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# North Korea's Implementation of SDGs: Focused on 'Voluntary National Review'

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Recently, North Korea has reported on its status on the implementation of SDGs to the international community by conducting a Voluntary National Review (VNR). North Korea's VNR is remarkable in that it signals North Korea's willingness to implement global norms such as the SDGs, not to mention its actual implementation. Meanwhile, the Review shows that North Korea has strategically altered the goals to align with its national development goals and systemic characteristics, turning them into 'ourstyle SDGs.' Still, North Korea's participation in international community is meaningful. The international community ought to actively seek cooperative measures that complement North Korea's pursuit of SDGs.

On July 13, 2021, North Korea participated in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and reported on the implementation status of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereafter the 2030 Agenda). VNRs are a process that includes all participating countries – both developed and developing ones. They share

and review experiences, challenges, and lessons in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). North Korea initially tried to join in July 2020 but postponed its participation to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Hence, it undertook the VNR at the HLPF held in New York from Jul 6 to 15, 2021. This paper examines North Korea's implementation status based on the information from the pre-disclosed 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda (VNR Report).

### **North Korea's Status on the Implementation of SDGs, Systemic Construction, and Guideline Proposal**

North Korea's VNR holds the following meanings. First, the VNR hints at North Korea's strategic objectives and priorities on implementing the two universal norms: the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. In the VNR Report, North Korea reflected its priorities by choosing 17 goals and 95 targets and suggesting 132 indicators. It emphasized the importance of SDGs regarding energy, agriculture, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and the environment, and disclosed that its SDGs reflect 53% of the global SDGs targets.<sup>1)</sup> It also clarified that it has integrated the UN SDGs with its own National Development Goals (NDGs) to achieve its objective of developing a Great Socialist Nation and the 5-Year Economic Plan. In other words, North Korea has localized the global norm.

Second, the VNR confirms that North Korea is actually implementing the SDGs and has been constructing an implementation mechanism. North Korea has been preparing to cooperate with the international community in implementing the 2030 Agenda since September 2015. In the VNR Report, it has reaffirmed the SDGs' grounding premises behind the "Leave no one behind" principle and the emphasis

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1) DPRK, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda," The United Nations, June, 2021, p. 8, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

on the complex interactions among economic, social, and environmental factors. Also, in August 2018, North Korea has created the National Task Force for Sustainable Development (NTF) led by the Vice Premier and Chairman of the State Planning Commission (SPC) and systematized the implementation of SDGs by creating six Technical Committees (TC)<sup>2)</sup> on 1) socio-demography, 2) science and education, 3) public health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), 4) economy and energy, 5) environment and ecosystem, and 6) disaster risk management. According to the VNR Report, NTF establishes the national SDGs, targets and indicators, and manages the national-level implementation by consulting with subcommittees and executive headquarters. The TC, composed by Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) officials, measures the indicators using the national statistical system, integrates data, evaluates the status of implementation in each unit and area, and reports to the NTF. In other words, North Korea has developed an adjusting, evaluating, and monitoring system for the implementation of the SDGs with the NTF at the center and the TC playing a supporting role.

Third, the VNR Report provides hints on North Korea's post-sanction socioeconomic condition. Since North Korea's 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test in 2016, it faced stronger sanctions from the international community, and COVID-19 is predicted to have further devastated North Korea's economic condition. However, information on the specific condition is difficult to obtain. Fortunately, the VNR Report discloses the indicators for no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) among others, signaling the current economic condition in North Korea.

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2) According to the North Korean report from Vladivostok in Oct 2019, the six TCs are on 1) socio-demography, 2) public health and WASH, 3) agriculture and nutrition, 4) science and education, 5) economy and environment, 6) ecosystem and conservation. The VNR Report excludes agriculture, nutrition and conservation, and includes energy and disaster risk management. The addition of disaster risk management shows that North Korea takes the effects of the frequent floods and typhoons that destroy farmlands and halt the distribution of food and nutrition.

