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People with Disabilities in a Changing North Korea

Katharina Zellweger



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Shorenstein APARC Working Paper

Katharina Zellweger 2011–13 Pantech Fellow Korea Program



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About the Author

Katharina Zellweger is currently a visiting fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Prior to that she was the Pantech Fellow in Korean Studies at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, in residence at Stanford University from November 2011 to August 2013. Most recently at Stanford she taught *An Insight into North Korea Society*, a course for both graduate and undergraduate students. She is a frequent presenter on the topic of the situation of the North Korean people, to audiences in the United States and abroad, and has widely participated in workshops, seminars, and conferences on humanitarian and security issues concerning the Korean Peninsula, and more specifically those issues regarding North Korea.

Zellweger is a senior aid manager with over thirty years of field experience in Hong Kong, China, and North Korea. She was based in Pyongyang for five years (2006–2011) as North Korea country director for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), an office of the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The focus of her work was on sustainable agricultural production in order to address food security issues, income generation to improve people's livelihoods, and capacity development contributing to individual and institutional learning.

Before joining SDC, Zellweger worked from 1978 to 2006 for the Catholic agency Caritas in Hong Kong in a senior post; she played a key role in pioneering Caritas involvement initiatives in China and in North Korea.

Zellweger received the Bishop Tji Hak-soon Justice and Peace Award in 2005 from a South Korean foundation established to promote social justice, and in 2006 the Dame of St. Gregory the Great from the Vatican for her work in North Korea.

Upon the invitation of The Korea Society of New York she organized a (still ongoing) travelling exhibition of her collection of North Korean socialist posters.

Zellweger has a master's degree in international administration from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont.

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1. Introduction

People with disabilities are the world's largest minority group, the only one any person can join at any time.¹

Republic of Korea (DPRK, commonly known as North Korea), a country also widely regarded as immobile when it comes to social change. Stories from defectors paint a grim picture of a monotonous daily life coupled with a constant fear of arbitrary government punishment and imprisonment. In the Western and South Korean media there are frequent reports about disabled people not being allowed to reside in the showcase capital of Pyongyang, being hidden away even elsewhere, and possibly having been used as subjects in chemical and biological weapons experiments.² The media report that the mere sighting of a person in a wheelchair in the capital is a surprising, if not shocking, occurrence.

The fact is that misperceptions and misinterpretations, controlled access, staged visits, and other types of restrictions result in distorted views of North Korea. Foreign visitors often report

I "Disabled World – Disability News and Information," accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.disabled-world.com.

² Philip Iglauer, "N.K. Experiments on Disabled Children, Rights Group," *The Korea Herald*, June 30, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130630000160.

that they are only able to see the North Korea that the regime wants them to see, but many also view the country and its people with preconceived notions. Foreign media tend to report only sensational or unusual news. Such factors make it difficult to determine the ultimate "truth" about the country, and thus no one can honestly claim to have a full picture of the situation in North Korea.

Like all societies, North Korea is complex. Although the country suffers from unusually high poverty and considerable international isolation, many aspects of its society are actually within normal international ranges. For a foreigner to obtain realistic information and develop an accurate understanding of the country and its people, long-term engagement, patience, and development of mutual trust are necessary. This paper is based on the author's twenty years of experience as an aid worker assisting the North Korean people, including five years as a resident in Pyongyang (2006–11) and two visits in 2013 to learn not only about the present situation of North Koreans living with disabilities but also to observe developments taking place.³

Over the course of the last two decades, North Korea has undergone many social changes. Among these, significant positive developments in terms of attitudes toward disabilities are beginning to take place. Though much more needs to be done, services for people with disabilities are increasing; public awareness of the needs and rights of the disabled is growing; and integration of the disabled into mainstream society is occurring, albeit gradually.

³ The author first met North Korean officials in Beijing in August 1995. Thereafter, due to her active involvement in humanitarian aid and development assistance projects, from spring 1995 to summer 2006 she visited the country fifty-one times. This includes working in Pyongyang for five years, from October 2006 to September 2011, as head of the DPRK office of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

2. Disabilities: A Global Issue

Most human beings experience some form of disability during their lifetimes. Some people may be born with a handicap; others may develop a disorder due to illness or injury; and most people will develop one or more disabilities in their later years. Nevertheless, throughout most of the world traditional attitudes and practices tend to discriminate, harass, neglect, or even banish the disabled from public sight. Only in the past several decades has public awareness of those living with physical or mental challenges begun to change for the better in most parts of the world. Beginning during World War II, organizations and services for disabled persons started to increase, as considerable efforts were made to rehabilitate war veterans. Nonetheless, people with disabilities, as well as those who care for them, still face numerous challenges, in particular, finding adequate support and resources to make improvements to their daily lives. The tendency is to treat people with disabilities as *objects* in need of help rather than as *individuals* able and eager to enjoy full lives despite the challenges they face.

The preamble to the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities declares that disability "results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." Article I states: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." Based on this broad definition, the extent

⁴ United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol," December 6, 2006, accessed December 16, 2013, http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf.

of a disability may range from mild or moderate to severe and profound; people may also have multiple disabilities; and disabilities may be either visible or invisible.

According to the World Health Organization's 2011 "World Report on Disability," over one billion people in the world have one or more disabilities. Among these, between 110 and 190 million people face very significant disabilities. This corresponds to approximately 15 percent of the world's population. This contrasts with WHO estimates in the 1970s suggesting a figure closer to 10 percent.

Patients fill the beds and rooms at Hamhung Orthopedic Hospital. Note: faces are blurred to protect anonymity. Credit for all photos: Katharina Zellweger.



Internationally, it is difficult to compare disability figures because there are differences among countries in terms of how "disability" is defined. The great variability in such statistics can be seen in the entries for select countries in the UN ESCAP Report, "Disability at a Glance 2010: A Profile of 36 Countries and Areas in Asia and the Pacific" (select Asian nations shown in table 1).6

⁵ WHO, "World Report on Disability," accessed December 16, 2013, http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/index.html.

⁶ UN ESCAP, "Disability at a Glance 2010: A Profile of 36 Countries and Areas in Asia and the Pacific," accessed January 10, 2014, http://www.unescap.org/publications/disability/disability-at-a-glance-2010.pdf.

