

---

the

---

# Humanitarian Leader

---

## Opening Doors in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

JAMES BANFILL, JASMINE BARRETT, CARLA VITANTONIO  
AND NAZANIN ZADEH-CUMMINGS



# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

## Opening Doors in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

WORKING PAPER 015

JUNE 2021

---

### Author Details

#### James Banfill

Visiting research fellow, Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University Seoul, Republic of Korea

James.banfill@alumni.psu.edu

James Banfill is a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University in Seoul, Korea. He has previously worked in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on cultural projects, sports exchange, tourism, agricultural training and humanitarian aid monitoring. He holds a master's in soil science from Pennsylvania State University, United States.

#### Jasmine Barrett

PhD candidate, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Jasmine49@gmail.com

Jasmine Barrett is a PhD candidate at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on the development of the disability sector in the DPRK. Her dissertation is tentatively titled 'Disability in the DPRK: identity, social inclusion, and changing perceptions of disability'. Prior to joining the University of Melbourne, Jasmine was an entrepreneur partnering with the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled to create employment for people with disability in the DPRK.

#### Carla Vitantonio

Country Director, CARE International, Havana, Cuba

Carla.vitantonio@care.ca

Humanitarian professional, author and activist Carla Vitantonio is a feminist and an advocate for human rights. In the past ten years, she has worked with governmental and non-governmental organisations in the DPRK, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Cuba. In each of those places, she stood beside the most vulnerable, being persons with disabilities, women and persons belonging to ethnic minorities. Carla believes in inclusive processes and the art of political negotiation. She has published two books with ADD Editore, Myanmar Swing (2021) and Pyongyang Blues (2019).

#### Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings

Associate Director of Research and Lecturer in Humanitarian Studies, Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

nazanin@deakin.edu.au

Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings has been researching humanitarian issues in the DPRK since 2014. She is both a lecturer in humanitarian studies and a graduate of a humanitarian studies master's program, informing her interests in humanitarian pedagogy and the role of higher education and critical perspectives in the humanitarian sector. Nazanin received her PhD from the City University of Hong Kong in 2019.



# Abstract

---

This paper considers the opportunities for effective humanitarian collaboration in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). It brings together perspectives from three individuals with extensive lived experience working in the DPRK. Collectively, these authors have worked in various sectors of international humanitarian aid and other areas of engagement such as emergency response and preparedness, education, social enterprise and tourism. The paper draws from these experiences to present lessons on overcoming obstacles and harnessing opportunities in the DPRK.

## **How does this paper inform humanitarian leadership practice?**

The paper informs humanitarian leadership by presenting experience-based knowledge on the DPRK. It is rooted in the practice of international engagement, and contains concrete lessons for leaders not only looking to expand their understanding of the DPRK but of aid in authoritarian contexts more broadly.

## Opening doors in the DPRK: An introduction *Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings*

In 1995, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea) made its first wide-scale appeal for international humanitarian aid while in the midst of a famine. Known as the Arduous March, between 1995 and 2000 the famine killed an estimated 600,000 to 1 million North Koreans (Goodkind & West, 2001). Humanitarian organisations, including large international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, Red Cross bodies, and small DPRK-focused groups began working in the country. Some groups established residency in the country, with foreign staff living full-time in the DPRK, and others worked on a non-resident basis, with regular or ad-hoc visits.

As the famine era subsided, it became clear that North Koreans still faced issues of food insecurity and access to adequate healthcare and sanitation. Some high-profile NGOs left the country in the early years of engagement, such as Médecins sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors without Borders), who left in 1998 due to 'lack of access, the inability to evaluate the quality of [their] program and the lack of any perspectives of improvement' (Claus, as cited in MSF, 2014, p. 120). Others pivoted from emergency famine aid to programs that aimed to address protracted humanitarian issues, and humanitarian engagement moved from an acute emergency phase to addressing more long-term needs. In 2005, the DPRK announced the end of the humanitarian aid era in favour of development aid, requiring all NGOs to leave. This did interrupt or end the work of some groups, but others were able to renegotiate and remain, or had already begun working on projects that incorporated sustainability concerns.

