

Identifying success factors in inter-Korean cooperation projects: the World Vision “Seed Potato Project”

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, North Korea suffered from severe economic hardships in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and massive floods; North Korea is still has not escaped this suffering. South Korea has pursued various inter-Korean cooperation projects to help North Korea open and develop its economy; however, there are limited successful cases for improvement in North Korea. It is imperative to define a long-term strategy through analysis of key success factors for inter-Korean cooperation in order to develop more successful cases of inter-Korean cooperation; however, limited studies have been conducted to analyze successful inter-Korean cooperation projects. This study selects the “Seed Potato Project” (implemented by the World Vision) as a successful case to be analyzed and identifies key success factors for inter-Korean cooperation. As illustrated in previous studies, the results of the analysis of success factors of a “Seed Potato Project” from a trust-building perspective has revealed that this project follows key success factors like openness, integrity, consistency, and benevolence. In the last section of this report, this study also presents important policy implications to develop future successful cases for inter-Korean cooperation.

KEYWORDS: North Korea, Seed Potato Project, World Vision, Inter-Korean Cooperation

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, North Korea has aspired to achieve economic development in order to realize a self-supportive national economy not affected by external forces. However, the collapse of the communist block and the massive flood in the 1990s has driven the country into severe economic hardship. Especially, the loss of industrial infrastructure caused by the massive floods (which resulted in severe food shortage and mass starvation) has made it almost impossible to implement an economic development plan for its economic reconstruction. The economic hardship seemed to be eased in the early 2000s thanks to the supply of energy by the KEDO etc. However, international support was sus-

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ended at the end of 2002 due to the suspicion that the North Korean operated uranium enrichment facilities; subsequently, North Korea fell into economic hardship. International sanctions have been reinforced as North Korea conducted two rounds of nuclear tests, fired long-range ballistic missiles, sunk the South Korean frigate the Cheonan, and launched an artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island. This has further secluded the country from the outer world and aggravated its economic hardship. Responding to the closed-door policy and economic hardship of North Korea, the South Korean government had implemented various inter-Korean cooperation projects under the theme of “Sunshine Policy” from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s to help North Korea open and developed its economy. However, there have been conflicting opinions about the cooperation projects in South Korea. The advocates of the Sunshine Policy have argued that this kind of support is a reasonable act as the South and the North are one. Meanwhile, those on the negative side have criticized that Sunshine Policy is too generous in its provisions of unconditional aid to a hostile country. Why do these two sides have such different opinions? The most convincing explanation is that there have been few inter-Korean cooperation projects to motivate North Korea to make visible changes to openness; as a result, the perception of North Korea by South Koreans has not changed much and the consensus on the inter-Korean cooperation has not been made in South Korea.

South Korea is not making enough effort to draw important lessons from the few success cases and apply them to other areas of inter-Korean cooperation. Given such limitations, this study identifies key success factors from past inter-Korean cooperation projects to better prepare for the future. For this purpose, the research team has analyzed the success factors of the “Seed Potato Project” sponsored by World Vision that has recently introduced a “potato revolution” to North Korea. The identification of key success factors from the previous inter-Korean cooperation projects will affect South Korea’s efforts to enhance the efficiency of future inter-Korean cooperation projects and help usher fundamental changes in North Korea.

2. PERSPECTIVE OF ANALYSIS

It is not easy to judge whether an inter-Korean cooperation project is a success or not because the information on project performance is generally lacking and the current extreme tension between North and South Korea has triggered a political debate over the impact of inter-Korean cooperation and the value of aid to the North. Therefore, this study adopts a narrow definition focused on changes in North Korean actions instead of a broad definition that includes the impact of inter-Korean cooperation projects as the designation of success. This implies that a successful case of inter-Korean cooperation is one that brings progressive changes to North Korean actions.¹

