the Humanitarian Leader

Social positioning in humanitarian diplomacy: INGOs in North Korea

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CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

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CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Abstract

This article shows how the theoretical approach of 'the practice turn' can be useful when studying humanitarian diplomacy in international relations. The research argues that the social position of organisations influences the implementation of their humanitarian diplomacy. The article uses, as a central example, the case of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) providing humanitarian aid to North Korea. To paint a picture of the field of humanitarian aid in North Korea, this research uses multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to analyse around 2,000 pieces of qualitative information. The research shows that the field is made up of three groups of INGOs. We will present their social characteristics and their impact on the humanitarian aid sector in North Korea.

Leadership relevance

Humanitarian workers evolve in a complex social environment where organisational identity influences the way humanitarian diplomacy is led. By studying the sociological profiles of international non-governmental organisations working in or with North Korea, this paper provides an understanding of their social environment. The results will help humanitarians understand the dynamics that influence their decisions.

Note: This article presents part of the findings of a master's thesis. It was made possible in part by a research visit to the Academy of Korean Studies in South Korea.

Introduction

Humanitarian diplomacy is often regarded in terms of the relationship that humanitarians have with others; for example, the way they negotiate with an armed group. However, humanitarian organisations are also responsible for the negotiations' outcomes. It is important to look at humanitarian organisations' identities to understand how this can affect their humanitarian diplomacy.

Humanitarian diplomacy is at the heart of international humanitarian aid. The outcome of a project is associated with its success and its implementation is highly dependent on the actors who develop it on the field. Therefore, there are various ways of practicing humanitarian diplomacy. The style of negotiation, the cultural background, the funding or the organisational values also influence the way it is practiced. Furthermore, humanitarians do not see themselves as negotiators, which implies that they do not rely on fixed negotiation models (Grace, 2020). As the common sense of diplomacy can only be learned through its exercise (Grace, 2020; Pouliot, 2008, 2015), humanitarian diplomacy, just as conventional diplomacy, is learned through practice. Therefore, it is crucial to study it in its social context.

Using the theoretical approach of 'the practice turn' in international relations, the article focuses on the sociological field of humanitarian aid in North Korea. To date, this approach has rarely been used to analyse this type of topic (Turunen, 2020). Yet it is ideal for this purpose, as it considers the 'small' actors in international relations, the unspoken and the common sense, as central elements. The approach defies the asocial tendency of international relations theories by refocusing the analysis on what decisions are based on rather than the usual rationale of what decisions should lead to (Kratochwil, 2011; Pouliot, 2017). When using the practice turn framework, claiming that rational calculation is ubiquitous in the political agent is impossible to do. Indeed, the political agent relies on experience and knowledge, but above all on what makes sense (Pouliot, 2017).

Humanitarian aid in North Korea is the perfect representation of the importance of humanitarian diplomacy in international relations. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have direct contact with North Korean society. Some organisations have been successfully working in the country since the beginning of the millennium. Therefore, humanitarian organisations have key knowledge on how to cooperate effectively with the country's authorities. Collecting information in North Korea is complex and the practice turn framework, which has never been used to study North Korea, can bring a new insight into the experience of INGOs in this reclusive society.

This article looks at the different social groups of INGOs that are present in the humanitarian aid sector in North Korea. As the statistics often used, such as the number of organisations that have projects in North Korea, are insufficient to understand the social dynamics, the sector has been mapped through a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) that considers 147 modalities. This analysis will give us graphs that will allow us to both map the sector and identify the different social groups. Subsequently, the groups will be analysed to understand their social identity. We will conclude by highlighting the benefits of analysing humanitarian diplomacy using the practice turn approach in international relations.

This article looks at the different social groups of INGOs that are present in the humanitarian aid sector in North Korea.

Methodology

The best definition of humanitarian diplomacy comes from Minear and Smith (2007). In its broadest sense, humanitarian diplomacy defines the set of negotiation practices that humanitarian INGOs need to deploy to carry out their projects. They add a very important nuance: there are two diplomacies, one with a lowercase 'd' and one with a capital 'D'. The first one includes all the small negotiations that take place daily, in the field. The second refers to the place of humanitarian workers in conventional diplomatic negotiations (Minear & Smith, 2007). In the case of our research, we are interested in the first type. In North Korea, small-scale interactions and negotiations seem to be the most effective and representative practice of humanitarian diplomacy.