According to Disabled World, Asia and the Pacific region, with some 400 million disabled persons, account for the most people in the world with disabilities. In 1996 China's Disabled Persons Federation published new statistics on disabled persons in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Out of a population of 1.2 billion people at the time, sixty million individuals were classified as having one or more disabilities, representing approximately 5 percent of the total population.

TABLE 1
Proportion of persons with disabilities to total population (2010)

Country	Ratio	Country	Ratio
Australia	20.0	Hong Kong	4.0
Lao dpr	8.0	Mongolia	3.5
Sri Lanka	7.0	Singapore	3.0
Vietnam	6.4	Myanmar	2.8
China	6.3	India	2.1
Bangladesh	5.6	Thailand	1.7
Japan	5.0	Phillipines	1.2
Republic of Korea	4.6	Indonesia	1.0
Cambodia	4.5	Malaysia	1.0

Source: Based on UN ESCAP, "Disability at a Glance 2010: A Profile of 36 Countries and Areas in Asia and the Pacific."

⁷ Disabled World, "Disability and Health News from Asia," accessed December 15, 2013, http://www.disabled-world.com/news/asia.

⁸ Zhuoying Qu, "Disability Statistics in the People's Republic of China," *Asia & Pacific Journal on Disability*, no. 3, September 1998, accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/english/asia/resource/zooap/oo3/zooapoo308. html.

3. The Historical Context of Disability Policy in North Korea

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite state governments in Eastern Europe, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea lost its major economic partners. Although North Korea remained a socialist society with a Soviet-style authoritarian political system, Russia and the Eastern European countries no longer provided markets for DPRK exports or preferential access to technology and other imports. At about the same time, China also began demanding market prices for its oil and other exports to the DPRK. (Oil-based imports are essential for North Korea to produce fertilizers, pesticides, and plastic sheeting for seed propagation, as well as to maintain irrigation facilities and other agricultural machinery.) As a result, the country's ability to grow sufficient food to feed its people was weakened, a problem acutely compounded by a series of natural disasters in the mid-1990s.

The country's economic near-collapse coupled with its natural disasters had catastrophic consequences for the North Korean people. Facing the threat of nationwide starvation in the summer of 1995, the North Korean government made an unprecedented appeal to the United Nations for humanitarian assistance. It was in the process of responding to the crisis that the international community gradually became more knowledgeable about the system, leadership, society, and people in North Korea

The immediate post—Cold War economic crisis and famine resulted in a chronically malnourished populace. Even today, most of North Korea's twenty-four million people find it difficult to survive day-to-day hardships. Many people fall between the cracks of an exceedingly weak social safety net.

As in most poor countries, urban living standards differ starkly from those in the rest of the country, as economic development commonly starts at the center and expands gradually to the periphery. Yet North Korea is clearly experiencing a historic social and economic transformation. During the past twenty years, I have personally observed what I call the "five M's": (1) markets and (2) money are playing a much greater role in the daily lives of ordinary North Koreans; (3) mobile phones have become a common form of communication; (4) the number of motor vehicles have increased; and (5) in Pyongyang, there are signs that a middle class is developing. Today, even people at the margins, for instance, those with disabilities, are also beginning to benefit from growth and modernization.

 $^{9\,}$ Katharina Zellweger, "Accelerating Social Change in North Korea," unpublished paper, August 2012.

4. The Legal Framework for Disabilities in the DPRK

The DPRK has a fairly extensive legal framework for the protection and support of the disabled. The constitution (as revised in 1998) provides a general principle for protecting people with disabilities. Article 72 states: "Citizens are entitled to free medical care, and all persons who are no longer able to work because of old age, illness or a physical disability, the old and children who have no means of support are all entitled to material assistance. This right is ensured by free medical care, an expanding network of hospitals, sanatoria and other medical institutions, State social insurance and other social security systems." ¹⁰

On June 18, 2003, the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly passed the Law of [the] Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the Protection of Persons with Disability.¹¹ The law contains six chapters on caring for disabled persons, covering such areas as rehabilitation, education, cultural life, and labor.

The Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a human rights instrument of the United Nations to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities throughout the world, was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 2006. To date, it has 155 signatories. The Convention became international law on May 3, 2008, albeit only in those countries that ratified it. The

^{10 &}quot;DPRK's Socialist Constitution," accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.novexcn.com/dprk_constitution_98.html.

[&]quot;The Law of Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the Protection of the Person with Disability," June 18, 2003, accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.nkproject.org/guide/down.php?idx=473.

¹² UN Enable, "VRPF and Optional Protocol Signatures and Ratifications," accessed December 15, 2013, http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/maps/enablemap.jpg.

DPRK signed the Convention on July 3, 2013, thereby agreeing to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities, as outlined by the Convention's eight guiding principles:

- Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons;
- Non-discrimination;
- Full and effective participation and inclusion in society;
- Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity;
- Equality of opportunity;
- Accessibility;
- Equality between men and women;
- Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the rights of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

However, the Convention has yet to be ratified by the DPRK government.

In most countries, the gap between commendable principles and laws supporting the disabled and actual practice is great. This is certainly the case in North Korea's highly structured society, where robust physical and mental health is emphasized and any weakness is considered shameful. People with disabilities thus become easy targets of stigmatization and discrimination; all too often they remain out of sight and are neglected by both their home communities and the authorities.

5. The Current Situation of People with Disabilities in North Korea

Even though much more information is available about North Korea today than was available even a decade ago, knowledge about the inner workings of its society remains limited. This is especially the case regarding North Koreans with disabilities, about which next-to-nothing has been published. Although some government services have long been provided for children with vision and hearing impairments,¹³ as well as for disabled war veterans and their families, the North Korean government only relatively recently, and reluctantly, acknowledged the existence of disabled people in the country. Since the late 1990s, however, there have been clear indications that views within North Korea regarding people with disabilities are changing.

As revealed in the 2008 population census conducted by the DPRK Central Bureau of Statistics with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 8.16 percent of North Korea's population of 24.05 million¹⁴ has some type of disability, a total of approximately 1.96 million people.

