Need, Aid, and Root Causes:

The Appropriateness of Humanitarian Response in the DPRK

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2020 quietly marked a quarter century of international humanitarian aid in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea), an effort that began with the DPRK's landmark appeal in 1995 during a period of famine known as the Arduous March. Humanitarian aid, sometimes referred to as 'humanitarian relief', carries connotations of emergency, urgent response, and acute threats to human morbidity, mortality, and dignity. The Relief Web Glossary of Humanitarian Terms, for example, defines humanitarian assistance as 'aid that seeks, to save lives and alleviate suffering of a crisis-affected population.'[1] However, the role of humanitarian aid in long-term contexts of need, including but certainly not limited to the DPRK, questions the contemporary utility of this understanding. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Red Cross and United Nations (UN) bodies began working in the country on both a resident and non-resident basis in the mid-1990s. They were met with a context in some ways different from many others in which they had worked – there was no violent armed conflict, power vacuums, local civil society, or traditional threats to aid worker security.[2]

As the famine subsided, it became clear that even without an acute crisis, humanitarian need persisted. Humanitarian staff and agencies have come and gone, geopolitics have created and

[1] ReliefWeb. 2008. *Glossary of Humanitarian Terms*. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/world/reliefweb-glossary-humanitarian-terms-enko.
[2] The Aid Worker Security Database (available at https://aidworkersecurity.org/) contains no record of security incidents against humanitarian aid workers in the DPRK.

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narrowed opportunities for engagement, and programmes have shifted from famine relief to include efforts geared more at sustainability and capacity building – but despite the end of the famine emergency, the DPRK has continued to receive international humanitarian aid. Humanitarian efforts contend with the discomfort between two realms: access and the structural nature of need. Agencies work in the country to their attempts to positively impact the lives of North Koreans, and work within the constraints of both externally-imposed challenges (e.g. funding amounts and sanctions) and internally determined structural impediments to better humanitarian conditions (e.g. human rights abuses and state choices regarding resource use).

The DPRK is not unique in its position as a long-term humanitarian aid recipient. In 2019, the DPRK was one of 40 countries with more than 700,000 people determined to be experiencing humanitarian need. 27 countries were part of UN-coordinated humanitarian or refugee response plans for five or more consecutive years, but the DPRK is one of only three of the 27 whose humanitarian need is not rooted in conflict and/or displacement.[3] Instead, Development Initiatives characterises the DPRK, along with Haiti and Tanzania, as having 'natural hazards' as the cause of humanitarian crisis. This summary characterisation overlooks the deep political and economic roots of humanitarian need. In the mid 1990s major failings of the humanitarian sector, such as genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, raised discussions of the value of the so-called humanitarian principles and the relationship between humanitarianism and politics.[4] These conversations have circled back in recent years, with renewed focus on tackling the root causes of need and questioning the relationship and constructed dichotomy between life-saving humanitarian and structural development work.

Deep roots in a protracted context – the blurring of the humanitarian/development divide

While there is no singular definition of humanitarianism, the mainstream international sector generally focuses around four areas: protecting life, health, subsistence, and physical security, with primary and secondary aims being protection of 'human life where this is threatened on a wide scale' and reduction of 'excessive human suffering,' respectively.[5] Though the boundaries of these ideas are not neatly drawn – what is the threshold for 'excessive'? – they do highlight the importance of

[3] Development Initiatives. 2020. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020.* pp. 22-23. Available at: https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/#downloads.
[4] Barnett, Michael. 2011. *The Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
[5] Darcy, James and Charles-Antoine Hofmann. 2003. "According to need? Needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector." (*Humanitarian Policy Group Report 15*). London: Overseas Development Institute. P. 13

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not just preserving or saving life but considering the quality of those lives. The mainstream sector cites a group of four principles, known as the humanitarian principles, as guiding concepts in their work. They are humanity (addressing human suffering wherever it is found), neutrality (not taking sides in conflicts or disputes), impartiality (allocating aid based on needs, without discrimination), and independence (autonomy from political or other aims).

