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Famine in North Korea: humanitarian policy in the late 1990s

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1 Introduction

> *The instructors were too hungry to stand and taught us sitting down. When the classes ended … [students] without money went to the rice paddies to dig up rice roots to hand in at school. In summer students scraped off the inner barks of pine trees. When I looked out of the window during class, I saw lines of death carriages loaded with corpses passing by. That year, so many people died of starvation* (Ziemek, 2009: 15).

This testimony, from a North Korean refugee who fled to South Korea, describes her experience of the so-called 'Arduous March'.[1] Throughout the 1990s, North Korea was gripped by economic crisis, natural disaster and famine. The causes of the crisis included the failure of the North's extreme socialist model, the end of Soviet and Eastern European subsidies after 1990 and the collapse of the Socialist bloc. It also coincided with the death in 1994 of the country's revered leader Kim Il Sung.

Long closed off from countries outside of the socialist bloc, the crisis led North Korea to issue an unprecedented request to the international community for humanitarian assistance. In response, United Nations organisations, national government agencies, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), NGOs and even private groups and individuals embarked on large-scale humanitarian activities in the country. For most organisations this was their first contact with North Korea. For others it was their first experience of operations anywhere in North-east Asia (Flake, 2003; Schloms, 2003). Despite this concerted intervention, involving one of the largest aid operations of the time, the most widely quoted estimate suggests that between 600,000 and a million North Koreans died from hunger or disease during the famine (Haggard and Noland, 2007). Others put the number of dead as high as 3.5 million.[2]

The provision of aid to North Korea was controversial because the catastrophe that faced the country resulted from government mismanagement and failure, rather than natural disaster. Moreover, there seemed little willingness on the part of North Korea to liberalise its authoritarian regime and move towards the greater openness and reform unfolding across the former communist world. It is thus not surprising that many donor countries and organisations had serious reservations about their aid work in the country, and formulating an acceptable humanitarian aid policy was fraught with difficulty. Donors had a strong desire to provide humanitarian assistance to the desperate North Korean population, while at the same time ensuring that the aid given did not prop up a regime that was causing the suffering in the first place.

In subsequent analyses of humanitarian operations in North Korea, a number of commentators have criticised the aid community for failing in this core objective. The economist Nicholas Ebertstadt, for example, wrote that 'these clueless programs of humanitarian relief have been a resounding failure. Or to be a little more precise: they have done a wonderful job of nourishing and supporting the regime – they have only incidentally and episodically mitigated the distress of the victims for which they were intended' (Eberstadt, 2011). Aid groups including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Action Contre la Faim (ACF) have also expressed deep concern about their humanitarian engagement with North Korea during this period. Both organisations eventually withdrew from the country, in part because they believed that aid was being diverted by the government, and because they believed that aid actors were being used by the international community to prop up the North Korean regime.

Other analysts, however, have argued that the international aid community was right to continue working in North Korea. Haggard and Noland (2007) criticise those who thought that aid should be withdrawn in order to hasten the reform or collapse of the North Korean regime, noting that, while pulling out of the North would not have guaranteed the fall of the government, it would certainly have led to hardship for a population in dire need of assistance.

1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at 'A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action: Regional Conference on East and Southeast Asia', co-organised by the Humanitarian Policy Group and the Institute of South-East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, 29–30 January 2013.

2 For a full discussion of possible death rates, see Haggard and Noland (2007), pp. 74–76.

For Hazel Smith (2005), a former UN representative in the North, food aid not only made a marked difference to the health and nutrition of the wider North Korean population, but also led to a positive shift in attitudes among the North Korean authorities towards engagement, negotiation and compromise. Andrew Natsios, the former head of the US Agency for International Development and World Vision US, touched on a particularly sensitive aspect of aid policy when he argued the case for humanitarian aid to North Korea during the famine on both moral and pragmatic grounds. In 1997, Natsios wrote that 'even if policy makers are unmoved by the ethical problem of using the threat of mass starvation to force the North to negotiate, they should worry about the profoundly destabilising effects famine can have' (Natsios, 1997).

This paper – part of the Humanitarian Policy Group's 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action' project – draws on these analyses and other information to chart a history of humanitarian aid during the 'Arduous March'. It focuses on the role played by the UN, Western aid agencies and the United States, which provided the vast majority of the funding for UN operations. Alongside published accounts of their role, the paper also uses information recently released by MSF, *MSF and North Korea 1995–1998*,[3] an interview with a former senior ACF employee who led a team working inside North Korea at the time of the famine and an unpublished ACF press dossier distributed following the NGO's withdrawal from the country in 2000.