The period we are focusing on are the years between 2010 and 2020. This is a period that has been little studied in the literature on the topic and Kim Jong Un was in power for most of the period. For our research, we define INGOs as organisations that provide humanitarian and development aid[1]. They are not directly attached to a state. They work in one or more countries that are not their home country, hence their international character. This is why we do not use the term non-governmental organisation (NGO). In our MCA, INGOs are considered a singular entity. We will study the organisations working in and with North Korea.

[1] To simplify reading, we consider humanitarian aid and development aid as one and the same in this paper.

To carry out the MCA, we analysed nearly 150 websites of humanitarian and development INGOs that have had a mission in North Korea in the last 10 years[2]. The information found was compiled in Excel to form a sociological profile of each organisation according to modalities previously selected. We removed 24 organisations from our list due to a lack of information, bringing us to a new total of 129 websites. This allowed us to observe the general portrait of each organisation to help us interpret the MCA and extract the relevant data for our analysis.

To carry out the multiple correspondence analysis, we analysed nearly 150 websites of humanitarian and development INGOs that have had a mission in North Korea in the last 10 years.

We collected information distributed over 18 attributes for each of the organisations studied. Of these 18 attributes, two are descriptive: 'Name' and 'Identification number'. The attributes 'Activity' and 'Humanitarian network' were used as additional variables. All other attributes were used as analysis variables: 'Humanitarian activity', 'Type of organisation', 'Religion', 'Country', 'Residence', 'Humanitarian network', 'Advocacy', 'Type of law', 'Size', 'NK focus', 'Finance', 'Main donor', 'Start of activity in North Korea', 'Independence', and 'Non-political'. The 16 non-identifying attributes have between 2 and 18 modalities per attribute for a total of 147 terms. Therefore, 1,935 pieces of information were collected for all 129 organisations, and 96% of the total data is verified and genuine.

The social geography of INGOs in North Korea

The MCA enables us to project a multidimensional cloud in the form of a 2D table that places all the objects according to the relationships between the attributes that constitute them. The two axes of the graph of an MCA have no real values other than their rate of variance in the representation of their respective dimension. The graphs represent the complex relationships of the elements of the field; however, interpretation is required to understand the different dynamics. To help the reader understand the meaning of the graph, we added some indicators. Hierarchy indicators such as 'bottom', 'centre' and 'top' are represented by a black dot and indicate the hierarchy of the field. The cardinal points placed at the end of the graphs are indicative as they help with the spatial understanding of the graph[3]. Some graphs have coloured areas to identify groups of organisations according to one of their attributes.

The MCA should be read in terms of the distance between the points. Points that are close together indicate that according to their sociological profile, these INGOs are similar. Distant points indicate differences and diametrically opposed points indicate a strong contrast. Therefore, it becomes possible to reveal the rank of the organisations in the hierarchy of the field and the practices generated by their position.

The graphs below represent different layers of the same calculation. They have been split into several graphs to facilitate reading. All the graphs have been scaled to reflect that they represent the same calculation[4].

Positions in the graph do not determine social practices, agency is always there, but behaviours are nevertheless encouraged by socialisation. Therefore, an organisation that finds itself in a politicised area will not necessarily be politicised. It is, however, more likely to be so than another. Statistically, our analysis is similar to predictive analysis, and socially, to a personality test.

Organisation and nationality

The first graph below shows the position of the organisations according to their identification number[5]. The graph informs us where the organisations are located given their sociological profile. Considering that we must look at a field through its hierarchy, the majority of the organisations are in a less dominant position.

The distribution of INGOs in the field becomes more precise when we are looking at nationalities. The attribute that most influences the expression of the MCA is 'country'. As presented in Figure 2, countries are positioned according to a zoned group logic. We can observe that a significant number of organisations are in the south-east, including a majority of European organisations[6]. We can see that German INGOs are sociologically opposed to Korean ones. The International Red Cross and Humanity & Inclusion are examples of organisations from the 'top' group.