According to Weol Soon Kim-Rupnow, associate professor at the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, "Some Koreans believe that *lifelong* disability is a kind of payback for something they did wrong in the past. As a result, many Koreans with disabilities and their families often

¹³ In April 1995, the author was one of the first foreigners to visit a residential school for deaf children. The Songchon School was established in South Pyongan province in the late 1940s. According to the school director, in March 1993 then-supreme leader Kim Il Sung started to pay greater attention to people with hearing problems, and subsequently several articles were published about such disabilities; see, for example, *Korea*, No. 325 (October 1993).

¹⁴ UNFPA, "2008 Census of Population of DPRK: Key Findings," accessed December 16, 2013, http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/news/2010/dprko8_censuskeyfinds.pdf.

suffer from shame, helplessness, denial, withdrawal, and depression. Many view *acquired* disability as the result of some sort of bad luck or misfortune." Though Kim-Rupnow is focusing primarily on South Korea, these beliefs hold true also on the northern side of the divided Korean Peninsula.

The governments of both Koreas officially refer to people with disabilities using virtually identical terms, *changaein* (장애인) in the South, and *changaeja* (장애자) in the North. (*Changae* means "obstacle" or "hindrance"; *in* and *ja* both mean "person.") As elsewhere in the world, the two Korean societies also have derogatory terms, often incorrect by definition, to refer to those with disabilities. In the South, *bulguja* (불구자) may be translated as "handicapped," and the derogatory term *pyeongshin* (병신) refers to a crippled or deformed person. North Koreans also use *bulgu* and *pyeongshin*.

A young boy, still walking with crutches, eagerly awaits having his prosthesis fitted.



Foreign visitors to Pyongyang today continue to express surprise that almost no people in wheelchairs or with crutches are visible on the streets of the capital. In 2006 a un special rapporteur on human rights noted that defectors have reported that, historically, disabled persons

¹⁵ Weol Soon Kim-Rupnow, "An Introduction to Korean Culture for Rehabilitation Service Providers," Center for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange, CIRRIE, 2001, accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.cirrie.buffalo.edu/culture/monographs/korea.pdf.



Production workshop at the Hamhung Physical Rehabilitation Center and Orthopedic Factory. In 2012 over one thousand devices were made; many others were repaired, and unusable devices were recycled.

were separated according to their physical deformity or handicap and were housed in special group accommodations, often in harsh conditions, away from Pyongyang or other major cities. ¹⁶ More recently, a Seoul-based human rights group, Citizen Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, reported that a defector had provided information about a "Hospital 83," said to be located on an island off the coast of South Hamgyong province, where disabled children were being used for "medical tests such as dissection of body parts, as well as tests of biological and chemical weapons." ¹⁷ As noted recently by the head of the current UN inquiry on human rights in North Korea, verification of such reports is virtually impossible, as no foreigners have had access to such places. ¹⁸

^{16 &}quot;North Korea Puts Handicapped in Camps, U.N. Report Says," *Mail Online*, October 20, 2006, accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-411648/North-Korea-puts-handicapped-camps-U-N-report-says.html. The UN special rapporteur was not allowed to visit the DPRK and thus had to rely on information from outside sources.

¹⁷ Philip Iglauer, "N.K. Experiments on Disabled Children, Rights Group," *Korea Herald*, June 30, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130630000160.

^{18 &}quot;UN Rights Panel Urges N. Korea To Grant Access," AFP, August 27, 2013, accessed December 4, 2013, http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130827/



Blind youth learning

Braille and using

computers.

The lack of common devices and equipment to assist those with disabilities, such as wheelchairs, crutches, or canes, not to mention the lack of accessibility on streets and in buildings, hinders the integration of disabled people into mainstream society. Furthermore, certain provinces and regions, particularly along the east coast and in the northeast, are especially poorly equipped to provide services for the disabled. Thus often the only option for the disabled is to remain confined to their homes.

Poverty and traditional attitudes of shame have greatly complicated life for those with disabilities. Again, however, changing views and the implementation of new programs are beginning to bring about some improvements. This leads to the questions of whether the gradual opening-up of the country to the outside world will result in better public services for the disabled and whether official and popular attitudes in North Korea toward the disabled will change significantly.

6. Establishment of the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled

The flow of information about the lives of ordinary North Koreans has improved since the onset of humanitarian aid programs in the mid-1990s and the increased presence of international aid workers. Yet people with disabilities have only gradually begun to receive assistance from the international community as the DPRK government initially was reluctant to discuss the topic, much less to allow outside workers access. Over time, however, occasional visits to residential schools for children with vision or hearing problems became possible. Some ad-hoc support has been accepted, and advice about the treatment and education of disabled people has been much appreciated by those within the country who are working with people with disabilities.



Logo of the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled (KFPD).

Links with China, in particular collaboration with China's Disabled Persons' Federation, an organization established in Beijing in 1988, have changed the thinking of the authorities



A patient faces the challenge of walking again after being fitted with two leg prostheses.

in Pyongyang. The DPRK government began to see first-hand the value of involving civil society to provide assistance to the disabled. With this came recognition that people with disabilities have certain rights and they should be given opportunities to develop their physical, mental, and social capabilities to the fullest possible extent. Awareness of the rights and needs of people with disabilities increased further as DPRK officials began to participate in UN meetings¹⁹ on the subject in New York, Geneva, and Rome. The country's willingness to acknowledge problems within its borders and to begin to make efforts to improve the situation resulted in a somewhat better image of the country, at least as it pertains to treatment of the disability. Nonetheless, despite some advances, overall negative reports still abound.

On July 29, 1998, a cabinet resolution of the DPRK government established a "civil society organization" to represent the rights and interests of people with disabilities. Initially this body was known as the Korean Association for Supporting the Disabled (KASD), but it has since been renamed the Korean

¹⁹ The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea were simultaneously admitted to the United Nations in September 1991.

Federation for the Protection of the Disabled (KFPD). The KFPD considers itself a non-governmental organization (NGO), even though staff salaries and fringe benefits, as well as certain infrastructure costs, are covered by the Ministry of Health. The KFPD relies on both local and international donations for specific projects and programs.