Since its first nuclear test in 2006, the DPRK has been sanctioned under UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. As sanctions have become broader, they have had a wider applicability to humanitarian engagement, such as restrictions on metal items. In 2017, UNSC resolution 2397 established humanitarian exemptions. However, this process has been burdensome for aid groups, some of whom are small and not well-equipped to navigate expensive international bureaucratic processes; it has also weakened ability for agile and timely response, and, even with proper exemptions, humanitarians have faced challenges with procurement and banking (Zadeh-Cummings & Harris, 2020). Secondary sanctions and travel bans from the United States have further complicated aid programs. In January 2020, the DPRK became one of the first countries in the world to close its border in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) situation in China. The border remains shut at the time of writing, impacting tourism, trade and aid. Foreign humanitarian workers in the country faced growing restrictions and, by March 2021, there were no UN or NGO workers remaining in the DPRK (O'Carroll, 2021).

It is at this moment of little foreign presence in the DPRK that the authors of this paper came together for an online panel at the 2021 Humanitarian Leadership Conference. The panel, which shared its title with this paper, was not borne of a desire to showcase the well-documented and well-known challenges of working in the DPRK, but to highlight the opportunities for rewarding collaboration, effective partnership and impactful cooperation. My co-authors—James Banfill, Jasmine Barrett and Carla Vitantonio—bring deep experience to the discussion. Collectively, they lived, visited and worked in the DPRK across a variety of fields, including international humanitarian aid and other areas of engagement such as emergency response and preparedness, education, social enterprise and tourism. This paper captures the lessons and insights they shared at the conference.

Our inquiry is based on several ideas. The first is that the DPRK is not inherently shrouded in mystery. We reject outdated concepts of the DPRK as 'crazy' or 'unpredictable'—or, as Smith (2000) put it in her critique, the "bad, mad, sad" paradigms. Instead, we focus on lived experience to draw out knowable aspects of the DPRK and working with North Koreans. In many other countries, it would not need to be said that individuals differ from one another but, when discussing the DPRK, it bears reminding that North Koreans are not monolithic. Thus, while the authors here share lessons and thoughts, it is with the assumption that readers recognise that not all North Koreans are the same. The second core concept of this paper is knowledge-sharing. We came together with the belief that sharing experiences in the DPRK would help provoke discussion to better prepare others to embark on work in the country. At the centre of this sharing and learning is the wellbeing of the North Korean people. This paper, and the panel behind it, is inspired by international solidarity with the citizens of the DPRK.

---

***It is important to keep the welfare of North Korean people in the global conversation.***

---

As the world waits for the DPRK to safely reopen its borders, the authors urge readers to seize this moment for reflection and learning. It is important to keep the welfare of North Korean people in the global conversation. We also encourage activism pointed at the barriers constructed by the international community. More work must be done to reduce the impact of sanctions on humanitarian engagement, including a reliable banking channel and smoother exemption processes, to open more doors.

The following three sections present lessons from the co-authors: Carla Vitantonio challenges the concept of the DPRK as a place unlike any other; Jasmine Barrett considers how to actually begin working in the DPRK, demystifying the process and showing the options

humanitarians can consider; and James Banfill asks how we can better prepare to work in North Korea. A conclusion collates the key messages.

## Deconstructing the narrative of uniqueness

Carla Vitantonio

I have been asked several times to talk about aid in the DPRK. On many of these occasions, I could not help but generate delusion in my audience: according to some, I don't condemn the regime enough, thus allegedly positioning myself as 'pro-DPRK'. Those who support the regime, on the other hand, consider my reflections too critical and unacceptable: I am not a friend. As a humanitarian and a professional, I cannot satisfy either group: I refuse to take judgemental, black-and-white positions. It is not my role to express judgement on a culture or country that is too far from my own to be neutrally observed. All I can do is collect information, observe and devolve my observations in order to help collective sense-making and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

For an aid worker, every context is unique, and a good part of our job is to be able to learn and adapt to the context in order to make humanitarian assistance as effective as possible. It is not a mystery that one of the main principles that drives humanitarian aid is 'do no harm'; that is, 'prevent and/or mitigate any adverse effects of interventions which can increase people's vulnerability to both physical and psychosocial risk' (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015). Needless to say, in order not to cause harm one needs to know the existing structures and, to some extent, accept them; I will return to this later.

