

International Humanitarian Assistance and Multilateral Cooperation in North Korea

Jangho CHOI Head of Team, International Cooperation for Korean Unification Team (choi.j@kiep.go.kr)

Yoojeong CHOI Senior Researcher, International Cooperation for Korean Unification Team (choiyj@kiep.go.kr)

I. Introduction

The economic situation in North Korea is deteriorating. Tightening UN sanctions in 2016 and 2017 effectively halted North Korean exports. Three years after the border closure in 2020 to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic, imports have dropped dramatically, and the North Korean economy is facing severe shortages. The Ministry of Unification shared this view announcing "it is judged that a number of people are dying of starvation in some parts of North Korea" in January and February 2023. To sum up, it is hard to rule out the possibility of a large-scale humanitarian crisis in North Korea.

In recent years, climate change and global warming have increased the frequency of disastrous weather events on the Korean Peninsula, including heat waves, localized heavy rainfall due to the heat dome phenomenon, and coastal inundation caused by rising sea level.

In the event of a major flood, drought, heat wave, or another epidemic, North Korea is likely to fail in responding to natural disasters due to insufficient industrial production. In this case, even if North Korea produces enough food, a natural disaster, such as a flood that washes away roads or bridges, could result in poor food distribution and localized starvation. The North Korean economy is currently very fragile. Pyongyang's emphasis on agricultural production at the February 2023 Workers' Party meeting may have been aimed at preventing the food supply situation from deteriorating rapidly in the event of a natural disaster, which is expected to occur in the summer of 2023.

If there is an economic crisis in North Korea, humanitarian aid to the country should be one of the priorities. This is because North Korea's problems should only be allowed to spread

within the country. More importantly, the international community should help the people living in North Korea to achieve the minimum standard of living that they deserve as human beings. This article will look at humanitarian assistance and multilateral cooperation in North Korea. We will examine how humanitarian assistance has been delivered to North Korea, what North Korea's position is on international assistance, and what multilateral cooperation has achieved.

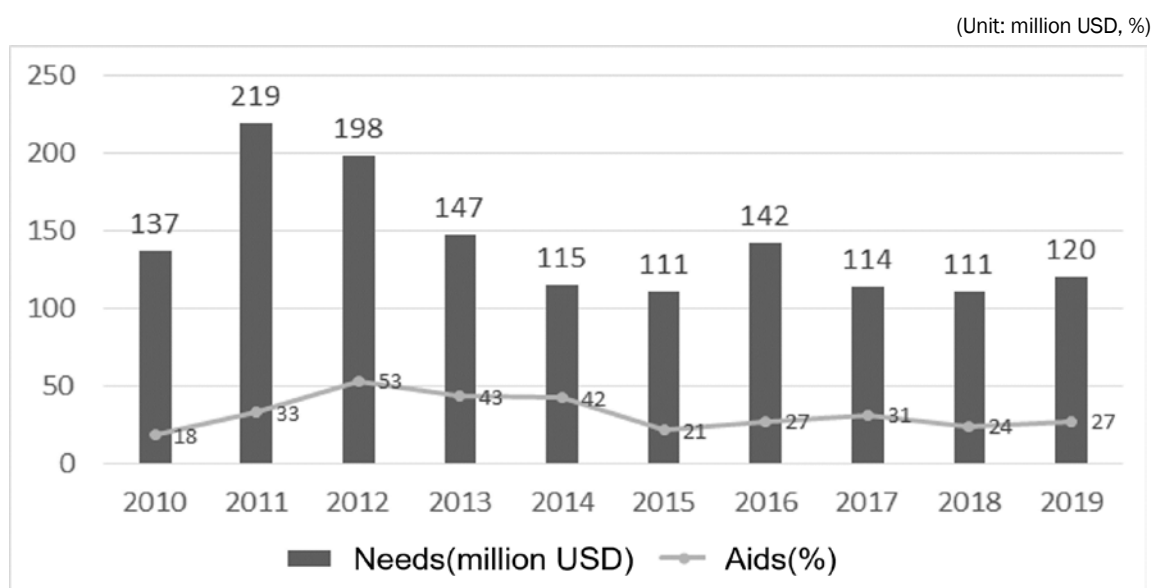
II. North Korea's Demand for Humanitarian Assistance

North Korea's demand for humanitarian assistance and multilateral cooperation can be viewed in terms of financing its economic development (stimulating trade and investment), normalizing foreign relations and easing sanctions, and humanitarian assistance. In 2011-2012, North Korea attempted to raise funds for economic development from the international community. Specifically, it tried to revitalize trade and foreign investment. In the early years of Kim Jong-un's presidency, from 2013-2016, the country attempted to normalize foreign relations to be included in the international community, while trying to ease sanctions against North Korea. However, during the middle years of Kim Jong-un's presidency, 2017-2022, the country needed humanitarian assistance from the international community to resolve economic difficulties caused

by the triple threat of sanctions, natural disasters, and COVID-19.