### Accommodation and Alteration of a Global Norm, “North Korean SDGs”

One key feature of the VNR Report is that North Korea advocates for ‘ourstyle (*woorisik*) SDGs’ that mix the global SDGs with North Korea’s own NDGs and accounts for its unique situation and legal institutions. This feature can be seen as a process of integrating national policy objectives with SDGs and institutionalizing them. North Korea has suggested and allocated four national development goals: 1) Strengthen the people’s government and display the people-first principle, 2) Develop all sectors based on science and education, 3) Build self-supporting and knowledge-based economy, and 4) Construct fully developed socialist culture. From a different perspective, this integration can be seen as North Korea’s efforts to justify its strategic direction and mobilize internal resources. Now that it has integrated the new 5-Year Plan (2021–2025) suggested at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress held in Jan 2021, the connection between the two goals will remain for a while. The internal connections between the UN SDGs and North Korea’s NDGs are as follows:

<Table 1> Inter-linkage between SDGs and NDGs

SDGs	UN	North Korea
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Improve people’s livelihood
2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Develop sustainable agriculture and realize self-sufficiency of food
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Prepare all as intelligent workers
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Consolidate gender equality and rights of all women and girls
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	Ensure sustainable access to water and sanitation
7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Ensure access to sustainable and modern energy
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and	Establish self-reliant and

	sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	knowledge-based economy and provide employment
9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	Put national economy on a Juche and modern basis and modernize infrastructure
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries	Enhance the position and role of all the masses as masters of state and society
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	Ensure living conditions and environment for affluent and civilized life
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	Ensure sustainable consumption and production
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	Combat climate change and its impacts reduction
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	Sustainably conserve and use coastal and sea resources
15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	Sustainably manage forests, restore land fertility and maintain biodiversity
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	Consolidate the Socialist System
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development	Develop friendly partnership
Goals	North Korea's NDGs	SDGs
Building a powerful socialist country	1. Strengthen the people's government and display the people-first principle	4, 9, 16
	2. Develop all sectors based on science and education	4, 5, 9, 12, 14, 17
	3. Build self-supporting and knowledge-based economy	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
	4. Construct fully developed socialist culture	1, 3, 4, 9, 13, 14
	The common goals interlinked to all the NDGs	4, 5, 9, 17

Source: DPRK, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda”, pp. reorganized based on the contents of pp. 8~11, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

Among the various reinterpretations from North Korea, two representative cases of alteration and selective implementation are SDG 16 and 17. Since the two goals are especially difficult for North Korea to implement at face value, North Korea seems to have downsized the initial intention of the goals during implementation. SDG 16 deals with violence, conflict prevention, and institutionalization and emphasizes an equal approach to justice, human rights, and state accountability. SDG 17 deals with development finance, technology, capacity building, trade, and systemic issues, but North Korea lacks realizable targets and applicable global indicators. North Korea has altered SDG 16 into “consolidating the socialist system” and SDG 17 into “developing friendly partnerships.”<sup>3)</sup> The goal of “consolidating the socialist system” illustrates that the implementation of the SDGs cannot be disconnected from the fundamental goal of sustaining and strengthening the North Korean system. North Korea is internally promoting the People First Principle by mobilizing various social sectors and groups for science and technology-based development. At the same time, it is also continuing to strengthen its socialist universal healthcare and free education system. Also, regarding SDG 16 and 17, it is suggesting the need for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in creating a peaceful environment and easing the sanctions to implement the SDGs. The VNR Report clearly states that continuing sanctions and blockades seriously frustrate the implementation of the SDGs.

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3) North Korea has provided the following indicators: 16.9.1, “Birth registration of children under 5” (2020, 100%) and 17.6.1, “Number of science and/or technology cooperation agreements and programmes between countries, by type of cooperation” (2019, 8). DPRK, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda,” p. 63, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021).

## Looking at the Conditions in North Korea through SDG Targets and Indicators

North Korea suggested its 17 goals and related indicators on various statistics. This section examines some of the important indicators and discusses their implications.

### 1. 2019 Population Census

According to the Report, North Korea had a population of 25,488,350 in 2019, or about half of the population of South Korea. This data is nothing new in that the 2008 Census has already provided a rough estimate of the North Korean population. What is new, however, is that the data is from the 2019 Population Census.