[2] Finding the organisations was a huge task, as no comprehensive directory exists. We thank Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings for suggesting and allowing us to use the data she collected for her doctoral thesis. See Zadeh-Cummings, N.A., *Humanitarians in the Hermit Kingdom: NGOs, Aid, and Access in the DPRK*. City University of Hong Kong, 2019.

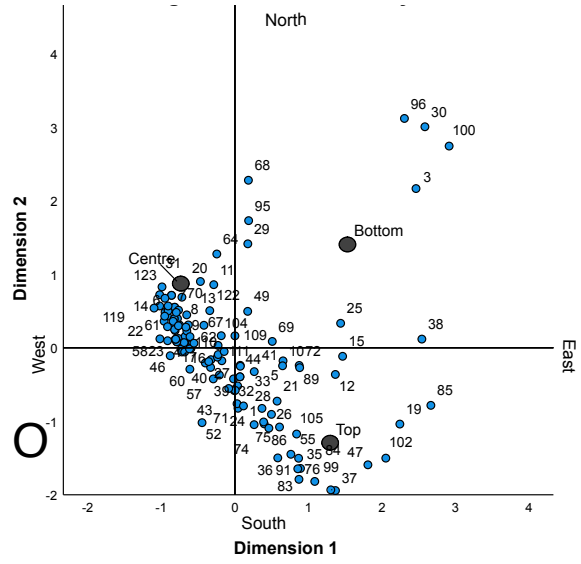
[3] The field is basically a geographical representation of relationships.

[4] In order to best represent the dynamics of each graph.

[5] For reasons of anonymity, the names of the organisations are withheld.

[6] 77% of the European organisations that belong to the south-east zone (France, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, Denmark, Poland) are in the 'European' zone.

Figure 1: Organisations labelled by identification number



occupied by Canada, Italy, and Finland in small numbers, showing a contrast with the rest of the MCA. The World Federation of the Deaf is an example of a 'bottom' group organisation.

Three zones can be drawn by clustering organisations by country of origin[8]. Looking at Figure 3, we see that there is a division between European and South Korean organisations. We see that American organisations form a bridge between the 'centre' and the 'top' zones. There is not an exclusive American zone, but the weight of American organisations should not be underestimated in the analysis—there are 34 American organisations that are present along the axis of the field[9]. There is not just one kind of American organisation, but several, as we observe organisations from civil society to institutionalised organisations. Social groups better represent the organisations' identity because, alongside nationality, other attributes impact identity. For example, American organisations are found alongside South Korean organisations because they are similar in size, funding or advocacy.

Figure 2: Organisations by country of origin

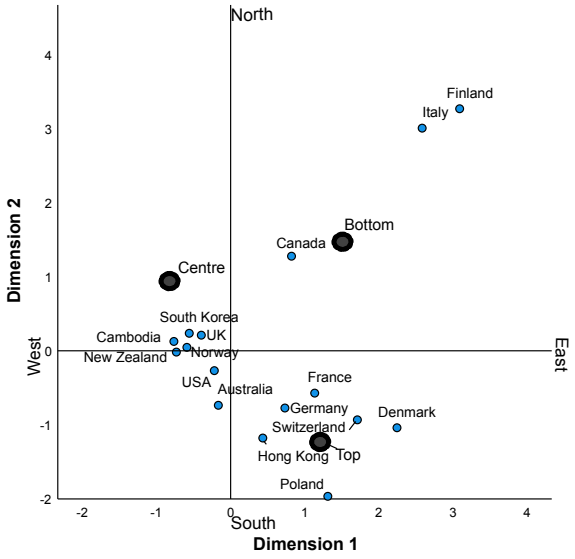
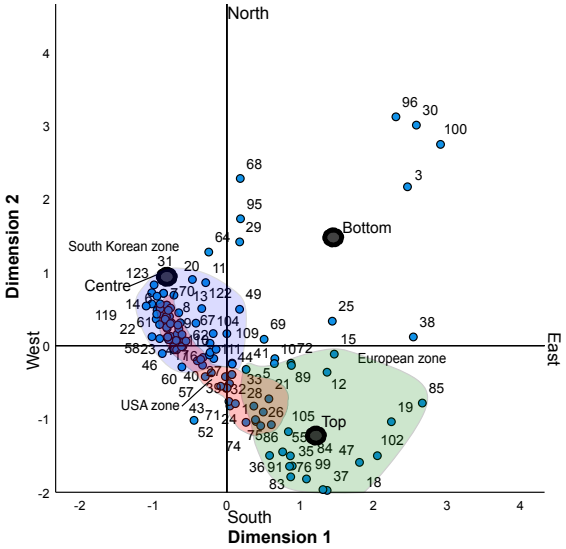