If we start from this assumption—that every context is unique—we are immediately challenging the narrative of the DPRK as 'exceptional': the post-colonial idea of aid workers arriving in a ruthless country and doing what they can (or what they want) has luckily been overcome. Today, humanitarian assistance must be *accountable*: to donors, to beneficiaries and, to some extent, to the host country, too. In this sense, even in the DPRK we must abide by local rules and regulations in order to deliver assistance. This does not mean that we agree with the local rules and regulations, just as we may not agree with those of Ethiopia or Colombia, to mention two countries where aid delivery is massive. It means that we recognise reality, we observe the setting and we consider the challenges and opportunities that this setting gives us. From this starting point, we might well decide to provide assistance through projects that challenge some norms and aim at a systemic change. A clear example is all the work done by Humanity & Inclusion (formerly Handicap International) that worked

alongside the DPRK government to bring them first to the creation of a national law on disability, then to signing the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and finally to its ratification. It was a huge change, if we imagine that until 2000 the official position of the DPRK government was that there were no persons with disability in the country. Now, not only does the country have a quasi-civil society organisation—the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled (KFPD)—working alongside the government to improve living conditions for people with disabilities, there are visible changes in Korean society, in favour of the inclusion of people with all kinds of disabilities. This stage of development was reached only through a constant exchange and dialogue with local authorities and organisations.

---

**Today, humanitarian assistance must be accountable: to donors, to beneficiaries and, to some extent, to the host country, too.**

---

I would like to deepen my considerations on the possibility (or not) of delivering aid in the DPRK. When we look at implementation modalities, we should recall the four humanitarian principles and see if they can be respected: humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality. According to many, the one principle at stake in the DPRK is impartiality. Impartiality means that "humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions" (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2017).

The fact that the DPRK government restricts the area of aid to six out of nine provinces (excluding one province because it is too far to be reached,<sup>2</sup> and the remaining two because there are nuclear plants and, allegedly,<sup>3</sup> labour camps) brings many to question the capacity of aid agencies to be able to reach the most vulnerable. I am afraid there is not a unique response to this question; however, this situation is actually very frequent in aid. Similar challenges arise in countries such as Myanmar, Ethiopia, Cuba (just to name three), and aid agencies find their way around, without seeing their effectiveness questioned. The fact of the matter is

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, this is one of the two reasons that foreign publishers use when I ask why they won't translate my book, *Pyongyang Blues*, into English. The other is that I do not hold a United States, United Kingdom or Republic of Korea passport.

---

<sup>2</sup> Historically things have been different. Until 2006, all NGOs and UN agencies could reach the North Hamgyong Region, and had projects there. When the situation improved and the DPRK changed rules of access, NGOs progressively withdrew, and, as of the most recent available data, the only resident agencies currently operating there are WFP and UNICEF.

<sup>3</sup> I use the word 'allegedly' because I have never personally seen one; I don't have the skills, nor do I think it's my role, to correctly interpret aerial pictures.

that, if we contextualise humanitarian assistance, there is no context in the world where these four principles can completely and transparently be respected. In addition, part of our work as humanitarians is to do our best in respecting the four principles, while walking a precarious line and balancing a set of unfortunate circumstances. In the DPRK, resident agencies found a reasonable way to maintain some impartiality: to deliver aid, the main rule was “no access, no aid”. It is a very strong statement that was somehow respected by Korean authorities, and allowed NGOs to be able to conduct some monitoring, thus avoiding aid being delivered, as many feared, to the military, or to groups that did not need it.

“No access, no aid” is only one of several examples I could draw on to prove that delivering aid in the DPRK needs as much tact, diplomacy, strategy, and respect of the local context as is required in other parts of the world.

### How to begin working in the DPRK: A practical guide for humanitarian practitioners *Jasmine Barrett*

This section is a practical guide for humanitarian practitioners on how to set up a humanitarian project and begin working in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, often referred to as DPRK, North Korea or Korea.<sup>4</sup> My aim is to demystify the process, and demonstrate that it is not as complicated as it is perceived to be. I have been engaged in humanitarian work in the DPRK for ten years, and I would like to share some of my personal experience with readers.

There are very few humanitarian organisations operating in the DPRK and aid appeals are chronically underfunded. With a population of 25 million people, almost half are classified by the UN as “in need”, yet only a quarter are ‘targeted’ for humanitarian aid (UN Humanitarian Country Team [HCT], 2019). I hope that this paper will spur more humanitarian practitioners and organisations to reach out to local partners in the DPRK and start a conversation about how they can work together. With so few humanitarian actors present in the country, even a small project can be immensely appreciated by the locals, and have a big impact. There are both resident and non-resident NGOs and UN agencies working in the DPRK, but this paper will focus on setting up an aid program as a non-resident NGO, because this would be the most logical starting point for almost all humanitarian organisations.

