country or do not, so their decisions and movements are more prone to concrete changes. A few non-resident NGOs have disclosed that they left or took breaks for reasons related to dealing with the DPRK authorities, as listed in Table 2. These departures are indicative of the challenges NGOs/IOs faced in working with the DPRK authorities, but also of external factors that influenced humanitarian groups such as funding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Years Active</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Reason for leaving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Foodgrains Bank; 1996 – present, interrupted between 2005-2008</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Non-resident NGO working in food, agriculture, and livelihoods</td>
<td>DPRK ended humanitarian aid in favour of development aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARE; 1996 - 2000</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Non-resident NGO working in food and agriculture</td>
<td>Wanted to move on to development programmes but DPRK authorities disagreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church World Service; 1995 – 2003</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Non-resident NGO working in food and medicine</td>
<td>Disbanding of aid consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Contre la Faim/Action Against Hunger (ACF); 1998 - 2000</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Resident NGO working in food</td>
<td>Concerns over aid manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADRA; 1995 – 2005</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Resident NGO working in food, medicine, and energy</td>
<td>Request of DPRK authorities, who wanted to move to development programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agape International; 1995 – 2005, 2006 – present</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Originally resident NGO working in food, return in 2006 as non-resident working in energy</td>
<td>Request of DPRK authorities, who wanted to move to development programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cap Anamur; 1998 –</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Resident NGO</td>
<td>Denied improved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>NGO/IO</td>
<td>Country(s)</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>CESVI; 1997 – 2005</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Working in medicine, food, and material goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997 – 2005</td>
<td>Children’s Aid Direct (CAD);</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Resident NGO working in food and material aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998 – 2002</td>
<td>HelpAge International;</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Resident NGO working with the elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>return in 2012 as non-resident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998 – 1999</td>
<td>Oxfam UK; 1998 – 1999</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Resident NGO working in water and sanitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979 – 2007</td>
<td>UNDP; 1979 – 2007, 2009 - present</td>
<td></td>
<td>Resident IO working in food, energy, disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>preparedness, and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 – 2005</td>
<td>WFP; 1995 – 2005, 2006 – present</td>
<td></td>
<td>Resident IO working in food and nutrition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** NGO/IO exits and interruptions
It is difficult to ascertain precisely the DPRK’s thoughts regarding these NGO exits, particularly those that left in the late 1990s. However, it is reasonable to believe that these exits showed the DPRK that some groups would leave even if initial negotiations had given them access into the country. NGO aid could not be taken for granted – a message that was delivered after only a few years of NGO engagement in the DPRK. However, this was true for NGOs as individual entities – not for NGOs as a whole. Even when MSF left and condemned the DPRK’s lack of humanitarian space, other groups continued to work and start new programmes. The DPRK seemed comfortable enough with this general trend of assistance to even push humanitarian NGOs out themselves in the mid-2000s in an attempt to garner more development aid. While that effort was not entirely successful, there was a shift towards development assistance and engagement projects that had not been seen in the first decade of humanitarian aid. The following subsection explores this opening of programmes.

From humanitarian to development aid

By the year 2000, NGOs had been present in the DPRK for five years. It was no longer a largely unknowable situation, and there were dozens of groups from a variety of countries with experience working in the country with IOs and DPRK authorities. The challenges of monitoring, negotiating, and implementing programmes were well known at this point, and the international community seemed to be less enthusiastic about providing aid than they had been in the decade prior. Donor fatigue may also have begun to set in by the early 2000s. International food aid fell by more than half from 226.3 million USD in 1999 to 106.66 million in 2000 (Chung 2003, 95). However, during this same time period some pre-Cold War sources of assistance began to send humanitarian assistance. Hungarian Baptist Aid (HBA), an NGO, gained ‘semi-residential’ status in the DPRK in 2001 (Baptist Press 2001). In 2004, Russia gave 11 million USD to the WFP for food aid in the DPRK – its first ever donation to the WFP (WFP 2004).

In 2005, the DPRK changed its mind and made an abrupt shift in focus towards development aid. There are several underlying reasons that could help explain this decision. 2005’s harvest was an improvement from earlier years. The
shift, or least its effect on European NGOs, may have been related to a UN resolution submitted by the European Union that condemned the DPRK’s human rights record (McDonald 2005). Perhaps it was simply that the DPRK grew ashamed of its decade-long role of international humanitarian aid recipient. Whatever the reason, the change affected both IOs and NGOs, resident and non-resident.

By 2005, nine European NGOs were working in the DPRK with residential status. These nine groups all worked in humanitarian aid, with programmes in areas including food security, agriculture, nutrition, livelihoods, healthcare, water and sanitation, and working with the disabled. In September 2005, the DPRK announced that these humanitarian groups had to leave by the end of the year. Most groups were able to negotiate with the DPRK authorities to stay in the country, though some did leave as indicated in Table 2. The groups had to abandon their organisational names to instead work under the umbrella of ‘European Union Program Support Units’ (EUPS Units), and their primary interlocutor changed from the FDRC to one of its successors, the Korea European Cooperation Coordinating Agency (KECCA). Just as with the FDRC, the terminology used gives insight into the mindset and direction of the DPRK authorities. The vocabulary in KECCA and EUPS point towards development assistance and emphasise collaboration.

