

Towards a Liaison Unit for Knowledge Sharing in Pyongyang

Erich Weingartner, Seoul, 2 November 2007

Successful education usually involves an interactive, mutually beneficial relationship between a knowledge provider and a knowledge recipient. Relationships have both intellectual and emotional components. The desire to teach must be matched by a willingness to learn. The teacher's perception of a student's educational needs must correspond with the student's self-perception and confidence in the teacher's qualifications. The higher the emotional content, the greater is the capacity to learn. Paradoxically, the higher the emotional intensity, the lower the capacity for reason. Education is the process whereby the motivational energy of emotion is harnessed to activate and expand rational capacities.

These well-known educational principles are both confirmed and challenged by the distrustful and conflictive attitudes that have marked the relationship between the DPRK and the international community for decades. Although there is a genuine—even urgent—desire on the part of North Koreans to learn, there is also an intense aversion to being taught by outsiders. Their need for knowledge is a pragmatic one, aimed at solving a multitude of problems. But acquiring knowledge as a commodity is not the same as being taught. DPRK Koreans are acutely aware that teaching is more than a transfer of knowledge. It is also a transfer of philosophy, of worldview, of ideology.

Differing worldviews lead to different needs assessments. What the outside world considers priorities for the transmission of knowledge are often perceived as a danger to the viability of the DPRK system and insulting to North Korean professionals and bureaucrats. The learning priorities identified by DPRK officials are too often dismissed as misguided and naïve (or even morally wrong) by international agencies.

The FALU model

It is not surprising that in the past decade knowledge sharing ventures have repeatedly faltered in a learning environment with an exceptionally low threshold of confidence that is constantly aggravated by unpredictable political crises. It is also no surprise that North Koreans tend to be greatly concerned about the motivations of those who would presume to teach them.

One of the more interesting parts of my work in the DPRK as head of the Food Aid Liaison Unit (FALU) from 1997 to 1999 was the informal conversations I had with North Korean co-workers, interpreters and government officials during long overland trips, or at meals or drinking sessions, when everyone was in a relaxed frame of mind. In one such conversation with a close North Korean colleague in the FALU office, I was challenged to explain my motivation for working in the DPRK.

I told him my relationship with Korea began in the South. Before the famine, it was peace I was mainly concerned with—the danger that a new conflict in Korea would pose for the region, and likely the whole world. In addition to the satisfaction of playing some part in saving people's lives, I hoped the international response to the famine would be an opportunity to sow the seeds of peace. I hoped that getting to know one another face to face would lead to more trust and more

options, that learning about and from each other would expose a mutuality of interest that could eventually lead to lasting peace.

Then I reversed the challenge, suggesting that in light of the fact that both of us were working in a United Nations food aid agency, my expectation was that our motivations were not that different.

“Of course we both work for WFP,” my colleague replied, “but I am a servant of my leader for the sake of my people, and you are a servant of the international community for the sake of ... what? We know that there is a concerted effort to bring down our system. And we also understand that, as you say in English, ‘there is no free lunch’. You are willing to send us food, but it comes with intrusive monitoring requirements. You say you want to make sure that the right beneficiaries receive the food. But aren't you really serving other interests? Interests that do not want peace with us? Interests eager to sow the seeds of our destruction? I also want peace. But peace cannot be won by the weak. My motivation is to make my country strong so that we can become equal partners in peace. At the same time that we are struggling to get international food aid, we are also struggling to protect our revolutionary heritage, for which our elders heroically fought and died.”

My colleague was speaking from his heart, even if his arguments sounded much like the ideological slogans splattered across the North Korean countryside. He was a keen student of English idioms and expressions, and often bounced back at me catch-words that I had taught him.

“Knowledge is power,” he would say. “And we need your knowledge. But we are all the same aware that your knowledge is most dangerous to our way of life.”

Or he would say, “Money speaks, right? But the recipient is never the one who holds the power. Therefore the recipient has to be the most vigilant. Is it not the same with knowledge? We study you and you study us. But that doesn't mean there is a mutual interest. Why do we need to know? It is so that we can become more powerful, so that we can protect our country and our system. You on the other hand are eager to teach us so that you can discover our weaknesses and cause our downfall.”

Every activity undertaken with the DPRK is a learning experience for both parties. In that sense, every activity involves knowledge *sharing* in a real sense, whether or not the two sides are aware of it.