The paper highlights three predominant themes that characterised the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies working in North Korea over this period: (i) the intransigence of the North Korean authorities; (ii) the availability and accessibility of information for aid agencies; and (iii) the use of humanitarian aid in the service of foreign policy goals. In conclusion, the paper examines the impact of this period on more recent humanitarian engagement with North Korea. In order to contextualise the involvement of the international aid community in North Korea, it will first be useful to review a history of aid in North Korea prior to the 1990s.

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3 The author is grateful to MSF for granting permission to use this internal MSF document prior to its publication. The author would also like to thank Laurence Binet of MSF International and Sophie McNamara of MSF Australia for their kind assistance with accessing the document.

2 Aid and division: a history framed by the Cold War

North Korea is a modern creation. After the withdrawal of the Japanese from the Korean peninsula in 1945, it was divided at the 38th parallel into two zones: the south, administered by the United States, and the north, administered by the Soviet Union. Regimes friendly to the respective occupiers were installed – Kim Il Sung became the President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north, and Syngman Rhee became the President of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south. Both the new regimes and the occupying powers failed to cooperate on a unified administration for the whole peninsula, and entrenched divisions on both sides finally led to war in June 1950. The conflict lasted three years, ending where it began – with the Korean peninsula divided at the 38th parallel. Over those three brutal years both North and South Korea were devastated. Around 2.8 million Koreans died. The majority of casualties were suffered by the North, which was left in ruins by bombing 'that hardly left a modern building standing' (Cumings, 2010).

In the years that followed the war both the North and South were faced with the massive challenge of rebuilding their economies and societies. The prognosis for the peninsula was grim, but particularly so for the South (Cumings, 1997). Indeed, in the two decades that followed the division of the peninsula the rate of economic growth in the North outstripped the South (*ibid.*), despite the fact that the North had suffered disproportionate losses during the war and much of the peninsula's productive agricultural land was in the South (Noland, 2012). The North, however, had vast coal and mineral resources, and the remnants of the Japanese colonial era's heavy industrial installations. Overcoming its war losses, North Korea recovered rapidly, establishing a system able to provide for the basic welfare requirements of its population. Like many other nations in the Socialist bloc, however, it did so under a harsh authoritarian political system (Cumings, 1997; Smith, 2005).

Under Kim Il Sung, North Korea developed an indigenous ideology, *Juche*, combining ideas of socialism and nationalism. Through *Juche*, North Korea sought economic self-sufficiency, political sovereignty and military self-reliance (Park, 1987a: 66).[4] *Juche's* strong nationalist elements reflected the challenging historical experiences of the Korean people, including invasion, colonisation and occupation by foreign powers (Cumings, 1997). Paradoxically, the ideology did not preclude the acceptance of foreign aid and technology on the path to achieving the goal of national independence and self-reliance, and aid became an important element in the country's reconstruction.

The Cold War defined much of the North's experience of aid, whether humanitarian, economic or military. In the first decade and a half of its existence it received substantial assistance from China, the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern European countries (Ha and Jensen, 1987; Chung, 1987). Aid from Eastern Europe was generally non-military, and included humanitarian and development assistance both during and after the Korean War. During the war, for example, Poland offered soap, machine parts and two aircraft for medical use (Chun, 1987). In 1953, Romania gave railroad carriages, fishing boats and oil trucks, and provided for the construction of a cement plant and an aspirin factory (*ibid.*). East Germany provided substantial aid during and after the war, including clothing, medicine, blankets and other basic goods, as well as substantial aid for reconstruction (*ibid.*). The country also received huge amounts of economic and military assistance, mainly from the Soviet Union and China.

From the 1960s onwards, following the Sino-Soviet split, North Korea attempted to play the role of an 'independent' socialist nation, refusing to align with either of the two socialist powers. It used this as leverage to maximise support from both the Soviets and the Chinese as it sought not only financial aid, but also military support, oil, petroleum products and technology (Ha and Jensen, 1987; Chun, 1987). In the context of the Cold War strategic environment, the

4 For a full discussion of *Juche* and the role of autonomy and self-reliance within it, see Koh (2014).

North had much to offer Moscow and Beijing in return. Aside from moral support in the competition between the Soviet Union and China, North Korea provided important coastal access. Influence in the North was also strategically important, given the US presence in South Korea and the proximity of Japan (Ha and Jensen, 1987).

