

The Provision of Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea through Multilateral Cooperation

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Abstract

South Korea's humanitarian assistance to North Korea has always been part of its successive administrations' North Korea policies, and has continually changed depending on the humanitarian needs of its northern neighbor and inter-Korean relations. While humanitarian assistance to North Korea has been conducted through diverse cooperative channels, the years-long suspension of aid necessitates that the South Korean government seeks new approaches and measures. The recent spread of COVID-19 variants in North Korea poses a risk to humanitarian conditions in the country, potentially worsening food insecurity, malnutrition, and access to health services and clean water. At the current juncture, the provision of direct aid to North Korea may not be feasible in the short term. For this reason, South Korea should instead provide aid indirectly through multilateral agencies and play a leading role in mitigating the humanitarian crisis experienced by the vulnerable population in North Korea. In the mid to long term, South Korea should consider establishing a 'Northeast Asian multilateral body for humanitarian cooperation' (tentatively named) and providing support for North Korea's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

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Suspension of Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea: A Crisis or An Opportunity?

The South Korean government's humanitarian assistance to North Korea has effectively been on hold for more than 10 years. On May 14, despite the rapid spread of the new COVID-19 variants, described by the North Korean leadership as "the greatest turmoil since the country's founding," North Korea announced it would not open its borders to receive vaccine offers from the international community. Nevertheless, the South Korean administration has expressed its continued willingness to help its northern neighbor, saying that humanitarian assistance should be provided irrespective of the political situation, including North Korea's military provocations.¹⁾ Despite the unprecedented crisis in which the Omicron variant posed a threat to the life and health of the North Korean people, North Korea rejected offers from South Korea for public health and medical assistance to stick to its COVID-19 measures based on surveillance, lockdowns, and quarantine.²⁾ It is apparent that North Korea considers the COVID-19 situation as having stabilized since mid-May as the number of new fever cases began to decrease. However, given that the accuracy of North Korea's diagnostic testing and the reliability of its statistics are both doubtful, the country may have suffered more significant consequences from the pandemic. Depending on potential improvements in inter-Korean relations or changes to the COVID-19 situation in North Korea, the North Korean leadership may respond differently towards South Korea's offer to help. In addition, humanitarian aid is not confined to public health and medical assistance. Especially when climate change poses an imminent threat to humanity as a whole and North Korea is

1) The Ministry of Unification, "The Minister of Unification Kwon Young-se Met with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman," (June 8, 2022, Press Releases), <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/news/release/?boardId=bbs_0000000000000004&mode=view&cntId=54997&category=&pageIdx=> (Accessed on June 8, 2022).

2) The Ministry of Unification, "South Korean Government's Proposal to Hold Working-level Contacts for Cooperation in Public Health and Quarantine Efforts," (May 16, 2022, Press Releases), <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/news/release/?boardId=bbs_0000000000000004&mode=view&cntId=54987&category=&pageIdx=1> (Accessed on June 8, 2022).

at a higher risk of natural disasters and food crises, humanitarian assistance is still a measure of considerable importance. That said, the fact that South Korea's aid has been suspended for many years requires us to seek new approaches and measures.

In the past years, the South Korean government's assistance to North Korea was carried out through various channels. In most cases, the aid was either in the form of direct support from the government or indirect support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations. From 1995 to 2021, South Korea provided KRW 3.34 trillion worth of humanitarian assistance to North Korea in cumulative terms; government-led assistance totaled KRW 2.415 trillion and civilian-led assistance amounted to KRW 925.8 billion. Direct support by the government, consisting of grant and loans for food, accounted for 60% of the total aid. Only 8.9% was grant aid through international organizations.

