

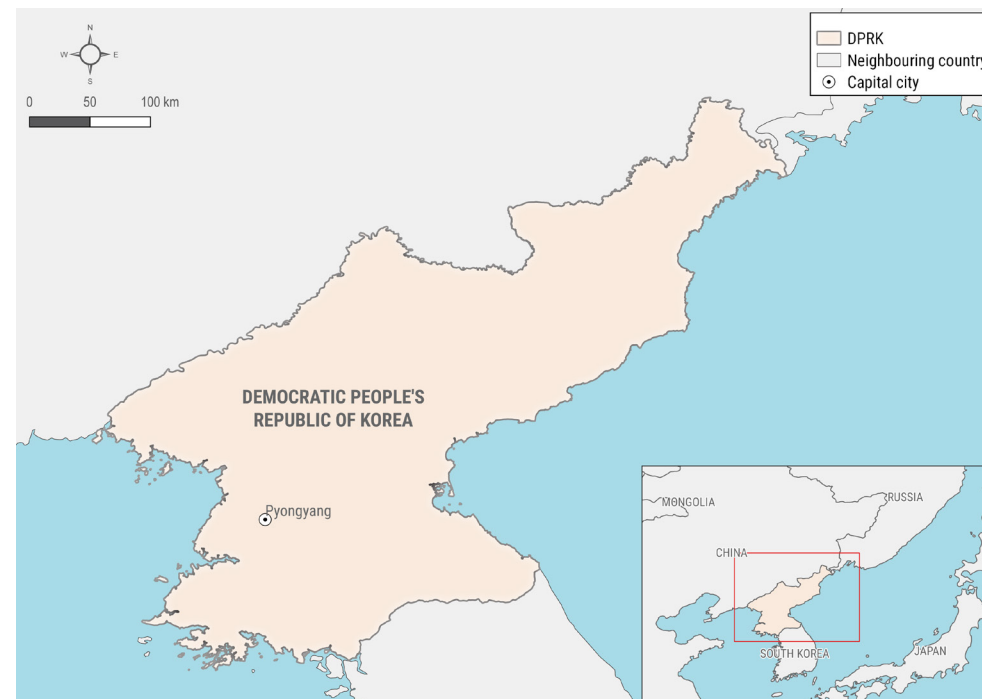
DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Humanitarian needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

OVERVIEW

The humanitarian crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is protracted and multifaceted. The harsh climate, natural disasters, and governmental policies that have shown limited sustainability contribute to chronic food insecurity (Al Jazeera 01/07/2021; Reuters 08/10/2021). Media outlets regularly report on the DPRK's nuclear programme and the tensions in the Korean Peninsula, but the complex crisis within the country is underreported compared to other crises around the globe (CARE 23/01/2018). Authorities' restrictions on the flow of direct information limit public awareness and understanding of the challenges North Koreans face.

In 2020, over ten million people (40% of the total population) needed humanitarian assistance. The zero COVID-19 policy of the DPRK Government disrupted humanitarian needs assessments during the pandemic, but estimates indicate that 60% of the population was food insecure by the end of 2021. Throughout the year, border closures and prolonged quarantine measures on imports resulted in critical shortages of basic goods, including medicine, and trade with China decreased by up to 90% in 2021 compared to 2019 (Daily NK 25/05/2020 and 15/11/2021; Nikkei Asia 18/01/2022; The Guardian 01/04/2021). Aside from the already challenging operational environment, the COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy of DPRK authorities adds another complicated layer for the humanitarian community to work around in the foreseeable future.



Source: ACAPS (14/06/2022)

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About this report

Aim: This report aims to provide an overview of the complex humanitarian crisis in the DPRK. It also reports on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the population, the humanitarian response in the country, and ensuing needs.

Methodology: This report relies mainly on the secondary data review of publicly available sources.

Limitations: International humanitarian presence in the DPRK since the COVID-19 pandemic has been limited to national responders. As a result, holding key informant interviews for this report was significantly challenging. The limited number of sources at times made the triangulation of information difficult.