During this period, North Korea was also an aid donor, as well as an aid recipient. Just as the North's receipt of aid had been framed by the Cold War, so its aid and other support was directed by ideological as well as pragmatic motives. In particular, aid policy was used as a weapon in the competition between North and South Korea for influence in particular countries or regions. In the Middle East and North Africa, North Korea successfully challenged the South for influence in the mid-1970s (Moon, 1987). Moral and material aid to the Arab world included support for the Algerian independence movement against France, aid to Arab nations in the 1967 and 1973 Arab–Israeli wars and other economic, cultural and scientific agreements with countries in the Middle East including Egypt, Iran, Libya and Syria (*ibid.*). Similar trends were also evident in Africa and Latin America (Park, 1987b; Lee, 1987). While there were clearly pragmatic motives for this aid, it also reflects solidarity with many of the Middle Eastern movements of the time, which were anti-colonial and often socialist in their ideology. In the first half of the 1970s, North Korea established diplomatic relations with 23 African governments, compared to just four by the South (Park, 1987b). It is noteworthy that, as late as 1984, North Korea was providing aid to *South* Korea in response to massive flooding. By this time, however, the South's economic strength had surpassed the North's, and it is likely that the aid was accepted as a gesture of cooperation, rather than out of necessity (Kwak, 1987).

Despite the impressive beginnings of the North Korean regime, the combination of socialism and autarky made its economic model unsustainable. The North's aspirations to self-sufficiency were beset by a fundamental problem. The heavy industrial model that had aimed to promote defence and economic independence in fact relied upon foreign technology and overseas support. It was heavily dependent on oil, which had to be imported, and it needed generous financial terms from sympathetic governments (MacDonald, 1996). The country pursued one of the most extreme versions of socialism and suffered more than other socialist bloc members from the systemic deficiencies of socialism: allocative waste, poor coordination and the lack of incentives and motivation.

These problems came to a head as the socialist patrons on which the North relied began to experience their own economic decline in the 1970s and 1980s. The North's only alternative was trade with the capitalist bloc, but the North Korean system and its underlying ideology were not compatible with the liberal international financial system. With little of value to offer by way of international trade, a history of defaulting on its debts, a brutal authoritarian regime and a nascent nuclear programme, few countries were willing to engage economically. The collapse of the socialist bloc in the early 1990s dealt a final blow that sent the North Korean economy into rapid decline, precipitating the economic crisis and famine that subsequently overwhelmed the country and its people.

3 The humanitarian response

News of a crisis in North Korea started to appear in the Japanese press in 1992, when the *Asahi Shimbun* reported severe food and energy shortages (Morris-Suzuki, 2011). By 1995 the humanitarian situation was extremely grave. In the summer of that year North Korea was hit by heavy flooding, made worse by the environmental destruction – deforestation, man-made soil erosion and the neglect of food protection – caused by the North's failed socialist industrial model. The flooding is estimated to have affected over 5m North Koreans and caused over $15 billion in damage (Woo-Cumings, 2002). In response to appeals for international help, including letters sent directly to aid agencies, including MSF-France (MSF, 2008), between 1995 and 1999 over $640m in aid was sent to North Korea (Flake, 2003). The United States alone is thought to have given between $400m and $540m in food aid and energy assistance (Flake, 2003, Haggard and Noland, 2007), and by 2005 US assistance totalled over $1bn (Haggard and Noland, 2007).

3.1 Official intransigence

From the very start, as organisations began to negotiate terms of reference and start up their operations, they were faced with deep-set intransigence from the North Korean authorities. To some extent, the North Korean situation was no different to similar complex emergencies. As Haggard and Noland (2007) point out, 'as is true in any aid game, the North Korean government sought to maximise flows of aid while limiting the conditions attached to it'. Even so, humanitarian organisations faced a worrying contradiction. They had been invited by the North Korean government to deliver humanitarian support, yet that same authority was the main obstacle to carrying out aid work. Aid organisations could not operate in a manner they found acceptable, creating intense frustration and suspicion. For instance, information routinely made public by other countries was considered a state secret in North Korea, and when information was made available it was not unreasonable to suppose that this had been done for strategic reasons.

Humanitarian organisations faced a series of impediments, including poor-quality data, restrictions on the movement of personnel and monitoring activities, intrusive oversight of staff by North Korean guides, drivers and translators, the requirement for aid staff to be housed in elaborate and costly hotels, the assignment of local staff with English-language but no relevant technical skills, the banning of aid staff who spoke Korean and lack of access to restricted regions of the country (Smith, 2005; Schloms, 2003; Natsios, 2001; MSF, 2008).

