

Thirty Years of International Aid to North Korea: An Analysis of Humanitarian Aid Operations and Sectoral Allocation*

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Abstract

This paper aims to better understand the trajectory and contributions of international humanitarian assistance to North Korea over the last three decades, while examining the status of international aid and constraints placed on humanitarian operations in the country, as well as allocations of humanitarian aid by sector. A survey of UN documents and statistics demonstrates the roles of major actors and channels of international aid to North Korea. The majority of humanitarian aid to North Korea has been channeled through UN agencies and NGOs, contributing to improving the livelihoods of vulnerable people and access to basic services. About 63 percent of international assistance to North Korea was allocated to food aid and agriculture. The remainder was largely used for health, WASH and multi-sector operations. By examining the significant shortfall of funding, the paper also investigates multiple operational constraints on the aid delivery of international organizations. In highlighting the status and changing trends of humanitarian aid by sector, the paper assesses the features of sectoral allocation of international aid and associated problems. This paper suggests some policy implications for the resumption of international organizations' in-country operations and the expansion of humanitarian aid to North Korea.

Keywords

North Korea, Aid, Humanitarian Assistance, Sanctions, United Nations, NGOs, International Organizations

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I. Introduction

Since the initiation of emergency relief efforts in 1995 in response to North Korea's economic collapse and subsequent famine, the international community has contributed to alleviating the country's humanitarian crises and the hardships of vulnerable people over the past thirty years. International humanitarian assistance to North Korea has encompassed not only the delivery of food and medical supplies but also the implementation of humanitarian and development programs across sectors, including agriculture, health, education, water supply and sanitation, reforestation and disaster risk management. Such aid has improved several socio-economic indicators, such as nutrition, infant and child mortality, maternal mortality and the treatment of infectious diseases. For instance, the maternal mortality ratio dropped from 188 per 100,000 live births in 2002 to 85 in 2014, while the neonatal mortality rate declined significantly from 31.7 per 1,000 live births in 1997 to 3.2 in 2021 (Lee, 2024, p.11). The tuberculosis incidence rate also fell from 451 per 100,000 people in 2015 to 351 in 2020 (DPRK, 2021, p.19).

However, heightened geopolitical tensions associated with North Korea's nuclear weapons development and the prolonged border closure following the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the livelihoods of ordinary North Koreans. About 40 percent of the population is estimated to be food insecure (HCT, 2020, p.14). In the 2023 Global Hunger Index, North Korea ranked 106th out of 125 countries, classifying it as a country with a serious level of hunger. Indeed, Approximately 8.4 million people - 33 percent of the population - reportedly lack access to safe drinking water (HCT, 2020, p.14). The suspension of international organizations' operations in North Korea due to its border closure has further deteriorated food security and healthcare services as well as its capacity to deal with natural disasters and climate change.¹⁾ For

example, although a small volume of vaccines was supplied by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2023, the halt of in-country activities has resulted in a sharp decline in immunization coverage among infants and children during the 2020s, raising the risk of disease outbreaks (UNICEF, 2023).

During the last three decades, international humanitarian assistance to North Korea has operated under substantial constraints. In contrast to typical recipient countries, international organizations in North Korea have been unable to freely access the general population, the intended beneficiaries, and have faced restrictions in conducting on-site monitoring to verify the distribution and use of aid supplies. UN agencies and NGOs working in North Korea have adhered to the 'no access, no assistance' principle, providing humanitarian aid only in areas where monitoring and assessment are possible. Field visits by international staff require prior travel approval from the authorities typically one week in advance (HCT, 2017, p.16). Moreover, obtaining reliable data has been a great challenge. While some improvements were made in the 2010s, international organizations' access to data and information on North Korea's socio-economic situation remains very limited (HCT, 2018, p.12). Consequently, the rigid attitude and restrictive measures of North Korea have constrained international aid efforts.

North Korea's nuclear standoff and corresponding stringent sanctions have led to further negative impacts on the humanitarian operations of international organizations, diminishing the effectiveness of aid. The funding of international aid to North Korea remained at a very low level during the last decade. Five resolutions of the UN Security Council in 2016 and 2017 repeatedly stated that tougher sanctions were not intended to restrict humanitarian assistance to the civilian population. However, in practice, the procurement of aid-related supplies,

1) Following the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, North Korea closed its borders on January 22, 2020. UN agencies and NGOs managed to provide some nutritional support and medical supplies to vulnerable populations in 2020. However, as the border closure persisted, the last remaining international staff from the WFP and Concern Worldwide departed North Korea in March 2021 (WFP, 2021, p.8).

transportation and financial transactions have encountered significant difficulties. The tightening of sanctions has placed substantial constraints on the activities of UN agencies and NGOs (HCT, 2019, p.7; WFP, 2021, p.8). The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) announced the suspension of its funding in February 2018. Fida International, a Finnish NGO, also withdrew from North Korea in June 2019, citing the inability to access financial services.²⁾ After the Coronavirus-related border closure, the resident activities of international organizations have been suspended, with only small-scale humanitarian supplies being delivered to North Korea.³⁾

This paper aims to better understand the trajectory and contribution of international humanitarian assistance to North Korea over the last three decades, while examining the status of international aid and constraints placed on humanitarian operations in the country as well as the sectoral allocations of humanitarian aid. Along with a review of documents of UN agencies and other international organizations, this paper analyzes the statistics of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) financial tracking service, which provides a record of international humanitarian aid available since 2000. This examination illustrates how international assistance has been channeled to North Korea and contributed to improving the situation of vulnerable people. It also addresses the changing trends of international aid to North Korea associated with multiple operational constraints on the aid delivery of international organizations. After examining the aid coordination mechanism, this paper thus undertakes an investigation into the status of humanitarian aid to North Korea by sector, which sheds light on the features of sectoral allocation of international aid and associated problems.