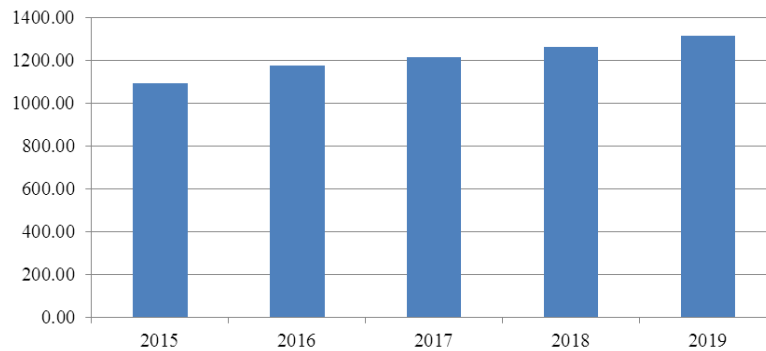
North Korea initially planned to undertake a population census in 2018 with the help of the UN. However, it postponed the census to 2019 and eventually reported to the UN that it will undertake the census alone without UN's help. Since then, whether the census actually took place was unknown until North Korea published this reference.

Since North Korea undertook the census alone, it may not disclose the specific statistics as it did in the UN-supported 2008 Census. Also, considering North Korea's level of competency in statistical administration, the validity of the data is questionable. The self-administration of the Census is disappointing in that the previous, internationally supported census provided very useful information in analyzing North Korea from the outside.

### 2. The Size of the North Korean Economy and Its Level of Income

The Report includes a self-calculated GDP. It reports a GDP of \$33.504 billion in 2019 but does not state whether the number is in real or nominal terms. The number stated is predicted to be the real GDP since the GDP per capita nearly matches the number derived from dividing the GDP by the population (See Figure 1).<sup>4)</sup> From here on, all analyses assume real GDP.

&lt;Figure 1&gt; North Korea's Real Per Capita GDP (unit: dollar)



Source: DPRK, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda," p. 30, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

North Korea's 2019 GDP, when divided by the population, is \$1,317. This number is higher than the 2019 nominal GDP per capita of \$640 and real GDP per capita of \$615 (2015) estimated by the UN. However, the number still is at the level of the poorest nations, showing North Korea's self-recognition of its sluggish economic development.

The Report also shows that, between 2015 and 2019, the real GDP increased by 5.1% per year and the real GDP per capita increased by 4.6% per year. In other words, the report is claiming a 22.2% increase in the size of the economy during the period. <Figure 1> shows that the numbers are increasing during the period. The statistics show that North Korea has been stably growing at a high pace since the mid-2010s and has been doing so even after sanctions have intensified.

However, such findings do not match the general perception of the North Korean economy. According to the most widely used estimates from the Bank of Korea, North Korea's economy has reduced by 3.6% during 2015-2019, and the real per capita income has also declined by 5.4% during the period. While per capita income has increased in 2016, it has been on a downhill ever since. Evaluations from 2017

4) If the number is real GDP, there must also be a base year, but the Report does not provide such information.



and onward are debated, but the Bank of Korea's estimates seem to better portray the reality than the Report considering that North Korea is facing harsher sanctions.

Why would North Korea publish such alienated statistics? Many factors must have played their part, but one of the most important factors would be North Korea's lack of administrative competence in calculating its GDP. In fact, North Korea openly acknowledges the need to "establish regular data collection system according to the international standards for measuring indicators of the economic growth."<sup>5)</sup> North Korea's unfamiliarity with GDP statistics is also shown through the various errors rarely observed in national reports such as mistaking the GDP for per capita GDP or omitting whether the numbers are in real or nominal terms.

### 3. Potential Exacerbation of Food Shortages

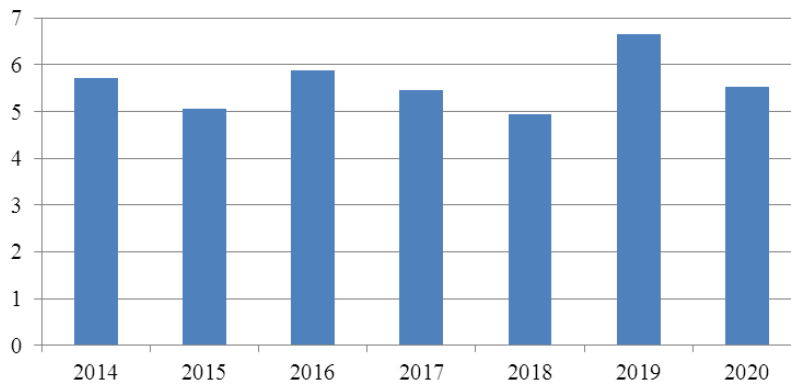
Recently, food problems have been exacerbating in North Korea. In fact, Kim Jong-un has openly remarked on "the strains in people's food conditions" during the Third Full Session of the Workers' Party of Korea's Central Committee held in June 2021. The unstable price of rice has also intensified such concerns.