The intransigence of the North Korean authorities created greater difficulties for some organisations than others. The internal report from MSF's 1995 exploratory mission noted the authorities' objections to the presence of expatriates in the field (MSF, 2008). This proved to be a particular problem for NGOs such as MSF and Médecins du Monde (MDM), which place a high priority on patients having direct access to expatriate medical staff. In turn, the response to this intransigence also varied, depending on the nature and location of projects and agencies' operational values and protocols. For some organisations, conditions in North Korea were considered no worse than in other humanitarian theatres (Smith, 2005). Others felt that a continued presence in the country could encourage a culture of negotiation and compromise with their North Korean interlocutors.

Among the organisations most tolerant of the initial North Korean official response, the view was that short-term compromise would lead to long-term gains in access and monitoring (Haggard and Noland, 2007; Smith, 2005; Snyder, 2003). This policy achieved some success. Demands for access from the World Food Programme (WFP) opened up the north-east provinces to exploratory visits in 1997, revealing the full extent of the crisis and making it possible 'to ramp up supplies to these highly distressed areas' (Haggard and Noland, 2007). There were also small-scale successes within projects as a result of sustained engagement. One MSF doctor recalls how 'week after week, relations were increasingly straightforward and direct'; another tells of how her North Korean interpreter assisted in checking stocks of drugs, reporting irregularities to her

and finding out from local staff how drugs had been distributed (MSF, 2008).

Other obdurate behaviour on the part of the authorities could not be ignored by even the most pragmatic humanitarian organisations. Of particular concern was the denial of access to visibly sick children. MSF field staff witnessed 'children in bad general condition driven away [from a hospital] in a cart to an unknown destination. No reasonable explanation could be given by the staff'. Other examples included seriously malnourished children being present one day for clinical examination, then never being seen again. In one instance, on finding wards empty and being told that there were no patients, an expatriate searched the hospital and found 'about thirty children in a very bad general condition, physical, medical as well a[s] nutritional' (MSF, 2008).

For a number of organisations, therefore, the challenges created by the intransigence of the North Korean authorities, particularly in areas such as access and monitoring, meant that their minimum requirements for operating could not be met. In the 1998 MSF-France President's Annual Report, reviewing the organisation's mission in North Korea, President Dr Philippe Bieberson wrote that 'for the first time, in 1995, the North Korean government called upon international aid, but fixed conditions whilst doing so: no evaluation of needs, no serious control over the destination of aid, selection and drastic discipline demanded of aid organisations' (MSF, 2008). MSF's press release announcing its decision to close its operations in 1998 stated that 'the lack of access, the inability to evaluate the quality of our programme all led to our decision to withdraw' (MSF, 2008). Similarly, in its announcement of its decision to pull out of North Korea in 2000, ACF revealed that 'the North Korean authorities did not accept Action Against Hunger's normal standards of supervision and monitoring … therefore, the organisation opted to leave North Korea rather than implement a programme where these very basic principles of humanitarian intervention could not be observed' (ACF, 2000).

ACF worked in North Hamgyong province (*Hamgyŏngbukdo*), in the north-east of the country, and had its base in the industrial city of Chongjin (*Ch'ŏngjin-si*), where it ran nutrition programmes supporting nurseries and kindergartens. This area of the country suffered disproportionately during the famine, and the horror of the situation was directly witnessed by ACF workers when, during a trip to newly opened areas in North Hamgyong, ACF staff witnessed people so malnourished they looked like 'walking skeletons' (ACF interview, 2015). People in Chongjin lived in dense urban conditions, without access to land for subsistence farming, and so were wholly reliant on the public distribution service (PDS) for rations to meet their basic needs. When the authorities stopped providing through the PDS (a decision believed by some aid organisations to be in retaliation for the questionable loyalty of people in the north-east), many quickly succumbed to hunger and disease (Demmick, 2010; ACF interview, 2015). Observing the severe deprivation of people in the city, especially homeless children seen 'in alarming conditions in the streets', ACF proposed a programme of soup distribution. The agency had planned to work with official North Korean institutions in the preparation and distribution of hot soup to zones across the city with acute needs during the winter of 1999–2000, and the idea was originally welcomed by ACF's North Korean interlocutor in Chongjin. However, the proposal was finally rejected by higher authorities. Prevented from carrying out work to meet the needs of people in desperate need, ACF concluded that withdrawal was the only available option (ACF, 2000; ACF interview, 2015).

