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What are the Public Opinion on the Cooperation in the South-North Border Regions? The Task for Cooperation on Disasters and Calamities¹⁾

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After the breakdown of the second U.S.-North Korea summit, President Moon Jae-in chose cooperation in the DMZ (Korean Demilitarized Zone) border regions as a way to make a breakthrough to tackle the stalemate in inter-Korean relations. His proposal of “Inter-Korean Border Committee” announced at the Oslo Forum in June 2019, “DMZ International Peace Zone” during the keynote speech at the UN General Assembly, and building a “community of life and safety on the Korean Peninsula” to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic are all against this backdrop. However, recovering the inter-Korean relations based on DMZ peace initiatives suggested by the ROK government has yet shown tangible outcomes. North Korea’s passive attitude is pointed out as a cause to why the Moon Administration’s peace initiatives show no further progress. Furthermore, building public empathy around peace initiatives is also a major task as empathy and support from the people are essential to continue to implement good policies. Therefore, it is a meaningful task to find out how the people (including the residents in border regions) perceive the cooperation in the South-North border regions for laying out future governmental policies.

1) This article is an excerpt from the survey of KINU’s research, *A Comprehensive Study On the Cooperation in Border Regions for the Sustainable Development of Inter-Korean Relations* to be published in December, 2021 (in Korean).

After the breakdown of the second U.S.-North Korea summit in 2019, inter-Korean relations have also come to a deadlock. To normalize inter-Korean relations aside from the U.S.-North Korea relationship, the government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) proposed cooperation in the DMZ border regions; a symbol of military confrontation, as a breakthrough. At the Oslo Forum in June 2019, President Moon displayed the Border Regions Committee of East and West Germany as a precedent and proposed cooperation on the inter-Korean border regions. When he made a keynote speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2019, he proposed the “DMZ International Peace Zone,” as an attempt to transform the heavily armed demilitarized zone into a peace zone. During the congratulatory remarks delivered on the March 1st Independence Movement Day and National Liberation Day, he continued to highlight the need to build a community of life and safety on the Korean Peninsula. Recovering the inter-Korean relations through the government’s DMZ peace initiative has yet to be realized due to the passive attitude of North Korea. When it comes to implementing the DMZ peace initiative, one of the decisive factors is the agreement from the people supporting the DMZ peace initiative.

Research Summary

KINU (Korea Institute for National Unification) conducted a research survey on the residents living in border regions, the general public, and experts on disasters, calamities, and inter-Korean relations to come up with inter-Korean border region strategies worthy of support and empathy from the Korean people.

The research was held between July 16 - July 30 and surveyed 210 residents living in border regions (Gimpo, Paju, Yeoncheon, Cheorwon, Inje, Hwacheon, Yanggu, Goseong), 723 adults over the age of 19 and 48 experts.²⁾ The survey included the

perceptions of North Korea and the inter-Korean relations, disasters and calamities in border regions, and the need for inter-Korean cooperation related to the disasters and calamities in border regions.

Perceptions on North Korea and the Inter-Korean Relations

The general public's perception of North Korea is the basis for setting the direction for North Korean policy. This survey confirmed that there was a gap between the perceptions of experts and the general public (including the residents in border areas). 85.4% of experts view North Korea as a "partner for cooperation," but many residents in border areas and the general public (residents in border areas - 61.4%, general public - 45.4%) showed alarming view towards North Korea. It is worth noting that the residents in border regions especially viewed North Korea as an alert. Also, the residents in border regions responded that there is less need for the recovery of inter-Korean relations. Considering the fact that these residents will be hit the hardest by possible military tensions, the lesser need for improving inter-Korean relations is understandable since North Korea's provocative actions and the inter-Korean conflict ridden with conflict and confrontation have become all too familiar in their daily lives.

These perceptions are also reflected in the trust in North Korea as a potential negotiating partner. 76.2% of residents in border regions and 68.1% of the general