The Report provides the statistics on the annual cereal production rate. <Figure 2> shows a sizable increase in production in 2019 (6.65 million tons) followed by a hefty, million-ton reduction in 2020 (5.52 million ton). However, the number for 2019 is unusually large, meaning that the reduction in 2020 still resulted in a near-average number.

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5) DPRK, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda", p. 31 <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

&lt;Figure 2&gt; North Korea's Annual Cereal Production (Unit: million tons)



Source: DPRK, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda", p. 15, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

Why, then, would there be signs of food shortages despite the ordinary production rate? The answer is the lack of food inflow. North Korea has always depended on imports and aids for a big portion of its food resource. Between 2010 and 2019, North Korea has annually imported about 320,000 tons of grain. However, with this year's border closures, it has yet to import or receive food from abroad. Food smuggling has also become difficult, further frustrating the situation.

However, North Korea has maintained the same level of production, which composes the largest part of its food source, and has enhanced its agricultural capacity compared to the days of the Arduous March. Hence, we can still predict North Korea to evade any extreme food shortages if some imports and aids get through the border in the second half of 2021.

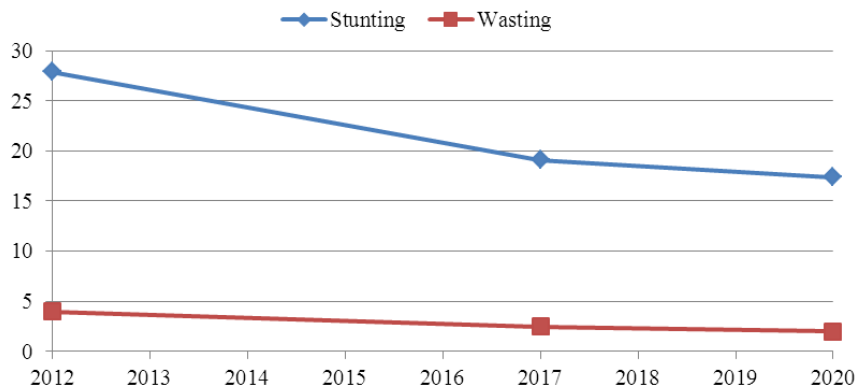
#### 4. People's Living Conditions under Sanctions

The Report also provides information on people's living conditions after the sanctions have been imposed. It includes the numbers for undernourishment of children under 5, which is one of the main indicators of living conditions. This information provides an update from the 2017 MICS Report. <Figure 3> shows that

stunting and wasting have all decreased from 2017, meaning that the nutritional statuses of children under 5 have enhanced after 2017. Maternal mortality rate and under-5 and neonatal mortality rates have also slightly decreased since 2017.

Considering that sanctions have intensified in the second half of 2017, the numbers can seem somewhat surprising. However, many studies have attested that those sanctions may not have affected the consumption among North Korean people until the COVID-19 pandemic has erupted. Imports of consumer and intermediary goods were at similar levels from previous years, vitalizing the public and protecting the economy from a sudden shock. The data discussed above demonstrates this analysis.

<Figure 3> Prevalence of Stunting and Wasting among Children under 5 (Unit: %)



Source: DPRK, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda”, p. 16, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

Since the border closure in 2020, the impact of sanctions seems to have reached the public much more directly. However, the Report does not contain a straightforward statistic. A few indices can be used to examine the impact, but they omit the data from 2018 to 2019, which can potentially lead to an unreliable analysis. For instance, <Figure 3> only provides the data for 2017 and 2020, implying a general downward trend in the rate of malnutrition. However, the implication should not be taken for granted as the situation in 2018 and 2019 can differ drastically from the

situation in 2020. In fact, the most likely situation is that the rate of malnutrition decreased until 2019 but increased in 2020.