Perceptions of official intransigence at times reflected insufficient knowledge on the part of humanitarian organisations, in part because the government refused to allow international organisations to employ Korean-speaking staff (Natsios, 1997). With little or no experience of operating in North-east Asia, the humanitarian community's understanding of the social, historical and political context in North Korea was often limited. This was exacerbated by a chronic lack of local knowledge and the technical inability of local staff to carry out basic procedures such as data collection and reporting. This led to a perception that the North Korean authorities were unwilling to assist, when in fact individual North Koreans may have simply lacked the skills or cultural understanding of the humanitarian actors they were working with.

A political culture that emphasised self-reliance, national pride and resistance to foreign influence certainly motivated some of the intransigent attitudes of the North Korean authorities. An endemic nationalism prevented some in North Korea from admitting the extent of the problems they faced, and feelings of shame surrounded the acceptance of external aid. During negotiations on the UN Agricultural Reform

and Environmental Programme (AREP), one North Korean delegate admitted that, as a representative of his country, he found it difficult to be a recipient of aid because the North had itself been a donor in the past (Smith, 2005). There was also deep mistrust of the aims of the international community and humanitarian organisations. For their part, the aid community blamed the North Korean authorities for the extent of the humanitarian disaster. It was generally held by those involved in North Korea that the fundamental cause of the problem was the country's political and economic system, and thus the 'fault' of the regime. Unlike the situation that had applied in earlier humanitarian donations to the North by its Cold War allies, this aid was not being given to express solidarity with the government in its plight. It is also likely that North Korea's own experience of donating foreign aid during the Cold War meant that it perceived assistance as being politically motivated. The North's nascent nuclear programme and ongoing negotiations on it created additional complications and tensions. Given the political and security environment and the cultural context, intransigence on the part of the authorities was perhaps inevitable. The surprise displayed by humanitarian actors in the face of these challenges, therefore, suggested a profound naivety amongst many organisations operating in the country.

3.2 Access to information

Reaction to the North Korean crisis from within the international aid community was shaped by a second theme that characterised this period: the challenge of information. Scant and unverifiable information about matters that aid organisations needed to address fed the frustration and mistrust felt by many humanitarian actors towards the North Korean government. The lack of available data meant that, at the height of the famine, there was still debate among humanitarian actors as to whether acute malnutrition and starvation actually existed. This shortage of data was due primarily to restrictions on free access to the population, especially in areas of the north-east most heavily affected by food shortages (Haggard and Noland, 2007). This confused picture was made worse by the challenges involved in collecting information in the field: the nervousness of national staff and interlocutors; the use of interpreters; the genuine lack of knowledge amongst local workers and officials; fear of losing face; and expectations – claiming shortages in order to get additional supplies (MSF, 2008; Smith, 2005; Schloms, 2003; Snyder, 2003). The North Korean government was also concerned that the sharing of information on the nutritional and health status of its population with the international community was a threat to its security. It is likely that the North feared that US and South Korean knowledge of the dire nutritional state of its people might encourage hawkish elements in these administrations. Thus, when the results of a 1998 UNICEF/WFP/EU nutritional survey were made public, there was great indignation on the part of the North Korean authorities, which believed that such a disclosure justified their tight management of information (Schloms, 2003).

Assessing the precise extent and gravity of the famine was so opaque and confusing that aid organisations contradicted themselves in public as different parts of an organisation reported different interpretations of the same events. MSF's internal review of its organisation's experience in North Korea admitted that 'in the international press … MSF stated that it did not have any solid proof for denying or confirming the existence of a famine. At the same time, the international press circulated witness accounts of North Korean refugees, received from the MSF team in China, reporting a famine situation' (MSF, 2008).

Hazel Smith argues that the lack of information and access meant that 'Western policymakers too often import[ed] worst-case analysis of DPRK intentions and capabilities into the political arena as established fact' (Smith, 2005: 23). In other words, the lack of information combined with high levels of suspicion meant that an adverse scenario was always assumed. Thus, what appeared on the surface to be malfeasance on the part of the regime may not always have been wrongdoing. One example was the disappearance of medicines. One MSF doctor described how drugs would go missing, only to discover that clinic staff were hoarding them fearful of MSF's departure, and was certain that in the case of the operations she was involved in, they were not being diverted:

> *If we insisted, saying that we wouldn't leave without looking over the medicines, we always ended up seeing them. We never saw medicines being given to the army … The message denouncing the diversion of aid was sometimes issued outside the country … but we never really talked about the diversion of medicines, because this was never proven* (MSF, 2008).