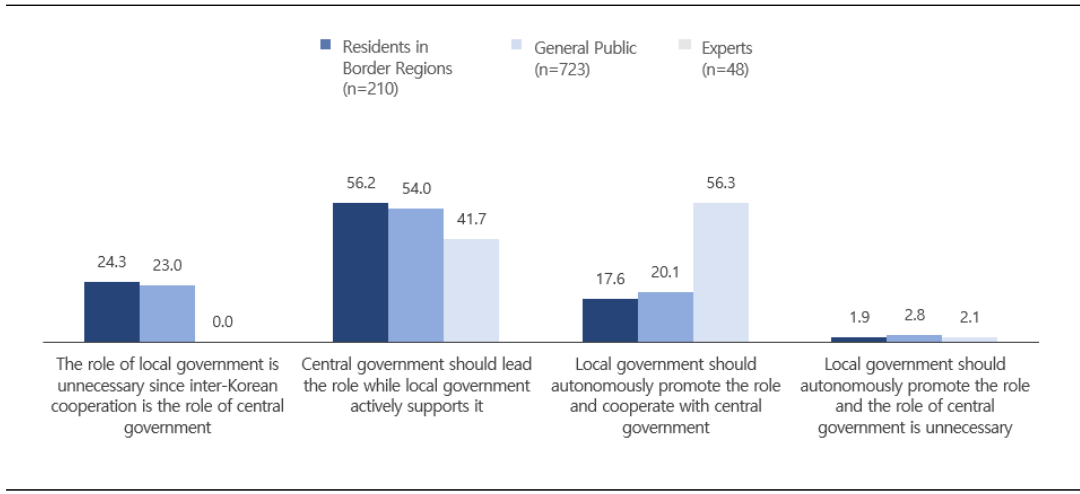
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- 2) The survey was conducted in a structured questionnaire format. Face-to-face interview was taken for the interview with residents in border regions, while online survey was held for the general public and email and mobile survey was held for the experts. According to the Special Act on Support for Border Regions, there are a total of 15 cities and counties near border regions in Korea, including Ganghwa, Ongjin, Dongducheon, Goyang, Paju, Gimpo, Yangju, Yeoncheon, Pocheon, Chuncheon, Cherwon, Hwacheon, Yanggu, Inje, and Goseong, but the survey was conducted on the residents who are living under a direct impact in an adjacent are to border regions.

public responded that North Korea cannot be trusted as a negotiating partner. Even 33.3% of the experts said that North Korea cannot be trusted. This result shows that preemptive efforts to build trust between the two Koreas are required.

The roles of the central government and local government are also worth notifying. A decentralized North Korean policy is gaining traction among policymakers and experts, leading to an expansion of local government's roles and autonomy. But 24.3% of the residents in border regions and 23.0% of the general public responded that the inter-Korean cooperation is an exclusive area of expertise reserved for the central government, so the inter-Korean exchange and cooperation efforts from the local governments are unnecessary, implying that the communication with North Korea should be led by the central government. This can be explained from two aspects. First, due to the negative perception of North Korea innately rooted in the long division of the two Koreas, people believe that it is the role of the central government to lead the inter-Korean communication and cooperation. Second, despite the tangible achievements on inter-Korean communication and cooperation from local governments in the past, such achievements are generally unknown to the locals and the general public, so they are inadequately assessing the role of local governments (See <Figure 1>).

<Figure 1> The role of central government and local government for inter-Korean communication and cooperation

(Unit: %)

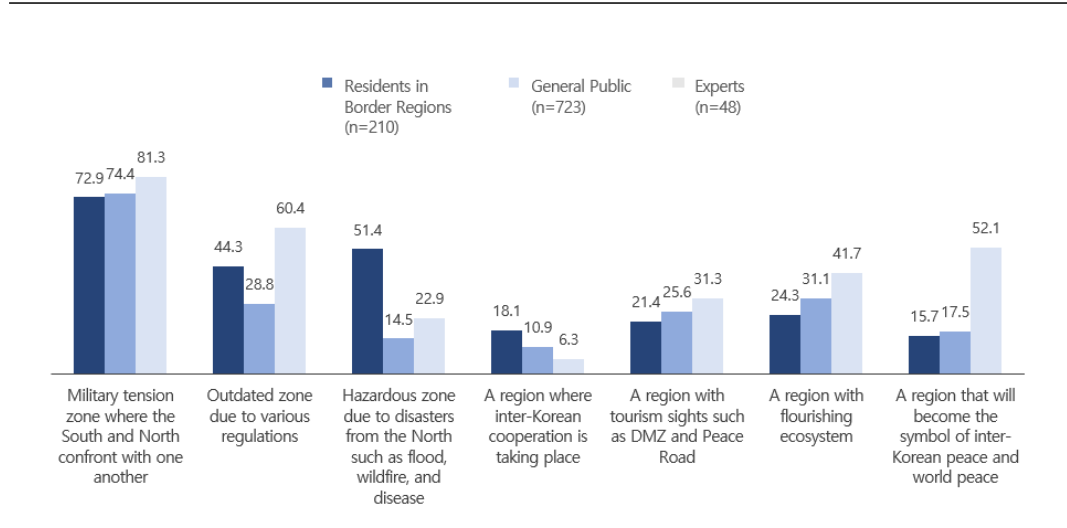


Perceptions of Border Regions, Disasters, and Calamities

The image of border regions is perceived as a military tension zone for experts, the residents of the region, and the general public. It is interesting, for the following reasons, that experts view the border regions as falling behind due to various regulations, whereas the residents of border regions perceive the place as a hazardous region due to disasters (See <Figure 2>).