First, since Kim Jong-un took power, North Korea's signature policy of domestic stability has been to "put the people and the masses first. It aims to "build an economic power" and "improve people's lives," which inevitably requires North Korea to grow and develop its economy. However, due to the lack of accumulated capital, North Korea needs to earn foreign currency to revitalize its external economy and use it to recover its internal economy. Humanitarian assistance is still needed, especially for vulnerable people in North Korea. Concerns about the humanitarian crisis in North Korea have intensified since sanctions were tightened.

However, the international community's humanitarian assistance to North Korea has been inadequate. Figures reported by UN organizations show that over the past decade, only a fraction of the funding needed for humanitarian aid has been provided to North Korea. The required funding necessary to implement humanitarian assistance projects in North Korea amounted to \$1.47 million in 2013 and \$1.11 million in 2018, but only 43% of the amount needed in 2013 and 24% of the amount needed in 2018. Furthermore, in 2020 and 2021, when the COVID-19 crisis hit, it is estimated that the need for funding increased, and the actual amount provided decreased even further.

Figure 1. Trends in North Korea's Humanitarian Aid Needs and Actual Funding (2010-19)

Source: UN OCHA. (2020), "DPR Korea Needs and Priorities Plan 2020," p. 11.

III. North Korea's Position on Humanitarian Assistance and Multilateral Cooperation

Since Kim Jong-un took power, North Korea's multilateral cooperation policy has been characterized by a negative stance toward participation in US-led international financial and international trade organizations, and support for humanitarian assistance to North Korea. On the other hand, Pyongyang has been positive about integration into the international order to promote trade and investment and international organizations led by China and developing countries. Overall, these positions have not changed significantly during the 10 years of Kim Jong-un's rule (2012-2022).

A review of recent North Korean literature shows that North Korea views these measures as "attempts by imperialist countries to subor-

porate the economies of developing countries." This is because the international community is demanding economic transformation for its humanitarian aid, which North Korea perceives as a threat to its regime. Despite the fact that most humanitarian assistance does not require North Korea to change its power, North Korea believes that the goal of the humanitarian aid is ultimately to change its regime and open up its borders. The WTO, for example, is criticized by North Korea as "an unfair trade system that applies the same principles, rules, and order to all member countries, ignoring differences in their level of economic development, under the guise of 'free, non-discriminatory, and reciprocal' international trade principles" and "enhances the exploitation of developing countries." North Korea even has a negative view of global value chains (GVCs). In North Korea's view, the establishment of production structures

with so-called "advanced capitalist countries" is negative in that it: 1) deepens the external dependence (vulnerability) of developing countries, 2) deforms the industrial structure, and 3) increases income inequality.

Nonetheless, from 2018 through the first half of 2020, North Korea has spoken of the importance and necessity of joining and participating in international organizations and conducting economic and diplomatic negotiations. In a 2020 article in the North Korean publication *Economic Research*, the DPRK emphasized the need for cooperation among countries, stating that "economic and diplomatic negotiations are the main means for all countries to unite and cooperate in terms of resolving various economic frictions during the negotiation process."

As a result, North Korea recognizes the need for humanitarian assistance and multilateral cooperation for sustainable economic growth and development, but is wary of economic dependence, which could lead to regime instability. Therefore, it seems appropriate to say that North Korea does not reject multilateral cooperation per se, but has doubt about economic dependence on the United States. This is why North Korea is wary of joining the World Trade Organization and other international financial organizations, which could be most

beneficial to its economy but is positive about interregional financial organizations and arrangements centered on China. The problem is that this attitude has prevented the international community from delivering humanitarian aid to North Korea, which is being borne by the North Korean people.

IV. International Support for North Korea by Sector

When looking at aid to North Korea by sector, infrastructure and humanitarian aid account for a much larger share than others. However, since 2015, debt relief has accounted for the largest amount of aid, resulting from debt relief diplomacy between Russia and North Korea. North Korea and Russia agreed that in exchange for debt relief, North Korea would utilize the funds for future economic cooperation (mainly in education, healthcare, and energy). On the other hand, social infrastructure is mostly a type of humanitarian assistance in the sense that it mainly includes support in the education, health, and medical sectors. Since Kim Jong-un took power, there has been little support for production and economic infrastructure. As a result, the international community's assistance to North Korea has been mostly of humanitarian nature, focused on health, medicine, education, and nutrition.

