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North Korea: Policy & Governance

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Hunger in the cold and extreme country of North Korea is a very peculiar and unique case. North Koreans are constantly facing famine and food shortages. Much of the country's food supply and economy rests on rice and wheat crops being successfully harvested. Ultimately the way North Korea operates on a political and economic level is what perpetuates and worsens food shortages. When the country faces difficulties its leaders focus on economic production rather than food production because it operates on a Stalinist agricultural system. Also, the way that farming is done in North Korea is outdated, farmers use hand tools instead of machines so harvesting crops is often inefficient and painstaking. The easiest solution to lessen hunger in North Korea would be to convince the government to allow citizens to use machines to harvest grain and rice instead of by hand. All other solutions to improve the lives of North Koreans are far more complicated due to their unique circumstances, but changing the way the government operated on a political and economic level to be less communist and totalitarian would benefit North Koreans.

North Korea has a population of approximately 25.8 million people, which is large but considered small for Asian countries (The Economist, 2021). 62% of the population lives in urbanized areas, the remaining 38% live in rural areas (The Economist, 2021). The highly populated cities are due to the government encouraging North Koreans to move to the cities to increase the number of people working within heavy industries. The government of North Korea is one of the last communist totalitarian governments in the world today. The economy of North Korea is incredibly fragile and runs on the mass production of chemicals, textiles, and several consumer goods. The country also has a decent source of iron ore and coal as well as the world largest magnesite mines, all of which are mined and exported. Agriculture is often neglected in North Korea because its leaders focus on improving the economy via the increase of production in heavy industries rather than farming, this is what ultimately causes food

shortages. The main crops in North Korea are rice and wheat, farming in North Korea is difficult because of the harsh weather conditions, they are prone to extremely cold winters and hot summers, along with approximately 40 inches of rain a year and the occasional cyclone. Another food source and large industry in North Korea is commercialized fishing, specifically deep sea fishing, this is a main source of protein for the country (Lew et al, 2021).

Families in North Korea are seen as the basic unit of society and are typically small. Most families have 4 to 5 people and 2 to 3 generations (Savada, 1993). The majority of families live in small 110 sq meter apartments within urbanized cities, families living in rural areas live in brick houses with slate roofs (Savada, 1993). Apartment buildings in cities are often very large and intended to house large numbers of people, some buildings are reported to be 40 stories high (Savada, 1993). Many people get married and start families later because of mandatory military service. Common sources of food are wheat, rice barely, fish, potatoes, multiple types of beans, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. It is important to note that North Korea fluctuates from being able to provide itself with enough of certain foods and needing to import food or receive foreign aid from countries such as Russia, the U.S, China and South Korea. More often than not North Korea is in moderate to desperate need of foreign aid but refuses to accept foreign aid or only accepts aid from select countries. Many families face difficulties with having enough food because the country does not have enough food to provide them with and the average job does not leave workers with enough money to purchase the small amount of food that is available. The majority of North Koreans work in factories based in heavy industry and manufacturing. These jobs do not provide households, even with multiple incomes, with enough money to purchase food and other basic needs. Arguably the most significant detail about North Korea is how controlling the government is. Citizens are only able to purchase government approved products but some risk purchasing goods on the black market or “real peoples economy”. The availability of goods is also a problem in the country, not only is there extreme restrictions on every product on the market, but there is also a continuously ongoing shortage of everyday necessities and goods. Surprisingly education is free in North Korea, this includes a year of preschool along with primary and secondary school, which is essentially preschool and grades 1 through 12. Unsurprisingly school in North Korea is used by the government to indoctrinate children with nationalist and communist ideas. Students are primarily educated in technology and math in order to eventually have an occupation involved in those fields in order to benefit their country. Medical care is also free and available in North Korea however, like many other necessities in North Korea there is a shortage of medical supplies and medicine. An ongoing trend in North Korea's so called “classless society” is the priority and special privileges given to the elite and wealthy, this group is constructed

primarily of high ranking military leaders and officials of the Korean Workers Party or KWP (Lew et al, 2021).

The lack and unavailability of food in North Korea has historically and is currently causing extreme hunger in the country. Most issues in North Korea are covered up by the government but because of how bad the “food problem” has become Kim Jung Un has addressed the fact that the country is struggling to feed the population (Lew et al, 2021). The exact status of the current famine in North Korea is hard to gauge but is especially concerning considering the North Korean famine in which 10% to 19% or 2.5 to 3.5 million people died (The Wilson Center, 2002). As far as the rest of the world can tell it is very possible that the 1990’s North Korean Famine could essentially repeat itself as the lack of government action and other conditions are identical (The Wilson Center, 2002). Urban and rural populations are affected differently by the North Korean food problem because of how the population is distributed and how the economy is run (Lew et al, 2021). The economy is prioritized over food production, so when there is a food shortage food production is purposefully reduced. This is largely what perpetuates food insecurity in North Korea, because the country operates on a Stalinist agricultural system (The Wilson Center, 2002). The effect of these conditions are North Korean farmers being underpaid, producing less crops, which means less food available for the country. People living in urban areas are unable to afford food and are pressured to work more to earn more money for food (The Wilson Center, 2002). Poor people are especially vulnerable in this cycle because of their low status, the higher class are given top priority and are able to sustain their unbothered, lavish, and secure lifestyles while the rest of the country struggles to live (Lew et al, 2021).

As previously stated the main problem causing food insecurity in North Korea is government policy. A major obstacle in improving extreme food insecurity in the country is the North Korean government's hostility towards and unwillingness to cooperate with foreign countries. Another major obstacle is that many countries will oppose this plan or refuse to participate because North Korea can be an unpredictable and difficult country to negotiate with on a diplomatic level. The best option to maintain the safety of foreign countries while still assisting North Koreans is to convince the government to adopt modern farming methods in order to make farming more efficient. With modern farming techniques the country would easily be able to produce and harvest more food for itself. Unfortunately this solution does not directly address the main cause of food insecurity, this is due mainly to the fact that aggressively attempting to change North Korea for the better of its citizens could be detrimental in a limitless number

of ways. Some examples of possible modern techniques that could be implemented are cold frames and plastic mulch in order to lengthen the growing season and make the best of the comparatively barren soil as much as possible; both of these methods have proven successful in places like Alaska (Stevenson et al, 2012). Plastic mulch is a thin layer of UV resistant plastic film that is placed directly over crop beds. The purpose of plastic mulch is to retain as much nutrients, warmth, and water as possible (Greengold Farms,2022). Cold frames are wooden frames with removable clear plastic covers that are used to protect crops from cold weather and pests, the purpose is to increase efficiency by extending the growing season and protecting crops from being damaged by weather and animals (Eartheasy, 2022). It is worth noting that both North Korea have the same hilly, rocky, cold, harsh, and high latitude climate, meaning that the same farming methods should work just as well in either location.

There are many ways the U.N. or individual countries could take action but few of them are likely to end as planned. Given that North Korea is picky to say the least about which countries can provide foreign aid, letting them choose the country or countries helping would be beneficial overall (Lew et al, 2021). This plan would be far more sustainable than sending food overseas since North Koreans will be able to efficiently produce their own food and be more self-sufficient as a country. North Korea leaders pride themselves on the idea of countrywide self sufficiency while not actually practicing it by accepting large amounts of foreign aid, the opportunity to be self sufficient may appeal to them (Lew et al, 2021).For this to be successful North Korea would have to cooperate which is difficult considering their past, however they may be willing to accept help considering the severity of their food problem (The Wilson Center, 2002).

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