<Figure 2> Perceptions toward border regions

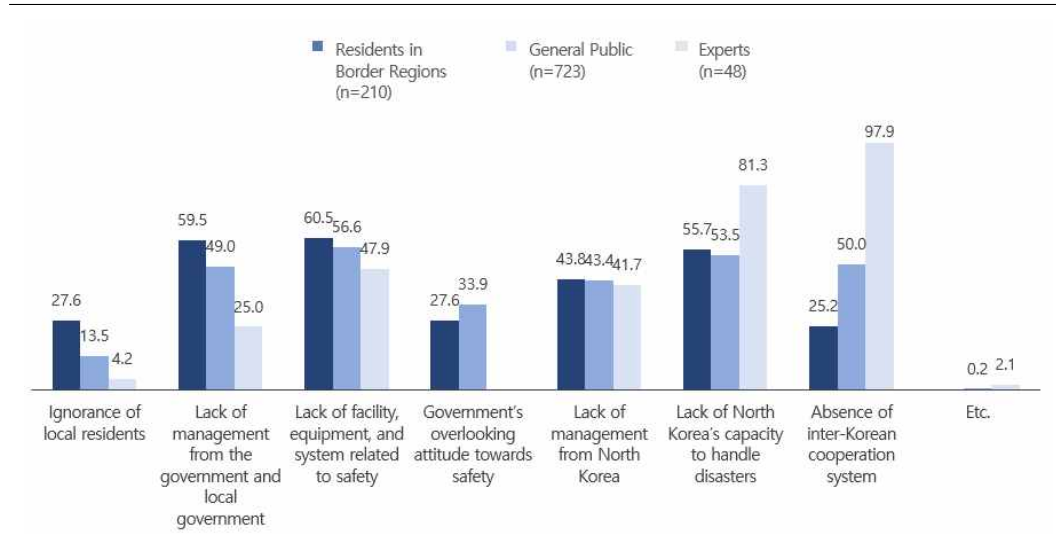
(Unit: %, Multiple answers)



Another aspect worth noting is the reason why disasters and calamities repetitively occur in border regions. The residents and the general public pointed out that the government and local governments lack managing and monitoring capabilities, and the main reason lie in the shortcomings of safety facilities, equipment, and systems. Meanwhile, experts believe that it has to do with North Korea’s incapability to manage the disasters, as well as the absence of cooperation channels with North Korea. In a nutshell, experts focus on external factors such as the lack of North Korea’s responsive capacities and absence of inter-Korean cooperation, while the people (including the residents in border areas) articulate on the internal factors (See <Figure 3>).

<Figure 3> The reason why disasters repetitively occur in border regions

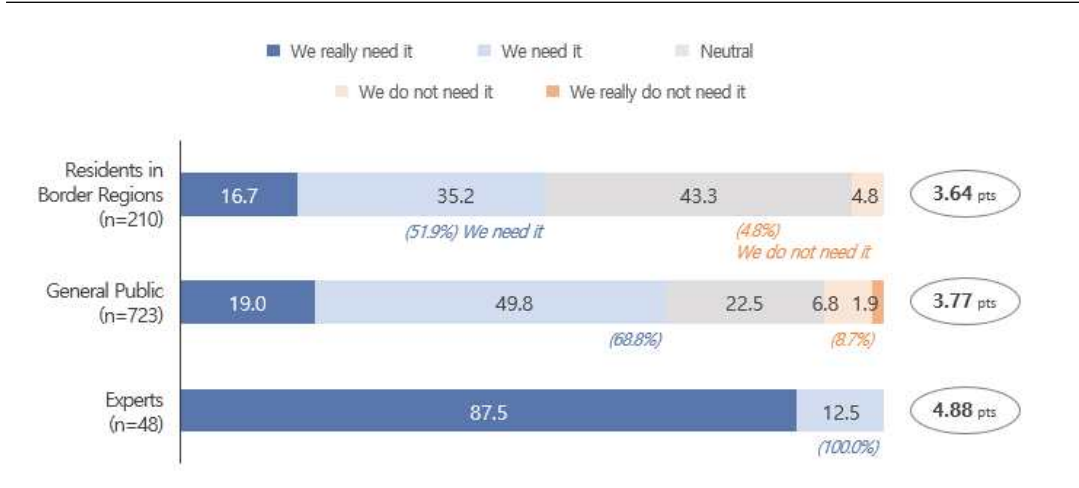
(Unit: %)