Seen from this perspective, FALU was in essence a knowledge-sharing conduit. FALU was an experiment to bridge the gap between internal and external actors for both small and large relief agencies who had no opportunity—or wish—to establish a permanent presence in the DPRK. It was a unique collaboration between the UN system and non-governmental agencies, unrivalled in any other part of the world.

That is not to say that FALU came into being without controversy. Even the origins of FALU are in dispute, with numerous claims of fatherhood. Some regard it as a clever manoeuvre on the part of NGOs to infiltrate both the WFP and the DPRK simultaneously. Others argue that the creation

of FALU set a precedent that compromised the ability of subsequent NGOs to gain residency.¹

When the World Food Programme (WFP) was invited to Pyongyang following the floods of 1995, there was no guarantee that traditional WFP donors would be easily persuaded to supply the urgently needed food aid. There was widespread suspicion that the DPRK's first ever request for aid from the international community was based on political rather than human need. The WFP country director in Pyongyang therefore began discussions with DPRK officials on how to accommodate food donations from the non-governmental sector. With the informal agreement of the DPRK, an item covering NGO assistance was included in the June 1996 UN Appeal for the DPRK. A month later, the DPRK's Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) officially requested the WFP to create a food aid liaison unit within the authority of the WFP's Pyongyang office.

On the basis of this mandate, the WFP invited a number of NGOs to form a consortium and second an international officer who would staff FALU as the WFP NGO Liaison Officer in Pyongyang. In September of that year, NGOs began consultations that culminated in my appointment as founding Head of FALU. First discussions with NGOs involved InterAction (otherwise known as American Council for Voluntary International Action), headquartered in Washington, DC, and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies based in Geneva, Switzerland. In December 1996, eight interested NGOs met in Geneva, hosted by Action by Churches Together (ACT). The WFP Operations Department Director for Asia and the Pacific Region and two officials from the DPRK Mission to the Geneva Office of the UN were also in attendance. At this meeting, the FALU consortium was officially established.²

The consortium drafted a memorandum of understanding and a job description for the NGO officer. Administrative costs and any seconded staff members would be financed by the participating NGOs. FALU staff would report in the first instance to the WFP Country Director, and subsequently to periodic meetings of the consortium.³ A condition specified by the WFP was that the services of FALU would have to be made available to all NGOs, regardless of their membership in the consortium.

¹ In his chapter on "The Experience of US NGOs in North Korea" (*Paved With Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea*, L. Gordon Flake, Scott Snyder, eds., Praeger, 2003), Gordon Flake puts it this way:

"Despite the best efforts of FALU representatives in Pyongyang, some NGO representatives viewed the FALU's very creation as another premature concession to the NGOs' inability to perform independent monitoring in North Korea and to the DPRK officials' preference for handling the monitoring and distribution of food through more easily manipulated, on-the-ground international organizations such as the WFP, which formed an early preference for the Public Distribution System (PDS) as the vehicle for managing food aid distribution efforts."

I should note my personal disappointment that the book's editors chose to ignore the FALU experience, which contradicts a number of the book's main themes and conclusions. Whereas the US, European and South Korean NGO efforts are dealt with in separate chapters, the experience of FALU receives barely one page in this 168-page volume (and this in a chapter dealing with US NGOs!). FALU gets no mention whatever in a rather partial chronology that uses the adjective "Stalinist" 8 times.

² FALU founding members were Action by Churches Together (Geneva, Switzerland), the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (Winnipeg, Canada), Caritas Internationalis (Rome, Italy), Food for the Hungry International (Scottsdale, USA), Mercy Corps International (Portland, USA), and World Vision International (Monrovia, USA). Subsequently, Adventist Disaster Response Agency (Washington DC, USA) joined the consortium. Church World Service (CWS, an ACT member agency) was requested to play the role of convener.

³ The Consortium members overseeing the FALU operation created a FALU Steering Committee.

Agreed objectives of FALU were as follows:

- to increase the volume of humanitarian assistance from the international NGO community and to enhance the role of NGOs;
- on behalf of WFP, to provide liaison services between the FDRC and the NGOs with a view to promoting better mutual understanding and relief cooperation between them; and
- to assist the FDRC and the WFP in monitoring food needs and coordinate NGO input and help with administrative matters.