Information from the DPRK is generally very limited because of strict government censorship.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE DPRK

Introduction

The DPRK is generally extremely vulnerable to epidemics and pandemics, including the COVID-19 pandemic, because its health system has one of the lowest response capacities in the world to such events. At the same time, the DPRK has been extremely hesitant to administer COVID-19 vaccines to the population (The Diplomat 08/10/2021; NTI/JHCHS 10/2019; UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; VOA 12/05/2022).

The Government started implementing preemptive containment measures against the potential spread of COVID-19 as early as January 2020. The initial COVID-19 containment measures included quarantine measures on travellers from abroad and cancelling all flights from China, followed by strict border closures (38North 23/04/2020).

The DPRK has not reported any COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the pandemic, even after a fever outbreak in May 2022 (VOA 23/02/2022; WHO accessed 27/05/2022; UN 12/05/2022).

Renewed containment measures

In January 2022, the DPRK resumed railway imports from China after two years of strict border closures. By late April, the country again suspended imports because of a COVID-19 outbreak in the bordering Chinese Dandong city. In May 2022, the Government imposed a second national lockdown amid a fever outbreak (VOA 20/01/2022 and 12/05/2022; WHO 21/05/2022).

As at 18 May 2022, the DPRK Government had documented over two million cases of fever. Despite this number, it has reported no positive COVID-19 cases or related deaths to the WHO since the beginning of the pandemic or since the May fever outbreak (WHO 21/05/2022; WHO accessed 30/05/2022; 38North accessed 11/06/2022). The Government started slowly easing the second national lockdown after three weeks, with people being allowed to leave their homes (NK News 29/05/2022).

COVID-19 coordination

The DPRK has regularly tested healthcare workers and people with influenza or severe acute respiratory infections, with over 60,000 RT-PCR tests reported by mid-March 2022 (WHO 26/03/2022).

The UN COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) mechanism for COVID-19 response includes the DPRK, but they have rejected the COVAX requirement to have international staff on-site to monitor the campaign, stalling the vaccination of its population since May 2021. In September, the DPRK again rejected the allocated COVAX doses for the country (The Guardian 03/09/2021; NYT 30/11/2021; Reuters 10/02/2022). The DPRK has stopped the entry of foreigners, including aid workers, as part of COVID-19 containment measures.

Vaccination hesitancy

Although the DPRK's closest diplomatic relations are with Russia and China, it has not accepted any vaccines made by those two countries.

The DPRK's hesitancy to administer COVID-19 vaccinations has political and operational reasons and concerns over vaccine safety and efficiency (The Guardian 03/09/2021). Another reason the DPRK is not accepting any vaccines from abroad is conspiracy-driven fears of COVID-19 vaccines, although this information cannot be verified. The DPRK has the capacity to implement national vaccination programmes, including vaccines that require transportation in cold temperatures (similar to AstraZeneca vaccine requirements) (BBC 02/12/2020; The Guardian 03/09/2021; Park and Ham 09/2021).

The DPRK is not anti-vaccine, but it is extremely hesitant about COVID-19 vaccines; it seems to be attempting to develop its own COVID-19 vaccine to address all concerns (Daily NK 12/05/2021; The Diplomat 08/10/2021; VOA 23/02/2022). The DPRK has a unique and multifaceted ideological context in which self-reliance and Korean nationalism influence governmental decisions and policies, including about COVID-19 vaccination. For example, the DPRK did allow its diplomats outside the country to receive COVID-19 vaccine shots, but likely out of convenience and to ensure the resumption of diplomatic missions abroad (Reuters 09/07/2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic impact on the humanitarian and socioeconomic situation

The COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures have aggravated the humanitarian crisis in the DPRK (FAO 12/2021 and 07/03/2022; OHCHR 17/05/2022).