The first step is to find a local partner. Many, but not all, local partners have their own websites that outline the scope of their work, their goals and interests, and who their existing foreign partners are. A list of local partner websites is included as an appendix.

---

<sup>4</sup> The people of the DPRK do not agree with the use of the term ‘North Korea’, so this section will respectfully use ‘DPRK’ or ‘Korea.’

The National Coordinating Committee, a division of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, partners with six UN agencies present in the DPRK, while the Korean European Cooperation Coordination Agency (KECCA) partners with the resident European NGOs (UN DPR Korea, 2014). The DPRK Red Cross Society and the Ministry of Public Health partner with numerous resident and non-resident NGOs. Other local partners include the Korea Education Fund, which targets children through schools and orphanages; Care for the Elderly, whose remit includes people with age-related disabilities; and the Korea Green Fund, which specialises in clean, green technology, addressing climate change and protecting the environment. The KFPD targets people with disabilities and is responsible for the implementation of the UNCRPD; for full disclosure, KFPD is my local partner and I find them an excellent group to work with. There are a dozen other local partners, including the Korea–America Private Exchange Society (KAPES), which works exclusively with North American NGOs, and the Compatriots Association, which works exclusively with the Korean diaspora.

Local partners perform a number of essential functions and will be critical to the success of a project. It has been reported in the news media that when practitioners go to the DPRK there are ‘minders’ who watch them all the time, however, they do a lot more than simply ‘mind’ people. Basically, a local partner will facilitate everything a practitioner does in-country. They will apply for their visa, pick them up from the airport, and host them. They will facilitate logistics, distribution and transportation. They will organise their schedule and apply for permission for them to visit project sites for monitoring and evaluation. They will set up meetings, facilitate introductions, and act as interpreters. In short, having a local partner is like having local staff, but they are much more than that. They are guides, confidants and teachers. When making the initial contact with a local partner, I recommend asking one of their existing foreign partners for an introduction. Despite email addresses being listed on their websites, it is still necessary for practitioners to ask for an introduction and register their email address, otherwise the emails will bounce back.

---

### **Local partners perform a number of essential functions and will be critical to the success of a project.**

---

The DPRK is one of the most sanctioned countries in the world. Therefore, it is important to be familiar with the UN sanctions regime and how to request a humanitarian exemption in the early stages of planning. Details of how to do this can be found on the UNSC website listed in the appendix. Humanitarian practitioners will also need to check if there are additional unilateral sanctions in the country where they are operating. Local partners will not be able to help navigate the sanctions regime, as they do not see them as legitimate.

Banking and logistics need to be considered. Local partners can help with logistics such as sending goods via shipping container to Nampo port, or sending goods by truck over the China–DPRK border. However, due to sanctions, there are no international banking channels available, so it is recommended that visitors seek advice from other humanitarian practitioners about how to safely and legally move their money.

On a practitioner’s first visit, a local partner will pick them up from the airport, drive them to their hotel, and stay with them for the duration of their visit. Itineraries must be organised and emailed in advance; while small adjustments can usually be accommodated, it will be too late to make major changes on arrival. A well-planned itinerary is one of the keys to a fruitful visit, so it is important to include all the people and places one would like to visit, and plan tangible outcomes in order to maintain momentum. Cynics may say, “They only let you see what they want you to see,” but this has not been my experience at all. It is surprising how accommodating they can be with your itinerary—one has to do is ask.

In summary, to get a humanitarian project off the ground: find a local partner, become familiar with the sanctions, and network with humanitarian practitioners who have experience in-country. A stand-up comedian once told me a simple rule that he followed while working in China. He said, “Avoid the ‘three Ts’ [Tibet, Taiwan and Tiananmen] and you will be fine.” A similar rule applies in the DPRK in terms of avoiding sensitive political topics. As humanitarian practitioners, our core business is not politics, but the humanitarian imperative. After years of working in the DPRK, trusted friendships have emerged with my local partners, and together we have witnessed tangible improvements in the lives of our beneficiaries.