Despite the difference, all sides agreed that inter-Korean cooperation is vital for managing the safety in border regions against disasters. However, the responses of residents in border areas (51.9%) were lower than that of experts (100%) or the general public (68.8%), which stems from the distrust on security concerns and North Korea. Moreover, the residents' expectations toward the recovery of inter-Korean relations have repeatedly fell short in the past and failed occasionally, which may have affected the sentiments of the people. As for the need to prepare and cooperate preemptively for the disaster management rather than promoting support during the emergency and post-accident restoration cooperation, the number of response from the residents of border regions was the largest, followed by those of the general public and experts. Also, experts emphasized building a permanent liaison office between the two Koreas, rather than focusing on the accident itself (See <Figure 4>).

<Figure 4>

The need for inter-Korean cooperation to manage the safety in border regions
(Unit: %, On a scale of 0~5)



Additionally, among the disasters in border regions, social disasters such as disease and security threats were more urgent than natural disasters like storms, droughts, and downpours. Moreover, all the respondents chose inter-Korean mutual cooperation as a foremost priority to prevent disasters in border regions, but the response rate differs. 68.8% of experts chose inter-Korean mutual cooperation as a foremost priority to prevent disasters in border regions, while 44.4% of the general public and 38.1% of the residents chose it as a priority. At the same time, 27.6% of the residents and 22.9% of the general public responded that the need to facilitate a cooperative body for the border regions between the central and local governments should be a priority, showing that these respondents value national disaster management along with the cooperation of the two Koreas against border region disasters.

The Tasks for Cooperation against Disasters and Calamities in the Border Regions

The inter-Korean dialogue for the cooperation to tackle disasters has been continuously held: from the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement in 1991 to the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 19, 2018, showing that both North and South Korea agree on the need to build cooperation. This can be a significant solution to combat the current strain of inter-Korean relations. The key factor is how the citizens are viewing the government's efforts, which are represented through establishing an international zone of peace in the DMZ. One of the major reasons for the discontinuation of North Korean policies from the previous administrations was due to the progression of these policies without the consensus of the people.

The tasks for inter-Korean cooperation on the disasters in border regions derived from this research are the following. First, South Korea should demand that North Korea implement an agreement on disasters and calamities, thereby laying a foundation in which the people can trust North Korea as a reliable negotiating partner. North Korea recently submitted the *Voluntary National Review* (VNR) to the UN, disclosing its current situation to the international community. In the process of submitting its VNR report to the UN, North Korea revealed the current status of its society to the international community and called for international cooperation and support, which will play out positively building trust with North Korea.

We confirmed that there are gaps between the perception of the people (including the residents in border regions) and experts. While about half of the experts believe that inter-Korean cooperation and communication should be promoted regardless of the agreement and support from the public, the majority of Koreans claim that a full, or at least, a considerable amount of consensus and support is required. As for the actors of inter-Korean cooperation and communication, experts stress that the local governments should lead the process while the central government plays

a backup role. But the people prioritize the role of the central government rather than the local governments. In other words, people believe that the local governments lack the capacity to communicate with the distrusted North. But this also implies that the accomplishments for cooperation and communication made by the local governments lack public understanding and participation from the residents. Therefore, the local governments should actively facilitate the projects to encourage participation of the residents in cooperation and communication, as well as promote the achievements to the public. Most importantly, although the local governments and communities have made restoration efforts during times of disasters, the people and local residents are unaware of these attempts as they are not visible to the public.

The residents in border regions had to solely bear the burden of the “cost of division” due to the division on the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, channels to deliver the opinions of the residents on local developments have been lacking even up until now. We can see this from the responses on a question of the disasters that damage people the hardest, in which residents in border regions answered in the order of livestock disease, wildfires, harmful insects, and droughts and floods, while the general public answered in the order of livestock disease, droughts and floods, wildfires, infectious disease, and harmful insects. This suggests that if the public opinions are gathered without separating the residents in the border areas from the general public for inter-Korean cooperation policies, there may be a chance that the voices of residents in border regions will be unheard. Therefore, the opinions of residents in border regions should be at the top of the list when deciding the priorities of inter-Korean cooperation against disasters and calamities in border regions. ©KINU 2021

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