Many researchers consider mutual trust-building as a factor that drives positive behavioral changes in North Korea. Eulchool Lim (2008) noted that high-ranking officials in the North Korean government and American NGOs had continuously promoted cooperation though they had conflicting political views. And he pointed out the successful reason from the behavior of American NGOs: for example, American NGOs have focused on relatively less sensitive areas to deliver what they had promised and limited the leakage of information from the North. These efforts can make the North trust American NGOs and the trust plays a role as key success factors to ensure productive coopera-

¹ In The meaning of progressive is that North Korea acquires new technology or knowledge and reinforces its capabilities through inter-Korean cooperation projects.

tion with the North. Sukhwan Ahn et al. (1997) researched behavioral changes between the South and the North using a game model. This study reveals that if there is a little trust between the two Koreas, then it can help build practical long-term cooperation that will ultimately benefit both sides. Sooil Kim (2007) indirectly mentioned the correlation between cooperation and mutual trust by the analysis that inter-Korean economic cooperation positively influences the formation of mutual trust between the two Koreas on a short-term basis. Oyon Hwang (2001) emphasized that trust building is a precondition for transforming the current confrontational structure into a peaceful system of mutual prosperity on the Korean peninsula.

From these discussions, it can be inferred that mutual trust building is critical for successful inter-Korean cooperation. Then, what is Trust? Trust promotes satisfaction and motivation, which promotes cooperation between parties concerned, saves agency costs and transaction costs, generates smooth and efficient transactions, and improves the capability to adapt to complexity and changes. Trust is a social rather than an individual or self-centered concept and is not easily established; it can only be established when personal belief is confirmed by action of a counterparty.

Mayer (1995: 718) analyzed factors suggested by many scholars as contributing to trust-building and identified ability, openness, integrity, benevolence, and reliability as common factors for trust-building. Ability can be defined as 'a series of skills, capabilities, and attributes that enable a person to have influence in certain areas'. Giffin (1967) presented expertise as a factor that contributes to trust while Gabarro (1978) included functional proficiency, proficiency in inter-personal relations, business insight, and judgment in the list of trust-building factors. Integrity means honesty and sincerity that entails abiding by the rules and the acceptance of principles. Benevolence is an act of doing favors and means an emotional attachment between two mutually trusting parties. Openness means transparent conversations that offer true and accurate information to a counterparty. According to Heonsoo Lee (1999:37-41), reliability means consistency over times without fluctuation, so it is related to predictability and observance with explicit and implicit promises.

This study reviews success factors of the Seed Potato Project sponsored by the World Vision from the perspectives of factors that contribute to trust-building that include ability, openness, integrity, benevolence, and reliability. Based on this understanding of success factors, this study will also present policy implications that are helpful in the generation of more successful cases in inter-Korean cooperation.

3. STAGES OF THE INTER-KOREAN SEED POTATO PROJECT

This chapter will review stages of the inter-Korean Seed Potato Project of the World Vision that is praised for its significant outcome despite crop production challenges in North Korea. For this purpose, the progress of this cooperative project jointly implemented by the World Vision and the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science as well as the process to generate a visible outcome will be reviewed in chronological order.

3.1 Migrate from Simply Offering Aid to the North to the Reconstruction of the North Korean Agricultural Industry

The World Vision's assistance to North Korea (that first started in the form of offering food aid to the North) has now progressed into the reconstruction of North Korean agricultural sector. At the end of 1994, South Korea made an initial contact with the North to provide food aid to the North. It could have been a bilateral burden because the food aid project was the first in the history of inter-Korean cooperation; however, the World Vision in South Korea played under the name of global NGOs to reduce the political burden on both sides and successfully offered 5 million tons of corn to the North in May 1995. From the onset, the World Vision tried to strictly manage the whole process and requested that North Korea submit a food distribution plan as well as a follow-up report on actual food distribution accomplishments.

After this initial project, the World Vision started to operate noodle factories in six counties in three provinces of North Korea (Pyongan, Kangwon, and Hamkyong) to provide noodles for North Korean children in danger of starvation. It also offered several thousand tons of food to communities living in poor conditions in local provinces.

