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U.S.-DPRK
EDUCATIONAL
EXCHANGES:
ASSESSMENT AND
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THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN
ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

**MOVING
FORWARD**

THE VALUE OF APPLES IN
HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING:
LESSONS FROM MERCY CORPS' EDUCATIONAL
EXCHANGES IN NORTH KOREA

David Austin

Invariably, when visiting North Korea the typical foreigner is instantly struck by the differences encountered in the cultural and political lives of North Koreans. There are photos of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il hanging in all the buildings and neatly pinned to everyone's lapel; there are few cars, wide streets, and the list goes on. Observations between visitors are often discussed in hushed voices so as not to draw unnecessary attention from the North Korean minders and to avoid any possible awkward conversation. Most first-time visitors sneak in a few comments with their national colleagues in the restroom at the Koryo Hotel, or while walking up the steps near the Juche Tower. One cannot help but be struck by the unified national spirit presented in lockstep with the eternal president, Comrade Kim Il-sung.

This was not necessarily the case when I accompanied a group of agricultural scientists to North Korea. Although they could not help but recognize the political distinctions during our first few hours in Pyongyang, they were far more fascinated by the unseasonable absence of leaves on the trees as we drove from the airport to our guest house and by the subsequent huge numbers of butterflies we could see flitting about the fields—things that I could see but had not noticed. From what could be observed, I was told, this may be a two-generation summer for the destructive peach fruit moth, *Carposina niponensis*!

I quickly realized that I had entered a new world on this most recent trip to North Korea, a world overpopulated with coddling moths, American white butterflies, and leaf miners. I had traveled to North Korea many times before, but had never seen it through this point of view. I was traveling with an entomologist and two horticulture experts whose perspectives and observations were freshly different from my own.

In my previous travels to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), I was always keenly aware of the most recent political changes taking place in Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington. Every time that I flew into the country, those seemingly ever-present tensions loomed large in governing my

speech and writings in every meeting and encounter. However, I had never noticed the bugs that, on this trip, kept popping up in the conversation or spontaneously grabbing my colleagues' attention during our field meetings. This was something new.

As a guest in North Korea, I know that I bear a certain responsibility as I travel there to “not screw up” (as my older sisters would all tell me); otherwise I could put in jeopardy the programs that my agency has so carefully nurtured and developed after years of trust-building with our Korean counterparts at the Korean American Private Exchange Society (KAPES). As a newcomer to the North Korea portfolio, I am very aware that Mercy Corps' programming in North Korea is a unique opportunity for our organization to play an important role as a humanitarian bridge between two countries that are technically still at war. I try to carefully consider all that happens around me—or at least until this trip I had thought that I was paying attention to what was happening all around me—until I realized that I had no idea what was happening in the insect and plant kingdoms, two kingdoms that affect the lives of people as much as, if not more than, their political environments.

During this most recent tour with three professors from Oregon State University (OSU), instead of discussing politics or the military in North Korea, we explored the mating habits of coddling moths, weather patterns, blossom times, and soil pH with our North Korean colleagues. Our conversations focused on a common desire to help increase the fruit production of some of the country's collective apple farms. This platform of common understanding in the horticultural communities transcended our national cultures and brought us together into a single scientific one.

From these fruitful conversations and productive field visits, I gained a deeper understanding of the role that university and educational exchanges can play in creating broader opportunities for mutual understanding between the vastly different societies of our two countries. Three years ago these same Oregon State University professors— Anita Azarenko, Helmut Riedl, and Steve Castagnoli—helped host a North Korean delegation to Oregon that Mercy Corps arranged with the farm managers of Kwaill County and KAPES. Dr. Azarenko taught the delegation in her classrooms at the university in Corvallis and, perhaps more importantly, on her private organic apple farm in rural Lane County. The Koreans learned organic farming principals and integrated pest management and then were given pruning hooks and shears to learn practical pruning techniques. After their afternoon on the farm, the Koreans' most pressing question was “How much money do the apples sell for?”

Now it was time for the American professors to see their former students in the context of their own working farms, and so Mercy Corps arranged the visit of the OSU team in order to establish a stronger understanding of how our involvement might lead to improved fruit production.

The consistency of relationships that Mercy Corps has been able to build through our apple programs, as well as in our donor base, provides a healthy measure of understanding as we seek both transparency and efficacy in our programming. By keeping the same people involved in the relationships, we have been able to forge stronger ties as we have more interaction—both in regards to difficulties and successes—in the development, execution, and follow-up of our programming.

Cultural, academic, and scientific exchanges provide an added layer of professionalism in our engagement with the North Koreans that benefits our overall relationships. Because we bring quality professionals, we demonstrate a level of commitment that speaks well to the North Koreans of our intentions to be helpful, which in turn deepens our relationships. When one recalls from our political theory classes that politics begins and ends with relationships, it is encouraging to know that we can build relationships of understanding through such cultural and scientific exchanges.

Thus, universities in particular are a tremendous catalyst for these kinds of exchanges. The American academic community—and in our case, land-grant universities—provide a tremendous resource for positive engagement with their niche-specific counterparts in North Korea who similarly study non-political sciences. These exchanges and relationships offer an alternative view to the one received by the general public through traditional media.

