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*U.S.-DPRK Educational Exchanges: Assessment And Future Strategy* may be downloaded in its entirety from the Shorenstein APARC website:  
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Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Books, 2011.  
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First printing, 2011.  
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-931368-24-7

U.S.-DPRK  
EDUCATIONAL  
EXCHANGES:  
ASSESSMENT AND  
FUTURE STRATEGY

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THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN  
ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

WHAT MAKES THE  
DIFFERENCE?

# SOME LESSONS BASED ON U.S. NON- GOVERNMENTAL ENGAGEMENT WITH NORTH KOREA<sup>1</sup>

*Edward P. Reed*

The aim of most U.S. non-governmental exchange programs with North Korea has been to strengthen the DPRK's human and institutional capacity for improving living standards and shifting to a sustainable development track, while encouraging an open and peaceful relationship with the world community. The Asia Foundation (TAF) has pursued this aim primarily by facilitating dialogue and exchange between North Korean professionals and their counterparts in the United States and Asia. The content of the program has been varied, with the primary topics being international legal issues, agriculture, and English teaching methodologies. For the most part TAF has responded to interests expressed by North Korean counterparts, as long as these interests could potentially contribute to addressing development problems. Priority has also been placed on arranging for delegations of North Koreans to come to the United States, where they could make professional contacts, observe U.S. society and, in some cases, participate in Track Two dialogues. Nevertheless, TAF has organized educational programs in China and other Asian countries when doing so has seemed most practical and beneficial.

## **Types of Programs**

### *Study Visits to the United States*

Seven delegations of North Koreans have visited the United States with Asia Foundation support since the year 2000, as part of programs focused on one of four areas: agriculture, teaching English as a second language, library sciences and information technologies, and non-governmental organization (NGO) liaison.

- **Agriculture:** Four visits by agricultural specialists, one to the University of California, Davis (2000) and three to Cornell University (2000, 2001, 2005). In 2001, TAF facilitated a donation by Cornell of 10,000

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fruit cuttings for re-planting in North Korea. Members of the Cornell faculty have visited North Korea on three occasions (2001, 2005, 2006). During one visit, a Cornell scientist delivered a lecture on soils management to specialists of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences (AAS). In late 2008, North Korea invited TAF to arrange the visit of a Cornell rice scientist to the AAS, but this trip was canceled at the last minute due to a health problem of the scientist. Since 2006, the goal of these exchanges has been to create the framework for a more formalized institutional relationship between the College of Agriculture at Cornell and the Academy of Agricultural Sciences of the DPRK.

- **English Teaching Methodology:** Senior officials and staff of the Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies (PUFS) visited U.S. universities with specialized programs in teaching English as a second language (2002). A visit to Columbia University's TESL program was included in the program of a DPRK delegation to the United States in 2007. TAF invited the Chancellor and several senior faculty of PUFS to visit universities in the United States, but this visit did not occur. TAF staff have visited PUFS on several occasions in order to maintain this connection and follow up on book donations provided to PUFS.
- **Information Science and Technology:** TAF arranged for the participation of three DPRK IT specialists in a joint Unicode international working group on converting Korean-language characters into standardized machine language held in the United States (2000). Officials and staff of the Grand People's Study House and several universities visited the United States for exposure to library and information science facilities, technology, and practices (2002).
- **NGO Dialogue:** TAF organized a visit to the United States by a senior delegation from the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (at that time, the DPRK's designated liaison with foreign NGOs) to hold dialogues in three locations with U.S. NGOs that conduct direct support programs in the DPRK (2005).
- In 2007 and 2008, in response to expressed interest of DPRK counterparts, TAF offered to organize additional study trips to the United States focusing on banking and finance, teaching English as a second language, and urban planning and infrastructure development. TAF also encouraged the continuation of the exchange program with Cornell. However, the counterpart informed TAF that participation in programs in the United States was not possible during that time period.