〈Table 1〉 Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea by Channel, 1995~2021

(Unit: KRW 100 million, %)

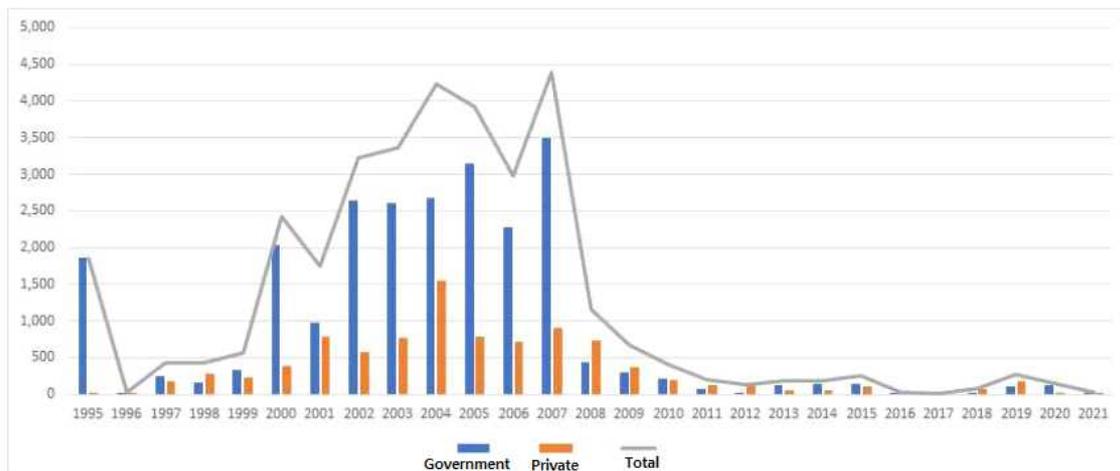
| | Government | | | | | Private | Total |
|------------|---------------|---|---|----------------|----------|---------|--------|
| | Bilateral aid | Funding for civil society organizations | Aid through international organizations | Loans for food | Subtotal | | |
| Amount | 11,258 | 1,192 | 2,969 | 8,728 | 24,147 | 9,258 | 33,404 |
| Percentage | 33.7 | 3.6 | 8.9 | 26.1 | 72.3 | 27.7 | 100 |

Source: Reordered based on the Ministry of Unification, "Statistics on the Ministry's Key Businesses: Humanitarian Aid to North Korea," <<https://unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/statistics/>> (Accessed on June 8, 2022).

Humanitarian assistance has always been a key means in South Korean administrations' North Korea policies, which have continually changed depending on the humanitarian needs in North Korea as well as inter-Korean relations. Humanitarian assistance by the South Korean government and NGOs

reached a peak in 2007 and then started to plummet. Apart from some assistance provided through South Korean NGOs for humanitarian and development cooperation and international organizations, most government-led aid has been completely suspended. In June 2019, South Korea planned to provide 50,000 tons of domestic rice to North Korea through the World Food Programme (WFP), but North Korea refused to accept the aid. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, South Korea expressed its willingness to provide both direct and indirect support for North Korea; at the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party, however, North Korea said that such offers for public health and humanitarian cooperation are in "non-fundamental" areas and stated its clear intention to refuse such help.

〈Figure 1〉 Trends in Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea
(Unit: KRW 100 million)



Source: Reordered based on the Ministry of Unification, "Statistics on the Ministry's Key Businesses: Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea" <<https://unikorea.go.kr/uni-korea/business/statistics/>> (Accessed on June 8, 2022).

The problem is that the humanitarian crisis in North Korea has become a protracted issue for too long, not to mention the deteriorating standard of living and quality of life. Due to food insecurity, malnutrition, and the lack of access to quality health services, sanitation, and drinking water, the vulnerable

still cannot secure the basic necessities of life.³⁾ In case of a surge in Omicron cases, the medically vulnerable – the elderly and people with underlying medical conditions – and their families will suffer from even greater anxiety as the country lacks sufficient medical supplies, medicines, and device to diagnose and treat COVID-19 patients. Under the recently imposed ‘maximum emergency epidemic prevention system,’ the leadership only allowed basic production and restricted the movement of people and supplies and local market operations, thereby worsening the medication shortage. This will put more pressure on the livelihoods of North Koreans and aggravate existing food and nutrition conditions. In addition, due to the withdrawal of foreign aid workers and tight border controls that have continued for more than two years and five months, a resumption of humanitarian projects by international organizations is unlikely anytime soon. Also, North Korea may face not only a food shortage but a humanitarian crisis if the ongoing severe drought continues throughout the year. The country’s emergency rice reserves are depleted, and the operation of cooperative farms suffers from additional disruptions.