2) Yonhap News (June 13, 2019), “Finnish NGO decides to quit operations in N. Korea amid sanctions.”

3) Radio Free Asia (July 26, 2022), “UNFPA distributed aid supplies to North Korean health facilities last month.”

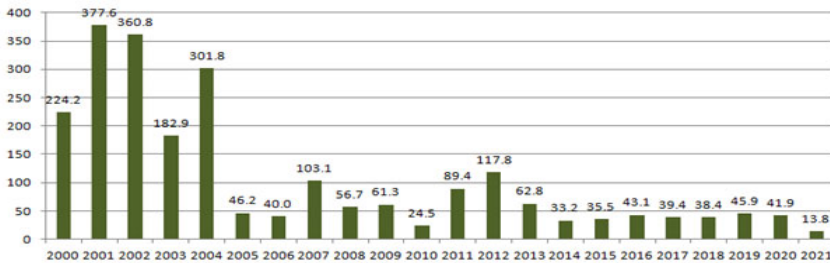
II. An Overview of Major Actors and the Channel for Aid Delivery to North Korea

1. Government Donors

Since the initiation of international aid to North Korea in 1995, the scale and characteristics of assistance have been heavily influenced by the country’s domestic situation and geopolitical environment as well as the international community’s approach to engaging with the country. International aid to North Korea increased significantly until the early 2000s, a period marked by a severe economic crisis in North Korea and its efforts to improve foreign relations. Humanitarian assistance during this period was largely based on the UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for the DPRK. As illustrated in Figure 1, the volume of international aid to North Korea peaked at USD 378 million in 2001 and USD 361 million in 2002. During the first half of the 2000s, 36 countries contributed to bilateral or multilateral aid to North Korea (Lee, 2019, p.409).⁴⁾

〈Figure 1. Annual Funding of Humanitarian Aid to North Korea〉

(Unit: USD millions)



Source: UNOCHA, Financial Tracking Service (<https://fts.unocha.org/>)

4) The database of UNOCHA’s Financial Tracking Service (<http://fts.unocha.org>)

In terms of funding from government donors since 1995, the United States was the largest donor country, providing approximately USD 1.3 billion in aid to North Korea between 1995 and 2009. Food assistance accounted for more than 50 percent and energy assistance made up about 40 percent of the total. A portion of this food aid and around USD 600 million worth of energy (heavy fuel oil) were delivered bilaterally to North Korea (Manyin & Nikitin, 2014, pp.1-2). As diplomatic relations improved in the early 2000s, several European countries, along with Japan, Canada and Australia, were involved in humanitarian assistance to North Korea. The South Korean government also supported food and fertilizer directly to North Korea until the late 2000s in the form of grants or concessional loans. The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development reportedly signed a loan agreement with North Korea, providing about USD 43 million between 2008 and 2012 to support the installation of water supply and sewage treatment facilities in Pyongyang (Zellweger, 2012, p.60).⁵⁾

However, international aid to North Korea declined sharply from the mid-2000s and, due to such funding constraints, humanitarian assistance remained at a minimal level for supporting vulnerable people. Following the third nuclear test conducted in February 2013, international sentiment further worsened and annual aid to North Korea dropped to below USD 50 million in 2014. The bilateral aid of donor countries virtually ceased, and humanitarian assistance was provided primarily through UN agencies and NGOs. UN agencies fell significantly short of their funding targets. For instance, in 2017, UN agencies raised USD 35.4 million, only 31.2 percent of the planned target of USD 113.5 million. The situation worsened in 2019, with the value of aid amounting to just USD 32.9 million, representing only 27 percent of the target.

5) Although detailed information is not available, China has supplied substantial amounts of food, oil, and essential materials to North Korea. Indeed, China engaged in investment-type aid, such as the building of the Daeam Friendship Glass Factory in Nampo City in 2005.

Such poor underfunding in 2019 placed North Korea as the lowest in amount globally and the third lowest in terms of funding percentage relative to target (HCT, 2020, p.11).

Throughout the 2010s, about ten countries participated in humanitarian aid to North Korea. The number of donor countries and organizations decreased further in the late 2010s, with only seven countries (Sweden, Switzerland, Russia, Canada, Norway, France and Liechtenstein) providing money in 2018. European countries and other donors such as Canada and Australia used multilateral aid channels for providing funds through UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross for humanitarian operations in North Korea. Consequently, the proportion of bilateral aid in international assistance was significantly reduced in the 2010s.