### *Activities Outside the United States*

- **Economics and Business:** In 1997, TAF provided travel and partial tuition support so as to enable six DPRK economists to participate in a year-long program on international business and economics at Australian National University.
- **International Trade Law:** Between December 1998 and April 2001, TAF organized and sponsored four training seminars for DPRK legal specialists in Beijing and Shanghai. Each seminar involved 12–15 DPRK participants and focused on such topics as contract law, international commercial arbitration, bankruptcy law, and company law. Under the academic direction of Professor Jerome Cohen, of New York University Law School, instructors for the seminars were drawn from NYU, the University of Washington, and Chinese universities and law firms. TAF's offer to sustain and expand this program was not accepted by the North Koreans.
- **Agriculture:** Since early 2010 TAF has worked with the China National Rice Research Institute (CNRRI), based in Hangzhou, to arrange workshops and field trips in China for scientists from the DPRK Academy of Agricultural Sciences. This is a triangular arrangement by which the CNRRI organizes programs in consultation with TAF and hosts the visiting DPRK delegations; TAF provides financial support and joins the delegations during their visits to China. TAF has also supported AAS visits to the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines to encourage long-term cooperation on food security.
- **Participation in Regional Meetings:** The Asia Foundation has provided support to enable DPRK specialists to participate in international meetings primarily related to security issues. This is a form of cooperation that has continued in spite of fluctuation in the political environment. Since 2001, TAF has supported participation by staff of the North Korean Institute for Disarmament and Peace in regional meetings organized by the Council on Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). Other meetings have included three workshops organized by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) conducted in Berlin in 2003 and 2004 and an Uppsala University conference on conflict management in Northeast Asia in 2004.

### *Books Contributions*

As part of TAF's region-wide Books for Asia Program, since 1999 TAF has made annual shipments of English-language textbooks and other educational materials to the Grand People's Study House in Pyongyang and

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several major universities. The total number of items shipped now comes to over 130,000 volumes. The Books program represents the most important material contribution made by TAF to the DPRK. It has served as a sustained expression of goodwill and also, apparently, as a rationale for counterparts to cooperate with TAF in less tangible areas.

## Some General Considerations

### *Is the DPRK a “Developing Country”?*

According to widely accepted economic data, the DPRK can be classified as a “low income” developing country. A food security crisis has persisted for some fifteen years. Infrastructure outside of Pyongyang is undeveloped or seriously deteriorated. Investment and international trade are extremely limited. However, as we all know, the DPRK can more accurately be described as a collapsed semi-industrial economy, and these observations are not the whole picture. There is almost universal literacy and the level of education is high, though the content of textbooks and other educational materials is narrow and in some cases out of date. There is a large and skilled, but largely idle, industrial workforce. The health care infrastructure is well developed, though there is a serious shortage of medical equipment and supplies. The important point in regard to developing educational programs is that the DPRK does not consider itself a “developing country.” And, in fact, it has real strengths that can be built on.

### *Politics Rules*

In the DPRK, important decisions about almost every aspect of life are determined by political guidance passed down through the Korean Workers’ Party or bureaucratic channels. Certainly, any contact or cooperation with an international entity is strictly governed by political considerations, and cooperation with a U.S. organization even more so. Discussions and negotiations with technocrats or educators normally take place in the presence of a political officer who will ultimately determine the final outcome in consultation with his superiors. What looks like agreement at the technical level may not hold up in the long run.

### *Stovepipe Bureaucracy*

The DPRK is a command society; all authority, policy, and direction flows vertically from top to bottom. However, there appears to be little horizontal communication between units of the government, or sometimes even between offices of the same institution. This places an extreme constraint on efforts to strengthen institutional capacity through training and exchanges. Participants in educational activities outside the country seem to have limited opportunities to share what they have learned within their own institutions. Also, similar

requests for assistance may be made to international organizations from different units of the same institution.

### *Why Strengthen DPRK Institutions?*

There is the widespread view that the current policies of the DPRK do not support a sustainable economy. If such is the case, why should the premise and institutions on which the system is built be supported or strengthened? One approach is to focus on institutions that will be important in any transition that the DPRK undergoes in the future (and, of course, to avoid strengthening institutions that are critical for upholding the current structures). Another is to consider exchanges as opportunities to stretch and build individual capacity that can be applied in whatever future context might emerge. Nevertheless, this is an important issue that any international institution should consider and respond to.