Seeking Humanitarian Assistance through International Organizations to Meet the Emergent Need of North Koreans

To meet the emergent humanitarian needs of North Koreans, the South Korean government must seek out ways to provide aid not directly but indirectly through international organizations and establish a wide range of cooperative channels and platforms. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was known that as many as 2.67 million children in North Korea were in need of humanitarian assistance and there were 10.4 million people with severe physical and mental issues. These figures are likely to have increased since the pandemic.⁴⁾ Considering the on-going need for humanitarian assistance in

3) UN Resident Coordinator for DPR Korea, “DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2020,” April 2020, p. 14, <https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/2020_DPRK_Needs_and-Priorities_Plan.pdf> (Accessed on June 8, 2022).

4) UNICEF, “UNICEF DPRK Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2,” February 19, 2021,

North Korea, South Korea should prioritize providing anti-pandemic cooperation and assistance in the areas of public health, food, nutrition, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for the vulnerable population in a timely manner.

The trends in humanitarian assistance to North Korea through the United Nations (UN) agencies indicate that the role of multilateral agencies has grown gradually over the past few years. In terms of aid channels, the member states of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were the largest donors from 2002 to 2009; since 2010, multilateral agencies including the UN institutions have played a bigger role in providing aid to North Korea. In part, this was because DAC member states started to cut aid to North Korea after the country withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. On a separate note, certain UN resident agencies in North Korea, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO), have extensive experience in humanitarian projects and response monitoring. Since bilateral aid is currently not an option, a more feasible solution may be to engage multilateral agencies to contribute more and play a leading role in mitigating the humanitarian crisis experienced by the vulnerable.

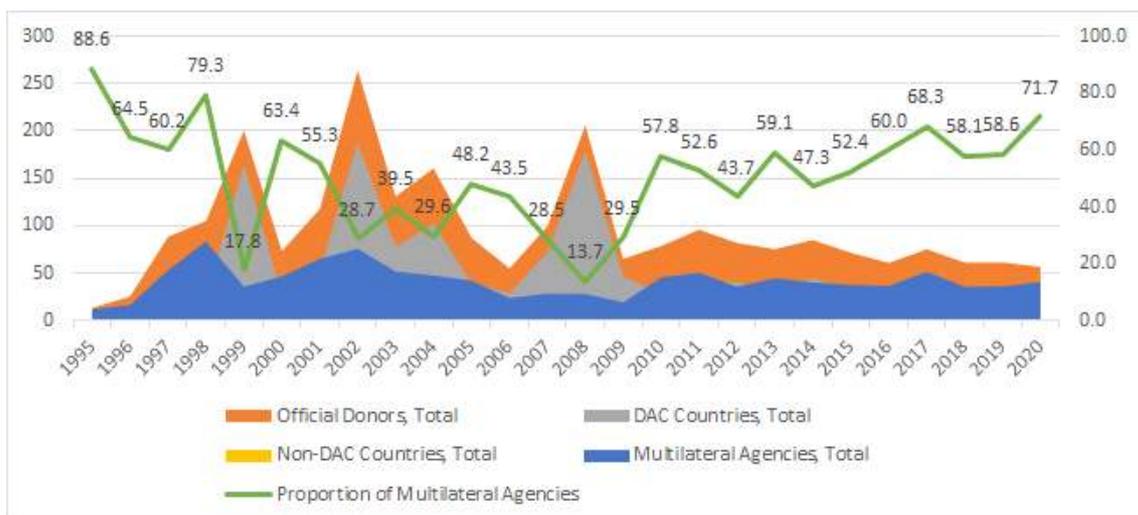
Given that EU institutions, the Global Fund, the WFP, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), and UNICEF had been the largest donors of humanitarian aid to North Korea from 1995 to 2020, the South Korean government could consider partnering with them in carrying out North Korea projects and providing assistance. In the short term, the government should assess these organizations' expertise and local accessibility in North Korea and determine if existing healthcare projects for women and children should continue or, if discontinued, resume. For instance, South Korea should consider