In 1997, from the request of the North, the World Vision dispatched healthcare teams to 12 childcare centers in North Korea to review the physical and nutritional conditions of North Korean children. The results of this review revealed that 85% of North Korean infants under age 2 suffered from malnutrition and that 60% of North Korean children were seriously underweight. To solve these issues, the World Vision decided to transcend the boundaries of existing assistance and move into a new frontier of agricultural sector reconstruction.

As part of the agricultural reconstruction efforts, South Korea offered a small amount of spring barley seeds to the North in 1997 to help North Korea's two-crop farming and this resulted in a successful harvest. This success helped the World Vision gain some trust from the North in the field of agricultural reconstruction. As result, the North Korean Agricultural Commission asked the World Vision to provide support in the agricultural sector to help increase food production. Upon this request, the World Vision reviewed the status of the North Korean agricultural sector, analyzed issues, and selected four pilot farms for agricultural reconstruction. The World Vision provided the North with essential agricultural resources and improved seeds under strict management that enhanced the efficiency of the project. The World Vision also introduced improved agricultural techniques to North Korea to restructure the North Korean agricultural sector. All these efforts helped North Korea harvest more crops than the previous years despite the abnormal weather conditions in the country. Thank to such success, the World Vision could add two more farms to the list of farms under its management. In addition, the World Vision also pursued consistent cooperation with the North Korean Agricultural Commission through various support activities such as offering oilseed crops, operating greenhouses for vegetable production, and providing overseas technical training.

3.2 Pursue Cooperation for Virus-free Seed Potato Production

North Korea's key crops are rice and corn, of which corn requires a large amount of fertilizer. During the hardship period, the productivity of corn cultivation significantly decreased due to the drop in fertilizer production as result of the collapsed industrial base and abnormal climate conditions. North Korea developed a new strategy called "cultivation of right crop for right earth" to overcome this difficulty. According to this strategy, the North chose the potato as its strategic crop as it requires relatively less fertilizer than corn to produce the same output and the country is now pursuing the increase of potato production as a national policy; in addition, North Korea announced a plan to "revolutionize potato farming" in 1998:

The revolution of potato seed is an extremely important issue to be solved prior to any other efforts in potato farming. The revolution of potato seed is a core to initiate revolution in potato farming. Revolution of potato farming cannot be separated from potato seed revolution.²

The day of our victory in the revolution of potato farming is near. As we won the victory in the revolution of rice farming under the guidance of our 'respectable father Kim, Il-sung', we will win another victory in the revolution of potato farming following the order of 'our respectable marshal Kim, Jung-il'.³

We should remember the message from our 'respectable father Kim, Il-sung' that potato farming is the foundation of the agriculture in the high reaches and that potatoes are the king of field crops. We will continue to lead potato farming through the revolution of seeds as guided by our 'respectable marshal Kim, Jung-il' by reminding ourselves of this great thrust in potato farming.⁴

The World Vision strategized how it could help alleviate North Korea's food shortage, which was one of the most critical challenges the North faces. In consideration of the severity of food issues in North Korea and the North's desire to revolutionize potato farming, the World Vision proposed that the North establish a water culture system to produce "disease-free seeds", the core of potato farming. The World Vision has made a notable achievement in vegetable production through water culture in the North. Based on this achievement, the World Vision initiated inter-Korean cooperation on seed potatoes to assist North Korea secure healthy seed potatoes that will ultimately contribute to increased potato production.

The World Vision has led in the establishment of expert networks and cooperation programs among Korean experts who can advise on inter-Korean seed potato cooperation projects. In 2000, World Vision signed an agreement with North Korea over the inter-Korean Seed Potato Project to provide necessary equipment and resources for the project in May, completed the construction of the project site in August, and harvested 1 million seed potatoes in November. In addition, young North Korean scientists were also invited to participate in the project to assist in an easy transfer of new seed potato production technology (which applies tissue culture and water culture technologies to seed potato production) to North Korea. Responding to these efforts of the World Vision, the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science offered extensive support by allocating the vast majority of its budget to the Seed Potato Project and mobilizing about 45,000 workers to build roads near the Seed Potato Project sites.