As reported its 2011 annual report, the charter of the KFPD states:

The mission of the KFPD is to advocate and represent the rights and interests of people with disabilities in DPRK. Among its major tasks, contributions to the mental and physical rehabilitation of the people with disabilities, the establishment of a barrier-free environment, prevention of disabilities and ensuring a social status of respect for people with disabilities will be the top priority of the federation. The federation shall undertake various kinds of support services and advocate and disseminate public information to enable people with disabilities to play their role as the true masters of the society and community.²⁰

Despite countless challenges, the achievements already attributed to the KFPD form the basis for future development and progress. In 1999, for the first time in DPRK history, a national survey on the situation of people with disabilities was conducted. As noted above, advocacy activities resulted in the June 2003 adoption of a law to protect persons with disabilities. As a result of the law, the provision of assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, crutches, and hearing aids, was initiated, as well as the production of prostheses to help those with missing limbs.

Meanwhile, in addition to the 2001 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Handicap International, MOUS have also been signed with the China Disabled Persons' Federation and the World Federation of the Deaf, signaling an increased willingness to form partnerships and collaborations with foreign partners.

Domestically, the organizational structure for the disabled

²⁰ Central Committee of the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled, 2011 Annual Report, 5.

was strengthened with the establishment of the Korean Art Association for the Disabled, the Korean Sports Association for the Disabled, the Korean Company for Supporting the Disabled, and the Korean Foundation for the Disabled and Orphans. To implement the local work of the KFPD, a number of provincial, city, and county committees were set up, as well as departments for the disabled within various institutions. Internationally, a Beijing Representative Office was established in July 2008.²¹

²¹ The Beijing office has two KFPD staff members assisting donors regarding communications, visa procedures for visits to the DPRK, purchasing rehabilitation equipment and materials in China for projects in North Korea, as well as organizing exposure trips and training programs in China for DPRK rehabilitation experts.

7. Disability Statistics in the 2008 Population Census

The 2008 DPRK population census provides limited information on the health and welfare of North Korean citizens. Of the twelve disability categories usually used for assessments, four were included in the census.²² Only a small proportion of the population (8.1 percent) reported some kind of disability: sight (2.4 percent), hearing (1.7 percent), mobility (2.5 percent), and mental problems (1.5 percent). Within each of these categories, the degree of impairment was specified as (1) no difficulty, (2) slight difficulty, (3) considerable difficulty, or (4) zero ability. No data are available for children below the age of five. This last fact, together with the possibility that not all census respondents were willing to admit their disabilities, suggests that the overall prevalence of persons with disabilities is likely to be significantly higher than that reported in the census. (The estimate from the first-ever survey, conducted by the KFPD in 1999, was only 3.41 percent.) 23

Furthermore, North Koreans are living shorter lives. Average life expectancy fell from 72.7 years in 1993 to 69.3 years in 2008. At the same time, infant mortality increased from 14 to 19 per 1,000 live births. (A 2009 UN report puts the worldwide figure much higher, at 46 per 1,000 children.) DPRK infant mortality may be relatively low, in part because most couples have only one child; with four grandparents and two parents looking after an only child, the level of care may be higher than elsewhere. Moreover, in recent years the number of deliveries has declined

²² Central Bureau of Statistics, "DPR Korea 2008 Population Census: National Report," 2009, accessed December 4, 2013, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010_PHC/North_Korea/Final%20national%20census%20report.pdf.

²³ This information was provided in a 2008 funding request to a donor agency.

while the number of family doctors has remained about the same (one doctor is responsible for 630 people or 130 families). However, since the mid-1990s North Korean health-care institutions have faced significant pressures due to a lack of resources. The chances of survival for severely disabled children, especially babies, are not promising. This too probably accounts for the low disability rate: if those with severe disabilities do not survive infancy, there will be fewer older children and adults with disabilities.²⁴

²⁴ Karen Eggleston, faculty director of the Asia Health Policy Program at Stanford University, notes that, in the academic literature on public health, higher infant and child mortality leading to a lower share of the disabled in the adult population is referred as the "culling versus scarring" effect. "At older ages, such as war veterans, the most disabled might also suffer higher mortality, so that population would be 'culled,' but war- and age-related 'scarring' might also suggest a higher rate of disability. It is thus hard to determine whether one should expect a higher or lower share of disabled in the DPRK compared to elsewhere." Email correspondence with the author, August 27, 2013.

8. Traditional Services for the Disabled

Services for the Deaf and the Blind

Traditionally, institutions for the disabled in North Korea were located far away from the urban and suburban areas (as was the case in Europe, where services for the deaf and blind have a long history). The provision of education for deaf and blind persons in the DPRK began with the establishment of special schools in the late 1940s or the early 1950s. In the spring of 1995, the DPRK presented a report to an international humanitarian aid agency listing eight special schools for 960 children with hearing problems and three special schools for 140 visually impaired children.²⁵ Though these institutions have been in operation for many years, they are, like many medical facilities in North Korea, in need of updated staff training programs and modernized facilities. Deaf schools provide education to students for ten years, 26 including two years of vocational training in haircutting, handicrafts, drawing, embroidery, dress design, dressmaking, or electrical household appliance repair. The use of sign language as a communication tool for hearing-impaired people was officially recognized by the government in 2003.27 After graduation, students are given six additional months of on-the-job training in real-life conditions in the hopes that they will find future work. Job integration, however, remains a chal-

²⁵ The author, as representative of Caritas-Hong Kong, visited the DPRK for the first time in April 1995. At that time, she received the list of the nine schools, as well as requests for assistance for the disabled.

²⁶ For non-disabled students, North Korea's education system up to 2011 provided eleven years of free, compulsory schooling. This was increased to twelve years in 2012.

²⁷ Report on the first visit by Mr. Markku Jokinen, president of the World Federation of the Deaf, to the DPRK in July 2010, accessed December 10, 2013, http://www.together-hamhung.org/PDF/wfd%20delegation%20to%20DPRK.pdf.

At the Potonggang
Welfare Center for
People with Disabilities
in Pyongyang, women
with hearing or physical
disabilities have jobs at
the sewing workshop.



lenge. If these disabled students were, like all other students in the country, to receive twelve years of schoolingstudents with disabilities would be better prepared for the future.