2. UN Agencies

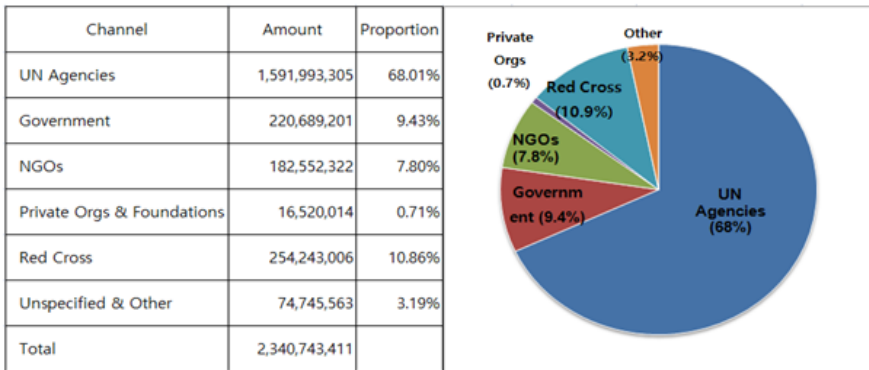
The majority of international humanitarian assistance to North Korea is channeled through UN agencies. As shown in Figure 2, an analysis of UNOCHA statistics suggests that approximately USD 1.6 billion, accounting for 68 percent of the total international aid to North Korea between 2000 and 2021, was delivered through UN agencies. As such, UN specialized agencies play a central role in humanitarian aid efforts in North Korea, particularly in terms of fundraising, project implementation and aid distribution and monitoring. Since the mid-1990s, six UN agencies have maintained offices in North Korea: UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Food Programme (WFP), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

WHO and UNICEF support North Korea in the healthcare field through the provision of essential medicines, vaccines and medical equipment, the capacity development of addressing communicable and non-communicable diseases and the training of healthcare personnel. UNICEF also provides nutritional support to infants, children and pregnant and lactating women, while implementing

collaborative programs in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. UNDP supports economic and trade management, agricultural development, environmental protection and alternative energy projects. WFP plays a major role in the delivery of food aid to North Korea and, together with FAO, conducts the Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM). UNFPA provided technical assistance for the 2008 North Korean census and operated programs to improve reproductive health.

〈Figure 2. Channels of Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea〉

(Unit: USD)



Note: Aggregate of the 2000–2021 period.

Source: the database of UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service.

The UNOCHA, a UN organization leading humanitarian aid to countries and regions in need of emergency relief, withdrew its resident office from North Korea in 2005. Nevertheless, in response to emergency situations such as food shortage and flood damage, UNOCHA continued to allocate the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to UN agencies for humanitarian aid to North Korea. Given the decline in funding from government donors and NGOs in the 2010s, the CERF grant significantly contributed to the humanitarian

operations of UN agencies (Noij & Fauveau, 2015, p.14).

In addition to six resident UN agencies, several UN agencies engage in humanitarian assistance to North Korea on a non-resident basis. These non-resident UN agencies include the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), and United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). For example, UNEP published reports on North Korea's environmental condition and climate change in collaboration with the North Korean Ministry of Land and Environmental Protection. It supported capacity-building projects for the management of environmental resources such as forests and water. UNIDO implemented technical support projects related to industry and energy. Between 2007 and 2014, UNIDO also implemented five environment-related technical support projects with a budget of USD 1 million.⁶⁾

3. The International Red Cross Movement

The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and national Red Cross Societies have continued to engage in humanitarian aid to North Korea since the economic crisis of the mid-1990s. According to UNOCHA data, the total amount of humanitarian assistance channeled through the International Red Cross Movement to North Korea has exceeded USD 254 million, representing about 11 percent of total aid, since 2000.

The North Korean Red Cross Society became a member of the IFRC in 1956

6) The website of UNIDO, "UNIDO supports five environmental projects in North Korea."

and the IFRC has undertaken humanitarian activities in North Korea since 1995. Along with emergency disaster relief operations, the IFRC focused on supporting healthcare, WASH and disaster management capacity building. In the health sector, the IFRC provided essential medicines and medical equipment to local clinics and hospitals as well as training for medical personnel. The essential medicines supplied by the IFRC, including antibiotics and pain relievers, were distributed to 2,030 local (ri) clinics across the country and hospitals in 56 counties in North Pyongyang, South Pyongyang, North Hwanghae, South Hwanghae, and South Hamgyong provinces, benefiting about 8.25 million people (UNCT, 2011, p.42; IFRC, 2012, p.1).

The IFRC's aid program, implemented in collaboration with the North Korean Red Cross Society, has been carried out based on three-year Cooperation Agreement Strategies (CAS) since 2009. Nine member national Red Cross Societies from such countries as Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain have participate in these agreements (IFRC, 2012, p.2). These national Red Cross societies have provided technical support in areas such as disaster risk management, reforestation and the WASH project. In recent years, the Chinese Red Cross Society has also joined in aid activities in North Korea, particularly in disaster risk reduction (IFRC, 2021, p.4).

4. International NGOs

International NGOs also play an important role in providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea. However, due to the deterioration of the country's foreign relations, growing aid fatigue of the international community and stringent sanctions, the involvement of NGOs in North Korea has tended to decline since the late 2000s. Most of the international NGOs operating in North Korea were European-based, while NGOs from the United States and Canada typically participated on a non-resident basis, providing nutritional support and medical supplies.