Figure 3: Organisations by majority country area



The north-west zone, the 'centre', is occupied by a cluster of organisations, mostly South Korean ones, followed by American organisations and those of other countries that are also present in the 'centre' in small numbers. These organisations have an identity that is close to the Korean one, for example, organisations founded by expatriate Koreans[7]. The Eugene Bell Foundation and Sunyang Hana are examples of organisations in the 'centre' group. The north-east zone, the 'bottom', is

Advocacy

Humanitarian organisations often advocate for ideas related to their core objectives. Advocacy can be defined as an action aimed at influencing the policies or actions of other organisations, institutions or governments

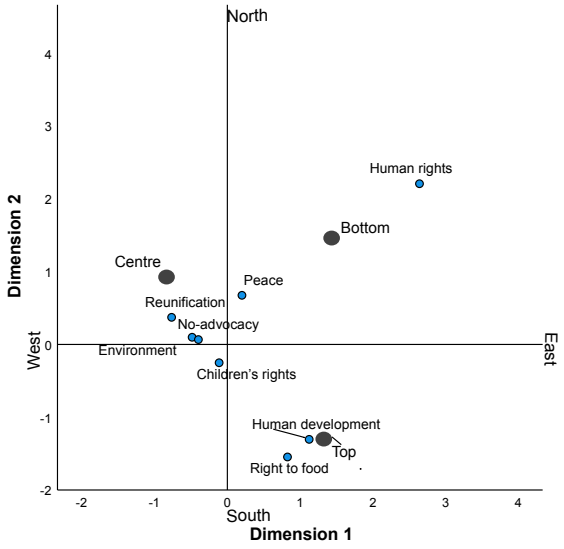
[7] 80% of South Korean organisations are represented in the north-west of the graph and 91% are in the South Korean country zone.

[8] There are 50 South Korean organisations, 34 American organisations, 11 German organisations and several INGOs from European countries that have had projects in North Korea between 2010 and 2020.

[9] 90% of American organisations are present in the 'US zone'.

in favour of an organisation's objectives and interests. Advocacy allows organisations to make their voices heard, promote their values, and mobilise community support. On the other hand, some organisations prefer to focus on more concrete and practical actions in the field, rather than engaging in advocacy that may be seen as more controversial and detrimental to their objectives. Looking at the disposition of 'advocacy', the second most important attribute, there is a west-east division in the field[10]. Out of 129 organisations, 59 advocate for a cause. The position of the different modalities is a reminder of the different areas where INGOs are gathered. If we simply look at the 'Reunification' modality, we understand that it is mainly carried by South Korean organisations[11].

Figure 4: Advocacy



'Human rights' is the advocacy type that contributes the most in differentiating the modalities. Its position in the north-east reflects its unique character and the various organisations that promote this advocacy are almost automatically separated from the rest of the INGOs. This modality characterises the 'bottom' group.

We find that adopting advocacy or not is linked to the number of countries in which the organisations work. When looking at the attribute 'size', we find that only 36% of the 'small' organisations advocate, while 60% of the 'large' organisations do so[12]. This dynamic also reflects a financial rationale, as 95% of organisations with funding of more than CAD$5 million are organisations working in more than eight countries. Determining whether the adoption of advocacy comes before significant funding, or the opposite, is difficult.

The dot indicating advocacy for children's rights is shared by the 'centre' and the 'top'. Half of the organisations that perform this advocacy are Christian faith based INGOs. This is partly explained by the strong presence of American faith-based organisations—23 American and 21 South Korean[13]. This type of faith-based organisation tends to focus on children. This is an aspect that we observe when analysing the websites of the different organisations.

