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North Koreans' Current Living Conditions Based on UNICEF Survey Results

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Recently, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) disclosed the results of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPR Korea) Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), which was last conducted eight years ago in 2009. The results include various data that enhance the understanding of reality of North Koreans' living conditions. This report focuses on statistics regarding the nutritional status of North Korean infants. According to the survey, the nutritional status of infants in North Korea has rapidly improved over the last 20 years, which can be attributed to factors such as international assistance, increased food production in North Korea, and stabilization of socioeconomic environment which affects the nutritional status. Despite such a rapid improvement, the nutritional status still appears to be concerning so continuous external support will be required for vulnerable population living in underserved areas. The survey is expected to be used as an important reference in studying North Koreans' living conditions and preparing related plans for inter-Korean cooperation, as it contains various other statistics regarding the lives of North Koreans.

What would be the quality of life for North Korean residents? Is it really true that the life of North Koreans has improved since the dawn of the Kim Jong-un era? If so, how much has it improved? Although many people including researchers studying North Korea are interested in how North Koreans live, it is difficult to get a grasp of the reality of their life. Not only are there not many materials that show how North Koreans live, but also the available data are only confined to certain regions, such as Pyongyang or areas near the Chinese border. Against this backdrop, the 2017 DPR Korea MICS, conducted among 8,500 households by North Korean government's Central Bureau of Statistics with technical and financial assistance from the UNICEF, is expected to be significantly helpful in obtaining information about and getting a grasp of North Koreans' actual living conditions.¹⁾

Meaning and Characteristics of the 2017 MICS

MICS is a non-periodic survey conducted by the governments of developing countries with the support from the UNICEF. It has been conducted four times in North Korea in 1998, 2000, 2009, and 2017. The MICS report is analyzed to be a very useful reference in understanding the current status of North Koreans' living conditions in the following regard: the data are collected among samples of big enough households that are deemed nationally representative; it contains various information that helps understand the reality of life of children and women in their childbearing years; and results can be easily compared with other developing countries since the MICS uses the internationally-universal indices.

Compared with previous reports, the 2017 MICS has several characteristics. First, it has become very rich in content. For example, surveys on the use of intranet, computer, and mobile telephone as well as on infant mortality were conducted for the first time, which makes the number of indices more than double from 55 in 2009

1) A report of the 2017 DPR Korea MICS can be download from the official website of UNICEF MICS (<http://mics.unicef.org>).

to 117 in 2017. This is interpreted as a result of changes in the living environment of North Koreans. Some items, such as questions regarding the rate of birth registration and HIV/AIDS, that were included in the 2009 report are missing in the 2017 version. This seems to be due to the fact that North Korea, contrary to other developing countries, was analyzed to be doing very well in those areas, and accordingly, the UNICEF may have decided that continuous survey on such areas was unnecessary.

Another noticeable characteristic of the 2017 MICS is that the report provides results analyzed by the level of wealth when presenting statistics for each index. For example, while the 2009 report provides statistics regarding the low birth weight index simply based on factors such as the place of birth and mother's education level, the 2017 report includes statistics analyzed based on the level of wealth in addition to those factors above. The wealth level-based statistics measured for each index will be very useful in analyzing the status of inequality in North Korea in the future.

Another notable factor is that more in-depth surveys on household characteristics were conducted in the 2017 MICS, which seems to be related to the wealth level-based analysis mentioned above. To present the results analyzed by the wealth level, it was necessary to survey the level of wealth of each household, which required detailed survey of household characteristics. Accordingly, surveys on the following areas for each household were conducted for the first time: the number of rooms; intranet access at home; ownership of home appliances such as TV, refrigerator, and electric rice cooker; ownership of agricultural land and livestock; ownership of bicycle, motorcycle, computer, mobile telephone, etc.

Statistics deducted from surveying the level of wealth also provide interesting information on the reality of North Koreans' life. For example, according to the survey, 53.7 percent of all sample households owned agricultural land. And 98.2 percent, 30.3 percent, 69.0 percent, and 18.7 percent of them owned a TV, refrigerator, electric rice cooker, mobile phone, and computer respectively. Only 1.4 percent of all households had intranet access, and the figure was not that high

for households in Pyongyang either at 5.2 percent.

Life of North Koreans According to Infants' Nutritional Status

The 2017 MICS presents statistics for about 100 indices. This report examines statistics regarding chronic malnutrition of North Korean infants aged under five and discusses their implications—a representative index that garners international attention as well as shows the actual living conditions.²⁾

Chronic malnutrition is a condition in which a child's growth is excessively stunted for their age. It occurs when an infant does not consume enough food for a prolonged period of time. Since survey examiners directly measure the weights and heights of infants, the results of the chronic malnutrition survey are deemed reliable compared to a survey with questionnaires asking for subjective opinions. According to the 2017 survey, 19.1 percent of all infants aged under 5 are analyzed to be in chronic malnutrition in North Korea. Such figure—calculated in the MICS or the National Nutrition Survey with the support of World Food Programme (WFP), and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)—has steadily decreased from 62.3 percent in 1998 to 37.0 percent in 2004, 32.4 percent in 2009, and 27.9 percent in 2012 indicating that the nutritional status of North Korean infants has improved rapidly over an extended period of time.