After 1995 the capacity of the three special schools for blind children was increased from 140 students to 250 students, but, just as the schools for the deaf are not filled to capacity, those for the blind are also underutilized. Parents prefer to keep their disabled children at home rather than send them to distant residential schools.²⁸ Through the use of Braille typewriters, writing frames, styluses, and special paper,²⁹ the students learn to write in Korean Hangul Braille, to express themselves in text form, and to share information with other blind or visually impaired children.

Assistance for Disabled War Veterans

The Korean War, which began on June 25, 1950, ended after three years of brutal conflict. In the West, it is often referred to

²⁸ This information was provided to the author by foreigners who had recently visited these schools.

²⁹ All such materials have been donated by foreigners.



Another workshop at the
Potonggang Welfare Center.
A man repairs a watch.

as "the forgotten war," but in both North and South Korea, it is anything but "forgotten." Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and millions of civilians died and after the war, the Korean Peninsula was left in ruins. Technically, the war continues because, even though an armistice is in place, a peace treaty has yet to be signed.

Postwar reconstruction in North Korea included providing assistance to wounded war victims. Disabled war veterans today still receive special treatment and privileges, including housing, job opportunities in special workshops and small factories, and health care. Article 76 of the DPRK's newly amended constitution states that "Revolutionary fighters, the families of revolutionary and patriotic martyrs, the families of soldiers of the People's Army and disabled enjoy the special protection of the State and society." The annual health report of the Ministry of Health lists 682 sanatoria, omany of which offer services for disabled war veterans. North Korea has a special term for veterans who were disabled due to military service: yeong'ye kun'in (영화군 인), or "honored soldier."

^{30 &}quot;MDGs Progress and Annual Report on Health Status: DPRK, 2011," March 2011, accessed December 10, 2013, http://www.searo.who.int/entity/health_situation_trends/data/mdg/DPRK_MDG_2011.PDF.

9. Recent Developments: New Services

Since the establishment of the KFPD, activities and services for the disabled have clearly increased, in many cases because of donations from overseas benefactors.

The Potonggang Welfare Center for People with Disabilities, providing job opportunities for a small number of disabled people, was initiated in Pyongyang in 2007. It includes a sewing workshop, a watch repair station, and both hairdresser and beauty-parlor facilities. Located in downtown Pyongyang, it is frequented by local residents, but there is still a high demand among the disabled to find employment.

The Taedonggang Cultural Center for the Disabled, established in Pyongyang in 2009, aims to provide disabled children with opportunities to participate in music and dance groups as well as other cultural events. The center also seeks to raise awareness and foster the integration of disabled people into mainstream society. It is one place, perhaps the only place in the entire country, where parents and other family members can accompany their disabled children to the center and take part in cultural activities, thus providing opportunities for the community and the children to interact. In part because of this organization, residents near the center, not just family members, are becoming accustomed to encountering people with disabilities; but the process of full social integration remains at an early stage.

In 2010 the KFPD organized the first "Table Tennis Games for Amateurs and People with Disabilities." Participants in the six-day tournament in Pyongyang included some thirty athletes with disabilities as well as many able-bodied players. While raising public awareness about the plight of the disabled, the games also gave disabled athletes new confidence. In 2012 the event



At the Hamhung Physical Rehabilitation Center and Orthopedic Factory, a worker shows the production process for an old-style prosthetic arm.

included participation by disabled athletes from throughout the country; in 2013 foreign guests were also invited to take part.

A lone North Korean athlete,³¹ a seventeen-year-old amputee, participated in the 2012 Paralympics in London, marking North Korea's first-ever appearance in an international competition for people with disabilities. Although swimmer Rim Ju Song, who had lost his left arm and left leg in a construction accident at the age of six, came in last in his race, his courage to compete made history at home and abroad. His participation was made possible with the assistance of foreign donors. If funding becomes available, it is likely that more disabled North Korean athletes will participate in the next Paralympics Games, scheduled for Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

The China Rehabilitation Research Center in Beijing, affiliated with the China Disabled Persons' Federation, continues to offer training programs for groups of North Korean professionals from the KFPD and related service facilities. Such cooperation plays a key role in improving existing services, as well as in developing new services, for people with disabilities in the DPRK. In addition to specific courses, exposure to various rehabilitation services in China, including speech therapy,

³¹ Amelia Gentleman, "Meet Swimmer Rim Ju Song, North Korea's First Paralympic Athlete," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2012, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/sep/04/north-korea-first-paralympic-athlete.

physiotherapy, and occupational therapy, offers new ideas for possible pilot projects back in the DPRK.

Depending on the availability of funds, the KFPD reports that it intends to increase and improve services in the following areas:³²

- Improving the availability of assistive technology by selling, producing, and repairing devices and equipment, such as wheelchairs and other kinds of mobility aids, canes for the visually impaired, and hearing aids;
- Supporting vocational training programs to enhance working capabilities for the disabled and to secure their suitable employment and integration into the workforce;
- Establishing sheltered workshops for people with physical, visual, or hearing disabilities, and, whenever feasible, assisting the disabled to become small-scale business operators;
- Advancing learning for disabled children by renovating the existing education infrastructure, and by introducing education based on information technology, including publishing an electronic sign-language dictionary;
- Developing services for those with mental-health issues and cognitive disabilities;
- Increasing preventive measures by promoting road safety for pedestrians and operators of cars, trucks, motorcycles, and bicycles;
- Promoting barrier-free access in planning for new buildings and removing barriers in existing facilities;
- Engaging in capacity building for KFPD staff in terms of information, education, and communication;
- Expanding and consolidating partnerships at the national and international levels; and
- Constructing and managing a comprehensive rehabilitation center in Pyongyang.

³² Author's discussions with the KFPD, June 2013.