Government-mandated border closures and travel restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have disrupted humanitarian aid delivery. These restrictions have hampered the import of humanitarian supplies. Response operations continued using in-country stocks for as long as they were available.

Since August 2020, international humanitarian and diplomatic staff have also not been allowed to enter the DPRK as part of these restrictions (UNGA 28/07/2021). Very few diplomatic missions remained operational in the DPRK (NK News 02/02/2022).

By March 2021, international humanitarian staff had largely left the country, but some UN agencies and INGOs remained operational through the community staff. They responded to the most critical food, health, and WASH needs using the supplies already in stock in the country. Internal travel suspension affected field monitoring activities, including needs assessments and evaluations, resulting in an information gap on the severity of multisectoral needs throughout the country. Humanitarian needs and the number of people most vulnerable to food insecurity have very likely increased, but there is no concrete evidence with all humanitarian assessments having stopped in 2021–2022. In 2020, 16,000 people were at risk of death from tuberculosis without humanitarian response (UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020). Depleted in-country humanitarian supplies most likely increased vulnerability to food insecurity and the related risk of death and disease because of higher malnutrition caseloads (UNICEF 19/02/2021; FAO 12/2021; OCHA 02/12/2021; UNGA 28/07/2021 and 08/10/2021).

The disruption in the humanitarian programme cycle and needs assessments has also resulted in a funding gap. The humanitarian funding for the DPRK reported to OCHA fell from around USD 40 million in 2020 to just USD 1.5 million in 2022 (OCHA accessed 29/05/2022).

Although the DPRK suffered from chronic food insecurity, the Government issued statements calling the shortages a food crisis in mid-2021. In 2020, the impact of drought, typhoons, and heavy rains significantly affected food production. The COVID-19 pandemic further worsened food insecurity in 2020–2021 (Al Jazeera 01/07/2021; Reuters 08/10/2021). Border closures led to an up to 90% reduction in trade in 2021. The closures also resulted in critical shortages in basic supplies, including basic and chronic disease medicines (Daily NK 25/05/2020 and 15/11/2021; Nikkei Asia 18/01/2022; The Guardian 01/04/2021). Even though the DPRK started allowing limited imports in early 2022, border closures remained severe. There has been no definite time set for reopening, with some government statements indicating it could take as far as 2025 (DW 21/01/2022; RFA 26/10/2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extends beyond humanitarian needs and response. Border closures also halted DPRK exports and tourism. North Korea's economy contracted by 4.5% in 2020 alone. The Government sent 16–17-year-old orphans to work in mines and construction sites in 2021 to support the economy (BBC 29/05/2021; Smith 09/2021). Border closures and the increased presence of troops at the border have also affected informal cross-border livelihood activities, such as smuggling (Daily NK 19/04/2021; CSIS 09/03/2022; OHCHR 17/05/2022). The pandemic has likely affected socioeconomic groups not considered vulnerable to food insecurity before. There have been reports of reduced food rations to

soldiers stationed to guard border areas, reduced access to medicine for wealthy people, and film actors resorting to begging for food (Daily NK 25/01/2022, 19/04/2021, 25/11/2021, and 25/05/2020).

ANALYSIS OF HUMANITARIAN NEEDS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Food insecurity affected an estimated 63% of the population (around 16 million people) by the end of 2021 (USDA 28/07/2021). The DPRK leadership acknowledged facing economic hardship and a food crisis by mid-2021 (38 North 08/07/2021). The official number of people in need of humanitarian assistance after 2020 is not available because of the pandemic-related disruptions that halted needs assessments in the country.

Over ten million people (around 40% of the population) needed humanitarian assistance in 2018–2020, all of whom required nutritional assistance (UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020). It is worth mentioning that this number was a decrease from the 2015–2017 figure when 18 million people needed humanitarian assistance (around 70% of the population). This decrease, however, was the result of a change in the assessment methodology instead of an actual improvement in food security. The Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been disrupting yearly needs assessments in the DPRK since 2020.

