

Cynthia Ulbing
TST BOCES
Ithaca, NY

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North Korea: Surviving Hunger through a Drought

Outside of P'yongyang, North Korea a family sits around a table to eat what little dinner they have been provided. The father, Yeong Gim, has been raising chickens on his land for years, yet his children still starve. At eight months, his son should just be starting to crawl, but the malnourished infant is just becoming strong enough to roll himself over.

Yeong Gim's family is small, like most other North Korean households. His household consists of himself, his wife, his older daughter Yeong Gippeum, and his baby son. His daughter's name is supposed to mean "joy," but she has only been raised in a life of turmoil. Together, the family unit raises "work points," that are distributed to the family as a whole, rather than the head of household. Today, especially among the working class, sons are desired to help with labor. Some laws are still in effect allowing a man to divorce his wife for not being able to bear a son, but those traditions are quickly being abandoned (North Korea Family Life).

Agriculture is a tricky business in North Korea, as only about 18% of its landmass is arable. The percentage used to be higher, but after the Korean War there was little effort put into restoring the land. The lack of modern irrigation systems leaves many rural families praying for rain to keep their crops alive. Unfortunately the country has been fighting drought for years. The once-popular rice patties are now restricted to warmer regions with irrigation and flood-control systems. The poorer farmers are forced to grow cheaper grains and hope that they survive the dry summers (North Korea Agriculture). Once the grains are grown, the troops march in and collect the harvests and food is distributed to families at food depots. Only the smallest farm owners get the opportunity to take their food to market and make whatever profit they can (Becker 103).

Recently a reform was attempted to improve agricultural policy. In order to support the poorer rural farmers there was talk about a policy that would let them keep more of their output. If this policy had been passed, it would have marked a change in North Korean government since the command of their new ruler Kim Jong Un. Unfortunately, the policy did not pass and the government will continue to hold a rigid control over its farmers, but the fact that the country was ready to admit they have a problem was a huge step forward. Although the government may benefit from the money they pour into their military, they can in no way benefit from a starving population of noncombatants (North Korea Lays Golden Goose).

Since the 1980s North Korea has been trying to steadily increase its share of livestock. Pork and poultry are raised mostly around cities at farms like Yeong Gim's, where demand is high, while cattle mostly graze in the more mountainous areas. Sheep and goats are common in the countryside where they can be used for work and are available for trade (North Korea Agriculture).

Eighty percent of North Korea's landmass is made up of mountain ranges. Between these ranges are narrow valleys. Most of the North Korean people live in the valleys or in the scarce plains, where they generally have more success with farming. There is no water way running through the country, so ships have to sail around the Korean Peninsula to get from the East to West coast (Worden 64).

Although Yeong Gim and his family are fictional, their circumstances are not. Sixty percent of children in The Democratic People's Republic of North Korea experience malnutrition (Here are some Important Statistics). Nearly a third of children show signs of underdevelopment. The problem is not that the country lacks workers or hospitals, but that those facilities lack resources. There are actually quite a few farmers and doctors in North Korea (relative to their population), but the money for tools and medicine is poured into government spending on the military and the testing of weapons of mass destruction. As a result, the people grow weak and hungry and die (North Korea Hunger: Millions). In the cities, groups of children called "kotjebi" roam the streets in groups stealing what food they can and salvaging the rest from the garbage (Deprive and Rule).

Many of the country's hardships with hunger and other issues originate in former leader Kim Jong Il's 1995 party policy. He called it "military first," meaning not that the military would run the party, but that he had decided to put his military above everything else in his country (Myers 85).

It didn't take long before "military first" felt like a threat to any of the countries North Korea could consider enemies, namely the United States. Kim Jong Il had decided to pour everything he could into building a bigger and stronger army with exciting new- age weapons. The real threat, however, was not to the enemy countries overseas, but the civilians living in the military state. When funding was poured into the military, the first industry it was taken from was agriculture (Worden 104, 271).

Fortunately, there is still hope for the North Korean people. Of course, the simple answer is to reduce military spending and invest in better farming technology. As said by UN Special Reporter Vilit Muntarborn in a February 2012 interview, "The country is not poor... the resources of the country are misspent, misallocated, and misused by the elite 'military first' policy." Changing this policy, however, is easier said than done. It is common knowledge that North Korea is one of the most closed states in the world. The government has always been extremely nationalistic and even as nearly one million people starved in the mid- 1990s famine, they still refused most of the aid they were offered (North Korea Hunger: The Secret Famine). So, convincing this same government to reduce military spending in favor of feeding its people would be like talking to a brick wall.

What *can* be done to help eliminate hunger in North Korea? The answer is in the water. North Korea prides itself on self- sufficiency, so managing water scarcity can be the key to bringing fruitful crops back to the country. In the richest parts of P'yongyang, the elite live in lush expensive buildings surrounded by blooming gardens. An uninformed tourist passing through would have no idea the country is facing the worst drought it has seen in 100 years. While the country's richest live lives of luxury, the poor are hungry and parched (North Korea Facing). Without water, the worn out farmland that most rural families possessed is totally incapable of recovering (Worden 154).