After the expulsion of five American NGOs in March 2009, only European NGOs maintained their presence in North Korea, carrying out humanitarian interventions. Six European NGOs operated in North Korea as part of the European Union Project Support Units (EUPS Units) under agreement with the North Korean government. These NGOs included Premiere Urgence (France), Save the Children UK, Concern Worldwide (Ireland), Welthungerhilfe (Germany), Triangle Génération Humanitaire (France) and Handicap International (Belgium).

The humanitarian activities of NGOs participating in the EUPS were funded by the European Union (EU), European donor countries, the International Red Cross and private organizations. Despite the EU's participation in economic sanctions against North Korea, it continued to provide humanitarian aid to the country (UNCT, 2011, p.33). For instance, Triangle GH received funding in the 2010s from the European Commission's Europe Aid Cooperation Office, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the French government. SIDA supported humanitarian projects in the areas of nutrition and WASH over two decades, providing funding to international NGOs, including Save the Children and Concern Worldwide.

Although not part of the EUPS Units, Fida International, a Finnish NGO, maintained a presence in North Korea during the 2000s and 2010s, supporting agriculture, food security and healthcare projects. Additionally, the Danish NGO Mission East, which began relief activities in 2011, established a small resident office in North Korea in 2019 to monitor nutrition support and provide technical assistance in the agricultural sector such as potato cultivation (HCT, 2020, p.30).

III. Aid Coordination Mechanism and Operational Constraints in North Korea

Despite significant constraints on humanitarian activities in North Korea, international organizations have established collaborative frameworks to implement joint strategies with information sharing and project management. Six UN agencies resident in North Korea have formed the UN Country Team (UNCT), which coordinates inter-agency activities and administrative issues through the Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator. The operations of the Resident Coordinator's Office and the UN Country Team played a crucial role in fostering cooperation among aid projects in North Korea. For example, in the health sector, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA collaborated to implement maternal and child health programs. These UN agencies worked closely with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) and the GFATM. Indeed, international organizations engaged in healthcare projects sought technical assistance from WHO and worked together to address natural disasters, infectious diseases and other emergencies (WHO, 2016, p.27).

Along with resident UN agencies, international NGOs operating in North Korea, IFRC, ICRC and bilateral development agencies from Europe formed the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). The UN Resident Coordinator served as the chair of the HCT, through which, these organizations coordinated aid activities and shared information on North Korea (UNCT, 2012; HCT, 2018). The HCT issued the 'DPRK Needs and Priorities' report annually until 2020. This report outlined the humanitarian situation in North Korea, the number of vulnerable people in need of assistance, the content of sectoral programs and projects, and funding requirements.

In the 2010s, resident and non-resident UN agencies, in collaboration with the

North Korean government, set up the ‘Strategic Framework for Cooperation between the United Nations and the DPRK’ (UNSF) to improve humanitarian assistance and enhance the effectiveness of aid. The UNSF for the 2011–2015 period addressed four strategic priority areas, including social development, nutrition, and climate change and environment. Indeed, a new UNSF for 2017–2021, subtitled ‘Towards Sustainable and Resilient Human Development,’ was formulated. The North Korean government and 13 UN agencies agreed to focus on four key areas including food and nutrition security, social development services, resilience and sustainability, and data and development management (Office of the UN Resident Coordinator, 2016). This UN strategic framework included North Korea’s commitment to supporting the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as its implementation of the SDGs in the four priority areas. However, many of the planned projects under the UNSF could not be carried out due to North Korea’s nuclear problem, funding shortages and the Coronavirus-related border closure.

International organizations also formed aid coordination frameworks with the North Korean government for project planning, selection of beneficiaries and target areas, and project implementation. UN agencies cooperate with the National Coordination Committee established in 2006, an administrative body under the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Korean European Cooperation Coordination Agency serves as the counterpart for international NGOs affiliated with the EUPS Units as well as the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation. The DPRK Red Cross Society acts as the partner for humanitarian assistance of the IFRC, the ICRC and other national Red Cross societies (HCT, 2018, p.15). In the course of implementing aid projects, individual UN agencies and NGOs established cooperative relationships with relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Land and Environmental Protection, and local People’s Committees (HCT, 2020, p.38).

Resident UN agencies and NGOs also organized Sector Working Groups with relevant North Korean ministries to support the implementation of HCT's aid projects. Up to the first half of the 2010s, seven to nine sector-specific working groups were established, with some changes in name or composition depending on the scale of international assistance and North Korea's priority needs. After the mid-2010s, four sector working groups - food security and agriculture, nutrition, health and WASH - continued to operate. Additionally, the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Working Group was established in June 2016, led by UNDP and IFRC (HCT, 2018, p.15).

However, the coordination of aid between international organizations and the North Korean government was very limited. For instance, officials from North Korean ministries needed prior approval and complex procedures from their institutions to attend meetings with foreign organizations, including sector working group meetings (HCT, 2018, p.16; 2019, p.19). Moreover, most North Korean ministries were reluctant or unwilling to coordinate with NGOs on projects (Willitts-King, 2014, p.14).