With my arrival in Pyongyang in May 1997, FALU became operational, supporting non-resident NGOs with programming, monitoring and reporting, while building on the WFP's established presence and abilities. Although the WFP presence was modest at first, it expanded rapidly during the first year, becoming a formidable monitoring network, with five sub-offices throughout DPRK. FALU could draw on a number of strengths that were not normally available to non-resident NGOs:

- Commodities tracked by a team of over 20 international monitors;
- Access to WFP information, including a large and expanding database;
- Support from a well-established WFP administration, port captains and logistics; and
- UN diplomatic status for FALU staff, providing special privileges and protections.

Because of its unique institutional connection with the WFP and the relative freedom accorded by its NGO sponsors, FALU was often able to experiment with food aid deliveries to 'new' beneficiaries that the WFP had not yet incorporated.⁴ Because it was a small and rather independent bubble within a less independent WFP, FALU had the possibility of expanding not only the types of beneficiaries, but also its territory and even mandate. At its height, FALU operated in 158 counties accessible to the humanitarian community⁵ in all provinces of the country. In addition to food aid, FALU was supplying agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and small-scale tools and supplies. FALU branched out into the medical field, not only with medicines and hospital supplies, but also with maternal health care and the rehabilitation of laboratory facilities at the Pyongyang Pharmaceutical Factory and the National Drug Inspection Laboratory.

Knowledge sharing was implicit in all these activities. On a routine basis, FALU staff received visiting delegations—often unannounced—and provided briefings and advice. FALU responded to enquiries from NGOs around the world about needs and opportunities.

As NGOs and DPRK authorities came to know each other better in a working relationship, knowledge sharing became more explicit and was incorporated in FALU planning. Donor visits were organized to take advantage of the expertise of participating foreign professionals, in areas where specific deficiencies were detected. “Reverse delegations” of qualified DPR Korean specialists were organized to donor countries.⁶

In 1998 FALU organized a roundtable on monitoring procedures that for the first time brought together the FDRC and representatives of the aid community on this highly sensitive subject. In

⁴ Target groups such as the elderly, industrial workers, pregnant and nursing mothers, and others with special needs.

⁵ Home to approximately 81% of the population.

⁶ E.g., study tours by DPRK agriculturalists to witness application of farming techniques in Canada and the USA.

early 1999 FALU organized a PNW (Pregnant and Nursing Women) Planning Workshop with participation of all UN agencies and humanitarian organizations. This was followed by a round table seminar that succeeded in bringing together medical professionals from hospitals, technicians from pharmaceutical factories, researchers from the Pyongyang Institute for Child Nutrition, bureaucrats from several government ministries including health, education and foreign ministries, as well as interpreters and representatives of resident NGOs and intergovernmental agencies. Anyone who has ever administered programmes in the DPRK will be able to attest to the difficulties involved in forging lateral linkages in a system hampered by a “stovepipe” bureaucratic structure where ministries compete rather than cooperate with each other.

This particular seminar was a first of sorts. It dealt with infant malnutrition and its relationship to maternal malnutrition. For some North Korean professionals and officials this was an eye-opening educational experience. There had been insufficient clarity about the danger that maternal malnutrition can lead to irreversible physical and mental disabilities in their offspring.⁷ Since most DPR Korean children are institutionalized at six months of age or younger, many infants born of women who were malnourished during pregnancy required emergency treatment for malnutrition by the time they arrived at nurseries. An immediate outcome of the seminar was that the WFP received authorization to begin a focus on nutritional support for pregnant and nursing mothers. UNICEF took on the educational component of this work.

And that is just one example. Knowledge sharing was one of the ways FALU performed its liaison function: providing the political, intellectual and practical space for the generation of new ideas and methodologies conducive to the furthering of relationships. FALU provided for both international and local actors a "safe area" for the transfer of knowledge at different institutional levels and in different institutional capacities and expertise. The FALU office encouraged the flow of open communication between contracting parties, with the expectation that independently evolving relationships would result.