Typically, the news we hear from North Korea is political in nature: news about Kim Jong-il's health, the sinking of the *Cheonan*, Kim Jong-un and the succession of North Korean leadership. Global media analyze the political situation in North Korea up and down, contributing still further to the lack of understanding on both sides. However, these countless news stories have not necessarily engendered any positive steps toward easing tensions with the North Koreans, nor have they compelled us to think much differently about the stagnant situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Politics is rather myopic in that way. Like Hollywood, our political systems have a hyped-up notion of their own importance and demand the focus of our attention. Thus, the big differences are emphasized, while the smaller opportunities for success are met with little or no attention. Most of us engaged with North Korea have to gauge our steps in light of that demanding political perspective as we must operate in the political realities of the situation. Unfortunately, that glaring light too often limits our vision of what can be done, and the more promising opportunities for change are overcome by a powerful historical shadow.

That is why it is refreshing to travel with people whose lives are not dominated by politics, but rather by the more neutral sciences of horticulture, entomology, medicine, etc. These sciences are tremendously important for the long term, as their contributions can transform whole agricultural communities. It was an agricultural scientist, Norman Borlaug, who sparked

the Green Revolution in South Asia and saved tens, if not hundreds, of millions of lives over the past forty years. Similarly, but in a smaller context, Mercy Corps hopes that our humanitarian work in North Korean agriculture can benefit the food security of the people and eventually contribute to an increase in their overall standard of living.

By traveling with people who are more concerned about insects and the leaf size of apple trees, I discovered a more stable world in which to connect with and serve the people of North Korea. As an NGO program director, I can serve for a season as a facilitator, but my science-based colleagues can contribute to the longer-term cultural shift that naturally follows the progression of agricultural development. It was Thomas Jefferson who said, “The greatest service which can be rendered any country is to introduce a new plant to its culture,” and in that spirit Mercy Corps has been seeking ways to positively impact the apple orchard industry in North Korea.

Our recent journey there showed me that the research, studies, and outcomes of our friends and colleagues in the scientific community have created a platform of opportunity to help ease some of the greater tensions on the Korean Peninsula. By engaging in a non-political arena that dramatically affects the lives of Koreans, agricultural (and other science and academic) exchanges have opened doors of communication and assistance that can mutually benefit farmers, consumers, students, professors, and the cultures of both countries. Several U.S. NGOs are currently engaged with their local universities in the management of dairies, hospitals, greenhouses and other farms in North Korea. In our experience in Kwail County, the farm managers and their political counterparts respect the professionalism and scientific instruction brought by our academic colleagues. The recent management methods proposed by the OSU team during this trip offered a significant opportunity to improve the productivity of the orchards. The scientifically-proven information was not a political theory or an economic data point, but rather a useful tool that could be applied with positive results. In this case, it was not political change that would improve the trees; it was knowing how the weather patterns could help determine when to spray for the peach fruit moth.

This kind of technical, practical exchange of information leads to stronger relationships and opportunities for cooperation that eventually are recognized by the political authorities as having value. The more practical our exchanges can be—in terms of improving the harvest—the more valuable our relationships can become.

In order for Mercy Corps to establish more effective agriculture programs, we needed to bring some horticulture experts to assess our work and its potential, so we turned to our local land-grant institution, OSU. When the School of Horticulture was presented with the opportunity to assist in apple horticulture in North Korea (as they have also done in South Korea), they

realized that there was an institutional capacity to assist both our agency and their own researchers. They provided two apple experts—including the head of the department—and one entomologist.

Together the four of us traveled to North Korea in mid-September. During our trip I asked the entomologist, Dr. Helmut Riedl, how many countries he had been invited to visit because of his expertise in insects. He replied, “About twenty.” As an international studies major, I was fascinated. I realized that the power of international relations was significantly enhanced by this gentleman with a youthful curiosity for bugs. As we walked down the streets of Pyongyang, I would ponder what political slogan was written on the big red banners hanging on the sides of the apartment buildings, while Helmut was wondering what species of insect had eaten all the leaves of the poplar trees lining the streets.

When we visited South Hwanghae Province and toured apple orchards, I wanted to know the history of the farms, while Helmut tore a leaf from the tree, pulled out a magnifying glass, and counted the number of mites on the leaf’s underside. My other horticultural colleagues likewise started counting russet spots on the apples, and inquired about what they quickly deduced must have certainly been a late frost. Needless to say, our local hosts were far more engaged by the OSU team than they were by my interest in the history of farm collectivization.

I witnessed a level of engagement with the professors and apple farm managers that I had not seen on my earlier trip with our agency’s president, donors and a former U.S. ambassador. The farm managers may have been impressed with the prestige of our earlier visitors, but they connected professionally and personally with their agricultural counterparts.