North Korea's excessive restrictions on the humanitarian activities of UN agencies and NGOs, including field visits and monitoring, have significantly constrained international aid efforts. Conflicts and tensions occasionally arise between donor agencies and the North Korean authorities. Moreover, the North Korean government denies external aid to security-sensitive areas. On the other hand, while applying the 'no access, no aid' principle, international organizations do not provide assistance to areas where monitoring is not feasible. For example, when the authorities refused on-site access for international staff to monitor the distribution of medicines to local clinics and hospitals, UNICEF suspended its provision of medicines to North Hamgyong Province and Ryanggang Province in the mid-2000s (UNICEF, 2008, p.2). Indeed, international organizations were not permitted to undertake aid activities in whole areas of Jagang Province throughout the 2010s. Although there was

improvement in North Korea's cooperation for the monitoring and assessment of international organizations in the 2010s, such activities still faced considerable challenges. Field travel of international staff usually required seven days' notice to the North Korean authorities (UNCT, 2012, p.6; HCT, 2018, p.16).

The North Korean government has also continued to strictly limit the sharing of information with the outside world, making it difficult for international organizations to access detailed data on the country's socio-economic conditions and the livelihoods of its population. For example, the Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) conducted by the WFP and FAO to evaluate the country's food production and nutritional status was suspended since 2014 due to the government's refusal to cooperate despite the fact that the UN repeatedly urged North Korea to engage with the CFSAM (HCT, 2017, p.16). Indeed, North Korea's population census, which had been planned for 2018 with technical assistance from UNFPA, was postponed once by North Korea and later cooperation was refused. The census was intended to collect the disaggregated data necessary for understanding the living conditions of North Koreans and for vulnerability mapping (HCT, 2018, p.13). However, North Korea reportedly conducted a national census in 2019 without external support, and unlike the 2008 census, it did not share the data with international organizations. In addition to improving the conditions of aid monitoring, therefore, securing data for needs assessment remains an ongoing challenge for international humanitarian assistance to North Korea.

IV. Sectoral Allocation and Outcomes of Humanitarian Aid to North Korea

As can be seen, the international community has provided humanitarian aid to North Korea over three decades to alleviate poverty and improve the livelihoods of vulnerable populations and their access to basic services. The scale, type and priority of international assistance vary depending on the specific circumstances of recipient countries. In the case of North Korea, given substantial constraints faced by international organizations, humanitarian aid has been limited to a narrow range of sectors. For instance, international aid to such sectors as industry, transportation and energy has been barely existent for North Korea. Nevertheless, within the scope permitted under economic sanctions, the international community has delivered humanitarian aid to North Korea. These efforts include not only nutritional support for children and pregnant women but also specialized projects for people with disabilities, tuberculosis patients and the elderly. Moreover, before the halt of their resident operations, international organizations carried out collaborative programs for the country's capacity building in several sectors, including agriculture, healthcare, WASH, education, child protection, environmental protection and disaster risk management. In this regard, this chapter examines the status and changing trends of humanitarian aid to North Korea by sector, assessing the features of sectoral allocation of international aid and associated problems.

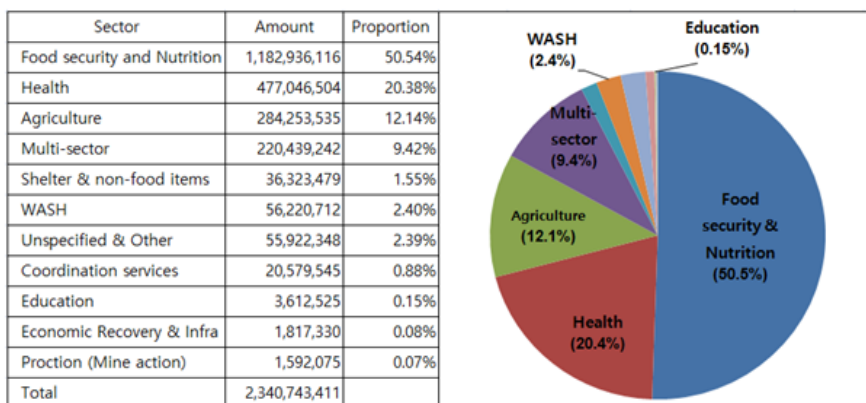
1. Food Security and Nutrition Support

An analysis of UNOCHA statistics available from 2000 to the early 2020s illustrates that approximately USD 1.47 billion - 62.7 percent of international aid to North Korea - was allocated to food aid and agriculture. The remainder

of humanitarian aid was largely allocated to the health sector, including the provision of vaccines, medicine and medical equipment, as well as the WASH sector. As shown in Figure 3, about 50 percent of USD 2.34 billion, the total amount of funding to North Korea from 2000 to 2021, was used for food security and nutritional support. Reflecting a chronic food shortage and widespread malnutrition in North Korea, the international community prioritized emergency food aid. As such, ‘food and nutrition security’ was identified as one of the priority areas in the UN Strategic Framework. Despite the decline in international aid to North Korea during the 2010s, food and nutrition assistance for vulnerable groups, including infants, pregnant women, lactating mothers and tuberculosis patients, continued.

〈Figure 3. International Aid to North Korea by Sector〉

(Unit: USD)



Note: Aggregate of the 2000-2021 period.

Source: An analysis of the data drawn from UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service.