Figure 2. ODA to North Korea by Sector (Percentage of Total Disbursements)

(Unit: %)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Debt Reduction	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.8	46.0	37.6	42.3	38.4	43.7
Humanitarian Aids	52.0	40.8	29.5	20.0	12.1	16.7	21.5	26.3	24.0	18.1
Social Infrastructure Support	36.7	42.6	50.1	63.1	27.2	25.3	24.9	19.4	17.5	23.8
In-kind Support	6.1	10.2	13.8	9.9	9.1	4.5	4.7	3.9	3.1	2.5
General Support	1.7	1.2	1.7	2.6	1.5	1.2	1.2	1.3	0.7	0.4
Other (Administrative costs, etc.)	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	3.8	3.8	2.3	3.4	13.0	10.4
Production Support	1.6	3.6	3.3	2.7	1.6	1.3	0.8	1.4	1.1	0.3
Economic Infrastructure Support	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.7	3.0	0.7	6.0	1.3	0.8	0.0

Source: OECD CRS data (Retrieved May 4, 2022)

V. Improving UN Sanctions Waiver Guidelines and Processes

The most significant recent achievement of humanitarian assistance to North Korea by the international community has been the publication of the UN sanctions waiver guidelines, which have since been refined in response to requests from North Korean operators. In August 2018, the UN Sanctions Committee first developed and published the Guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea (Guidelines for the Implementation of Sanctions on North Korea, No. 7) in response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis caused by sanctions on North Korea since 2016.

However, humanitarian aid providers have

complained that the guidelines are complicated and do not allow them to quickly assist North Korea. In accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2397, passed in 2017, aid providers are required to obtain a sanctions waiver from the UN Sanctions Committee in order to provide assistance to North Korea. North Korean aid organizations have expressed difficulties in carrying out aid projects due to the obligation to submit an exemption letter and the project's limited scope (validity period, number of shipments) even with approved exemption. First, to obtain sanctions exemption approval, humanitarian aid providers must submit a waiver request letter to the 1718 Committee, which must provide 10 detailed pieces of information, including the nature of the humanitarian aid project, infor-

mation on the beneficiaries of the project, reasons for requesting the waiver, information on the goods provided to North Korea, transportation plans and schedules, routes, and means, information on transportation personnel, financial transactions, and monitoring plans. There was much information to provide, and the process was complicated. For example, it was found that it took as little as eight days and as long as 333 days for organizations to receive approval after submitting a sanctions waiver letter, an average of 100 days. In response, on November 30, 2020, the UN Sanctions Committee released a "Guide to Support the Implementation of Sanctions on North Korea," which outlined four improvements to the sanction waiver process for humanitarian assistance projects by civilian organizations.

The "four enhancements" to the Guidance for Supporting the Implementation of Sanctions on North Korea include: extending the validity period of sanctions waiver approvals (from six months to nine months); relaxing the limit on the number of shipments of goods to North Korea (from one to three); easing the requirement to apply for a waiver directly to the 1718 Committee; and expanding the sharing of relevant information. In addition, the guidelines have been revised to allow organizations that have received two or more sanctions waivers in the past 18 months to apply directly to the 1718 Committee for a waiver without going through a UN member state government or UN Resident Coordination Office. The majority of humanitarian assistance projects in

North Korea that have been granted sanctions waivers have been in the areas of health care, water, and sanitation. In the three-year period ending in 2018-2021, a total of 72 sanctions waivers were granted, and approximately 30 organizations provided assistance to North Korea. The main areas of exempted projects were healthcare (49%), food security (15%), nutrition (14%), water and sanitation (14%), and other (8%).

VI. Conclusion

North Korea and the international community share a common need for humanitarian assistance and multilateral cooperation. However, disagreements remain over the positions, responses, and solutions to related issues that have not led to tangible results. Humanitarian aid can help North Korea meet its immediate food needs. There is also a need for multilateral cooperation in terms of trade and investment facilitation, economic development, and financing. The international community wants to bring North Korea into the multilateral cooperation system in terms of calling for denuclearization and regime change. North Korea has accepted humanitarian assistance from the international community, joined some international organizations and conventions, and introduced and implemented international systems such as international standardization, quality improvement, intellectual property, product rights, and patent rights in the production and trade of goods. On the other hand, it has not expressed its intention to participate in major international organizations that call for

economic system reform. While the international community basically encourages North Korea's participation in these organizations, it still requires a proactive change in North Korea's attitude toward denuclearization. This difference in stance limits active humanitarian assistance to North Korea and its participation in multilateral cooperation.

North Korea's multilateral cooperation policy under Kim Jong-un has been limited by internal and external differences and external factors, particularly sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have arbitrarily and unilaterally limited North Korea's efforts. Sanctions and COVID-19 have physically constrained the realization of multilateral cooperation projects with the international community that North Korea is currently participating in or could participate in, making it difficult for humanitarian assistance and multilateral cooperation projects to proceed regardless of the will of North Korea or the international community.

North Korea's economic situation has been deteriorating for more than three years as a result of the COVID-19 border closure. Failure to adequately respond to floods and typhoons in the summer of 2023 could lead to food shortages and a humanitarian crisis in North Korea in the second half of the year. The international community, as well as the South Korean government, need to prepare for this and manage the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. **KIEP**