Job description of Food Aid Liaison Unit

- Provide a point of contact between non-resident NGOs and DPRK authorities;
- Identify needs and beneficiary populations and match to potential donors;
- Implement pilot projects to experiment with new geographical locations, types of input, local partnerships;
- Advocate with Government on behalf of NGOs opportunities and schedules of visits by NGO representatives and accompany delegations on field visits;
- Develop distribution plans with FDRC (DPRK foreign ministry); Monitor arrival and distribution/use of inputs; Assess impact and write reports to donor agencies;
- Promote and build relationships among NGOs (both resident and external), the UN system, local Governmental and non-governmental counterparts with a view to coordinating effective humanitarian relief;
- Explore with DPRK Government and the NGO community the possibilities of establishing longer-term relations, including relations between DPRK-based and international NGOs, if desired by both parties;

⁷ When infants are born of malnourished mothers, the after-effects of low birth weight compromise children's physical and cognitive development throughout their lives.

- Assist in the dissemination of public information about humanitarian needs in the DPRK by supplying FALU-related NGOs with special reports;
- Educate the DPRK about NGOs and educate NGOs about the DPRK—in other words, provide a “safe area” where the transfer of knowledge can proceed smoothly between internationals and locals at different institutional levels and in a variety of institutional capacities and expertise.

In negotiating a resident presence in Pyongyang, non-governmental aid agencies were interested in positioning their representatives to police the flow of resources from point of entry to consumer (beneficiary), i.e. fulfilling a monitoring and reporting function. For DPRK authorities, it was more important to understand the *modus operandi* of aid agencies, their motivations, their strengths, their weaknesses; how to maximize their inputs while minimizing their influence; how to limit their potential for disruptive ideological penetration internally and negative publicity about the DPRK system externally.

It should come as no surprise that the success rate of NGO engagement with the DPRK has been very spotty indeed. Claims of “success” compete with blame for “failure”. Engagement has itself become somewhat of a “hot potato” in the ideological competition among NGOs. Determining or assessing “outcomes” is tricky business in the DPRK. Defining outcomes is crucial for aid agencies because of the need to justify funding requests to donors. But defining outcomes according to international criteria can become threatening (or worse, a national embarrassment) for DPRK counterparts.

Numerous papers and at least one book have analyzed and itemized the shortcomings of the “humanitarian space” in the DPRK.⁸ Equivalent attention has not been paid to analysis of changing current practice in humanitarian and other aid deliveries, with a view to identifying areas where educational opportunities will have maximum impact.

All NGO offices in the DPRK, including FALU, were closed at the end of 2005.⁹ The official reason given at the time was that the time for emergency assistance had passed, that the DPRK was henceforth interested in receiving only development aid. It is natural that the demise of FALU has been particularly damaging to smaller non-resident NGOs, but some of the larger aid providers have also reduced or completely terminated their DPRK-related work.¹⁰

The LUKS proposal

Knowledge sharing is a rational answer to the need for accelerated mutual learning. The lowest form of knowledge sharing is the transmission of one-way educational resources such as

⁸ Erich Weingartner, *NGO Contributions to DPRK Development: Issues for Canada and the International Community*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2001).

L. Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder, eds., *Paved With Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea*, (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

⁹ The European Union was able to negotiate the continuation of work by several European NGOs. However, they are no longer identified as independent organizations, but are now known as “EU programme support” (EUPS).

¹⁰ Among these is the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), responsible for the largest food and agricultural inputs in the FALU consortium. However, it should be clarified that food donations—and the number of consortium members—had steadily declined even prior to FALU’s closing. The announcement by the DPRK in the Fall of 2005 that it would no longer require food aid led to a loss of interest by many donors.

textbooks, learned papers and other non-interactive media. Although very much prized by the DPRK, knowledge transfer via stand-alone textbooks cannot take the place of learning by doing, or the direct bonding involved in the teacher-student relationship.

By definition, knowledge sharing cannot be a one-way process. Much more than the provision of emergency food aid, knowledge sharing requires a mutuality of purpose and expectations. Numerous models for knowledge sharing with the DPRK have been tested during the past ten years (as other papers at this workshop have documented). Most successful were those based to a large degree on established relationships and long-term commitments.

Organizations with a resident presence in Pyongyang were naturally advantaged in this respect. For the past several years, members of the Informal Working Group on Knowledge Sharing (IWG-KS) have been considering the utility of a FALU-like resident structure in Pyongyang to service the needs of international knowledge providers. As FALU had done, an office such as this could act as interlocutor between the DPRK government and members of the international community, especially those without the possibility of establishing a resident presence, but with resources to further knowledge sharing. A Liaison Unit for Knowledge Sharing (LUKS) would function as interlocutor between external knowledge-providing agencies and DPRK institutions. LUKS would introduce one to the other and serve to ease the process of negotiation among them for projects that fit mutually accepted criteria.