As the primary channel for international food aid, the WFP provided approximately 4.6 million tons of food to North Korea from 1995 to the late 2010s through emergency relief operations (WFP, 2019, p.1). WFP’s assistance

focused on alleviating undernutrition among the most vulnerable categories of the population, including children, pregnant women and disaster-affected communities. Accordingly, WFP's food support to North Korea peaked in 2001, with 930,012 tons provided, but decreased to 373,000 tons in 2002. WFP also established local food processing factories in such regions as Sinuiju and Chongjin to produce fortified food. Rather than distributing grain directly to residents, WFP adopted a method of processing fortified food by mixing grain donated from abroad with nutrients such as vitamins and minerals. While up to 19 food processing factories were reportedly in operation during the first half of the 2000s, the number of operational factories had decreased to 13 by 2011 (UNCT, 2011, p.12).

International food aid to North Korea declined sharply after the mid-2000s. WFP provided 65,363 tons of food in 2009 and 55,218 tons in 2010, representing only about 20 percent of 292,855 tons provided in 2005. WFP planned an emergency relief program targeting 131 cities and counties in 2008, but the program had been reduced to 60 cities and counties by 2010 (UNCT, 2011, p.4). The shortage of funds for WFP's activities continued to reduce the number of target regions and beneficiaries throughout the 2010s. In 2018, about 694,000 people reportedly benefited from WFP's nutrition programs. However, WFP raised only 35 percent of the USD 52 million needed for that year. Due to this funding shortfall, nutritional support for 195,000 kindergarten children was suspended in November 2017 and the distribution of fortified cereals and biscuits to childcare institutions and hospitals was also halted in 2018 (WFP, 2018, pp.7-9). In 2019, WFP set up a three-year Country Strategic Plan focused on nutrition assistance to children and women (WFP, 2019). However, the humanitarian operations of WFP in North Korea have been suspended since March 2021.

2. Agriculture

According to UNOCHA data, approximately USD 284 million, accounting for about 12 percent of total aid to North Korea since 2000, has been gone to the agricultural sector. Several UN agencies and NGOs support North Korea's crop production through the provision of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, seeds and farming equipment. International organizations also provide technical support and training in agricultural fields, including seed improvement, double-cropping, potato cultivation, poultry farming, fruit and vegetable production and pest management. Indeed, to promote agricultural recovery and improve living conditions of rural residents, international organizations implement agricultural support projects, including the rehabilitation of irrigation canals, crop cultivation on slopes, the establishment of dairy farms and milk processing facilities, the installation of vegetable greenhouses and the construction of freshwater fish farms.

For example, the FAO had implemented 214 agricultural projects in North Korea by the late 2010s, with a total funding of USD 80.43 million. These projects were carried out on cooperative farms in 66 counties across eight provinces.⁷⁾ The FAO conducted a variety of technical support projects to increase food production and collaborated on joint projects with WFP, UNDP and IFAD. The FAO also supported North Korea in the field of animal disease quarantine and management capacity in response to outbreaks of transboundary livestock diseases, such as foot-and-mouth disease, African swine fever and avian influenza (FAO, 2015, pp.4-5).

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which had engaged in humanitarian activities for North Korea since 1995, supported several projects in the agricultural sector, including sloping land management, biological pest control and the improvement of maize and potato seeds. In particular, the

7) The website of the FAO Office in North Korea
(<https://www.fao.org/democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea>).

SDC was the first to introduce agro-forestry development projects in North Korea in 2005. Due to food shortages, farmers cleared trees on steep slopes to cultivate the land, leading to deforestation, soil erosion and increased risk of natural disasters such as floods and landslides. In collaboration with local authorities, the SDC supported the sustainable production of crops on sloping lands and promoted the planting of fruit trees to prevent soil erosion (Zellweger, 2012, p.62; SDC 2011, p.10).

In the 2010s, UN agencies and international NGOs implemented several agricultural support projects in conjunction with disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. For example, in 2014, the FAO reportedly implemented a project to strengthen institutional capacity for disaster risk management to improve food security. Following the drought in 2018, the FAO conducted a two-year project to provide emergency support to vulnerable farming households in several regions to mitigate the impact of heat waves, droughts and floods. In the late 2010s, WFP undertook a food for disaster risk reduction project. Local residents participated in such activities as repairing irrigation channels and river embankments and planting trees on slopes, receiving food in exchange for their labor. This project was implemented in nine counties that were particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and food insecurity (HCT, 2018, pp.26-27).

One of the notable features of the declining international aid to North Korea in the 2010s was the sharp reduction in the proportion of aid allocated to the agricultural sector. For instance, an analysis of UNOCHA statistics suggests that the agriculture sector, which accounted for 22.3 percent of the total aid to North Korea in 2004, had dropped to just 1.7 percent in 2016. The UNDP's agricultural recovery and environment protection programs in North Korea, which were actively pursued in the early 2000s, were suspended during the 2010s. Furthermore, agricultural projects of international organizations such as WFP and the FAO to improve food production were either reduced or

discontinued. Due to insufficient funding and the impact of stringent sanctions, international organizations could no longer carry out long-term collaborative programs to promote the capacity building of the agricultural sector, focusing instead on emergency nutrition assistance for vulnerable people.