In contrast, the attribute 'religion' is not a major contributor to the disposition of organisations, as it is not a pole of attraction but rather an identification of certain organisations[14]. This observation goes against some assumptions found in the academic literature. Indeed, according to Snyder (2007), religious INGOs are one of the most successful types of INGOs in implementing their projects, which may be strange considering that communist ideology is generally opposed to religion and its practices. This success can be explained by their private funding, low media attention and organisational values. According to Yeo (2017), religious INGOs are the best equipped to support long-term development projects[15]. On the other hand, they are more likely to lose out in negotiations, as they want to maintain access out of religious fervour (Flake & Snyder, 2003). However, there is no evidence in the MCA that religion contributes to humanitarian aid in North Korea, nor that it provides a particular financial situation. Rather, we argue that Snyder and Flake, in analysing faith-based organisations, have identified a specific dynamic of the 'centre' group. However, by using only one attribute, they interpreted the findings as specific to faith based INGOs and ignored that the whole group shared these characteristics. The presence of these INGOs is tolerated in North Korea and their beliefs are not seen as problematic as long as there is no confrontation (Zadeh-Cummings, 2019a).

[10] Considering South Korea as a country of the East is debatable, as its level of development is reaching Western standards. However, the statistical evidence from our data shows that these organisations are in a dominated dynamic vis-à-vis the West.

[11] South Korean organisations have different motivations from other organisations because of the division of the peninsula.

[12] 'Small' represents organisations working in 1 to 4 countries with funding of C$0 to 1 million, 'medium' represents organisations working in 4 to 8 countries with funding of C$1 to 5 million, and 'large' represents organisations working in 8 to 11 countries with funding of C$5 to 10 million. Finally, 'very large' represents organisations with funding of C$10-15 million and 'huge' denotes organisations with funding of C$15 million or more.

[13] 70% of all US organisations and 46% of South Korean organisations.

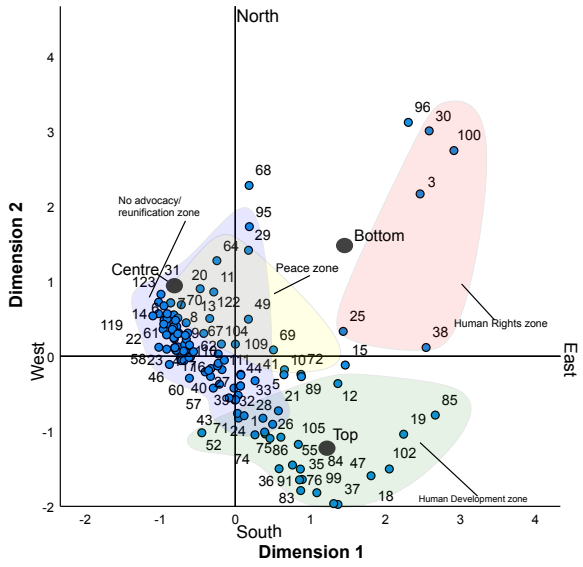
[14] However, religion could be the motivation for these organisations to offer aid.

[15] Alongside the religious organisations, Yeo also takes into account the organisations focusing on peace and reunification advocacy. He has thus identified a dynamic of the 'centre' group in this study without having described this group.

Out of the organisations analysed, we found that the majority—54%—do not advocate for their cause. However, most of these organisations gather in the north-west zone with those advocating for reunification. This dynamic shows that advocacy for reunification and peace is generic.

The graph below, just as the one presented above, shows the different zones created by the organisations' advocacy according to the modalities they share. We observe that the advocacy zones are roughly similar to the nationality zones. The 'Peace' zone overlaps with the 'No advocacy/Reunification' zone. This can be explained by the fact that 66% organisations advocating for peace are South Korean. The blue bubble overlaps with the 'Human Development' area, as does the 'Country: USA' area. Therefore, advocacy depends on nationality.