Consequently, the current nutritional status of North Korean infants is better than that of other developing countries. The percentage of infants suffering from chronic malnutrition in developing countries in Asia is higher than that of North Korea in general:³⁾ 36.1 percent in Bangladesh, 32.4 percent in Cambodia, 38.4 percent in India, 29.4 percent in Myanmar, 33.4 percent in the Philippines, and 17.3 percent in Sri Lanka. The World Bank statistics also show that in 2017, the figure was much

2) More detailed analysis will be provided in *Lives of North Koreans and Plans for Support and Cooperation* (Jea Hwan Hong, Seokjin Kim, and Eunmi Jeong, Korea Institute for National Unification), scheduled to be published in December 2018.

3) The study was conducted in 2014 for Bangladesh and Cambodia and in 2016 for India, Myanmar, and the Philippines, and in 2016 for Sri Lanka.

lower in North Korea than in low-income countries (35.2 percent) or middle- and low-income countries (31.5 percent).

In this regard, there arise two questions. First, how has the nutritional status of North Korean infants improved so rapidly? Rapid increase of food supply seems to have played an important role; however, the reason may differ depending on times. First, from the late 1990s to the early and mid 2000s, the main reason for such improvement had been food aid from the international community. However, the increase in food supply after the mid 2000s cannot be explained simply by international food aid because the amount of the aid had dramatically decreased thereafter. Moreover, food imports cannot account for the increased food supply either since the volume of North Korea's commercial food imports is small.

Accordingly, the food supply increase after the mid 2000s seems likely due to the increased food production in North Korea. However, this is not consistent with agricultural statistics in North Korea. The per capital grain production of North Korea, calculated based on FAO's grain production statistics, had been stagnant since the mid 2000s and started to increase slightly after the Kim Jong-un era. However, the review on North Korean infants' nutritional status shows that the food production may have increased sooner. How can such a discrepancy be explained? Although more in-depth review is required, one of the reasons seems to be the fact that quantitative and qualitative growth of individual farming has not been thoroughly reflected in the process of calculating agricultural statistics. In addition, consumption of foods other than staple grains seems to have increased thanks to improved economic situation in North Korea, which may have contributed to the discrepancy between agricultural statistics and the actual living status of North Koreans.

However, increased food supply still does not sufficiently explain why the nutritional status of infants in North Korea has improved more rapidly than that of middle- and low-income countries. Another factor to consider is that nutritional status of infants is affected not only by food, but also by nutritional status of mother, disease, hygiene, water quality, breast-feeding, status of women, and ways that children are taken care of. In other words, rising food supply will have a greater

impact on children's nutritional status in countries where such factors are stable than those without stable condition.

Since North Korea has traditionally made education and health a high priority, children's nutritional condition has been relatively sound compared to other developing nations. Therefore, the rapid improvement of nutritional status of North Korean infants compared to other countries is analyzed to be due to the synergy created by the increase of food supply in a relatively stable socio-economic environment.

Necessity for Plans to Provide Livelihood-based Assistance to North Koreans

The second question to answer is whether humanitarian aid to North Korean infants is still necessary when their nutritional status is better than that of developing countries. In conclusion, humanitarian assistance is still needed although the nutrition of North Korean infants has been improving rapidly and thus in a relatively sound condition.

Although the nutritional status of North Korean infants is better than that of other developing countries, it is still concerning that one in five infants is in chronic malnutrition. This is roughly eight times that of Korea. It is even more worrisome considering how chronic malnutrition in childhood affects individuals and society as a whole. It not only increases infant mortality and prevalence but also stunts growth and compromises cognitive ability, learning ability, and productivity even well into the adulthood. As chronic malnutrition in infancy and childhood deteriorates the quality of life of individuals and, in the long term, results in decreased quality of labor in society, the malnutrition issue needs to be continuously resolved.

Another reason that external humanitarian assistance is needed for vulnerable population living in underserved areas is that the social security system in North Korea is not functioning properly. According to the 2017 MICS, the percentage of infants suffering from chronic malnutrition is especially high in Ryanggang-do (31.8 percent), which is three times that of Pyongyang (10.1 percent)

and 1.5 times that of other regions. In addition, 27 percent of the lowest 20 percent in the wealth index is analyzed to be under chronic malnutrition. This is almost double the figure for the highest 40 percent of the wealth index (13.9 percent). However, it is unlikely that the North Korean authorities are paying special attention or providing practical support measures to these vulnerable populations and regions.

Due to the limited space of this paper, its focus has been limited to the nutritional status of North Korean infants; however, this is only a small part of the content provided in the 2017 DPR Korea MICS report. The report contains research findings on various topics, including maternal health and the health, nutrition, development, education, and living environment of infants. Each result provides useful insights on understanding the lives of North Koreans. In addition, the results of the three previous MICS, combined with the findings of the nutrition survey conducted in 2002, 2004, and 2012 and the data from the 2008 census, show the short-term change in the lives of North Koreans during the Kim Jong-un era as well as long-term changes over the last 20 years. Studying those findings also enables the understanding of vulnerable parts of North Koreans' life. It is expected that the 2017 DPR Korea MICS report can activate research on the actual conditions and changes in the life of North Koreans and be used as an important reference in devising plans for inter-Korean cooperation. ©KINU 2018

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