The farm managers clearly respected the technical and professional knowledge of the team that we had brought to meet with them. In a matter of hours our team had figured out ways to reduce the level of pesticide use by over 50 percent, and was able to make recommendations to protect the orchards’ fruit bearing potential for years to come. Likewise, the OSU professors were impressed with the commitment and knowledge of these farm managers who were tasked with managing nearly 70 percent of the North Korean apple orchards. Both sides could quietly mourn the lack of available resources that were needed to properly care for these trees, then discuss means of collaborating on potential research projects in several small pilot-scale projects. Although we did not speak Korean, and they did not speak English, it was clear that they all spoke *apples*, and this common horticultural language was spoken for several hours each day that we were together. It turns out that *apples* is the language of opportunity for our ongoing work in North Korea.

Mercy Corps has been involved in the North Korean apple industry for the past ten years. We have sent hundreds of thousands of trees to North Korea, and made more than twenty visits to the orchards of Kwail County.

The farms have been the catalyst for several prominent civic and business leaders from the state of Oregon to travel to North Korea to see these farms and to invest in relationships with our friends at KAPES.

Further, our agency has also hosted multiple agricultural delegations of North Korean farm managers and agriculture ministers here in Oregon, at times in partnership with both OSU and with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. We have been able to introduce North Koreans to U.S. farm management practices, pruning strategies, integrated pest management and other apple-related subjects; most importantly, we have been able to introduce them to life in America. Granted, our experience has been trying at times. Although we have had success in arranging technical visits, they are not without their difficulties. Arranging the visits has its own complicated hurdles, and executing a successful visit has others. In fact, at times we have to gauge our success by whether or not a visit occurs at all. During our most recent visit, the OSU team was able to make some simple suggestions on reducing pesticide use, but at the end of our meeting we were informed that the meetings scheduled for the next day had been cancelled, and the opportunity was lost to follow up on our technical advice. Fortunately, Mercy Corps has the kind of relationship with KAPES where we can have a frank discussion about these kind of frustrating interruptions in our coordinated plans and their detrimental impact on our ability to secure and maintain good programming. The receptivity to this kind of feedback has been cordial, and we do not know its long-term impact, but it is encouraging that we can now voice displeasure in a situation without threatening the overall partnership. We believe that there is a willingness to listen and stay engaged in the conversation even if it does not immediately translate into a change in circumstances.

Further, we recognize that success within our relationships at KAPES is subject to several factors outside the control of its government agency. For instance, the management of farms in the DPRK is not governed under a single bureaucratic institution or ministry, which in turn complicates any cooperation we might otherwise be able to facilitate between in-country orchards and internationally with cooperating agencies. Farms in most counties are coordinated through the National Fruit Company or Academy of Agricultural Sciences, but the farms in Kwail County are under the authority of Pyongyang City, and we do not know exactly who. Mercy Corps must coordinate its activities through KAPES, but the European NGOs work through other bodies within the DPRK. This makes partnership in programming difficult as we are not always aware of who makes the decisions or how best to respond to what the needs may be, as the farm managers may have one perspective from their work on the ground, while the authorities in Pyongyang express additional or competing priorities, and our European colleagues have different views altogether. During our most recent trip we were given a list of priorities from the farm managers for ways Mercy Corps

could assist with the orchards, while we were given a completely different list from the political authorities in Pyongyang, and the European agencies all had their own opinions. Fortunately, our OSU apple experts could help synthesize everything into some concrete steps forward that in the end, we believe, will help to accomplish everyone's goals.

Our program goal is to increase overall fruit production in the region. The achievement of that goal will be determined primarily by our ability to meet the political objectives of our hosts in Pyongyang and synchronize them with the agricultural science that nature requires in order for trees to bear fruit. One of our responsibilities as a humanitarian agency is to help the political powers realize that we are all on the same team when it comes to agricultural goals.

As a final example, we are currently considering an option to coordinate a nationally integrated pest management program for apples, which is a basic requirement for any farm to succeed in the long term. As we have started to uncover which foreign and domestic agencies (including NGOs) are involved in apple orchards, we have learned that they share the same goals but do not work with each other. This can make the sharing or gathering of information somewhat difficult. However, as we have learned who is doing what and where, we have acquired a broader picture of what needs to be done, and have started making some program recommendations to our North Korean colleagues that could greatly improve their chances of meeting their political—and our humanitarian—goals: an increase in fruit production.

In conclusion, Mercy Corps' experience in the DPRK over the past twelve years has shown us that the successes and relationships developed from these agricultural programs provide a platform for subsequently larger, more significant levels of humanitarian engagement in times of need. Academic exchanges have enhanced our ability to help in the short term of the ongoing agricultural project, and this in turn has strengthened our capacity to serve the broader needs of the country in greater times of crisis. During the food shortage in 2008, Mercy Corps was asked to lead a consortium of five NGOs to implement a food assistance program that fed 895,000 people each month for eight months. Similarly, our continued presence in the apple orchards has allowed Mercy Corps access to the local hospitals, which in turn has resulted in programs that have supplied medical equipment and medicine to five hospitals in South Hwanghae Province. These food and medical programs were funded by the U.S. government, which demonstrates how an organization like Mercy Corps can serve as a humanitarian bridge in an official capacity.