## Analysis of Exchange Experience

### *Elements for Success*

- **Clarity and Agreement on Objectives:** Basically, there have been three kinds of exchanges between the United States and the DPRK: political, technical and mixed. There are Track Two exchanges/seminars where the purpose is clear and the DPRK delegation is composed of government or Workers' Party members ready to engage (to the extent of their brief) on political topics. There are technical exchanges where the purpose is to gain knowledge, obtain some specific assistance, and in some cases explore possibilities for further cooperation. The delegation will include some technical persons competent in the field of focus and at least one political officer. However, there are also cases in which a technical focus is used to promote a political purpose. The technical content may provide a framework and rationale for the visit, but the primary interest on the DPRK side is to contribute to some political goal, such as delivering a message, having Track Two-type encounters, probing U.S. official positions, or simply demonstrating goodwill. In such cases the U.S. host should not expect serious technical involvement or follow-up, and the DPRK delegation's goals will probably not match the stated technical purpose. It is important that the host organization understand the DPRK's purpose; otherwise serious frustrations and misunderstandings may occur.
- **Initiative on the DPRK side:** There are many good external analyses of what ails the DPRK and what is needed to address its problems. A U.S. organization may be surprised when the DPRK resists participating in a program to address what seems to be an obvious and serious problem



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identified by the U.S. side, or when the DPRK sends a delegation that does not correspond to a program's purpose. Successful and sustained cooperation has been more likely when the DPRK has identified the problem and sought assistance, or responded to offers that match an identified need. Of course, this is a general rule in any kind of cooperation. A problem arises, however, when the DPRK identifies problems that appear marginal or solutions that seem inappropriate or even bizarre. One way of dealing with this problem is the menu approach. An institution can provide the DPRK counterpart with a list of programs or topics on which it is prepared to cooperate, and then follow up on those selected by the DPRK counterpart.

- **Institutional Linkages:** As elsewhere, successful educational exchange programs are built on substantive and sustained two-way institutional interaction. Short-term visits lead to institutional MOUs that create the framework for the exchange of students and faculty and the development of joint research programs. TAF has made efforts to facilitate the development of such a relationship between the international agricultural program of Cornell University and the Academy of Agricultural Sciences of the DPRK. Syracuse University has progressed further in developing an institutional relationship with Kim Chaek University of Science and Technology. In both cases the importance, as well as the challenges, of developing such relationships with the DPRK have been demonstrated. Even if the U.S. State Department agrees to issues visas, the DPRK has not signaled that it is prepared to send students or faculty to the U.S. university for any length of time, nor to host U.S. faculty at its institutions. Nevertheless, institutional agreements can be important in providing programs with focus and continuity, allowing for personal relationships to develop, and creating opportunities to rapidly ramp up programs when the political climate permits.
- **Trust-building:** This is a critical factor cited by almost everyone working with the DPRK (or any other international partner, for that matter). But it is tricky to apply this concept in the DPRK context, since it is not always clear where special requests are coming from. And some of the requests can be totally unrelated to the program under discussion. The point most frequently made by DPRK counterparts is that they trust partners who do what they agree to do. However, there have been cases where what is viewed as a "discussion of ideas" on the U.S. side is viewed as an "agreement" on the DPRK side. Thus, it is important that one not have general discussions of possible courses of action unless one's institution is ready to follow through if the DPRK side expresses interest. There should also be an institutional understanding of the line between donations/gifts for the sake of trust-building and for something

very different.

- **Multiple Programs:** It's as simple as "don't put all your eggs in one basket." Given the many things that can interrupt cooperation with a DPRK institution, it is good to have alternative programs—ideally with different counterparts—so that one might continue if another stalls.
- **Working with the Bureaucracy:** The DPRK has designated normal points of contact for outside organizations seeking program cooperation. For U.S. non-government entities this is KAPES, apparently a unit under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Based on experience, it appears that KAPES has its own interests and that these must be considered in working through them to reach counterpart institutions. Are there ways acceptable to the DPRK for reducing the number of bureaucratic layers in developing cooperative programs? Perhaps we can share experience on this topic.