<https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-peoples-republic-korea/unicef-dprk-humanitarian-situation-report-end-year-2020> (Accessed on June 7, 2022).

if the humanitarian aid project for women and infants in North Korea of \$10 million, launched in 2020 through the WFP, should continue. The Republic of Korea (ROK) should also assess if the healthcare project for women and children should resume with UNICEF, a project that South Korea contributed \$3.5 million in 2019 and ended in May 2020.⁵⁾ Some report that North Korea experienced an increase of infant mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic. If such trend continues, the South Korean government could consider providing assistance to North Korea to support the purchase of essential medicines for infants and children, help expand vaccination efforts, and improve water quality, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in the form of multi-bi aid.

< Figure 2 > Trends in Humanitarian Aid to North Korea by OECD Member Countries and Agencies

(Unit: USD million)



Source: OECD, <<https://stats.oecd.org/>> (Accessed on June 8, 2022).

Note: Sector(s): Total Bilateral Aid to All Sectors; Flow(s): ODA; Flow type: Disbursements.

5) The Ministry of Unification, *White Paper on Korean Unification 2022* (Seoul: The Ministry of Unification, 2022), p. 118; The Ministry of Unification, *White Paper on Korean Unification 2021* (Seoul: The Ministry of Unification, 2021), p. 102.

Promoting Partnership between Donors, Recipients, and Multilateral Agencies via a ‘Northeast Asian Multilateral Body for Humanitarian Cooperation’

An impending shortage of food was the main cause of a humanitarian crisis in the past. However, North Korea may face multiple crises in the future compounded by diverse factors such as climate change, an outbreak of diseases, and natural disasters. Providing aid for COVID-19 prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and vaccination is still a matter of importance as North Korea is at risk from further waves of infection. At the same time, it should be noted that the country is in constant need of aid for emergency relief from natural and man-made disasters, nutrition for infants, public health for mothers and children, prevention and control of malaria and tuberculosis, and non-infectious disease management. In particular, special attention should be paid to the fact that deaths from non-communicable diseases account for 84% of all deaths in North Korea and are the main cause of the mortality gap between South and North Korea.⁶⁾ In this regard, a multilateral body for humanitarian cooperation needs to be established to prepare for a situation in which humanitarian aid to North Korea covers more selective areas in phases. Based on these efforts, such a body can further strengthen partnership between donor countries, multilateral agencies, and recipient countries to carry out projects that aim to fundamentally improve humanitarian conditions and promote capacity development in many countries in need, including North Korea.

Over the past several years, the South Korean government has mounted a wide range of efforts to resume and run humanitarian cooperation projects; in 2019, it allowed South Korean municipalities to engage in aid projects for North Korea as independent operators; in 2020, it called for a revision to ‘Implementation Assistance Notice No. 7’ with regards to the sanctions exemption process; and in 2021, it launched the ‘Health and Medical

6) Lee Yo-han, “Trends in the UN’s Discussions on SDGs and the Possibility of North Korea’s Incorporation of SDGs”, (presentation material by the KINU Advisory Council, June 7, 2022).

Cooperation Platform of the Korean Peninsula.’ While the ‘Health and Medical Cooperation Platform of the Korean Peninsula’ is confined to dealing with public health issues, the proposed ‘Northeast Asian multilateral body for humanitarian cooperation’ can cover a full range of humanitarian issues such as public health, population, access to clean water, food aid, emergency relief, and multi-hazard response.

This multilateral body will consist of key donors and recipients, including South and North Korea, and international organizations that have expertise in humanitarian aid and have access to local areas in North Korea. Once launched, it will discuss and coordinate areas, targets, scope, and scale of aid to be provided, seeking humanitarian cooperation based on universal principles to meet member states’ needs.