Development is also rooted in ideas of quality of life. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee definition of official development assistance (ODA) focuses on the 'the promotion of economic development and welfare of developing countries.'[6] OECD concepts of development have been criticised for being too simple, relying on the premise that ODA flows will bring economic growth which will in turn bring development.[7] Other ideas of development are broader, such as Sen's seminal argument of freedom as both the ends and the means of development.[8] In both cases, development strikes closer to the political, economic, and societal core of not only times of uniquely acute need, but also day-to-day life. Dr. Stephen Linton, founder and president of the DPRK-focused NGO Eugene Bell Foundation, discussed the humanitarian/development divide in a 2018 interview:

> I think one of the problems is that, particularly recently, this term 'humanitarian assistance' has been expanded. And many international organisations and large NGOs, and even small NGOs, are providing what they call capacity building, or development assistance. And they call this humanitarian aid. But the intent of these programmes is to make life better for people, and there's certainly nothing wrong with that. But genuine, emergency aid is not necessarily to make life better, it's to save life that is in danger of ending … So I think pulling this term back apart where a distinction is made between life-saving aid, which no one, including the US government, objects to, and developmental aid, that can look in a certain sense like economic aid, has been a challenge.[9]

Linton's remarks drill to the issue of the humanitarian-development nexus in the DPRK: in a sanctioned and highly politicised environment with questions of denuclearisation and human rights abuses, seeking to improve daily lives is an inherently structural act. Without structural changes, acute needs have and likely will continue even in times of non-emergency. Notably in 2005, the

[6] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. 2018. "Official development assistance – definition and coverage." Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/officialdevelopmentassistancedefinitionandcoverage.htm
[7] Tandon, Yash. 2008. *Ending Aid Dependence*. Cape Town: Fahamu.
[8] Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Development as Freedom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[9] Arirang News. 2018. "[ISSUE TALK] TB crisis in North Korea 'emergency situation': One-on-one with Stephen Linton." Video, 16:40. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmfR97EsNcQ

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DPRK attempted to halt humanitarian aid and requested the departure of all NGOs, for the UN to shift to longer-term development work, and decried other countries such as the US for making humanitarian aid political.[10] It is unclear exactly what the DPRK envisioned for its UN-supported development work. Additionally, the nuclear issue had already halted donor appetite for involvement in more overtly structural and therefore political assistance, and humanitarian actors had also already been involved in work aimed at sustainability, not just emergency relief. The announcement did cease or interrupt work, such as by the World Food Programme, but the DPRK continued to receive humanitarian aid though at much lower funding levels.

Role of humanitarian aid in contexts of chronic need

In May 2016, over 9,000 participants from government, civil society, humanitarian agencies, and the private sector gathered in Istanbul for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), following then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's call to improve the humanitarian sector. Notably missing was Médecins sans Frontières (MSF, also known as Doctors without Borders), who pulled out weeks before in dissatisfaction with the WHS's direction, which the NGO described as 'an incorporation of humanitarian assistance into a broader development and resilience agenda.' MSF also highlighted its concern that having NGOs and UN agencies make commitments on the same platforms as states unfairly raised the profile and responsibilities of the former, when it is the latter that actually hold both power and responsibility.[11] The title of Ban Ki-moon's WHS report, 'One humanity: shared responsibility' pinpoints exactly the dissent MSF raised – are these truly shared responsibilities? Discussion of 'ending conflict' and 'addressing root causes' on a global level can flatten the depth and texture of what these platitudes mean in specific contexts. What does it mean to end need, and who has responsibility to act, in a conflict primed but not actively hostile context like the DPRK? As sceptics of aid often point out, humanitarian issues in the DPRK and blockages to aid such as sanctions are borne from the regime's decision making. Until the regime, as well as international stakeholders such as the United States, Republic of Korea, and China, commit to changes that will adequately address the economic and political root causes, what are humanitarians to do?

DuBois presents the idea of 'humanitarianisation' as a central flaw in contemporary

[10] BBC. 2005. "North Korea rejects UN food aid." *BBC*. 23 September 2005. Retrieved from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4273844.stm.

[11] Médecins sans Frontières. 2016. "MSF to pull out of World Humanitarian Summit." Retrieved from https://www.msf.org/msf-pull-out-world-humanitarian-summit.