The main reported needs in the DPRK are basic food, health, and WASH, which are all interconnected. Access to sufficient calorie intake and diverse sources of essential nutrients supports children's healthy growth and better immunity to diseases. Improved access to clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and hygiene materials helps fight off illnesses and death.

Food and nutrition

Chronic food insecurity, including malnutrition, is a major issue in the DPRK, particularly for young children and pregnant and lactating women. A lack of fruits, vegetables, and proteins hampers healthy growth for children. Every year, severe acute malnutrition affects 140,000 children under five years of age (UNICEF 21/07/2021). Nearly half of the children in rural areas are at significant risk of malnutrition (CHL 04/2020). Undernutrition, including chronic and acute malnutrition and underweight, is an underlying factor in disease and death and is a public health problem in the DPRK, particularly for children under five years of age. Children of this age suffering from malnutrition are at a higher risk of death because of common illnesses, such as diarrhoea and respiratory infections (UNICEF accessed 13/03/2022; WHO 09/06/2021).

Healthcare

Health facilities are available across the country, but critical shortages of essential medicines, medical supplies, and equipment reduce the quality of health services. These issues particularly affect rural areas, where infrastructure, heating, water, and electricity supplies are less developed (Park and Ham 09/2021; UNGA 28/07/2021). The health system in the socialist country is free and equal in theory, but in practice, the State does not sufficiently cover the cost of all heating and medical materials, which staff ask patients to cover. Political status also grants higher access to health (Lee et al. 29/06/2020; NK News 21/02/2020; The Borgen Project 21/07/2020). People with disabilities largely rely on female family members for care. The deaths of infants, children under five years of age, and mothers are also a major health concern. Tuberculosis, malaria, worm infections, hypertension, diabetes, and hepatitis B cases are common (UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; Han et al. 05/01/2019; TNH 25/02/2019; PIIE 29/04/2014).

WASH

Health and WASH needs intersect. A lack of access to clean drinking water, hygiene products, sanitation (toilet, shower, and washing) facilities, and adequate human waste management results in a higher risk of exposure to diseases, particularly for children under the age of five in rural areas. Electricity supply issues affect water treatment and supply levels:

- Water supply to 82% of the country goes through a water distribution system.
- Tap water is unsafe to drink and requires boiling at home, but only 16% of the population treats their drinking water properly.
- 33% of the population does not have access to safe drinking water.
- E. coli infects 23% of the water, posing a health risk, particularly to children under five years of age.
- 19% of the population lacks access to basic sanitation facilities, elevating the risk of the spread of waterborne diseases, particularly in rural areas (UNICEF 06/2018; UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; Daily NK 01/04/2019; WHO 07/02/2018).

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE DPRK

Climate and topography

The climate and topography in the DPRK prevent it from producing enough food to cover local demand. The DPRK is in the northern Korean Peninsula, a mountainous landscape with limited arable land (UNICEF 01/11/2019). Only 17% of the land mass can be used for agriculture, and it is concentrated in the plains and coastal areas (Lee et al. 01/03/2019).

Inadequate agricultural practices have worsened soil properties in the little available arable land, making food production even more challenging. Planting the same crop year after year has resulted in the overuse of soil as it does not allow for the proper renewal of soil nutrients (UNICEF 21/11/2019). The heavy use of chemical fertilisers has further reduced soil quality (Lee et al. 01/03/2019).

Deforestation affects food production. Between 1990–2015, around 40% of the forests in North Korea were cut down for wood or agricultural use. Deforestation has contributed to decreased soil fertility and water storage capacity, which have then weakened food production capability (Lee et al. 01/03/2019; FAO/WFP 03/05/2019).

A steep mountainous terrain with narrow valleys makes the DPRK prone to floods and landslides during heavy seasonal rainfall in the summer, putting crops and infrastructure at risk of being flooded. 80% of annual rainfall takes place between July–September. Floods induce soil erosion, which reduces agricultural productivity. Major floods occur almost every year in the DPRK, resulting in crop damages. In 2020, floods during the rainy season damaged 40,000 hectares of crops across the country (UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; 38 North 23/09/2020 and 16/10/2020; The Diplomat 21/10/2020).