## Can we better prepare to work in North Korea and with North Koreans? *James Banfill*

North Korea is a difficult place to gain experience. The practical reality of working in the country means interacting with North Koreans face-to-face. Non-North Korean<sup>5</sup> field practitioners typically gain an understanding of this operational environment through first-hand exposure over multiple years and visits. In pre-COVID-19 times, the DPRK was already one of the most isolated countries in the world, and opportunities for exposure remain limited. Although over 300 non-North Korean organisations have worked in the DPRK since the mid 1990s, only about

50 maintain an active presence.<sup>6</sup> Most organisations maintain only a few dedicated staff due to in-country restrictions on free movement, staff and donor fatigue, political sensitivities and relatively high operating costs.<sup>7</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated North Korea’s isolation. The current context raises questions about our ability to maintain effective and sustained humanitarian engagement over time. This section will make the case that preparation and training are important for working in North Korea, and propose ways of making such training relevant to working on the ground.

## Why should we prepare to work in North Korea?

### 1. The need for trust in a complex and nuanced operating environment

The particular restrictions that the DPRK government places on non-North Korean organisations, such as limits on access, are well-documented (see, for example, Flake & Snyder, 2003). Working in North Korea, there are almost always operational challenges, stemming from the country’s isolation, poor infrastructure and political sensitivities. These restrictions and challenges are compounded by an information-poor environment with numerous political sensitivities.

North Korea is not monolithic spatially or temporally—regions often differ, trends change over time, and some periods of working in the country are more difficult or sensitive than others, largely influenced by political factors, both internal and external. Strong relationships with North Korean partners are instrumental in accurately assessing and navigating these changing environments and obtaining relevant real-time (or near real-time) information on the ground. These relationships are often based on trust both at the organisational level and, perhaps more importantly, the interpersonal level (Zadeh–Cummings, 2019; Glenk, 2020). While long-term partnerships help maintain trust on an organisation level, trust on the interpersonal level takes time, often on the scale of years, to develop.

### 2. Current capacity is lacking

Humanitarian challenges on the ground are complex and interconnected over a wide range of fields, including food insecurity, environmental degradation, infrastructure decay, chronic disease, et cetera (UN HCT, 2020). The scale of these challenges can vary vastly by region

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘non-North Korean’ is used to catch all actors working in the field in North Korea, including South Koreans or Koreans based overseas.

<sup>6</sup> These organisations range in size from large international organisations, such as the World Food Programme, to small, privately funded non-governmental organisations, and even private philanthropists without any legal status. As such, the exact number active in the country at any given time remains unclear.

<sup>7</sup> Operational costs (such as rent and telecommunications) for non-North Koreans to maintain a resident presence in Pyongyang are on par with international cities, such as Beijing.



or community. Such complex and interdisciplinary problems, or ‘wicked problems’, are often beyond the ability of individuals to fully comprehend, let alone solve (Brown et al., 2010) further highlighting the need for coordination and knowledge-sharing not only across organisations but across technical fields. The current capacity of both North Koreans and the international community is inadequate to meet the magnitude of challenges. Realistically addressing these problems in the future will require an expansion of not only material and financial resources but also human resources. In the event of an emergency, this may need to occur rapidly.

---

**The unintended actions and mistakes of non-North Koreans can have real consequences for North Korean’s careers, livelihoods, even lives.**

---

### 3. Mistakes have consequences

Lastly, the harsh reality of working in North Korea is that the unintended actions and mistakes of non-North Koreans can have real consequences for North Korean’s careers, livelihoods, even lives. North Koreans are often held responsible for the actions of their non-North Korean partners by the country’s extensive security apparatus. While non-North Koreans will likely be able to sense periods of increased tension or stress among North Korean partners, the exact nature of potential consequences (or dangers) may never be known or only understood *ex post facto*. Non-North Koreans working in North Korea need to be cognisant that, in the process of their work, colleagues may be transferred, fall out of favour or disappear. International personnel need to prepare to cope with this high-stress environment and its potential consequences (Miller, 2012). For the sake of North Korean partners, we must also do our best to ensure the international community is not making the same mistakes repeatedly due to lack of awareness.

## How might we prepare to work in North Korea?

### 1. More communication and coordination

After more than two and a half decades of engagement with North Korea, the degree of communication and coordination among non-North Korean actors is not proportional to the scale, severity, complexity and uncertainties of the situation. One reason for this is the relative sensitivity of North Korean authorities to detailed public discussion of work done inside the country. In some cases, knowledge-sharing may be counterproductive. Public discussion can lead to problems for in-country partners or, in extreme cases, lead to the banning of non-North Koreans from continuing to work in the country.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> There is anecdotal evidence of non-North Koreans reporting on other non-North Koreans to North Korean authorities.