After witnessing the great success of producing 300,000 seed potatoes in the fall of 2000, North Korea asked the World Vision to implement the Seed Potato Project nationwide. In consideration of the difficulties of transporting seed potatoes due to the poor transportation infrastructure, the North asked the World Vision to establish four seed potato production bases throughout North Korea (Daehongdan Potato Research Center in the Northern highland area, Jangjin Potato Research Center in the east coast, Jungju Agricultural Science Center in the mountainous areas along the west coast, and Agricultural Biology Center in the plain area).

The World Vision researched these areas after an official request as prerequisite procedure. Based on the research outcome, the World Vision expanded the scope of the project. It was also in charge

² The Rodong Shinmun, December 10, 2000

³ The Rodong Shinmun, January 3, 1999

⁴ The Rodong Shinmun, October 11, 1998

of logistics and technology supervision during the construction of these production bases. Thanks to these efforts, all of the four seed potato production bases could successfully complete the pilot production of seed potatoes in 2003 and initiate the full-fledged production of seed potatoes through production normalization; in addition, some of these production bases exceeded their production targets. This greatly contributed to easing food shortages in North Korea and North Korea speaks highly of this project

Let me briefly explain the outcome of the project this year and the direction of future cooperation. After the project was launched in March 2000, we have had high hopes and expectations for the project. Finally, from this year, the project started to show the expected performance. Today, in Pyongyang, Daehongdan, Jungju, Hamhung and Baechon, more than 10 million virus-free seed potatoes were produced. This is the result of hard work and support of the World Vision, the North Korean Association of Economic Cooperation, the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science, and many other working staffs, scientists, and technicians.⁵

Under the wise guidance of the respectable leader Kim, Jung-il, we see a dramatic transformation taking place in potato farming. So the cooperation between the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science and the World Vision is quite timely as this cooperation helped build seed potato pilot production bases in various regions and enabled massive production of virus-free quality seed potatoes. This will be an exemplary case in inter-Korean economic cooperation. It is also very meaningful because the project has contributed not only to upgrading potato farming but also to resolving food shortage issue in North Korea.

As of 2004, the five Seed Potato Project sites started to achieve their production targets and the potato farming land and production volume dramatically increased. The establishment of a water culture system for seed potatoes has been an important driving force for the successful mass production of seed potatoes.

TABLE 1 Seed Potato Project Size and Annual Production Volume

Region	Year of Construction	Total Size (pyeong*)	Water Culture Greenhouse (pyeong)	Production Capacity (10,000 units)	Production Volume in 2007 (10,000 units)	Production Volume in 2008 (10,000 units)	Production Volume in 2009 (10,000 units)	Target Consumers
Pyongyang	2000	8,500	3,000	500	620	600	770	Yangkan Province, North Hamkyung Province
Daehongdan	2001	33,500	3,000	250	211	200	220	Pyongyang City, South Pyongan Province, Nampo City
Jungju	2001	4,300	1,000	170	278	280	280	North Pyongan Province, akang Province
Baechon	2003	3,300	1,000	170	254	250	260	South Hwanghae Province, North Hwanghae Province
Hamhung	2004	4,300	1,000	170	115	100	150	South Hamkyung Province, Kangwon Province
Total		53,900	9,000	1,260	1,478	1,430	1,680	

Source: World Vision * 1 pyeong = 3.3 m²

⁵ Presentation by Director Lee, Ilung of the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science at the 3rd Inter-Korean Symposium on Agricultural Science