10. Raising Awareness and Educating the Public

Foreign residents in Pyongyang have reported that in the year before the 2012 London Olympics, attitudes toward disabilities began to change. An increasing number of disabled people, including those using wheelchairs and "modern" crutches, were seen on the streets of Pyongyang.³³

For several years, North Korea has been marking the "International Day of Persons with Disabilities," ³⁴ instituted by the UN General Assembly in 1992 and celebrated annually on December 3. The designation is meant to encourage governments and organizations to implement measures to improve the lives of persons with disabilities. Official speeches, cultural and sports performances by disabled children at their schools, and photo exhibitions for foreign residents and certain members of the general public, are increasing the visibility of disability issues and the work performed by the KFPD. ³⁵

The Good Fellowship, an international meeting of deaf people in Pyongyang that includes North Koreans, has been initiated by the German Disabled Persons' Organization "TOGETHER – Educational Center for Deaf, Blind and Non-Disabled Children Hamhung e.V." It is organized jointly by the KFPD and the Liaison Office of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). Between 2009 and 2013, five Good Fellowship gatherings took

³³ Interviews conducted by the author with foreign residents in Pyongyang, in June 2013.

³⁴ The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons took place from 1983 to 1992. As this decade drew to a close, the UN General Assembly proclaimed December 3 as the "International Day of Disabled Persons." In 2008 the name was changed to "International Day of Persons with Disabilities."

³⁵ The author attended several of these functions; short video clips can also be found on YouTube, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-nho2fpwQko.

Simple equipment for learning to balance and to walk again after prostheses have been fitted, at the Hamhung Physical Rehabilitation Center/ Orthopedic Factory.



place, including a total of 117 foreign guests, all deaf or hardof-hearing people, from fourteen countries (Austria, Australia, China, Finland, Germany, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, Morocco, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United States).³⁶ The main goals of the Good Fellowship are to allow deaf individuals to become acquainted with one another, learn from one other, build new friendships, and find ways to establish international cooperation in such areas as sports and tourism. The gathering is a means of fostering exchanges among deaf people, advocating their empowerment, creating an environment of independence, and promoting greater civic inclusion not only within North Korea, but also in the home countries of the guests as well as around the globe. The WFD has applied to establish an official WFD Representative Office in Pyongyang, which likely will also bring other benefits to the deaf community in the DPRK.

In many communities throughout the DPRK, an informal KFPD volunteer network, now numbering approximately four thousand KFPD members, 37 was established a number of years

³⁶ This information was provided by the organizers in Pyongyang.

³⁷ This information was provided to the author during a visit to the DPRK in



This relatively simple workshop still produced over one thousand prostheses in 2012.

ago. The network enhances the spirit and work of the KFPD and provides the KFPD leadership and staff with valuable input. Some two thousand volunteers are registered at the KFPD's three branch offices, in Kangwon, South Pyongan, and South Hamgyong provinces, with the remaining volunteers coming from other locations in North Korea. Their mission is to assist the KFPD in assessing the needs of the disabled, to suggest ways to improve their living conditions, and to provide assistance by conducting surveys related to the disabled. With the KFPD linked to the Ministry of Health, many volunteers are family doctors with first-hand knowledge of local people and local situations. Because they are working at the grassroots level, they serve as visible advocates for the needs and rights of local people with disabilities.

11. The Role of the International Community and Humanitarian Aid Agencies

Comprehensive information about activities and donations for the benefit of the disabled community in the DPRK are unavailable, but the 2011 annual report of the KFPD lists fifteen international donors who contributed a total of 1.34 million euros. Of this amount, 48 percent, coming from three major donors—the European Union, the Belgium Development Cooperation, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency—was designated for Handicap International. Two specific grants for orphans accounted for another 19 percent of the total. The following are examples of projects with international assistance that have already been implemented.

Resident Humanitarian Organizations

Assistance from resident humanitarian organizations helps disabled people play a positive role in society by focusing on inclusion, contribution, and support services. Few international agencies have offices in the DPRK, and even fewer are involved in providing direct support to people with disabilities. UN agencies, such as UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, UNDP, and WFP, have now have begun to include disability issues in their policies and programs, and some embassies provide small-scale assistance to the KFPD. Nevertheless, foreign residents in Pyongyang have unique opportunities to encourage and provide support for the disabled. For example, by offering employment to individuals with disabilities whenever there are job vacancies and insuring that when new projects are planned, the planning also includes participation by the disabled.

Handicap International (HI) in the DPRK, referred to as the European Union Program Support Unit 07 (EUPS 7), began op-

erations in the DPRK in March 2001 by implementing projects and programs jointly with the KFPD. Its goals are to improve physical rehabilitation services, to adapt teaching at schools for blind and deaf children (including a vocational training component), and to support the KFPD in terms of capacity-building and management guidance so as to access sustainable funding opportunities.³⁸

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provides technical, material, and financial assistance to orthopedic centers in North Korea. The ICRC launched its first amputee-rehabilitation program in 2002 and in 2006, in cooperation with the Red Cross Society and the Armed Forces Military Medical Bureau of the DPRK, it opened a new physical rehabilitation center in Pyongyang for both military and civilian patients.³⁹ The ICRC also supports joint programs by the National Red Cross Society of the DPRK and that of the Republic of Korea to reunite, albeit only temporarily, Korean families that have been separated by the national division. More generally, the ICRC plays a vital role in the promotion of international humanitarian law.⁴⁰

TOGETHER – Educational Center for Deaf, Blind and Nondisabled Children Hamhung e.V., founded in Berlin in November 2008, has partnered internationally with the World Federation of the Deaf. In North Korea, it has joined forces with the KFPD.⁴¹ The chairman of TOGETHER, who was born

³⁸ Handicap International, "North Korea: Promoting the Participation of People with Disabilities," accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.handicap-international.org.uk/where we work/asia/north korea.

^{39 &}quot;North Korea: ICRC Inaugurates a Second Physical Rehabilitation Centre," News Release, April 24, 2006, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/news-release/2009-and-earlier/north-korea-news-240406.htm.

⁴⁰ ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross, "North Korea: ICRC to Support New Orthopaedic Centre," Press Briefing, March 22, 2005, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/6aqlaq.htm.

⁴¹ TOGETHER – Educational Center for Deaf, Blind and Nondisabled Children Hamhung e.V., accessed December 8, 2013, http://together-hamhung.org.

deaf, has dedicated much of his time to the working partnership with North Korea after a visit to the country in May 2004. The vice chair, a foreign businesswoman residing in Pyongyang, has committed part of her time to help deaf and blind individuals. Their stated priorities are education and vocational training for deaf and blind persons and promotion of inclusion, as included in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They regard cooperation to establish and develop strong disabled people's organizations for the deaf and the blind in the DPRK as an essential tool to meet their goals.