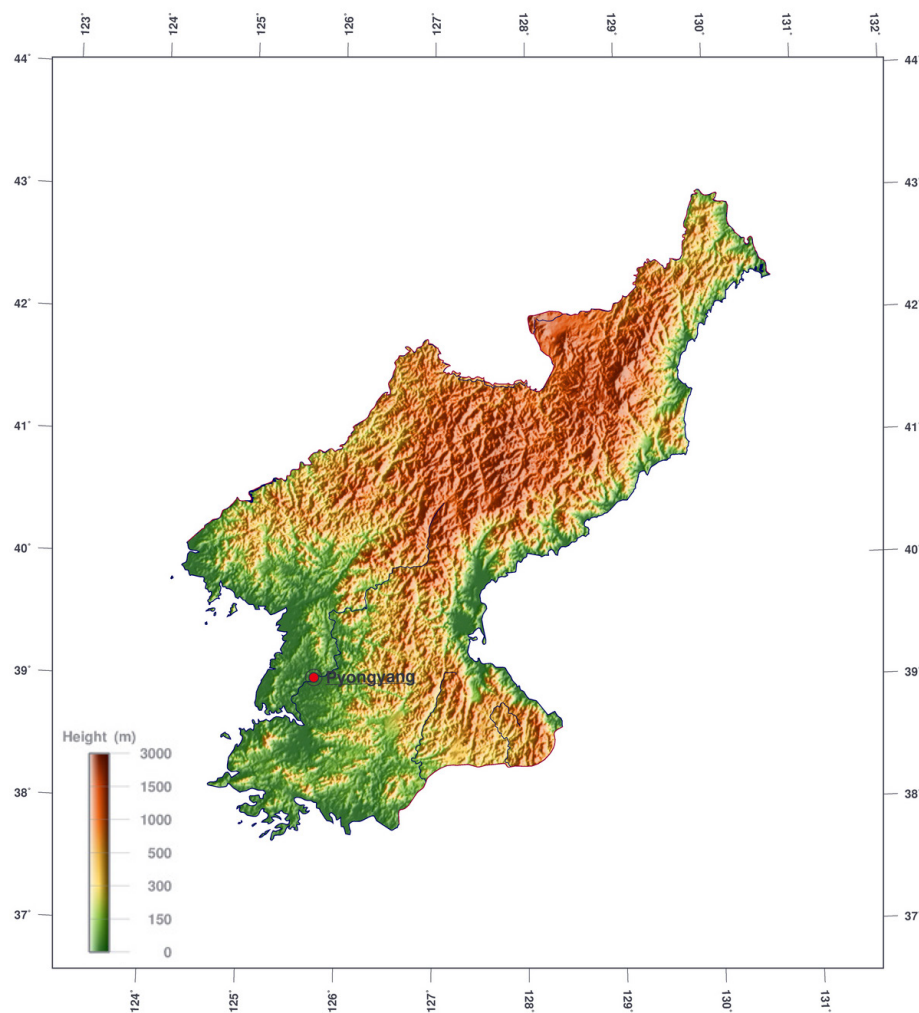
Low resilience to the yearly weather-related shocks puts crops at risk of damage. In 2017 and in 2019, drought affected rice, soybean, and maize crops and contributed to food shortages (CCS 28/07/2021). Prolonged dry spells and heat waves during July–August and weak irrigation infrastructure hamper the pollination process. Low precipitation during the winter season results in a lack of snow cover, exposing early crops to frost damage. The main crops in the DPRK include wheat, barley, paddy rice, and maize (FAO/WFP 03/05/2019).