3.3 Seed Production Project for Virus-free Seed Potatoes and Outcomes

In 2005, North Korea moved a step forward from the simple production of virus-free seed potatoes through water culture to seed production of seed potatoes in a field specially allocated for seed production. This seed production project is extremely important because the final production volume of potatoes is determined by the quality and the health of disease-free seed potato. Understanding the importance of this project, North Korea strongly asked for continuous cooperation with the World Vision in the seed production project of seed potato.⁶ The World Vision signed an agreement with the North on seed production project of seed potatoes at the Daehongdan Site in 2005 in response to the North Korean request. In 2006, the World Vision provided logistical support that included technical consultation and monitoring as well as equipment and resources required to construct a seed production base at the Daehongdan Site. In addition, North Korea's technological capabilities have been further strengthened through frequent contacts and continuous joint problem-solving efforts like the inter-Korean agricultural science symposiums. As result, the virus infection rate of seed potatoes produced at the Daehongdan site dropped from 20-30% in 2005 to 10-15% in 2009. This decreased infection rate has greatly enhanced potato production in North Korea.

The progress of the North Korean Seed Potato Project established by the World Vision has been briefly reviewed. The inter-Korean cooperation in the Seed Potato Project has dramatically increased the size of potato farming land in North Korea and enhanced productivity. Currently, productivity has improved to an average of 12 tons per unit square meters from 5-10 tons per unit square meters in 2000. This productivity increase has resulted in dramatic increases of production volume. As of 2008, the total potato production volume was 21.88 million tons. This success of the project has made the North Korean partners be promoted, which in turn reinforced the driving forces of the World Vision. On the economic front, this project has also made a significant contribution to easing food shortages in North Korea.

4. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF THE SEED POTATO PROJECT

A review of the progress of the inter-Korean seed potato cooperation project sponsored by the World Vision confirms that this project was a key force to change the focus of North Korean farming from corn to potatoes. The key success factors of this project can be summarized as benevolence, consistency, integrity, openness, and ability from the perspective of trust-building between the two Koreas.

The first success factor is the benevolence of the World Vision toward North Korea. From the very beginning, the World Vision initiated food aid to the North to help solve the food shortages. The World Vision remained cognizant of North Korean attitudes towards accepting international aid when implementing this project and emphasized the name "World Vision" to downplay the sponsorship by the South Korean government for relief of North Korean political complications. Such

⁶ In general, the virus-free seed potato cultivated from water culture is not directly used in potato production. It is planted in the field several times to increase the number of seed potatoes. This process is called seed production. It is necessary to develop technology that can lower the virus-infection rate since the infection rate of the seed potato cultivated from the seed production process determines the volume of the potato harvest. .

benevolence toward the North was repaid by the North Korean counterparty, who allowed more vegetable farms in North Korea to participate in the project. After that, the World Vision realized the need to migrate from simple food aid to food production to solve the food issue in the North through the implementation of various programs. The World Vision proposed water culture as an innovative idea for potato farming and sponsored this idea with logistical and technological support when the North wished to increase potato production.

The second success factor is consistency. Many inter-Korean cooperation projects have gone through vicissitudes that are dependent on the political environment. Unlike other cooperation partners, the World Vision did not boast its achievements and maintained a low profile in the execution of the project to lessen the political burdens. Simultaneously, by taking advantage of being an international NGO, the World Vision continuously led in the cooperation projects. One of the best-known examples is the support of corn to the North in 1995. When implementing inter-Korean exchange programs that might create some political burden on both sides, World Vision could continue to pursue the cooperation project in a consistent manner using its status as an international NGO. This consistency was responded by the predictability of the North by giving the North an impression that, “the World Vision is always working hard to help the North Korean agricultural sector.” This evaluation is in line with the opinion of Eulchool Lim (2001) who concluded that the World Vision project was a successful case of inter-Korean cooperation involving an international NGO that maintained consistent humane relations and was unaffected by political forces.

The World Vision project has integrity. From its inception, the World Vision actively worked on projects to assist North Korea. The World Vision faithfully fulfilled its promises following predefined procedures that included preliminary studies and reporting on resources allocation for the promised assistance. This has motivated the North Koreans to issue the World Vision an unprecedented number of limited permits for preliminary studies and so on. The integrity of World Vision continues since its initial project in 1994.