Such minor examples of acknowledged misunderstandings were insufficient to convince some NGOs that the authorities were sincere. Information provided to MSF on the destination of its aid often did not tally with the site visits organised by the North Korean authorities. It also became clear that the demographic data provided to MSF by the government was 'implausible', and the agency became convinced that its food and medical aid was being diverted through 'discriminatory food distribution systems' and directed 'according to social position and to party loyalty' (MSF, 2008). Evidence of diversion was sometimes discovered by accident, increasing distrust and suspicion. In a chance meeting with Russian diplomats, ACF staff were invited to the Russian consulate in Chongjin, where they were shown a collection of ACF items including baby soap and shampoo intended for orphanages and kindergartens. The diplomats told ACF that they had purchased these items in the Rajin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone (*Rajin-Sŏnbong Kyŏngche T'ŭkku*), located on the border with China. After this discovery, the ACF team was prevented from further interaction with the Russian consulate (ACF interview, 2015).

When MSF pulled out of North Korea, it was explicit in its accusation that food was being diverted from people in need and being given to the military and other politically important groups. Interviewed in the French newspaper *Libération*, the President of MSF France said that 'the objective is to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable but there is every reason to believe that the aid channelled through the system does not reach them' (Franklin, 1998 [translated from French]). ACF aired similar concerns when it wrote that 'it seems likely that the number of beneficiaries listed in 1998 was a gross overestimate. Does that imply that AAH made distributions to 50,000 people who did not exist? Where, or who, did this assistance go to?' (ACF, 2000). Following MSF's claims about the diversion of food aid, humanitarian organisations still in North Korea were challenged to justify their continued presence there. The UN, which also had strict requirements for the monitoring of aid, had to publicly refute the allegations and argued that WFP should continue its work. In an interview with *Libération*, Catherine Bertini, the Director-General of WFP, argued that 'food handled by the WFP was indeed reaching those for whom it was intended'. She admitted that monitoring was unsatisfactory, but argued that to reach malnourished children WFP had to find a way to work within the system (Haski, 2001[translated from French]).

These discussions went to the core of the debate over humanitarian aid to North Korea: what should be done when there are suspicions that aid is being diverted away from the most needy by the authorities or other third parties, and being used by Pyongyang to serve political and military ends? However, given the intensity of the food crisis and famine, leaving the North Korean people to the mercy of the regime seemed equally unpalatable for many organisations. Later analysis of the North Korean food crisis provides some comfort to those agencies that decided to remain. It suggests that, while as much as 30% of food aid might have been diverted (Haggard and Noland, 2007), this was not a centralised conspiracy but more often the result of activities by local authorities (*ibid.*). Certainly, rent-seeking behaviour encouraged diversion of aid to the market, enabling dishonest officials to make considerable profits. However, this diversion also lowered the price of food available in the market, thus making it affordable to more people, including many in desperate need (*ibid.*). It is also likely to have had an effect on the broader process of marketisation in North Korea (*ibid.*). Of course, the vulnerable target groups for whom this aid was really destined were deprived of it, and diversion to private markets benefited elites who could easily afford to purchase food on the open market. But the image of a planned and centrally controlled rerouting of aid to the elite and the military was more than likely incorrect.

This analysis is supported by the work of Schwekendiek (2011), who argues that 'people living in areas presumed to have military privileges were not found to be significantly better off during the famine'. Instead, he concludes that a 'decisive factor leading to the improvement of the nutritional status of North Koreans was probably international food aid'. That is not to deny that diversion of aid to the military took place – it may well have fed low-ranking conscripts, many of whom also fell victim to the food shortages that ravaged the country. Notwithstanding the image presented in the media of highly trained fighting machines, the bulk of North Korea's military consists of scrawny teenage conscripts in ill-fitting uniforms, assigned to civilian tasks such as cultivation and construction. Many of these young men and women were also in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.