3. Health Services

It is estimated that funding for the health sector amounted to about USD 477 million, which represents 20.4 percent of the total international aid to North Korea during the 2000-2021 period. Humanitarian assistance to the health sector since the mid-1990s includes the provision of essential medicines, vaccines and medical equipment, the renovation of health facilities, the capacity development of addressing communicable and non-communicable diseases, the promotion of reproductive health and the training of healthcare personnel. WHO, UNICEF and the IFRC have contributed to enhancing North Korea's healthcare capacity. Other UN agencies and NGOs have also supplied micronutrient supplements to children and pregnant and lactating women, while implementing maternal and child health programs.

UNICEF provided essential medicines to more than 2,000 health facilities, including local clinics and pediatric wards and obstetrics departments in regional hospitals, to improve maternal, newborn and child health. UNICEF also supplied vitamin A and deworming tablets twice a year to children aged six months to five years and multi-micronutrient powder supplements to children aged 6-23 months (HCT, 2017, p.27). Notably, from 2004, UNICEF supported the production of oral rehydration salts (ORS) to prevent dehydration caused by acute diarrhea in children. In 2004, 3 million sachets were produced, covering 30 percent of the country's total ORS demand, and production increased to 7 million sachets in 2007, covering 90 percent of national demand (Shin et al., 2014, p.91). To effectively treat childhood diarrhea, UNICEF, in collaboration with the IFRC, distributed zinc tablets and ORS sachets across North Korea.

Despite decreased funding in the 2010s, UNICEF continued to supply essential medicines, ORS and basic vaccines. Essential medicines supplied by UNICEF included antibiotics for treating children diagnosed with life-threatening pneumonia (UNICEF, 2018, p.5).

Despite the significant reduction in funding compared to the previous decade, the WHO and UNICEF continued their healthcare programs during the 2010s. According to UNOCHA data, for instance, the health sector accounted for 13.6 percent of the total aid to North Korea in 2016. With financial assistance from the GAVI and the GFATM, the WHO and UNICEF could maintain their immunization programs for North Korea in the 2010s. Through international support for vaccines, medical equipment and technical skills, North Korea made considerable progress in increasing vaccination coverage and combating infectious diseases.

The GFATM provided USD 24.8 million for UNICEF's malaria prevention and treatment activities in North Korea between 2010 and 2014, with an additional USD 8.86 million allocated for the 2015–2018 period. UNICEF's malaria programs were implemented in seven provinces where malaria was most prevalent. Additionally, for UNICEF's tuberculosis eradication program, GFATM provided USD 47.1 million during the 2010–2014 period, with a further USD 28.44 million allocated for the 2015–2018 period (UNICEF, 2016, p.40). UNICEF's program to strengthen North Korea's tuberculosis diagnosis and treatment capacity included the early diagnosis and treatment of childhood tuberculosis. Furthermore, the GFATM made an agreement with the WHO in June 2010 to provide USD 5,031,462 over five years for its tuberculosis programs in North Korea (WHO, 2016, p.26). With technical support from the WHO and financial assistance from the GFATM, the North Korean Ministry of Public Health conducted a nationwide tuberculosis prevalence survey in 2016, covering about 70,000 people in 100 regions. This was the first time a comprehensive tuberculosis survey had been conducted across North Korea.⁸⁾

4. The WASH Sector

Although the WASH sector receives a relatively small proportion of total aid, the international community has supported North Korea to improve ordinary people's access to potable water, sanitation and hygiene. As shown in Figure 3, funding for the WASH sector amounted to USD 56.22 million, accounting for about 2.4 percent of the total international aid from 2000 to 2021. Given its importance for basic human needs, the WASH sector has been designated as a key area in both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs. Therefore, since the early 2000s, UNICEF, IFRC, the SDC and Concern Worldwide has implemented WASH projects, including the construction of water supply facilities, the promotion of wastewater and sewage treatment, the installation of public toilets and sanitation facilities, and campaigns for hygiene promotion. Even amid the stringent sanctions imposed on North Korea in the 2010s, international organizations continued to carry out these WASH interventions (HCT, 2017, p.22). According to UNOCHA data, for instance, in 2016, the WASH sector received UDS 5.31 million, accounting for 12.3 percent of total aid.

One of the significant achievements of international organizations in the WASH sector is the support for the installation of gravity-fed water supply systems and solar-powered water supply systems. Due to outdated infrastructure, insufficient materials and chronic electricity shortages, many water intake stations and pump systems, which were largely established before the 1980s, no longer functioned properly, leaving many areas of North Korea without a piped water supply. Although the situation improved compared to the 2000s, as of the late 2010s, about 39 percent of North Koreans still lacked access to safely managed water and in rural areas, 56 percent of the population faced limited access to safe drinking water (HCT, 2019, p.27). Thus, several international

8) VOA (August 18, 2016), "North Korea completes first nationwide tuberculosis survey with WHO support."

organizations supported the installation of water supply facilities in small cities and rural areas of North Korea.

IFRC has been implementing WASH programs in North Korea since 1999. With IFRC's assistance, the North Korean Red Cross Society completed over 350 water and sanitation system projects in rural areas of South Hwanghae, South Hamgyong, North Pyongan and South Pyongan provinces, benefiting approximately 625,000 residents. Considering the electricity shortages in rural areas, IFRC supported the construction of gravity-fed water supply systems. Since 2011, pilot projects were implemented to build solar-powered water supply systems in several rural areas where the installation of gravity-fed water supply facilities was difficult (IFRC, 2012, p.8).