Figure 5: Organisations by advocacy zone

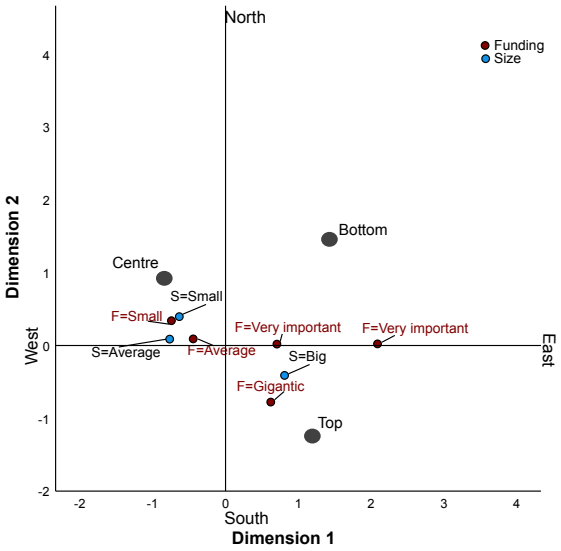


Finance and number of missions

The third and fourth most important elements for prioritising the field are the number of countries in which organisations work and how much they are funded. The graph shows the financial dynamics inherent to a West-East division. Most organisations have few missions and less than CAD$5 million in funding, including 50 organisations with less than CAD$1 million in funding[16].

[16] Approximately USD$3,700,000 and USD$750,000

Figure 6: Size and funding



We note an opposition between South Korean organisations and some organisations from the West[17] that reminds us of the classic hierarchical divisions in international humanitarian aid (Navarro-Flores, 2006). Advocacy, nationality, number of missions, and funding reflect this division. These attributes are followed by several others that we have not presented above. Nevertheless, the field is made up of three groups of organisations that are distinguished by their different attributes.

Typical sociological profile of the three groups

Attributes have concrete effects on the identity and practices of organisations—for example, the role of money in the number of resources available to humanitarians. Diplomatic practices are therefore based on social position. So how do the above differences manifest themselves on the field? To answer this question, we formed a typical profile of each group through research interviews, analysis of statistical data, and website overviews.

'Bottom': the politicised group

The 'Bottom' group is the group at the bottom of the field[18]. This group is the one whose organisations are least based on humanitarian aid. They focus on activist or politicised interests. They have specific objectives, primarily to influence certain government policies. However, it seems that to be able to reach

[17] Only two organisations are from Hong Kong and are dependent on another organisation. Therefore, we have ignored this in our analysis.

[18] Lower in terms of sociological position, not in terms of position on the graph.

these decision-making spaces, more economic capital is needed. Therefore, the 'top' may be more likely to succeed in this objective. The 'bottom', since its constituents have influence objectives, will convince the North Koreans to approach certain initiatives that they are not aware of. For example, a foreign organisation may obtain compromises from the Koreans, but since there is no base in place, the agency will have difficulty finding support among local authorities. This will undermine the effectiveness of the project. On the other hand, the organisations in the 'centre' fill the needs that the authorities have on the ground.

The 'bottom' organisations are regularly frustrated with the system and have a more direct diplomatic attitude. They do not practice open criticism of North Korea, and they do not openly talk about 'human rights' on the ground, although this may be one of their concerns. There is an 'implicit' understanding that this topic should not be discussed, proving that the 'common sense' of the field pushes for the restriction of discourse (Research interview, 2022-2021). It is not that they are hiding their beliefs, but rather that they are not addressing the topic head-on. This practice is also carried out in other countries where the political situation is similar, so these organisations do not practice a 'rights-based approach'.

The 'bottom' organisations do not consider and do not seem to be penalised by their politicisation. On the contrary, their politicisation allows them to freely negotiate, thus facilitating funding, diversifying project types, reducing relational asymmetry, and providing access to unique partners such as members of the Workers' Party of Korea. However, compared to other groups, relationships can be more fractious. Politicisation is a diplomatic style rather than a burden. The biggest advantage is a high degree of flexibility in the face of uncertainties in the field and in negotiating project development, as these organisations can change their mission if this allows them to maintain access to the field.

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The 'bottom' organisations are often more open-minded about criticism and external disclosure. Symbols such as the configuration of their office, their website, their stance, or their description of North Korea, reflect Western liberal positions. The employees of these organisations are educated and professional. They use technological and informed jargon while understanding the political situation of their organisation. They are present in international humanitarian spheres and activist circles.