The benefits of hindsight and the new data that made these retrospective reviews possible were not available to the agencies operating in North Korea during the food crisis. Agencies on the ground had to make

decisions based on their organisational values and the information available to them at the time, which often corroborated their belief that the regime was misusing aid. That does not, however, preclude questioning of these agencies' actions. While the decision to withdraw was the prerogative of those organisations that chose to do so, one might argue that their criticism of those organisations that elected to stay was misplaced. On the other hand, given the size and influence of the UN operation in North Korea during the famine, perhaps UN agencies should have been less willing to compromise with North Korean officials on issues around access to information for the purposes of assessment and monitoring. Being more demanding may have enabled the UN to shape an aid environment in which more agencies could operate according to their values.

The challenge of access to information persists. A number of areas of the country remain completely closed to humanitarian agencies. Staff movements are still restricted and the presence of expatriates is limited. The increased amount of data now available reflects the relationships of trust and compromise that have been developed over time, and attests to the benefits of a sustained presence in North Korea. However, for many NGOs whose organisational values cannot be respected by the kind of engagement and compromise required to work in the country, the historic and contemporary challenges mean that operating in North Korea will remain highly problematic.

3.3 Linking humanitarian aid and security goals

The third predominant feature of this history of aid to North Korea is the perception that humanitarian assistance was linked to the foreign policy goals of both the North Korean government *and* international aid donors, in particular around the North's nuclear programme. Coinciding with the emergence of the food crisis, the international community was becoming increasingly concerned by the North's nascent nuclear capability. As discussions around security took place at the same time as the international community was trying to deal with the food crisis, there was a growing perception that aid was being used as a tool by governments, the United States in particular, to curtail North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The first Agreed Framework to control the North's nuclear programme was signed in October 1994 following the declaration by Hans Blix, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), that the North was in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This coincided with a public announcement by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that North Korea had accumulated enough plutonium to construct a nuclear weapon. The North's participation in the Agreed Framework was rewarded by a package of measures, including energy assistance and financial aid (Cha, 2012: 253).

For its part, North Korea has been accused of using the nuclear programme as a bargaining chip to extract humanitarian assistance (Lankov, 2010). An MSF report in September 1995 noted that the North Koreans 'were jubilant when they mentioned their atomic negotiations with the Americans during which they obtained undreamed of concessions' (MSF, 2008). Although the United States to this day denies that aid was linked to security considerations, it appears that the North Korean authorities were well aware of the utility of such considerations in achieving positive outcomes in negotiations for aid – a reflection, perhaps, of their earlier Cold War experiences of the 'aid game'.

For some NGOs it was not the instrumentalisation of aid in nuclear negotiations that caused the greatest concern. Both MSF and ACF believed that aid was being used by the international community to prop up the regime. Bieberson wrote in his annual report that, through the provision of aid to North Korea, aid agencies were being manipulated to achieve a larger American and European plan to preserve stability on the Korean peninsula by preventing the fall of the regime (MSF, 2008). This view was widely held within MSF. Fiona Terry, an MSF researcher, wrote that humanitarian aid in the mid-1990s served to perpetuate the regime and thus extend the hardships faced by the North Korean population. Terry also suggested that some governments were giving aid in pursuance of their own long-term economic and regional interests, for example to prevent a mass outflow of refugees, to pursue future economic interests and to promote a smooth unification with the South (Terry, 2001).

Perceived threats to security also determined North Korean attitudes to aid, and to the aid agencies operating in North Korea during the famine. In particular, the presence of foreign humanitarian actors in the country constituted a challenge to the regime's survival. Admitting foreign aid workers undermined the credibility of the regime in the eyes of its citizens.

Foreigners are seen as agents of cultural infiltration, and to let them move around freely in North Korea posed a grave threat to the regime by demonstrating its reliance on outsiders – people the regime had consistently denigrated in its propaganda – to feed its citizens. Andrei Lankov has consistently written about the potential of information to bring about reform, arguing that 'combining engagement, information dissemination … is the only way to promote change in North Korea' – exactly what aid workers 'threatened' by their presence (Lankov, 2009).[5] Aid workers inside North Korea were also able to report on the illicit and abusive behaviour of the regime. For example, one NGO worker reported that poppy cultivation was so vast in North Hamgyong Province that it was visible from the main provincial roads. The regime also tried to use NGOs as channels for counterfeit currency.

Unpicking the relationship between aid decisions and foreign policy or security goals is extremely difficult given the opaque nature of these issues and the negotiations and decisions that surround them. Nonetheless, 20 years on from the beginning of the 'Arduous March', allegations of the instrumentalisation of aid for political purposes continue to surround humanitarian projects in North Korea. For the foreseeable future, the need for aid to the North Korean population will coincide with international concerns over the North's nuclear programme and its continued political survival. As a result, the link between humanitarian assistance and foreign policy objectives must continue to be interrogated to ensure that the basic needs of the North Korean people are not forgotten amidst the international effort to secure this volatile region.