Support for People with Disabilities by Non-resident Organizations

New Zealand–based Marama Global Inc.,⁴² known in the DPRK as the Korea Maranatha Foundation, collaborates with the KFPD. It supports the Wonsan Work Center for People with Disabilities by providing opportunities for meaningful employment, such as skills training to make soap and other necessary daily items, and provides small, motorized delivery vehicles and hand-propelled tricycles for taxi services.

A small non-profit organization established in California in 2007, **Jageun Namun**⁴³ ("Every Little Bit Counts"), began sending wheelchairs to countries throughout Asia, including North Korea, where the KFPD handles distribution to hospitals throughout the country.

Since 2004 Nepal's Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology, Himalayan Training Programs,⁴⁴ and the Fred Hollows

⁴² Marama Global: Partners in Sustainable Development, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.maramaglobal.org.

⁴³ Peter Schurmann and Aruna Lee, "Bay Area Man On a Mission to Supply North Korea with Wheelchairs," *New America Media*, April 18, 2013, accessed December 8, 2013, http://newamericamedia.org/2013/04/bay-area-man-on-a-mission-to-supply-north-korea-with-wheelchairs.php.

^{44 &}quot;Himalayan Training Programs," accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.cureblindness.org/where/himalayas/training.

Foundation⁴⁵ have been working together with the Ministry of Health and the KFPD. They offer training programs for North Korean ophthalmologists, providing intraocular lenses and medical equipment for cataract surgery in hospitals and supporting outreach camps in rural areas. The DPRK has a backlog of over forty thousand people in need of surgery for cataracts.

Introduced to the KFPD by the China Disabled Persons' Federation, the Hong Kong-based Kadoorie Charitable Foundation has made it possible for the KFPD to arrange the production of two thousand new, high-quality prosthetic and orthotic devices by funding the import of raw materials that are unavailable in North Korea. Sustainable local production alternatives are being tested as are mobile services for the supply and repair of prostheses and other assistive devices for amputees in rural areas being organized.

The Greentree Charity Foundation,⁴⁶ with funding from both the United States and South Korea, is another strong supporter of the KFPD. It provides humanitarian aid including food, medicine, and other provisions, along with special sports equipment for disabled children who are living in residential care.

⁴⁵ Fred Hollows Foundation, Australia, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.hollows.org.au.

⁴⁶ This information was provided by the supporters, in the "Kinsler Mission Report," April 1, 2013, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/missionconnections/kinsler-art-and-sue-201104.

12. A Case Study: Facilities for the Disabled in a Major Provincial City and in the Capital

In June 2013, during a week-long tour with KFPD representatives, the author visited several facilities for people with disabilities in the city of Hamhung. Located some 350 kilometers northeast of Pyongyang, Hamhung is the capital of South Hamgyong province. With a population of 768,000, it is the country's second-largest city. The following is based on observations from the tour.

The Hamhung Physical Rehabilitation Center/Hamhung Orthopedic Factory was founded in 1952 for victims of the Korean War. Today it serves disabled people from all over the country, including the capital. The center has 240 beds and approximately 200 staff persons, many of whom are themselves disabled.

Due to industrial accidents at construction sites and mines, as well as the rise in traffic accidents stemming from the increased numbers of cars, trucks, and bicycles on roadways, the number of amputees has increased the need for artificial limbs. Unfortunately, amputation is often the only solution to save the lives of those who require more complicated treatments or procedures that are typically unavailable in hospitals in the smaller cities and towns.

Services at the Hamhung Physical Rehabilitation Center are provided free of charge, as the state is required to provide free health services to all citizens. Food for patients is also provided by the government. At present, rations of 460 grams of cereals (rice, corn, barley, or wheat) are allotted daily to each patient, whereas staff members receive only 230 grams of cereals. The manager of the center readily conceded that the procurement of food is a serious problem. In the center's compound, large

wooden flower pots are being used to grow corn rather than flowers. Additionally, ensuring an uninterrupted supply of water and electricity is also a problem, particularly during the cold winter season. Although the center has both a water pump and a generator, it is still difficult to procure sufficient diesel fuel for their operation.

(left) Old-style prosthetics still made with metal and leather components; (right) more modern prosthetics are now being made, but materials mostly need to be imported from China.



In 2012 the center produced 1,040 prostheses, some in an older style made of metal and leather, and some more modern ones made of polypropylene. Orthopedic shoes are also produced. In 2013 the center treated an average of a hundred patients each month, fitting new devices and replacing old ones. Among the patients, 80 percent are male and 20 percent are female. The center also treats children. The average stay at the center is fifteen days for the fitting of new devices, and ten to fifteen days for replacements.

The center's workshops are orderly and clean. Some of the equipment is reasonably modern, but some is clearly outdated, having been supplied by sources in the Soviet Union decades ago. Clients are asked to return their old devices for recycling when they can no longer be used. For example, small pieces of



Measurements and fitting done by a technician. Some North Koreans at the Hamhung Physical Rehabilitation Center have received training abroad and now do their best under difficult circumstances (lack of materials, power interruptions, etc.) to serve the disabled.

leather from older prostheses are stitched together to mend shoes.

When the KFPD was founded in 1998 as the Korean Association for Supporting the Disabled, priority was given to revitalizing prostheses production in Hamhung, then and now the country's primary center for making prostheses. Collaboration with Handicap International resulted in a grant to establish a more modern prosthetics and orthotics workshop, with robust equipment and up-to-date training for staff.

Materials for the production of artificial limbs must be purchased from abroad, almost always from China, and each shipment is eagerly awaited. A change from polypropylene to resin technology, which is more likely to be available in North Korea, is being tested with the help of experts from Handicap International as one possible way of addressing long-term sustainability and reducing imports from abroad. Thus far, experiments with this hybrid technology have been challenging; ongoing work is attempting to enhance the quality of devices made with resin technology.

In 2012 the KFPD organized three mobile camps for disabled people in remote regions, mostly mining areas. At the camps, teams of eight to ten people, including factory technicians,

physiotherapists, and KFPD experts, repair old devices and fit new ones. Two more camps were held in 2013, one from April 17 to April 25, and the other from July 29 to August 6.