'Centre': the dedicated group

The 'centre' group is at the same time dominated by the 'top' group and very effective in developing its own projects, like the 'bottom' group. Thus, it is halfway between the lower and upper part of the field—hence its name. Most of the organisations in this group have a fundamental mission to help North Korea. They have a more conciliatory attitude towards North Korea which is shown by a deep respect for the symbols. One example is the naming of the country as 'The Democratic People's Republic of Korea', rather than 'North Korea'.

The employees of these organisations are often educated, but they are now away from the academic environment. They are professionals, but not in the 'big' social circles of international humanitarian aid. Their career is based on personal dedication to a cause rather than advancement in their professional sphere. Religion or advocacy may motivate their dedication.

Unlike the 'top' and the 'bottom' groups, which bring in foreign and potentially conflicting normative baggage, [organisations in the middle group] adopt universally accepted positions or co-opt North Korean ones.

Even when advocating for their position, the 'centre' group adopts an apparently apolitical stance by focusing their discourse on inter-Korean cordiality such as peace, reunification, cooperation, mutual understanding, etc. Thus, they do not impose external norms on North Korea. Unlike the 'top' and the 'bottom' groups, which bring in foreign and potentially conflicting normative baggage, they adopt universally accepted positions or co-opt North Korean ones. This position is far from negative as it provides them with mission-critical, even survival-critical stability. Their primary objective is not political, but humanitarian. Moreover, politicisation is not essential to the success of their mission. Their funding is more fragile and linked to their politically disinterested aid. Taking the risk of criticising or having their words distorted is simply not necessary.

Their low economic capital is compensated by their cultural capital. The organisations in the 'centre' are more familiar with the Korean language and North Korean culture. This exchange of capital allows them

to have successful projects even though they do not have significant resources, by building strong bonds of trust with the North Korean authorities. It is plausible to assume that without their knowledge of the culture, these organisations could not survive in the long term.

The organisations in the 'centre' are flexible in redefining their missions. This flexibility, which is more common among South Korean organisations, allows these INGOs to continue existing even if they have not been able to implement major projects in the North since 2010. To deal with this issue, some of them turn to public relations to promote reunification or peace on the peninsula. This reorientation allows them to rebrand their organisation as not strictly humanitarian, but also as deeply involved in North-South relations. This flexibility allows them to ensure the survival of the organisation by obtaining funding for this type of activity and convincing the South Korean population to support their activities. Without this flexibility, which is in line with rationalist assumptions about INGOs, the organisations would be doomed because they would not have the arguments to obtain funding (Kim, 2019).

In this group, the organisations do not seem to be looking for major compromises, as their demands are often accepted and suit North Korean authorities. Moreover, they prefer to extend their projects rather than start new ones, in order to establish an efficient systematised bureaucratic routine (Research interview, 2021-2022).

'Top': the privileged group

The 'top' organisations are privileged, as they occupy a dominant position in the field due to their significant resources. Through their humanitarian diplomacy, they adopt a more entrepreneurial and institutional attitude toward North Korea. They are all European or American organisations, and they develop projects in several other countries as well.

Humanitarians who work in these INGOs are educated, understand the political dynamics of their organisation, express themselves with humanitarian phraseology, and adopt the professional social codes of the international humanitarian aid sector. These organisations are similar to state humanitarian aid agencies in terms of capacity, symbolism, and operation.

The organisations from the 'top' group work according to the often-inflexible standards of their headquarters. They are not openly political, but they do adopt strong normative advocacy. Thanks to their economic capital and their powerful social capital, they have significant powers of influence. They can obtain residency, gain access to state initiatives, and deploy strong projects. However, these projects can also be similar in scale to other groups. Their economic capital does not seem to compensate for their lack of cultural knowledge compared to the 'centre' group. These INGOs could potentially be less efficient than those in the 'centre'. They have a strong organisational symbolism embedded in their INGO's history. They are, therefore, not flexible in the North Korean context. Since they do not have any close relationships with authorities, these organisations do not seem to adopt North Korean symbolism. On the other hand, they do not appear to be critical of the regime.

The organisations from the 'top' group work according to the often-inflexible standards of their headquarters. They are not openly political, but they do adopt strong normative advocacy.