Furthermore, there are silos of information across nationalities and generations as well as between organisations and individuals. Trust not only needs to be built between non-North Korean actors and North Koreans, but also between non-North Korean actors themselves. Such trust requires a recognition of the need for preparation and coordinated dialogue about the scope and scale of such preparation. Compared to the 1990s, or even the early 2000s, non-North Korean actors have numerous technical means for knowledge-sharing (for example, digital crisis maps, online databases and Zoom).

### 2. Distilling lessons learned

Previous attempts have been made to distil lessons learned from interactions with North Korea in general, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Snyder, 1999; Saccone, 2003). From a practical perspective, the most enduring and instructive paper for working in North Korea is titled ‘Unlikely partners: humanitarian aid agencies and North Korea’ (Reed, 2004). Reed identifies certain principles that have led to success in the field, such as build trust, appoint good staff, cultivate counterpart relations, prove yourself, design transparent projects, collaborate with other agencies, and persist. Each one of these principles encompasses numerous operational considerations in the field. Since Reed’s publication, the international community has had an additional decade and a half of experience in North Korea that can be harnessed for better outcomes.

### 3. Scenario- or simulation-based training

Scenario-based training or simulations—so-called ‘serious games’—may be a potential means of approximating the challenges, or sets of challenges, faced by practitioners in North Korea and transferring past lessons learned to newcomers in the field. Serious games have been employed to train field personnel for uncertain and high-stress environments, such as conflict situations as well as disaster and emergency response. In other words, can we approximate what it feels like to be in and work in North Korea?<sup>9</sup> What might such a serious game look like for the North Korean context?

As mentioned, non-North Korean organisations can be extremely cautious about the public sharing of information due to the sensitivities of the DPRK government. However, it should be possible to summarise past scenarios or dilemmas faced by field practitioners and strip them of information identifying locations, time and personas. What remains would be a generalised scenario, activity or dilemma for the trainee (or even the experienced practitioner) to attempt to problem-solve. The overall goal would be to compile a set of scenarios based on real events so that any person can quickly encounter both the diverse range and complex depth of problems faced on the ground in North Korea.

---

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent narrative introduction to this topic, see Abrahamian (2020).

While it is important to note that serious games have limits and are not a substitute for actual field experience, serious games can also improve empathy, build teamwork and stimulate discussion (Solinska-Nowak et al., 2018). In the North Korean field, all of these are desirable not only as takeaways for individuals, but in building relationships between non-North Korean actors.

\*

North Korea is not an easy place to work for many reasons and opportunities to gain experience in the country are limited. Over the past two and a half decades, non-North Korean actors have accrued a wide-range of experience working in the North Korean operational environment. However, lessons-learned and coordination remain limited and disparate. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, while North Korea remains closed for the foreseeable future, we can prepare to work in the country in the future.

## Conclusion

*James Banfill, Jasmine Barrett,  
Carla Vitantonio and  
Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings*

This working paper collated three pieces from individuals with significant experience working in the DPRK. In 'Deconstructing the narrative of uniqueness', Carla Vitantonio challenged the concept of the DPRK as "exceptional"; in 'How to begin working in DPRK: A practical guide for humanitarian practitioners', Jasmine Barrett outlined how humanitarians can practically approach building links in the DPRK; and in 'Can we better prepare to work in North Korea and with North Koreans?', James Banfill considered how the international community can be better equipped for engaging in the DPRK. While each section presented perspectives, ideas and advice from its respective author, the overarching thread tying them together is the belief in the importance of cooperative engagement in the DPRK.

The authors present this work at a time when COVID-19 restrictions are severely hampering the international community's ability to engage with North Korea. This paper's message of understanding and pursuing engagement in the DPRK is relevant both during times of surges in cooperation and in times like these, where opportunities are sparse. We do not deny the challenges or specific considerations of working in the DPRK, but ask readers to continue to imagine possibilities and explore ways to open doors.

## Appendix: DPRK humanitarian resources

### UN agencies in the DPRK

<https://dprkorea.un.org/>

### Local partners

Note: This is not an exhaustive list, and some local partners do not have a website.