The DPRK's geographic location within the northwestern Pacific Basin in east Asia makes it prone to cyclones and typhoons during August–September. The impact of these natural disasters has resulted in displacement, floods, and the disruption of harvesting activities, affecting food insecurity and compounding crop and infrastructure damages. The DPRK has a low capacity for resilience and recovery (UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; CHL 04/2020). In 2020,

three consecutive typhoons hit the country in late August and early September, aggravating food insecurity throughout 2021 (The Diplomat 21/10/2020; Reuters 16/06/2021).

Climate change will continue to contribute to the increased impact and frequency of weather-related shocks and natural disasters in the DPRK, including floods, dry spells, frost, and tropical cyclones (The Climate Centre 05/07/2018; CCS 28/07/2021; The Diplomat 21/10/2020).

Topographic map of DPRK



Source: Mapsland accessed 13/06/2022

Governance

A brief history of food insecurity

Self-reliance and self-defence are central concepts in the DPRK's official ideology called Juche (Vox 18/06/2018; Government of DPRK accessed 20/04/2022). Over the decades, the DPRK's Juche-based governmental policies have contributed to economic and agricultural practices that have influenced the state of food production (Radio Free Asia 06/11/2021; ORF 02/07/2021; Smith 09/2021). The combination of natural, economic, and political factors has resulted in recurring food shortages. Between 1995–1999, North Koreans suffered from a famine. Major floods and energy shortages related to geopolitical dynamics in the region worsened this situation (Smith 09/2021). Although no official numbers exist, estimates of the number of hunger-related deaths vary between 225,000–3.5 million (TNI 15/07/2021; Smith 09/2021; Seth 12/2011; BBC 09/04/2021). Although agriculture and food aid have improved, food insecurity continues to be a persistent issue in the DPRK (VOA 22/10/2021; UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; NPR 19/06/2018). The DPRK lacks modern agricultural machinery and continues to implement unsustainable agricultural practices (RFA 27/04/2021; ORF 02/07/2021; Smith Asia 09/2021). It relies on trade and aid to cover food gaps, but self-sufficiency continues to be the official political stance.

Governance and the food distribution system

The DPRK is a socialist country with a one-party dynastic political system. Its leaders have all been members of the same family since its establishment in 1948 (UN accessed 13/06/2022; UNGA 27/09/2021; Freedom House accessed 13/06/2022; CFR 17/06/2020). Governance in the DPRK is highly centralised, regulating all aspects of life, including access to food and opportunities. Food is rationed per county based on the estimated national production and planned food imports and distributed accordingly through the Food Distribution System (UNCT DPRK 01/04/2015). Food rations are reported to be inconsistent because of fluctuations in production and food availability. They do not meet the government target of 570 grams of cereal per person per day and vary according to some factors, such as household size. The Government also assigns higher rations to certain groups and occupations, including the military, over others because of a sociopolitical classification system called Songbun that prioritises groups considered more loyal by the leadership (RFA 06/11/2021; FAO/WFP 03/05/2019; UNCT DPRK 01/04/2015).

Geopolitics

Geopolitics of the twentieth century – starting when the Japanese empire took control of the Korean peninsula in 1920 – influenced the political system. The first leader and founder of the DPRK was a member of the armed resistance against Japanese rule, with backing

from China and, later, the Soviet Union. Towards the end of the second world war, Japan gave up control of the peninsula. It was divided between the temporary administration of the Soviet Union in the north and the United States in the south. Cold war tensions and the inter-Korean war in 1950–1953 prevented any prospects for the reunification of the disputed region. Despite active diplomatic efforts and inter-Korean talks, tensions between South Korea and the DPRK remain (Al Jazeera 13/01/2022; US National Archives accessed 29/11/2021; ICG 24/12/2021). The DPRK continuously states that US military presence in South Korea and their military cooperation is a security threat (Reuters 08/03/2021; Council on Foreign Relations 16/07/2019).