Openness means providing true and accurate information to the counterparty with candid and transparent conversations. The World Vision projects have maintained transparency as the organization always shares technology and information on seed potatoes with its North Korean counterpart, the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science. Evidence of this openness is the inter-Korean seminars on agricultural technology that started in 2000 and still continue.

The World Vision is also equipped with ability. First, the World Vision has the capability to overcome political sensitivity in inter-Korean cooperation projects. This ability was proven in the first food assistance project sponsored by the South Korean government that listed the name as “the World Vision” instead of the South Korean government as the sponsor to avoid any political difficulties. The World Vision is also capable of mobilizing related-experts in Korea. When the World Vision shifted its focus from various assistance projects to the reconstruction of the agricultural sector, it did not possess the technology for seed potato production through water culture. However, the World Vision formed networks with Korean experts and mobilized them to achieve a success in water culture of seed potato in North Korea once it decided to launch the Seed Potato Project. The World Vision also helped North Korean project partners who were friendly to the World Vision be promoted fastly that reinforced project implementation capabilities of the World Vision.

We have reviewed factors that have helped build trust in North Korean seed potato water culture projects sponsored by the World Vision. The results of the analysis show that the World Vision has consistently assisted North Korea through various projects based on its ability, benevolence toward the North, and integrity. All these factors have contributed to the establishment of mutual trust be-

tween the World Vision and the North. Achievements that have been generated based on this trust helped secure driving forces from within the North and reinforce the virtuous cycle of inter-Korean cooperation projects by the World Vision.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTER-KOREAN COOPERATION PROJECT

Many inter-Korean cooperation projects have been implemented; however, few have truly transformed North Korea. Based on this understanding, the research team analyzed success factors of the Seed Potato Project sponsored by the World Vision that transformed the North from the perspective of trust-building. From this analysis, the research team confirms that mutual trust should be established between the stakeholders of the South and the North to draw success from inter-Korean cooperation projects.

When a more favorable environment for bilateral cooperation is formed between the two Koreas in the future, the South Korean government needs to focus on trust-building with the North as a strategic move in the pursuit of inter-Korean cooperation projects. For this purpose, the South Korean government needs to identify areas where the North has strong demands and select cooperation projects that meet these demands to further increase the possibility of trust-building. The establishment of cooperation projects in areas that offer important implications for reunification (but are not politically sensitive) can be a good strategy. The next consideration is whether an organization or an individual who proposed a project is capable of successfully implementing it. To understand this capability, benevolence toward the North, consistency, integrity and expertise need to be evaluated. Third, when a project is underway, it is necessary to build success cases at an early stage to the provision of required assistance. Success can be attained when human and physical resources are efficiently allocated and the use of these resources is systematically managed. In addition, to generate success cases, cooperation projects should be unaffected by political interests and need to be implemented consistently. When the outcome of a project is unlikely to be readily available, it might be necessary to guarantee that the project is not halted during the whole project cycle. The reason why trust-building through successful cases is important is that it becomes the driving force for future project implementation. Fourth, it is necessary to evaluate how successful the technology transfer or implicit knowledge transfer to North Korea has been. Of course, this kind of evaluation is not easily done in short-term since most inter-Korean cooperation projects are not short-term projects. However, as an example, a fair evaluation of the impact a project offers can be made by giving extra points to projects that have the effect of technology transfer. Fifth, when a small success case has been established, it is necessary to build upon this success and guarantee follow-up projects that will help utilize the trust and assets that have been accumulated throughout the process.

This study presents important implications for future inter-Korean cooperation projects that can create change in the North from the perspective of trust-building. The research team hopes that these efforts help identify and implement future inter-Korean cooperation projects with a high potential for success. The research team also hopes the success cases help expand the networks for inter-Korean cooperation and build trust between the Koreas.

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