*Korea Education Fund*

<http://www.koredufund.org.kp/index.php?lang=eng>

*Korea Green Fund*

<http://naenara.com.kp/sites/kgf/index.php>

*PIINTEC*

<http://www.friend.com.kp/index.php/piintec/view/2593>

*Care for the Elderly*

<http://www.korelcfund.org.kp/index.php>

*Red Cross Society*

<http://www.friend.com.kp/dprkracs/>

*Korean Red Cross Foundation*

<http://www.friend.com.kp/index.php/krcf>

*Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled*

<http://naenara.com.kp/sites/kfpd/>

*Ministry of Public Health*

<http://www.moph.gov.kp/en/>

### UN Security Council Sanctions and Humanitarian Exemptions

<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1718/exemptions-measures/humanitarian-exemption-requests>

### Australian bilateral sanctions on the DPRK

<https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/security/sanctions/sanctions-regimes/north-korea/Pages/default>

### Book

Vitantonio, C. (2019). *Pyongyang Blues*. Add Editore.

## References

- Abrahamian, A. (2020). *Being in North Korea*. Brookings Institute.
- Brown, V.A., Deane, P.M., Harris, J.A. & Russell, J.Y. (2010). Towards a just and sustainable future, in J Harris, VA Brown & J Russell (Eds), *Tackling wicked problems: through the transdisciplinary imagination*. Routledge, 3-15.
- Flake, L.G. & Snyder, S (Eds). (2003). *Paved with good intentions: the NGO experience in North Korea*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Glenk, F.J. (2020). *Who adjusts to North Korea? The politics of humanitarian aid* [master's thesis]. Seoul National University.
- Goodkind, D. & West, L. (2001). The North Korean famine and its demographic impact, *Population and Development Review*, 27(2), 219-238.
- Médecins sans Frontières. (2014). *MSF and North Korea: 1995-1998*. <https://www.msf.org/speakingout/msf-and-north-korea-1995-1998>
- Miller, J.L. (2012). *Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters*. Columbia University Press.
- O'Carroll, C. (2021, March 18). No UN or NGO workers left in North Korea after more expats depart Pyongyang. *NK News*. <https://www.nknews.org/2021/03/no-un-or-ngo-workers-left-in-north-korea-after-more-expats-depart-pyongyang/>
- Reed, E. (2004). Unlikely partners: humanitarian aid agencies and North Korea, in C Ahn, N Eberstadt and Y Lee (Eds), *A new international engagement framework for North Korea?: Contending perspectives*. The Korea Economic Institute of America, 199-229.
- Saccone, R. (2003). *Negotiating with North Korea*. Hollym International.
- Smith, H. (2000). Bad, mad, sad or rational actor? Why the 'securitization' paradigm makes for poor policy analysis of North Korea, *International Affairs*, 76(3), 111-132.
- Snyder, S. (1999). *Negotiation on the edge: North Korea negotiating behavior*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Solinska-Nowak, A., Magnuszewski, P., Curl, M., French, A., Keating, A., Mochizuki, J., Liu, W., Mechler, R., Kulakowska, M. & Jarzabek, L. (2018). An overview of serious games for disaster risk management: prospects and limitations for informing actions to arrest increasing risk, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 31, 1013-1029.
- United Nations DPR Korea. (2014). *UNCT DPRK Sector Working Groups*. <https://dprkorea.un.org/en/10761-unct-dprk-sector-working-groups>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2015). *Emergency Handbook*. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/>
- United Nations Humanitarian Country Team. (2019). *DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2019*. [https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/DPRK\\_NP\\_2019\\_Final.pdf](https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/DPRK_NP_2019_Final.pdf)
- United Nations Humanitarian Country Team. (2020). *DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2020*. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2020\\_DPRK\\_Needs\\_and-Priorities\\_Plan.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2020_DPRK_Needs_and-Priorities_Plan.pdf)
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2017). *OCHA on Message: The humanitarian principles*. <https://www.unocha.org/node/897>
- Zadeh-Cummings, N. (2019). *Humanitarians in the Hermit Kingdom: NGOs, aid, and access in the DPRK* [doctoral dissertation]. City University of Hong Kong.
- Zadeh-Cummings, N. & Harris, L. (2020). The impact of sanctions against North Korea on humanitarian aid, *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 2(1), 44-52.