This past year, farmers like Yeong Gim have been forced to reduce their livestock and crops or suffer the consequences of the drought. Yeong even had to abandon the family dog to preserve as much water as possible for his chickens. Despite his efforts, nearly half his animals perished when he was unable to possess enough grain to keep them nourished. When his yield decreases his work points decrease. Like the never-ending cycle existent in sub- Saharan Africa, his inability to make food at a respectable price leads to his inability to purchase food, and his family struggles to survive on what can be provided by the World Food Program (Thurrow 23).

In order to conserve water in North Korea, less needs to be attributed to human agency. It takes thousands of gallons of clean, distilled water to run nuclear testing, and reserves are held for emergency purposes. By reducing what is wasted in expensive weapon production for the military, as well as in the fountains and gardens of the elite, and increasing what is used toward farms, the North Korean government would

already be taking a huge step in dealing with the food security issue. By raising homeland production rates the country will be putting itself in reach of its goal of self-sufficiency.

Another major contributor to the poor water and food security in North Korea is landscape modification and poor land use. As wetlands are drained to make room for future developments, the humidity of the whole area is dropped. Desertification occurs where there is not enough moisture for rain and therefore plant and animal life.

Land reforms beginning in the 1940s left the farms of hundreds of Japanese colonists back in the hands of the North Koreans. This was the beginning of the Korea's anti-imperialist movement and decision to become self-sufficient. For years crop yields were on the rise and it was looking like the country would finally make it, but in the early 1990s their luck started to change for the worse. Between undesirable weather conditions and improper use of farm land the country hit a halt, producing barely 4 million tons of grain a year. When the country continued to produce less than they needed to consume, it devastated the economy. All it would take was one summer of particularly bad weather to spark a three year long famine (Worden 47).

The famine in North Korea in the 1990s was a problem that continued to make itself worse over time. The poor in the country were spending 30% of their total income on government- distributed food. This created a competitive free market outside of the planned economy. Soon, those who were still trying to grow and sell food for a living were left in the dust. At the same time the agriculture industry was dealing with an even bigger blow when socialist allies China and the Soviet Union cut their support after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Previously, the allies had provided cheap fertilizer and subsidies to help keep Korea's agriculture afloat. Without this help, the North Korean farms had no way of surviving on their own (Worden 100, 102, 156).

Although there is no surefire way to fix North Korea's agricultural problems, there are routes that can be taken over time. With funding, modern techniques of siphoning water from deep in the ground can help keep crops irrigated even when the water table is low. With proper fertilizers much of the worn and acidic farmland can be restored. Professionals can be hired to help teach rural farm owners about the more effective agricultural techniques and introduce hybrid seeds. With these modern systems, crops can be grown in quantities to feed the whole country.

The key words are: with funding. If North Korea is ever going to be self- sufficient, there needs to be more money put into its agriculture. Although they seem to have an overall excellent education system, their knowledge about efficient agricultural practices is lacking (Worden 125). There are many organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank created specifically to help with these issues, but the problem is getting the money into a country we have practically no foreign policy with.

In order for the farmers to get the help they need, their government needs to make the decision to help them or allow someone else to. Expecting things to get better on their own is only worsening the situation. The policy of isolationism practiced in North Korea has been ineffective in bettering the lives of its people. When it was first declared, isolationism was a success because the country still had support of the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviets, the North Koreans was left in real isolation with no way of producing enough to fuel their country. If we want to help North Korea, we need to approach the country and its new Leader with a proposition. If North Korea is willing to accept aid and open up trade, even a little, they could effectively receive the funding needed to solve their hunger issues. Once the water shortages were dealt with Korea could start producing rice at the rate that it used to. It would need to be clear on both sides that there is no intention to "Americanize" North Korea, only to help it support itself.

There is no knowing how many more people have to die of hunger or dehydration before the government will decide to make such a change, but there is hope for the future. Following the death of Kim Jong Il, the country follows a new Dear Leader: Kim Jong Un. Although the regime will be staying in the hands of the Kim family for a third generation, some changes are bound to be made. When Kim Jong Il first took control of the country at fifteen, he didn't hesitate to implement strategies of his own, despite his deceased father's title of "Eternal President." With any hope, Kim Jong Un's rule will improve foreign relations and bring an end to the tradition of turning a blind eye to hunger in North Korea (Myers 51-52).

So for now there is little Yeong Gim can do but keep working his farm and waiting for more rain, but with the rapid awareness movements occurring worldwide, there is always hope for a new tomorrow. The world is fighting the hunger problem, and hunger fights back hard. We have to slam our fists on the table and make a finite decision that in this day and age, nobody should be going hungry. Yeong Gim may not live to see the day that hunger is abolished in North Korea, but there is hope that his children will. It may be as simple as one little push to get the ball rolling for good.

North Korea may be as unpredictable a country as they come, but past the scary demilitarized zone are towns and cities with real people dealing with real problems. Before people worry too much about who has the bigger army to kill other armies with, they should be worrying who has the resources to feed their noncombatants. War is ugly, but so is starvation. Sometimes it's best for the world to step back and take a look at where their values really lie.

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