Hunger in North Korea: a Challenge for Global Peace

Economic History of the North Korea

North Korea, formally the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, is one of the world’s most isolated and closed countries in terms of economy and politics. In this country, control of the economic structure, especially the production and distribution of food resources, is completely centralized. Over the past decade, the overall economic situation in North Korea has been deteriorating, peaking with the calamitous agricultural season in 2007 due to severe floods. Because military expenditure is a top priority, governmental investment in technical development and agricultural productivity has severely lagged behind. This political situation has deprived its people of basic survival needs and led the country to rely on various international food aids programs. Throughout the history of North Korea since its beginning about 60 years ago, food security has been a major national problem. This issue, however, stems not from a single factor, but from a complex intertwining of low agricultural productivity, poor diplomacy, and overall rigid governing.

In 2005, the North Korean government closed its doors once more and stopped the international humanitarian efforts within its territory, only accepting food aids provided by China and South Korea. Afterwards in 2007, South Korea helped its neighbor even more by promising to develop some of North Korea’s infrastructure and natural resources. Yet, North Korea’s isolationist policies deterred further development of international help, leading to a food security crisis. This dangerous situation invited the intervention of the U.S. in 2008. However, North Korea’s diplomatic relations with both South Korea and the U.S., the two most important aid providers, have been rough as these countries have decided to cut food deliveries to North Korea. Both of the countries required monitoring and secure delivery of food, a policy North Korea does not accept. This year, about one third North Korea’s population, an estimated 8.7 million people, will require food assistance for their survival (Penner, 2009). Food security in many countries is allowed only through continuous international trade and not self-sufficiency. In choosing policies which close diplomatic and trade relations, North Korea is already sealing its own demise (Harden, 2009).

Demographics and Educational System

Data referring back to 1993 give us general domestic figures regarding civilian life of North Korea. However, all estimated measurements and statistical evidence presented throughout this essay must be regarded with caution, as the North Korean government rarely allows assessments of the country, and those allowed in are subject to extreme bias and tend to represent skewed figures. It should also be regarded that social structure and relationships ranging from family size and composition to the governmental control of the economy and market are fundamentally different in communist-ruled countries than in the westernized world.

The World Food Program (WFP) estimates North Korea’s population to be about 23.552 million based on population growth rates and the last national population census of 1993 (FAO/WFP, 2008). In North Korea, the family is regarded by authorities as a “cell,” a basic unit of society and not an economic entity (Mortimer, 1993). The family size in both urban areas and in socialist cooperatives tends to be
small and a single household usually holds about four to five people and no more than two generations. Parents live with their youngest son and his wife. In this society, boys are still more desirable than girls for economic reasons and for continuing the family name. Women are not disadvantaged, but are regarded second to males for the aforementioned reasons.

Individual income is replaced by a work points system in which every person participates in production in a cooperative factory or office. Also, the socialist cooperative payment for work points earned by individual family members goes to the family unit as a whole, not just to a family head or patriarch. Detailed income information was nowhere to be found, but the general populace lives very different lives from the privileged elite superiors in governmental positions.

The education available in North Korea is stellar as evidenced by its boastful literacy rate of 98-99%. North Korea maintains an eleven-year universal, free, and compulsory school system followed by a higher education system. Education may begin at a young age in a t’agaso (nursery). Infants over three months who live in households where both parents work and no grandparents live nearby remain in the nurseries until they are four years old. The nurseries not only provide child care for working parents but also provide infants and small children with the foundations of a through ideological and political education. In general, the educational system is charged with the responsibility of kyo’yuk, the instruction in scientific knowledge and technical skills, and kyo’yang, indoctrination, which transforms the North Korean citizens into loyal communists (Mortimer, 1993; Encyclopedia of Modern Asia, 2001).

Agrarian Culture

Foods in North Korea are produced under the centralized control and distributed through Public Distribution Centers and state shops. However, information regarding how they are managed and what they sell is extremely limited. The staple foods, maize and rice, are not officially sold in the state shops but distributed only through the PDS, the public distribution system. Markets have sprung up recently around the country because the citizens have taken initiatives to sustain their lives under the ongoing economic crisis. The elite members of society took a hand in creating the system of markets by organizing illegal transportation systems for goods. It is reported that about 30 percent of international aid in food is diverted by the North Korean elites and that only 30 percent finds its way to markets. These markets, albeit against the government’s will, are keeping millions of North Koreans alive and also putting money into the elitists’ pockets. In 2005, the government feared it might lose control over food and people and prohibited private trade activities (Harden, 2009). Price data from the WFP and FAO indicates that households are buying or bartering for the commodities in markets to meet their subsidy requirements (FAO/WFP, 2009). The urban populace or simply those within reach of these markets can choose from a wide variety of food commodities including vegetables, fruits, fish, and meat.