Strengthening International Cooperation and Solidarity to Support Joint Implementation of SDGs between South and North Korea

The widespread COVID-19 pandemic as well as the history of humanitarian cooperation projects over the past 25 years show how important it is to set agenda items that can meet North Korea’s needs and enhance acceptance and reciprocity of humanitarian action. Since North Korea announced its intention to join the international effort to implement the ‘Post-2015 Development Agenda’ in September 2015, the country has been making efforts to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given that South and North Korea are both implementing the SDGs, the South Korean government can consider identifying detailed SDG targets for which the two countries can cooperate reciprocally based on their common interests and pursue knowledge-sharing and capacity development programs. For instance, eliminating hunger, promoting public health, mitigating the effects of disasters, and securing clean water constitute parts of the individual SDGs and are a high priority for North Korea. In particular, responding to climate change and strengthening resilience

to disasters are key areas that require common action by the two Koreas, not to mention bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

More realistically, the South Korean government should participate, both directly and indirectly, in establishing the UN's new strategic plans following the 'Strategic Framework 2017-2021 for Cooperation between the United Nation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.' The ROK also needs to contribute to planning North Korea projects aimed at providing humanitarian support and implementing SDGs. Other option for South Korea to choose includes providing cooperation and support for the next round of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), conducted by UNICEF in cooperation with the Central Bureau of Statistics of North Korea in 2017. Another option is to maximize humanitarian aid channels to tackle North Korea's possible humanitarian crisis, such as securing trust funds and earmarked funding by the UN or multilateral agencies.

Improving the Humanitarian Situation in North Korea by Cooperating and Partnering with the International Community

Improving the humanitarian situation and promoting quality of life in North Korea is an issue of importance that affects not only North Korea but also the entire Korean peninsula. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of health security and multilateral cooperation in times of the global spread of novel viruses. Building response capacity against global threats is a fundamental step towards promoting human rights in North Korea, protecting life and safety, and securing sustaining peace on the Korean peninsula. As the Yoon Administration has stated, humanitarian assistance to North Korea shall be provided without political and military considerations; and South Korea shall be able to communicate with and persuade its Northern neighbor and monitor the situation to ensure aid reaches the neediest. These approaches can make humanitarian assistance to North Korea more effective

and create social consensus on the need to provide such aid. In previous years, when South and North Korea played a dominant role in humanitarian cooperation, it was not easy for members of the international community to have a say in or plan cooperation based on universal norms and principles and persuade North Korea to accept them. In this regard, on the one hand, the South Korean government should take steps to develop projects for humanitarian and development assistance, provided directly or indirectly through South Korean NGOs; on the other, it shall proactively work and cooperate with the international community to mitigate the humanitarian crisis and improve quality of life in North Korea.

As bilateral aid to North Korea does not seem feasible in the short term, South Korea can instead work with multilateral agencies that are free from political interests and are not heavily restricted from conducting aid monitoring in North Korea. South Korea's humanitarian assistance to North Korea takes place under the ongoing sanctions regime. As such, it is necessary for the South Korean government to keep providing support in ensuring sanctions exemptions granted for humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, the key to providing assistance to North Korea is to follow humanitarian principles to the greatest extent possible, regardless of which country provides aid or how large the project is. Sustainable humanitarian aid will be guaranteed only when South Korea provides support not out of political interest but from humanitarian perspective; only then can South Korea ask North Korea to be transparent in its use of assistance provided.

In recent years, North Korea has strengthened communication and cooperation with the international community regarding the implementation of global development agendas, such as responding to climate change, ending poverty, and securing a sustainable environment; this highlights the need for South Korea to partner with multilateral agencies in providing humanitarian and development assistance. If the South Korean government aims to take the initiative in humanitarian assistance and increase aid effectiveness, it needs to

coordinate policies and divide work with donor agencies and also establish channels for information sharing and adjustment between donor countries, multilateral agencies, and recipient countries. In the event that North Korea persists in rejecting humanitarian support or engages in additional military provocations, such moves might pour cold water on social consensus on the need to provide aid. In this regard, South Korea should be able to pursue creative approaches with every possibility open to encourage participation and cooperation in humanitarian assistance from North Korea. © KINU 2022