To a lesser extent than the 'centre' group, they base their work on non-politicised humanitarian principles. The 'top' group is the only group that the others recognise, or even envy, in their perception of the social world, thus confirming their dominant position in the field (Research interviews, 2021-2022). Their strong visibility helps them in their relationship with the North Korean authorities who want to get closer to international circles. Indeed, despite the country's reclusion, the appeal of the international is strong; the authorities want to follow international standards and be present in international forums (Reed, 2005). The lack of funding seems to be the variable that restricts these organisations from having a greater international presence. For this reason, organisations with a strong international focus, such as those in the 'bottom' group and those with significant financial resources from the 'top', may allow some North Koreans to travel and gain international work experience.

Although these hierarchical social differences are observable through the MCA and in the field, it is important to specify that the field of humanitarian aid in North Korea is not explicitly competitive. Organisations do not meet in the field and do not always cooperate with the same North Korean agencies; they are all simply pursuing the same humanitarian objective. Moreover, there is no local NGO in the country to cooperate or compete with (Zadeh-Cummings, 2019a). All non-governmental humanitarian aid is therefore given by the organisations mentioned above, in partnership with North Korean state bodies. However, competition can be perceived indirectly. For example, INGOs have a practice of not exchanging information with each other, indicating that information is a valuable resource that can generate a form of domination.

Conclusion

The multiple correspondence analysis shows that certain conceptions of the field of humanitarian aid in North Korea can be nuanced. It shows that each group behaves according to its identity. The organisations play their cards right and know how to turn what might be perceived initially as negative elements into advantages.

The 'bottom' group might be advantaged by its politicisation. This observation could be promising for international advocacy associations or states that fund INGOs to have their interests represented. The 'centre' group, by respecting North Korean norms and avoiding politicisation, can turn disadvantageous attributes into advantages. This is an encouraging observation for Korean citizen movements. With many organisations from this group having virtually no resources, a merger between some of them could allow them to reach their full potential. The 'top' group is not as efficient as the other groups in its use of resources, but because of its strong economic, social, and symbolic power, it represents the flagship group for humanitarian aid in North Korea. One solution for them to be more efficient could be to fund groups in the 'centre' rather than to work directly in the field.

The analysis of the identities and social geography of a field is only the first step in the methodology of the practice turn. In line with its Bourdieusian epistemology, the next step would be to find the different practices that come from the social positioning of these organisations. One of the practices that we found in the field is that of niche selection, which is mainly practiced by the 'centre' organisations. Their low economic capital motivates them to specialise to achieve success. Ultimately, symbolic success has a material effect, as it makes it easier to get funding. Because of their dedication to humanitarian aid in North Korea, the field usually determines the type of specialisation of the organisation, not the other way around. For instance, initially focused on providing food aid, the Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF) strategically pivoted towards fighting tuberculosis in North Korea in response to the needs on the ground, ultimately becoming a leading figure in this field (History | Eugene Bell Foundation, n.d.). In contrast, organisations from the 'top' group suffer from a lack of flexibility in imposing their specialisation on the field. In an earlier article in this journal, Zadeh-Cummings (2022) uses the same example and believes EBF's adaptation to the needs of the field to be one of the best approaches to humanitarian localisation. This study is a continuation of her finding, as it allows us to see where the practice has developed from.

The results of this research can be applied not only to North Korea but to other contexts too. It could help to understand how the social dynamics of INGOs influenced the outcome of the international response during the Haitian earthquake crisis, or to understand the ongoing humanitarian mobilisation in Ukraine.

The groups presented in this article are a social reality. They have already been identified by the scientific community; however, they had never been the subject of research aimed at presenting them empirically. Thus, with this paper, researchers will be able to better understand and categorise the organisations they analyse. Choosing a theoretical approach based on international relations allows humanitarian organisations to understand their social world. It also allows donors to better understand the organisational dynamics that impact their donations. The results of this research can be applied not only to North Korea but to other contexts too. It could help to understand how the social dynamics of INGOs influenced the outcome of the international response during the Haitian earthquake crisis, or to understand the ongoing humanitarian mobilisation in Ukraine. By providing an informed picture of a complex social situation, the study of social positioning in humanitarian aid is a tool that can improve effectiveness in humanitarian projects.

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