There are five main categories of farms employed in North Korea: cooperative farms, state farms, household gardens on cooperative farms and other types of kitchen gardens, and sloping land cultivation outside cooperative farms. North Korea’s land is essentially poor for farming, comprised of about 15% of flat arable land. On this land there are about 3000 cooperative farms on which almost all the rural population lives. The average farm size is a little more than 500 ha, including 100 ha of forest for fuel wood. Primary crops grown on the farms are rice, maize, potato, winter wheat and spring barley, and soybeans, as well as an assortment of other crops.

Rural families use kitchen gardens as an important source for accessing household foods. The official size of kitchen gardens attached to homes or institutions is 30 pyong, about 100 m², but sizes vary significantly based on whether the area is urban or rural (Kim, 1999). Kitchen gardens are negligible in apartment buildings of urban districts but vital in rural areas. The main crops grown are cabbage and beans, but other vegetables including spinach, eggplant, cucumber, pumpkin, garlic, radish, onion, chili,
tomato, radish and beans are also grown. Some households, mainly those with larger holdings, also grow maize and potatoes; they may even produce cash crops for sale or barter (FAO/WFP, 2008).

Dietary diversity is lacking and malnutrition is wide-spread in North Korea due to a dangerous seasonality of food access that overshadows its citizens every year. The government not only mandates static seasonal planting dates but also regulates the types of crops farmers must plant for the year. Even though the weather is not permitting, this rigid scheduling forces farmers to plant crops even at improper times (Ireson, 2005). This poor planning is just a small part of North Korea’s fundamental issues in agriculture and technology. Meals were increased over the standard two per day in the average family during 2008 but the average meal is bound to go down again in 2009 due to the ongoing food crisis (FAO/WFP 2008, Harden, 2009).

The average citizens’ meals constitute primarily rice and vegetables, which provide a minimum nutrition level. An expanded diet consists of rice or maize and vegetables, often supplemented with wild foods picked from nearby forests of fields by hand. Meals contain minimal amount of oil but rarely animal proteins. In consequence, anecdotal evidence, as well as the recent UNICEF sponsored household child nutritional survey, indicates that ordinary North Korean diets have been chronically deficient in protein for many years. There are no estimations on soybean production or consumption of animal protein, but production of such sources of protein is minimal. Soybeans, a strong source of protein, have been grown only marginally in fields and yields have been extremely low. Grain too, over the years, has fallen to a dangerous level due to the lack of efficient machinery, fertilizer, and fuels along with other resources in general (Ireson, 2005; FAO/WFP, 2008).

Instability of Food Security

The problems of North Korea in food security, encompassing agriculture and general welfare of its citizens, go back to its problems in government. The communist government prohibits any divergence from central standards and does not allow any people to actually possess property, thus the lack of true income figures. Therefore, an increased agricultural productivity by small-scale subsistence family farmers or urban gardeners could help the fragile situation in the short term (as seen with the opening of independent markets), although an independent movement could also lead to punishment. But to solve the long-term problem, citizens do not need to work harder or work with more enthusiasm; the problem lies directly in politics and diplomacy.

Overall lack of effective diplomacy for conflict prevention and sustainability of citizens increases the number of vulnerable society members. In effect, the government’s rigid policies and firm independent ideology in terms of trade cause the citizens themselves to suffer. The economic situation in North Korea, which has been precarious, must be dealt swiftly yet delicately. The bold accusation by international organizations or economically powerful countries, of course, will not be answered directly and will not positively influence North Korean policy. Force, pressure, or any other methods of diplomacy have already been tried and do not work.

Years of trading deficit, food insecurity, and scant farming implements are all responsible for North Korea’s immense, culminated agricultural problems. North Korea’s main trading partners had been China, Republic of Korea, Japan, Thailand, the Russian Federation, and the European Union but today are China, Republic of Korea, and United States of America. Agricultural production in North Korea grew between 1999 and 2005 but slumped since 2006 especially when floods struck the country in 2007 (FAO/WFP, 2008). In accordance with the juche ideal of self-sufficiency declared by its former leader, North Korea’s agricultural strategy emphasized grain production to provide people’s basic caloric needs. This approach led to production yields that would meet nutritional requirements for sustainability, albeit
at terrible economic or environmental costs (Ireson, 2005). This approach evidently has failed: yields are still far below the sustainability level, and the environment has already been ravaged.

Production decreases because of the severe shortage of fertilizer. North Korea’s fertilizer reservoir has fallen down to 60 percent of 2007 levels. This lack of proper chemical enhancers greatly affects Japanese rice, the particular strain of rice which dominates North Korean diet, relies heavily on fertilizers. However, the problem runs deeper than the simple lack of fertilizer. Small-scale subsistence will not improve the lives of North Koreans in the long run and their appalling situation calls for immediate solutions.