The Hamhung Orthopedic Hospital, built in 1954 with assistance from Poland, has specialized in orthopedics since the 1980s. The Polish embassy in Pyongyang continues to provide

Two female amputees receiving physical therapy, a treatment new to the DPRK, meaning there is a dearth of properly trained therapists.



some support, such as donating hospital beds. With a team of 280 doctors at present, only 250 beds can be made available, although the hospital has a capacity to accommodate four hundred patients. More than three thousand in-patients and over five thousand out-patients are treated each year. The patients, both children and adults, stay an average of fifteen to thirty days. Family members must provide their own food, as the hospital's food supply is limited. Hospital management faces many water, sanitation, and equipment challenges: a leaking roof in one building, broken and outdated equipment, an irregular supply of electricity in the winter, and, in general, a lack of medicine and medical supplies. No support is received from the WHO. Limited assistance from the KFPD and Handicap International



At the Korean Rehabilitation
Center for Children with
Disabilities, a group of
disabled children—including one with Down's
syndrome—exercise,
sing, and dance. The staff
receives few foreign visitors
and is eager to learn more
about how to assess, treat,
and train intellectually and
physically disabled children.

provides some physiotherapy training.

The Korean Rehabilitation Center for Children with Disabilities, in the Taedongang District of Pyongyang, is a new KFPD project that officially opened on March 29, 2013. It has been integrated into the district nursery. The manager and eleven staff members look after twenty intellectually and physically disabled children (eight boys and twelve girls, between the ages of four and seven). The children are in residence Monday through Friday, and they spend their weekends at home. Services are provided free of charge. Some activities, such as singing and dancing, are carried out with the 130 children in the district nursery, in accordance with the concept of inclusive education and integrated services for all. The need for additional staff members, training programs, books, videos, and other materials for assessing, training, and educating the mentally disabled children at this center is obvious to the outside visitor.

13. Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary goal of this paper has been to present an informed and balanced view about what it means to live with disabilities in North Korea and current work to assist the disabled. The strides made in the past few years are commendable, but the way ahead remains daunting, with many critical issues still needing to be addressed. These issues include not only the obvious concerns about ensuring adequate health care, education, and employment, but also touch on matters related to communication, technology, barrier-free access, civic participation, and arts and culture—indeed, every facet of daily life. People with disabilities remain particularly vulnerable in a country that is suffering from poverty, international isolation, and traditional discriminatory attitudes and practices. However, it is possible that current nationwide trends toward a more open society that is no longer isolated from the eyes of the outside world may help North Korea take better care of its disabled population.

Continued and increased advocacy should raise the awareness of the general public and the relevant government agencies about the rights and needs of people with disabilities. Ideally, such advocacy will gradually change social attitudes, reduce discrimination and harassment, and steadily expand inclusion.

Grassroots work and activism is important but management from the top down is also critical. Only with full and active government protection and engagement will the country's attitudes toward the disabled undergo a fundamental change. It is imperative that the DPRK government not only understand the issues involved but also take the lead, along other organizations and individuals, to offer strong support. With respect to the further development of rehabilitation services throughout the country, policy decisions must be made at the national level.

Meanwhile, international organizations, NGOs, and the United Nations must also continue their advocacy on behalf of the disabled in the DPRK.

It should be the responsibility of the KFPD to urge the DPRK authorities to allocate adequate financial resources to the health sector, including funds earmarked for people with disabilities and for those organizations that provide them with aid.

Finding international funding for humanitarian aid and development-assistance projects is problematic due to North Korea's poor reputation worldwide. This also clearly affects financial support for programs that are intended to support the disabled. International grant-making and implementation organizations should be encouraged to direct, in a coordinated way, more funds for the benefit of disabled communities, including those in the DPRK.

Of course, limited resources hamper the progress of the disabled everywhere in the world, not only in the DPRK. However, many rehabilitation services commonly found in other countries are either still in an embryonic stage or unavailable in North Korea. This is the case, for example, regarding the lack of early assessment procedures for children and community-based rehabilitation services. The establishment of a center for training and research, such as a special institute at a university, where people working with and for people with disabilities will obtain the necessary qualifications, will represent a crucial step to improve much-needed services.

The KFPD, which is still a young organization, should begin to provide in-depth development programs for its staff, including service providers in the field. This will help health-care workers develop skills that can be taught to disabled individuals and that will aid them throughout their lives.

Specialization is also necessary, particularly to assist those with intellectual disabilities, in order to implement an all-encompassing approach, beginning with detailed assessments and

treatment and including follow-up support and mainstream integration.

The KFPD is clearly eager to collaborate with the outside world. Increased international cooperation will provide opportunities for North Koreans working on behalf of the disabled, as well as for those with disabilities, to be exposed to international practices, ideas, expertise, and technologies. The exchange and sharing of information through a collaborative approach, by providing opportunities for study tours and training programs as well as by the simple act of donating professional books and subscriptions to disability-specific journals, will have a large impact on people with disabilities and those working in this field but will also ultimately contribute to fostering improved relations between North Korea and the outside world.

Other activities will also aid the community of disabled citizens. These include sensitizing North Korea's national media regarding issues related to persons with disabilities and making certain that sign-language translations are available. These are but two examples; there are many other issues that can, and should, be addressed. At the international level, there are still serious concerns regarding transparency in the DPRK. Access for international journalists is rare, as are media communications and informational exchanges among those working on the issue of disabilities in North Korea. Ways to share experiences and expertise, ideally with the cooperation of counterpart institutions in South Korea, should be explored. Overall, more research regarding people with disabilities in North Korea should be encouraged.

As noted above, North Korea recently signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is a step in the right direction. Hopefully in the not-too-distant future, ratification will follow, leading to important adjustments in North Korean laws and legislation, but, equally important, to changes in public perceptions regarding disabilities.

If our goal is to grant a voice for people with disabilities in North Korea and to insure them equal political, economic, and social opportunities, not to mention opportunities in family life and community-based activities, there is still much to be accomplished, and this will require long-term commitments. A first step has already been taken, but much more needs to be done. This will require intensified efforts by both the government and the international community.



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