### 5. Action to Combat Climate Change

In replying to SDG 13, North Korea provided several indices previously unlisted in the UN SDG Country Profile.<sup>6)</sup> Being in a region highly prone to the effects of climate change, North Korea evaluated itself as being exposed to a potential decrease in agricultural production, destruction of agricultural infrastructure, and degradation of land and water resources, among others. The VNR Report emphasized North Korea's development of the National Disaster Reduction Strategy (NDRS) 2019–2030 to minimize the broad threats of climate change and the implementation of the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement through integrating the measures for decreasing the side effects of climate change and climate disasters into its national strategy. In a joint response to climate change, North Korea submitted its first greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction plan in 2016, and it recently submitted a revised version, setting 36 million tons (15.6%) as its national reduction contribution goal for 2030.<sup>7)</sup> North Korea is likely to set its eyes on climate change as it not only causes recurring natural disasters but also disrupts sustainable food production (SDG 2.1) and resilience (SDG 2.4, 13.1)

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6) The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "SDG Country Profile," <<https://country-profiles.unstatshub.org/prk>> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

7) According to the Sept 2019 letter to the UN Special Envoy for the 2019 Climate Action Summit from the U.S. Special Representative of North Korea, Sung Kim, North Korea's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) is 35,800,000 tons (16.4%).

**<Table 2> SDG 13 Climate Change Related Indicators on North Korea, 2015–2030**

Index	Unit	2015	2018	2020
13.1.1 Number of deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to disasters per 100,000 population	Person	0.43	0.59	0.47
13.1.2 National disaster risk reduction strategy	Year		Submitted in 2019	
13.1.3 Proportion of local disaster risk reduction plan adopted in line with national strategy	%	0	0	100
13.2.1 Number of national plan for greenhouse gas emissions reduction biennial update report submitted		2 <sup>nd</sup> Report (2012)	1 <sup>st</sup> NDC (2016)	Updated NDC (2021)

Source: DPRK, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda”, p. 62, <[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021\\_VNR\\_Report\\_DPRK.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf)> (Accessed July 6, 2021)

### The Need to Integrate Cooperative Measures and North Korea’s Willingness to Execute the SDGs

North Korea’s VNR is significant in that it shows North Korea’s willingness and execution of the SDGs. While it has altered the global norm into ‘ourstyle (*woorisik*) SDGs’ in line with its NDGs and systemic characteristics, North Korea’s efforts to follow the international trends are very noteworthy. In this sense, the international community should actively seek ways to integrate cooperative measures with North Korea’s willingness to execute the SDGs.

In implementing the SDGs, foreign aid and international cooperation are inevitable, and North Korea has expressed its openness through the VNR Report toward bi- and multilateral cooperation in specific topic areas. International cooperation should take into account the fact that the six TCs manage the topic-specific evaluation of the implementation process.

One possibility is for the international community to extend its support in

developing North Korea's national statistical capacity. Since the evaluations on SDG achievements rely heavily on quantified indicators, a reliable statistical system is an important prerequisite. However, North Korea currently lacks statistical competence, and it is openly acknowledging the need for improvement in the VNR report.

Previously, the international community has operated various programs to enhance North Korea's statistical capacities. Usually, these programs were short-term programs that produced limited results. In the future, the international community should provide longer and more structured programs to strengthen North Korea's statistical capacities and to provide the foundation for actively implementing the SDGs.

Also, if conditions are met, the various joint development cooperation for North Korea should resume as soon as possible. Various UN-affiliated organizations and international NGOs have continuously carried out humanitarian aid and development cooperation projects in North Korea since the 1990s. Ever since the toughening of sanctions in 2017, however, the scale of those projects has retrenched quite significantly. After 2020, such projects came to a halt in the aftermath of COVID-19. Such projects led by the international community can substantially help North Korea implement its SDGs. Since the sanctions still allow humanitarian assistances, the joint aid programs will not be obstructed by the sanctions. Hence, once the pandemic eases, international cooperation for North Korea must resume. The South Korean government should also participate in aiding North Korea through international organizations and actively support domestic non-profit organizations. ©KINU 2021

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