Outdated farming strategies and tools have caused chronic problems in food security; a detrimental outcome North Korea’s trading policies have imposed on the farmers. In 1999, UN consultants who evaluated the possible rehabilitation of the Hamhung fertilizer plant reported that the plant was based on 1970s’ production methods. Transplanting machines, like the Chollima tractor they use, have neither been replaced nor modernized since they were first introduced. The land itself is not particularly arable, and the desperate farm techniques North Korea uses only further degrades the environment. Repeated cultivation of corn on rain-fed fields has several deleterious effects. Until recently in 2004, the government resisted rotation of cropping with non-cereals. Without mineral fertilizer, continuous cultivation drains soil nutrients and degrades soil structure. The fertilizer North Korea did receive was ammonium sulphate which has a negative, acidifying effect on soil (Ireson, 2005). The trends for this factor have recently improved; however, North Korea is still far from sustainable.

Potential Solutions

There are two proposed ways any country in general can obtain food security: through reliably producing food (self-sufficiency) or purchasing food (international trade). The goal of self-sufficiency, arguably the hardest to achieve as a solution to food security of a nation, may be met in a reasonably short amount of time through rather sustainable farming methods. However, the long-term focus of the strategy would move North Korea away from self-sustainability and provides steps toward a more open, diplomatic trade system, the optimal source for food security. The success of this strategy would base on the assumption that North Korea itself would come to the conclusion that self-sufficiency is less optimal and economical than relying on world trade to provide a continuous food supply. In this case, first implementing a self-sufficient food production will lead to an eventual economic, and thus, agricultural diversification. This tactic would require a complete restructuring of North Korea’s agricultural sector namely: through renovated farming machinery, a long-awaited update on technology, increased use of environmentally-friendly fertilizers, and implementation of effective agricultural practices such as crop rotation.

To reach adequate human health levels, the crops would have to be diversified to contain enough protein contents along with other essential nutrients. Planting legume crops would not only add protein to the North Korean’s diet, but also contribute to nitrogen levels in the fields, acting as a natural fertilizer. Other crops which cannot grow effectively in the climate such as potatoes should no longer be planted but rather be traded. Through these changes, North Korea may see short-term food security for all of its citizens. Unfortunately, consistent food security is only likely to be acquired by improved diplomatic international relationships.

However, the solutions do not have to be so grand and immense that only world powers can initiate them. On the individual level, we can help alleviate the problem by raising awareness about these hunger issues. Whenever someone hears the name “North Korea,” they immediately think of Communism, violence, and nuclear weapons. What they are not aware of is the deep-rooted food crisis of the innocent civilians behind the oppressive government. It is especially critical in privileged countries such as the
United States that younger generations are aware of the not-so-fortunate lives of their fellow human beings so that they can one day take charge and make a difference in other people’s lives.

Conclusion

North Korea’s agricultural sector is failing to provide sustainable levels of food for its citizens, and overall yields continue to decrease yearly. The government’s *juche* policy favors complete self-sufficiency which is attainable, but not with North Korea’s current farming methods. On the other hand, North Korea could attain food security through global trade and of crops. Both approaches could lead to a healthier society. If the government opens up international trades, the situations of the general populace will greatly improve as imports of grains and other commodities are essential for long-term food security. A clear, simple solution would be for the government to start engaging in diplomatic initiatives and governance based on the principles of democracy; if the government focuses more on the basic needs of the society other than military operations, food security may not be a crisis. However, you cannot simply ask North Korea to open the economy, to open the country in general, and to take down communism to replace it with Democracy. A more moderate and tolerable approach, perhaps one similar to South Korea’s “Sunshine Policy,” could be one way to improve North Korea’s international relations and thus garner the trades necessary for its food security. The Sunshine Policy is based directly on one of Aesop’s fables. Instead of demanding and forcing agreements, it calls for gentle “sunshine” to disarm the closed and skeptical country. As North Korea is forced to open diplomatic channels because of the rise in current hunger rates, UN affiliated nations and other benefit associations should help nudge it along in the world market. This year, North Korea took measures to improve relations to the US and reached out for help despite its 2005 prohibition of international humanitarian services within its territory. Eventually, the North Korean government cannot ignore the cries of its hungry people and the government may choose to use violent means to divert the internal tension, as seen by their recent nuclear threats. Instead of sanctioning the government, other countries should create a friendly, helpful trade environment and be willing to transfer technology. In applying this humanitarian solution to North Korea and other hostile communities, the world as a whole can alleviate the oppressive forces of hunger and at the same time promote peace.
REFERENCES