International sanctions

The DPRK has been under numerous unilateral and international sanctions, including by the UNSC against the DPRK's nuclear weapons programme that became public in 2006 (UNSC 22/12/2017; CEIP accessed 20/04/2022). In 2017, the additional UNSC energy sanctions imposed a cap on the DPRK's import of petroleum to 500,000 barrels per year to limit the increased nuclear and ballistic missile testing in the country. The DPRK fully relies on fuel imports to cover its energy needs, including irrigation, agricultural machinery and transportation, and the production of much-needed fertiliser and pesticides for its agricultural terrain. The DPRK often states that the sanctions, combined with weather shocks and natural hazards, affect food production (UNSC 05/03/2019; Reuters 22/02/2019; BBC 20/06/2019; Smith 29/04/2020; KEI 23/03/2021).

Although intended to deter the DPRK from developing nuclear weapons, the sanctions have resulted in some secondary impacts and delays in the humanitarian response, particularly since the 2017 sanctions (TNH 09/01/2018; CHL 04/2020; NK News 16/07/2019; GHN 05/08/2019; UNSC 05/03/2019). On average, the overall delay for humanitarian assistance programmes is around three months. Some INGOs have faced delays of up to ten months (GHN 05/08/2019; NK News 16/07/2019).

Sanction-related operational difficulties that affect aid delivery include complications in customs clearance and logistical processes and dealing with banks and suppliers (UNSC 05/03/2019; 38 North 22/08/2019; GHN 05/08/2019; CHL 04/2020; USDA 21/01/2020). In the past, sanctions have delayed the import of health-assistance-related items. Examples include delays in the import of reproductive health kits, heaters for clinics, ambulance parts, refrigerators, wheelchairs, crutches, walking aid equipment, glasses, and hearing aids. Logistical and banking complications have also forced multiple NGOs to withdraw from the country (CHL 04/2020).

Sanctions' related bans on certain items further complicate the humanitarian response capacity because they include items needed for medical, agricultural, and WASH purposes.

These items include sterilisers, syringes, needles, ambulances, x-ray machines, microscopes, well drilling machines, filters, pumps, water tanks, pipes, and irrigation, harvesting, and processing equipment (NK News 16/07/2019).

Sanctions, combined with the DPRK's centralised economic system, affect livelihoods and limit sustainable development in the country (UNGA 08/10/2021; Smith 09/2021).

The impact of international sanctions is indirectly disproportionate for women because of gender inequality (KPN 01/10/2019). Women perform all house chores and family responsibilities aside from their jobs, including ones that are physically demanding. For example, in agriculture, the DPRK relies on hard physical labour because of a lack of technology and farming equipment. A lack of calorie intake affects people's ability to perform manual agricultural labour, the majority of which is by women (Smith 29/04/2020 and 09/2021; Kim and Easy 07/05/2021).

The DPRK receives food aid through the UN and, bilaterally or directly, mostly from China. Donor reluctance because of the nuclear programme and sanctions additionally influence funding for the international response to the DPRK's complex humanitarian crisis (BBC 20/06/2019; UNSC 05/03/2019; TNH 09/01/2018; OCHA accessed 13/03/2022; 38 North 22/08/2019). The US pressure on donors also affects humanitarian funding (GHN 05/08/2019). Since 2012, the gap between funding requirements and coverage has increased because of donor fatigue and hesitancy resulting from international sanctions (BBC 20/06/2019; TNH 09/01/2018). There has been a major funding gap since 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic (OCHA accessed 13/03/2022).

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

All international organisations engaged in humanitarian activities operate as part of the Humanitarian Country Team. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross operate in the DPRK. UN agencies with humanitarian mandates based in Pyongyang include WHO, FAO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, and WFP (UN accessed 20/04/2022; UN RC DPRK 22/04/2020; OCHA accessed 16/05/2022).

OUTLOOK

The DPRK leadership has consistently relied on severe COVID-19 containment measures since early 2020. It is unlikely to apply significant changes to the approach in 2022 and beyond, meaning access to humanitarian aid will likely remain constrained in the foreseeable future (CSIS 09/03/2022; NK News 16/03/2022).