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humanitarian approaches - where contexts and issues that are not humanitarian receive humanitarian responses 'often resulting in the biased, inappropriate and expansive management of crisis effects rather than causes.'[12] He asserts that humanitarian crises contain two core characteristics: a change from 'normalcy' that requires more than available response abilities. Dubois argues that protracted contexts are not humanitarian crises, and humanitarians should stand back in favour of more appropriate actors (e.g. peacebuilding, development, etc.).[13]

The case for supporting humanitarian efforts in the DPRK

The danger in interpreting the DPRK as not appropriate for humanitarian response is fourfold. First, while the 'hermit kingdom' moniker has largely fallen out of fashion (rightfully so!) and North Korean linkages have many facets, the country still has limited entry points for engagement. Curtailing humanitarian aid would eliminate one pathway for engagement, for learning about the challenges facing North Koreans, and for exposing North Koreans to outside ideas. Studies using humanitarian data[14] show that even with their limitations, there is a rich body of knowledge about the country facilitated by humanitarian interaction. Second, without a clear understanding of what other actors would intervene, their status as state or non-state actors, how they would be funded, and the DPRK's willingness to work with them, understanding the DPRK as not an emergency and therefore not humanitarian risks leaving an unfilled gap. Alternatively, this approach risks a gap filled by actors whose past behaviour demonstrates minimal interest in North Koreans' human security such as China. Third, the interwoven nature of acute need and normality do not signal a need to pull humanitarian aid away from the DPRK – instead, it highlights one understanding as to why humanitarian aid would continue to be appropriate. As Hilhorst explains, classical humanitarian paradigms are built on the exceptionality of crisis, while resilience approaches tear down divides between what is normal and what is a departure from normality.[15] The DPRK's continued humanitarian engagement demonstrates that humanitarian constructs have gone beyond ideas of 'emergency' or crisis. Fourth, the resilience paradigm also provides a framing for prepositioning humanitarian relationships – if the DPRK does fall back into large-scale emergency, established humanitarian linkages will likely be beneficial in constructing a larger scale or more

[12] DuBois, Marc. 2018. "The new humanitarian basics." (*Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper*). London: Overseas Development Institute. P. 1.
[13] Ibid, p. 8.
[14] See, for example: Smith, Hazel. 2015. *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Smith, Hazel. 2016. "Nutrition and Health in North Korea: What's New, What's Changed and Why It Matters." *North Korean Review* 12(1): 7-34.
[15] Hilhorst, Dorothea. 2018. "Classical humanitarianism and resilience humanitarianism: making sense of two brands of humanitarian action." *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3(15).

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urgent response.[16]

Conclusion

The responsibility for the well-being and human security of the North Korean people lies primarily with their own government. Humanitarian discussion around responsibility and power to end root causes serves as a reminder of this. This article argues that while concepts of development and humanitarianism highlight the challenges to bringing structural change in the DPRK, the long-term nature of need in the DPRK does not signal an inappropriate match with humanitarian aid.

The DPRK's COVID-19 response has severely impacted humanitarian aid as imports face hurdles and both domestic and international travel are restricted. Some groups have had to wholly pause their work, while others have found new ways of working with their North Korean counterparts to continue projects in some capacity. How the 2021 humanitarian landscape in the DPRK develops remains to be seen, with the potential for monumental challenges. For example, the World Food Programme has noted a 'significant residual risk' that lack of food importation will halt their work in 2021.[17] Much of this is dependent on the DPRK's response to COVID-19. However, humanitarian support — which requires commitments within the control of the international community, such as funding as well as legislation to reduce barriers and unintended effects of sanctions — should continue despite the protracted and structural nature of need. ■

[16] This also emerged as a finding from a study on humanitarian impacts of sanctions. See Zadeh-Cummings, N., and Harris, L. 2020. 'The Impact of Sanctions Against North Korea on Humanitarian Aid,' *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 2(1).

[17] World Food Programme. 2020. "Country Strategic Plan Revision." Available at: https://www.wfp.org/operations/kp02-dprk-interim-country-strategic-plan-2019-2022. P. 3.

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