

From Charity to Partnership: South Korean NGO Engagement with North Korea

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EXCERPTS

North Korea's plea for humanitarian assistance, which first came in 1995, provided an opening for South Korean NGOs to become directly involved in South-North relations. Between 1995 and 1998, progressive NGOs and religious groups took the lead in pressing for emergency aid to the North at a time when the South Korean government was taking a more cautious and measured approach. With the launching of the Sunshine policy by President Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003), followed by the Peace and Prosperity Policy of President Roh Moo Hyun (2003-2008), the role of civil society in South-North relations was recognized and actively promoted by the government.

Over the past decade, South Korean civil society and humanitarian NGOs in particular, have constituted an important aspect of the South's overall engagement initiative toward North Korea. The NGOs have aspired to reduce human suffering in the North, demonstrate the goodwill of the South Korean people, reduce hostility and build trust, and help create the basis for reconciliation between people in the North and South. Allowing for differences among the organizations and the need for following a learning curve, the South Korean NGOs, to a large extent, have achieved these goals. However, if the South Korean government continues to expand direct aid and economic cooperation with the North, the NGOs will face a new environment with problems of financial stability, project sustainability, absence of North Korean non-governmental counterparts, and the need to define a distinctive role. If they successfully meet these challenges, the humanitarian NGOs will play a critical role in laying the basis for eventual reconciliation between the peoples of the North and South.

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The Korean Sharing Movement (KSM) is perhaps the most influential and broadly based NGO aiding North Korea. The KSM was formed in 1997 by prominent religious and secular groups and individuals, many of whom had been active in the democratization movement, to mobilize the public to send food aid to the North. Other organizations directly affiliated with Protestant, Catholic and Buddhist religious groups also responded early in the crisis. They draw their support directly from their religious institutions and supporters. The third category includes large welfare-oriented NGOs that had been well established before the North Korean crisis emerged and developed special programs addressing the needs of vulnerable groups in the North, especially children. Professional associations, primarily of medical doctors, became involved after the 2000 summit to provide direct service and technical assistance. The final category is composed of several organizations initiated with the support of the Korean government to implement particular projects that the government placed high priority on. These include

large-scale rice cultivation, sericulture and reforestation projects implemented primarily in the Mt. Kumgang resort and areas bordering the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

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It seems clear that South Koreans, after more than a decade of engagement with an increasing level of civilian participation, have developed a more nuanced and realistic view of the North. One indication of this is a trend that seems to be emerging in the thinking of two non-governmental sectors, the humanitarian NGOs and the human rights advocacy groups. Until recently, these were two camps which had very different priorities and followed different strategies. The NGOs aimed to reduce suffering in the North through humanitarian engagement, which meant that all open criticism of the North Korean regime and system should be muted. The human rights organizations claimed that the North should be “blamed and shamed” in order to end the most abusive rights violations as quickly as possible. The experience of the past decade and the much greater information base on the North now available seem to have convinced some key elements in both camps that coordinating their efforts may be the best engagement strategy. A tentative dialogue has begun between representatives of the humanitarian and human rights groups in South Korea to share information about conditions in the North and develop joint analyses on which to base programming.

The decade-long humanitarian project of South Korean NGOs has probably had greater impact on the thinking about reconciliation and unification in the South than in the North. If NGO engagement continues to influence South Koreans toward a consensual view about how to relate with the North, and toward support for pragmatic approaches that go beyond charity to encourage change, then the NGOs will certainly have made a major contribution toward peaceful resolution of the South-North division.

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Assessment and Challenges

The evidence indicates that South Korean humanitarian NGOs have, to a large extent, realized their goals of delivering humanitarian aid directly to the people of North Korea. They have created and expanded channels for direct contact between people in the South and North. They have generated flows of information that have had a real, though asymmetrical, impact on how North and South Koreans understand each other. The NGOs have added a dimension to the South’s engagement policy toward the North that would have been absent if interaction was solely on a government-to-government basis. They have enabled contact between the South and North to be maintained at some minimum level even as the official relationship has fluctuated. This success has been achieved in spite of suspicion and resistance on the part of the North and a lack of consensus about their motives and role among the public in the South. The largest and most active NGOs have shown the persistence and capacity to learn from their experience and to adjust their program approaches in order to maintain their engagement with the North. Their approach is in the process of changing from “unconditional engagement” to

what might be called “partnership engagement” in which there are clear expectations of active cooperation and mutual contributions to development-oriented projects.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the NGO approach to engagement has had its limitations. The scale of assistance remains relatively modest and is becoming more dependent on government subsidies. While gradually expanding, their degree of penetration into North Korean civilian society is still limited. Perhaps the biggest challenge for South Korean NGOs will come if the plans for greatly increasing South-North economic cooperation agreed to in the October 2007 summit are actually implemented by the new Lee Myung-bak Administration. Both governments have justified the role of the NGOs, to some extent, as a substitute for their constrained official interaction. What happens when assistance through official channels is stepped up?

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To meet these challenges the South Korean humanitarian NGOs should accelerate their efforts toward professionalization and coordination. They should strengthen their capacity for planning and managing development assistance projects drawing on the extensive international experience in transitional states. They should increase their level of coordination and cooperation within their own sector as well as with international NGOs working with North Korea. The Korean government, for its part, should treat the NGO sector as an essential but independent partner for the South’s engagement policy toward the North. In this way, rather than remaining an adjunct, NGOs will be mainstreamed into South Korea’s engagement strategy.

NGO engagement represents the first steps toward people-to-people reconciliation between South and North Korea. Given the vast economic gap between the two sides, NGO engagement will continue to have an essential role to play, not only in addressing humanitarian and development needs in the North, but more importantly, in creating the multiple strands of human contact on which reconciliation and unification must be built.