### *Cautions*

- **Political Interruptions:** This is an obvious reality in working with the DPRK. It means that institutional leadership must be committed to engagement for the long haul. It probably means that the purpose of attempting educational cooperation with the DPRK must be viewed differently than the straightforward objectives that apply in most situations.
- **Silver Bullet Syndrome:** It appears that most North Koreans have been convinced that there is a specific, technical solution to most of their problems. Of course, they are operating in a system in which institutional, much less systemic, change is out of the question. A breakthrough in rice hybrid rice seed development (using the latest gene splicing technology) will solve the food crisis, rather than reducing local production to an ecologically sustainable level and importing food to close the gap (requiring a major systemic change to generate the necessary foreign exchange).
- **Short Time Horizon:** Everyone in the DPRK who works with external counterparts is under pressure to produce immediate and visible results. The problems are pressing, the superiors are demanding, and the consequences of failure are unpleasant. Some concrete benefits should be forthcoming in the short term in order that counterparts can stay engaged in a longer-term program.
- **One-Way Street:** In spite of talk about reciprocity in exchanges, DPRK counterparts are very limited in the access that they can offer to an external cooperating organization. They are not shy in pressing for

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wide access abroad to institutions and experts, but may be able to offer only another city tour and limited access to counterpart institutions and experts in their own country. In some cases, it has even been difficult to meet with participants in hosted exchanges when making follow-up visits to Pyongyang.

- **Gifts Demonstrate Sincerity:** Elaborating on the point above regarding trust-building, an external cooperating organization must be prepared to periodically provide some concrete evidence of its “sincerity.” The requested evidence may be entirely unrelated to the area of cooperation under discussion. The DPRK has a limited number of channels to the outside world, and whatever channels are available can be mobilized to meet an urgent need or request from leaders.
- **Publicity:** It is an understatement to say that the DPRK is publicity shy, except on its own terms. There have been cases where an external counterpart has trumpeted an agreement with a DPRK institution before the program has launched, and mysteriously the DPRK has pulled out. With the DPRK, “nothing happens until it happens,” and agreements are not programs. It is best to work quietly, with a sensitivity to the personal situation of counterparts. Talking with counterparts about timing and acceptable levels of publicity is advisable. It may be necessary to explain this to program donors.

## U.S.-DPRK Educational Exchanges: Some Considerations

The points made above can serve as general guidance to considering an exchange program with the DPRK. Here are some more specific points that program planners might consider:

- A U.S.-DPRK educational exchange will be embedded in the politics of U.S.-DPRK official relations. When the DPRK and U.S. policies line up for political engagement, exchange programs can move ahead. When one or both sides do not favor political engagement, discussions with the DPRK may continue, but concrete program steps will be limited.
- Given the above point, the leadership of U.S. educational institutions should take a long-term perspective on programs with the DPRK. They should view such programs not only as being educational in nature but also as contributing to the gradual stabilization of U.S.-Korea relations. This kind of support by an institution’s senior leadership is critical.
- Likewise, financial supporters of such programs must be committed and flexible. Programs will not unfold according to precise timetables. There will be periods of little or no expenditures, followed by the necessity for large budgets for exchanges that might develop with limited advance

notice.

- The DPRK, consistent with its self-image as an important player in the world, tends to value engagement with universities that it considers prestigious. (These would probably be the same that South Korean parents value highly.) Partnerships between these institutions and those with less name recognition but strong programs would be desirable.
- U.S. NGOs and foundations that have existing relationships and are committed to long-term programs with the DPRK can partner with educational institutions as facilitators and advisors on the development and maintenance of institutional relationships. The TAF-Cornell partnership is one example. In spite of a considerable lull in exchanges, the two institutions have maintained a partnership that can be activated when the political environment permits.
- The DPRK understands that educational exchanges can take place only with the approval of the U.S. government. An institution's access to the U.S. government at a high level is probably an advantage in the calculation of the DPRK counterparts. Having former government officials on the faculty of a U.S. partner institution is also likely to be considered a plus by the DPRK.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The author is currently Korea Country Representative for The Asia Foundation. This paper represents the personal views and analysis of the author, and not necessarily that of The Asia Foundation.