Concern Worldwide, an international NGO headquartered in Ireland, implemented WASH programs in areas where it provided nutrition assistance in order to enhance the effectiveness of its aid activities (McGrath, 2016, p.3). Alongside supporting the construction of gravity-fed water systems, Concern Worldwide assisted in establishing solar-powered water supply systems with technical support and the provision of equipment such as solar panels and pumps. In Kumchon and Singye counties of North Hwanghae Province, where Concern Worldwide focused its projects during the first half of the 2010s, piped water supply infrastructure was established between 2013 and 2015. By 2017, Concern Worldwide had supported the installation of over 80 water supply facilities in 18 counties of North Hwanghae and Kangwon provinces.⁹⁾

9) VOA (March 1, 2018), "Irish NGO to provide USD 2 million in aid to North Korea this year."

V. Conclusion

The prolonged border closure following the COVID pandemic has exacerbated North Korea's economic hardships and the living conditions of the general population have further deteriorated. Indeed, North Korea faces recurring natural disasters. The country's inadequate infrastructure and limited investment resources have hindered its ability to prevent and respond to natural disasters, leading to agricultural losses and material damage that disproportionately affect vulnerable people. In late July 2024, a large-scale flood in the middle and lower reaches of the Yalu River resulted in significant damage in North Pyongan province and Jagang province. Despite extensive flood damage, the North Korean government has reportedly refused external assistance. North Korea's refusal of foreign aid offers was similarly observed during the COVID-19 health crisis when the government rejected AstraZeneca vaccines distributed by the COVAX Facility.

As we have seen, the suspension of in-country operations by international organizations has adversely affected the humanitarian situation in North Korea and people's vulnerabilities. For example, according to the annual WHO and UNICEF estimates of national immunization coverage, North Korea's vaccination rates for such diseases as tuberculosis, hepatitis B and measles have recently declined significantly. While vaccination rates in North Korea had remained above 90 percent throughout the 2010s, the tuberculosis vaccination rate dropped to 63 percent in 2023 and the coverage rates for most other vaccines were estimated to be below 50 percent (Choi, 2024, p.2). As such, North Korea's economic difficulties and the suspension of international aid not only highlight weaknesses in the country's healthcare capabilities but have also led to deterioration in the nutritional status, health and overall living conditions of ordinary North Koreans.

North Korea should put great effort into aligning with the norms and standards of international aid, while the international community needs to expand humanitarian assistance to protect vulnerable people. Humanitarian aid to North Korea has become increasingly politicized (Lee, 2019). The country has approached international assistance with caution, often failing to effectively utilize foreign aid due to the regime's concern regarding the potential political impact of outside assistance (Lim, 2013, p.157). However, the regime's recent closed-door approach, emphasizing self-reliance, is not a good strategy to overcome the country's economic difficulties and humanitarian crises. North Korea needs to cooperate with the international community if in-country operations by UN agencies and international NGOs are to be resumed.

Although international staff have been unable to maintain presence in North Korea, international organizations have continued to communicate with relevant North Korean agencies. For instance, the IFRC has maintained communication with North Korean staff at the Pyongyang office to manage existing programs and exchange information with the North Korean Red Cross Society (IFRC 2023, 6). In addition, small-scale emergency humanitarian supplies have been delivered to North Korea. UNICEF provided some vaccines for children and pregnant women in 2023. UNFPA supplied medicines and equipment to healthcare facilities in June 2022. UN agencies and international NGOs emphasize that the return of international staff for conducting needs assessments and field monitoring are essential for resuming collaborative programs in North Korea.

In its Voluntary National Review (VNR) on SDGs reported to the UN in July 2021, the North Korean government acknowledged the contributions of international assistance and the need for cooperation with international organizations. The VNR report recognized the substantial tasks that the country needs to address for achieving the goals and targets of SDGs. Moreover, the North Korean authorities expressed a willingness to cooperate with the

international community in implementing its national SDGs, highlighting the contributions of international organizations involved in aid to North Korea. The VNR underscored the significant role of the GFATM in reducing malaria and tuberculosis incidence. The North Korean government also reported that the country developed disaster risk management projects in collaboration with UNDP, FAO, UNESCAP and UNDRR, while emphasizing the need to strengthen international cooperation in this area (DPRK, 2021, p.37).

International organizations and the North Korean government could advance collaborative programs in areas related to the SDGs. Since the SDGs encompass a broad range of objectives targeting vulnerable populations across social, economic and environmental domains, SDGs-related aid activities in North Korea can be classified as humanitarian assistance. In this regard, there is a need to broaden the scope of sanctions exemptions for SDG-related aid. The UN Strategic Framework of the 2010s already specified the implementation of development programs alongside humanitarian assistance in strategic priority areas such as food and nutrition security, social development services, and disaster and climate change resilience (Office of the UN Resident Coordinator, 2016, p.8). Therefore, North Korea and international organizations urgently need to engage in constructive dialogue to resume the in-country operations of UN agencies and NGOs and international support for North Korea's SDGs implementation. The expansion of humanitarian assistance is necessary to prevent a rollback of the progress in the country's humanitarian situation made with the international aid of the last three decades and to continue addressing the ongoing hardship faced by vulnerable people in North Korea.

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