5 See also Eberstadt (2004; 2011), generally known for his hawkish stance on North Korean issues, who argues that the persistence of the regime has resulted from a policy of economic and cultural isolation and the rejection of the system of international trade. Eberstadt highlights the official North Korea policy and doctrine that rebuffs interaction with outsiders through 'economic exchange and personal interchange' because of the dangers of 'ideological and cultural infiltration'.

4 Conclusion: an 'Arduous March' for humanitarian actors?

Whatever changes we may see on the Korean peninsula, North Korea will remain on the humanitarian agenda for years to come. Its 25m people continue to face considerable hardship as a result of a failed political system, compounded by intermittent natural disasters and the rise of infectious diseases such as TB and its drug-resistant form. In April 2015 the UN launched an appeal for $111m, calling North Korea 'both a silent and underfunded humanitarian situation'. According to the UN, 70% of North Koreans (18m people) are considered food insecure, with high levels of chronic and acute malnutrition among children (UN, 2015).[6]

Yet many of the behaviours and attitudes witnessed during the famine, on the part of both the regime and humanitarian agencies, have continued to shape humanitarian actions in the decade or more that has passed since the 'Arduous March'. In recent years a senior UN official was denied access to North Korea despite the UN's ongoing and significant operations there (Haggard and Noland, 2007), and two foreign NGO officials, including the head of Welt Hunger Hilfe, were recently expelled from the country (Ryall, 2015). Access to parts of the country remains restricted, and other controls remain in place. Many agencies are cautious about operating in North Korea, and crises such as Ebola in West Africa and civil wars in Syria and South Sudan (to name only a few) mean that North Korea is considered too low a priority and too difficult a context in which to work.

The political and security concerns linked to the granting of aid to North Korea have also continued, in particular because of the North's determination to develop its nuclear capability. Since the 1990s, US aid has been implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – linked to negotiations regarding the North's nuclear programme, leading to an almost complete cessation of US support for humanitarian activities in North Korea (Manyin, 2005; Lee, 2013). Similarly, South Korea and Japan have routinely linked the granting of aid, and their willingness to allow their countries' NGOs to operate in North Korea, to political goals. China, the North's main source of economic aid, gives assistance in order to sustain North Korea as a buffer between itself and South Korea, and the US forces based there, and to prevent the destabilising impact of the North's collapse. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the North's population continues to suffer.

There are signs of change, some of which has arguably been encouraged by aid actors that have continued to operate inside the country. The persistence of WFP and the UN has increased transparency in the aid-giving process (Haggard and Noland, 2007; Smith, 2005). Many NGOs continue to work in North Korea, and even MSF has returned to the country to open small-scale projects. It is promising that China has shifted its position regarding multilateral action, recently donating food through WFP, rather than sending it via bilateral channels.[7] Humanitarian aid has also been given in forms that will enable the North Korean population to sustain an improved standard of living. There are some excellent examples of longer-term projects providing technical training in areas such as agriculture and medicine.[8]

Retrospective analysis suggests that, overall, the North Korean people benefited from the intervention of the international aid community, and that the story of aid diversion is more complex than was often presented at the time. Further, the inflow of information, increased marketisation and independent actions by regional and local authorities have proved corrosive to a rigid authoritarian regime (Smith, 2005; Haggard and Noland, 2007; Noland, 2012; Lankov, 2013). Unfortunately, the pervasiveness of the three themes that characterised humanitarian aid in the

6 See http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50523#.VS1mSPmUeUV.

7 See https://www.wfp.org/node/3498/4572/326028.

8 The Swiss government is providing training to North Korea in land management and agroforestry practices and the European Union (EU) sponsors a range of projects to improve agricultural practices, enhance public health and provide technical training (Morris-Suzuki, 2011).

1990s – intransigence, lack of information and the instrumentalisation of aid – suggests that many of the same challenges continue to face those trying to bring relief to the North Korean people. Perhaps the most important lesson from the food crisis in North Korea, therefore, is that the policy of providing aid to the North Korean people should continue. It is vital that humanitarian agencies working in North Korea are culturally and practically willing to be patient and pragmatic. In other words, those who wish to engage with North Korea in an effort to reach its desperate people must be prepared for an 'Arduous March'.

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