

**Eugene Yim, USA****UNDERSTANDING THE NORTH
KOREAN PERSPECTIVE: A UNIQUE
ROLE OF RESEARCH IN IMPROVING
HUMANITARIAN COLLABORATION**

Historic neglect of the North Korean perspective has contributed to the unpredictability of success of collaborations between international humanitarian aid groups and the North Korean government. The ultimate result is a tragic inequity of access to humanitarian aid that perpetuates the ongoing suffering of the North Korean people. Although many foreign agencies have collaborated with North Korea over the past decade, only a few have succeeded. The logic behind the outcomes is cryptic, to say the least. A number of factors contributing to success have been proposed based on the experiences of foreign agencies, but there has been inadequate consideration of the North Korean perspective. For this reason, existing knowledge is speculative and hence an unreliable source on which to base policy decisions. Fortunately, there is a promising role for research in improving collaboration with North Korea by delineating their perspective.

North Korea, officially recognized as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), has entered the limelight in the past decade for a number of reasons, including its ongoing need for humanitarian support. Following the death of its 'Great Leader' Kim Il-Sung and a series of natural disasters in the mid-1990s, the economy of North Korea began an abrupt decline. The failure of the food distribution system led to the starvation and death of millions of North Koreans in rural areas. The flourishing health-care system was particularly devastated, as the national production of pharmaceutical supplies shut down in the face of increasing medical need. To complicate matters further, the fall of the communist-bloc countries of the former Soviet Union eliminated their primary source of external support. As a result, North Korea opened up its borders to the aid agencies of the western world.

In the late 1990s, the World Health Organization (WHO) collaborated with the North Korean government to address a growing malaria epidemic. Around the same time, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from South Korea supplied medical equipment, clinical techniques and medications for the increasing burden of helminthic infections in North Korea. Eugene Bell, a smaller, Christian NGO from the United States, has collaborated with North Korean public health officials to develop a strategy to control the TB epidemic in North Korea. Additional humanitarian aid groups that have attempted collaboration with North Korea include Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), Catholic Relief Services, the United States Agency for International Development, MercyCorps International and the American Red Cross. Considering the wide spectrum of these groups, it is not all too surprising that the different agencies encountered varied success in their efforts.

Indeed, these attempts at collaboration have differed quite a bit in their success. On one end of the spectrum, prominent groups like Doctors Without Borders have

ceased their efforts in North Korea despite an awareness of ongoing need. In public statements explaining their reasons for leaving the country, Doctors Without Borders highlighted policy changes in the North Korean government that were restricting and limiting activity of humanitarian aid groups. According to the United States Institute of Peace, Doctors Without Borders left because North Korea “wanted the tangible benefits of humanitarian aid, but would not allow any person-to-person contact between North Koreans and the aid workers”. In this situation, the reason why the collaboration was not successful is apparently clear from the perspective of the agencies.

However, such a view is simply a working hypothesis until the perspective of the North Koreans is also appreciated. Hearing this perspective would elaborate potential complexities that have been missed by making a priori assumptions based on one perspective. A paediatrician from the University of California at San Francisco, Dr Ricky Choi, was able to elicit this perspective while speaking with a North Korean official. As a part of a delegation to North Korea last year, Dr Choi spoke informally with a North Korean public health official about western perceptions of North Korean policy. When questioned about the complaints of frustrated aid groups such as Doctors Without Borders, the official stated the following: “The rumour that these organizations had difficulty having access is simply not true. We gave them access. We did, however, have problems with many of international aid agencies that demanded access to everywhere they wanted to go, yet provided only minimal amounts of medicine.”

This brief account suggests that the situation is intricate. The North Korean officials did tighten the restrictions on monitoring and access to groups such as Doctors Without Borders, but from their perspective they had a justifiable reason to do so. As the statement by the North Korean official suggests, perhaps the aid agencies were requesting an unwarranted degree of access for the amount of aid provided. In any case, what is made clear from this example is that much can be gained from understanding the North Korean perspective. It is a perspective that has been historically neglected and poorly understood by the western world. Unfortunately, such oversight has resulted in a number of botched collaborations between foreign agencies and North Korean officials.

Regardless of the reasons, collaborations such as the one described have failed to attain their objectives. In contrast to this picture, groups such as Eugene Bell have enjoyed long-standing relationships with North Korea and have collaborated with North Korean officials to address health epidemics effectively. Even in this example of a success, however, there is an apparent enigma: how can a small, Christian NGO from the United States have such a fruitful relationship with the North Korean government? Based on the atheistic nature of Communism and the hostility between North Korea and the United States of America, one would assume that religious and American affiliation would stack the odds against such an agency. The logic seems bizarre. To make sense of this apparent contradiction, the North Korean perspective will again be critical. Understanding the North Korean perspective on these successes as well as failures will provide critical insight into the factors that determine the success of collaborations with North Korea.

Furthermore, there is a particular role for research in contributing to this understanding. Rather than relying solely on isolated accounts of success and failure, scientific inquiry can be used to investigate systemically the factors that contribute to success. The

added rigour of this approach provides information that is more valuable for guiding future policy. With this in mind, researchers have already begun to document and analyse the collaborations. In 'Paved with Good Intentions: The NGO experience in North Korea', Flake and Snyder present information regarding the experiences of outside agencies working in North Korea. From this information, the researchers infer characteristics of North Korea's structure and system for managing outside aid agencies. Drawing from her experience with United Nations agencies and NGOs in North Korea, Hazel Smith describes the interaction between aid groups and the North Korean government in 'Hungry for Peace'. With the knowledge gained from these preliminary research studies, aid groups can learn from previous examples, avoiding prior mistakes and incorporating successful components into future efforts with North Korea.

What is still lacking in the existing fund of research, however, is the North Korean perspective. The research studies conducted hitherto have provided helpful insight but they have not adequately addressed the North Korean perspective. This gap of knowledge is due to a number of reasons. North Koreans rarely reside outside of their motherland, severely limiting the access of western researchers to this population. In addition, the history of conflict and ongoing political tensions are significant barriers for exchange of perspectives. On account of these barriers, the ideal way to gain insight into the North Korean perspective is to travel into the country itself. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities for foreigners to travel to North Korea.

Nonetheless, a number of progressive agencies have already begun providing such opportunities for exchange. For example, Nodutdol, a Korean-American NGO based in New York, sends a delegation of Korean Americans to North Korea every year with the expressed purpose of educational exchange. The insightful comments of the North Korean official quoted earlier were provided within the context of this delegation. Such efforts are notable attempts to normalize relations with North Korea and promote mutual understanding. As North Koreans are engaged in such discussions, future collaborations will benefit as the understanding of the North Korean perspective develops.

In this way, inquiry into the North Korean perspective can reduce the inequity that otherwise limits access of the North Korean people to international humanitarian aid. The perspective gained from open dialogue and systematic investigation will be critical in designing policies that will ultimately enhance delivery. Therein lies a rare opportunity for research to promote social justice by reducing inequity of access, while improving strained relations between groups that have historically misunderstood each other.

Following his baccalaureate education at Yale, Eugene Yim went to Stanford to train in medicine. An internship with a South Korean NGO first sparked his interest in health policy and international relations in North Korea. He subsequently worked with agencies that mobilize humanitarian efforts from the North Korean border in China. In the summer of 2007, he travelled to North Korea with a delegation formed by an NGO in New York. The goal of this venture was to meet with public health officers to identify factors that have contributed to the success of collaborations between foreign aid agencies and the North Korean government.