The IO most affected by 2005’s shift was the WFP. The WFP was the largest group working in food security. It supported 19 food factories in the DPRK and provided food aid for 6.5 million North Koreans in 160 counties out of 203, with a residential staff that peaked at 46 making 400 monitoring trips per month (WFP February 2006). Consistent with their apparent change in priority, the authorities ordered the WFP to switch from food aid to development work. Richard Ragan, the WFP Country Director for the DPRK at the time, explained the WFP’s North Korean counterparts ‘have expressed a clear preference for development-oriented assistance over emergency relief’ (WFP 2005). After negotiations lasting from fall of 2005 to spring 2006, the WFP was able to continue delivering food aid in the DPRK, but at a reduced programme size. The new operation aimed to provide food for 1.9 million North Koreans in 30 ‘focus counties,’ with 10 international resident staff members making ‘a much more limited number’ of monitoring trips (WFP May 2006, WFP
February 2006). The WFP had succeeded in continuing with food security projects, but this episode demonstrated that the authorities were willing to see even the largest of groups go if they did not compromise with the DPRK’s vision for aid. This is not particularly unique – states almost always want to be involved with the direction of aid in their country, and as the primary responsibility holders for the well-being of their citizens, have not only the option but the right to do so. The DPRK’s situation is notable, though, in its extremes – from swinging from humanitarian to development aid to the authorities’ total control of what groups were able to witness, do, and learn.

Despite NGO withdrawal, confusion regarding the goals and desires of the DPRK, and donor fatigue, international NGOs continued to establish projects in the country. While the DPRK did not hold to its intention of eliminating humanitarian aid, the authorities were successful in bringing in groups that implemented a diverse range of projects. Table 3 gives examples of NGOs that began development or engagement projects in the 2000s. The list is by no mean exhaustive, but meant to be indicative of the diversity of projects found in the DPRK during this period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Project examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DULA International</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2012 - present</td>
<td>Supplies, training, nutrition, and support for disabled people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanns-Seidel Foundation</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2006 - present</td>
<td>Business and agriculture training, book donations, study tours to Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea Foundation for International Healthcare</td>
<td>ROK</td>
<td>2006 - present</td>
<td>Health worker training, international seminars on inter-Korean healthcare cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agape International</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2006 – present (previously residential from 1995 - 2005)</td>
<td>Alternative energy such as wind turbines, books and training for deaf children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay Area TB Consortium</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2007 - present</td>
<td>Establishment of National Tuberculosis Reference Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chosun Exchange</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2007 – present</td>
<td>Business and tech talks, workshops, seminars, and study tours (some aimed specifically at women)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Examples of diversified NGOs

The diversification of programmes was exactly that – a diversification, and not a wholesale shift in focus. At the same time that the Chosun Exchange was setting up projects to teach North Korean women about business, other NGOs and IOs were continuing to deliver food aid, nutritional supplements, and medical assistance. The DPRK had found a way to have its cake and eat it, too. Previous attempts to discourage development aid had not gone well (for example, the case of CARE in Table 2), while kicking out humanitarians in favour of development had also not been successful. The DPRK instead became a recipient of aid traversing the entire spectrum of relief, rehabilitation, and development.

Current snapshot

As of June 2015, six UN agencies and six European NGOs maintain resident status in the country. Three countries – Italy, France, and Switzerland – have official offices with resident staff in the DPRK that deal with humanitarian and development issues operating as of June 2015. As indicated in Table 1, approximately 55 NGOs and 17 IOs were involved in the DPRK in 2015. These groups deliver both basic humanitarian aid, and more diverse development aid as discussed in the previous section.

In 2015, UNICEF reported that 28 percent of North Korean children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition (stunting, low height for age) and four percent experience acute malnutrition (wasting, low weight for height). In the same report, UNICEF acknowledged that ‘structural causes of vulnerability remained unchanged.’ Thus humanitarian need continues, and will likely continue as the DPRK authorities have proven unable and/or unwilling to pursue effective policy changes to alleviate the needs of North Koreans.

Conclusion
The DPRK has been a recipient of aid for its entire history as a state. In 60 years, it has received assistance from an array of geographically and ideologically diverse sources. In the 1970s and 1980s, the DPRK even experienced the role of aid donor – and of a donor whose projects failed. Fraternal bilateral assistance during the Cold War kept the DPRK afloat, while an emergency appeal in 1995 kicked off an international humanitarian effort that has been ongoing for over 20 years.

Though the authorities invited NGOs and IOs in, they grappled with their requests for information. It seemed as though the DPRK understood its role as recipient through a mind-set of ‘give-aid-get-out.’ The DPRK system adjusted to create mechanisms for foreign aid workers to operate in, while simultaneously trying to keep them from gaining too much information. In the past, aid had come without conditions. Now, the DPRK had to adjust to foreign standards of monitoring, needs assessments, and evaluations – or risk groups leaving. Humanitarian groups did leave, but the DPRK had no shortage of NGOs willing to work in the country. In fact, the authorities turned around one decade after first inviting humanitarians in to announce they must leave in favour of development assistance. The DPRK appears to have not considered this decision in the context of international development, as many development programmes have longer term and more integrated involvement than humanitarian relief projects. The attempted shift failed, but the DPRK did succeed in bringing in a more diverse set of NGOs.

Two decades after the initial appeal, the DPRK has gained experience working with the international humanitarian and development system. It can no longer shield itself behind a lack of familiarity with IOs/NGOs. The same goes for IOs/NGOs – the DPRK is not a totally unknowable, mysterious state. As humanitarian and development programmes continue into their twenty-first year, it is clear that the DPRK’s role as aid recipient has shifted both from its volition and from external factors. How the regime will navigate the coming years and the effects of long-term foreign aid remains to be seen.

Bibliography