Based on the FALU experience, the biggest challenge of a Liaison Unit for Knowledge Sharing will be to find the means to harmonize the motivation of external knowledge providers to effect changes in the current DPRK system with the perceived need of DPRK counterparts to safeguard the security of the existing system. A teacher's ability to transform a student depends on the student's willingness to absorb the lesson. Knowledge sharing, even more than the provision of emergency food aid, depends on a mutuality of purpose and expectations. The LUKS officer(s) will have to navigate the mutually acceptable ideological pain thresholds of the involved partners. There are trade-offs to be negotiated in engagement with the DPRK. The most sensitive of these inevitably involve DPRK security considerations, which are non-negotiable. But international agencies also come with non-negotiables: development principles, results-based expectations, best practices, standards of accountability. Trade-offs determine the willingness of both parties to share power in the implementation of a project.

If the “sharing” part of knowledge sharing is taken seriously, it should be expected that outsiders are as much affected by interaction with North Koreans as North Koreans are affected by interaction with us. The DPRK has its own reasons for seeking knowledge, and some of these reasons will contradict the reasons that outsiders offer knowledge. A realistic and honest assessment of both motivations and vulnerabilities is a prerequisite for knowledge sharing. How ready are we (the international community) to really understand where they are coming from, before we attempt an extreme makeover to shape them into our own image? The much-repeated urgency for “opening up” needs also to be viewed in this light. How can we hope to open up the DPRK when at the same time we continue to give them reason to suspect hidden agendas?

Access to international knowledge resources is authorized only to North Koreans with proven loyalty to the system. Conversely, donor agencies' resources are often dependent on the extent to which knowledge providers are able to penetrate the system's defensive shields. Since it is

currently impossible to educate the populace directly, LUKS will have the limited, but indispensable task of educating the gatekeepers. Goals will need to be mutually defined. Results and impact will need to be discovered and evaluated by both parties in order to make way for every subsequent round of knowledge sharing.

If I have laid so much stress on the importance of philosophical and ideological understanding, it is because practical arrangements can be worked out with surprising facility in the DPRK if there is an atmosphere of mutuality, whereas the simplest arrangements can become impossibly gridlocked if there are any lingering suspicions on the part of DPRK hosts.

FALU offers a useful model for a knowledge sharing liaison office, but there are also significant challenges that have to be faced if a LUKS is to be created.

The creation of FALU was requested and facilitated by the DPRK on the realistic expectation of increased material inputs from NGOs. In many cases since, knowledge sharing has accompanied the provision of substantial humanitarian, agricultural, medical, energy or other aid. Whether the DPRK is ready to approve the creation of a LUKS office without a guarantee of tangible material or political benefits, or whether international agencies are ready to provide such material incentives remains to be seen.

FALU was created within an existing United Nations agency (WFP). The logical placement of LUKS would have been the United Nations Development Programme. Unfortunately, the UNDP Pyongyang office is currently under suspension due to a financial management controversy that has affected the flexibility of all Pyongyang-based UN offices. One could imagine other arrangements, for example with bilateral offices such as Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) or multilateral NGOs like the International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). There is no guarantee, however, that DPRK authorities would find such arrangements justifiably within their interest.

Nonetheless, if in the not-too-distant future—pending successful continuation of the Six-Party Process—there is the prospect of substantial development assistance, accompanied by requisite education and training, the idea of a Liaison Unit for Knowledge Sharing could hold considerable appeal to DPRK authorities.

Whatever its eventual institutional location, the proposed LUKS could be organized to accomplish the following tasks:

Job description of Liaison Unit for Knowledge Sharing

- Establish priorities and work plans for LUKS, in close coordination with members of the LUKS Steering Committee, and in line with overall priorities and methodologies as contracted with the DPRK Government;
- Establish and maintain a network of knowledge providers, encourage the sharing of information among them, and promote the coordination of efforts.
- Become informed about DPRK needs in the knowledge agenda and match these with the corresponding potential of external providers;
- Act as ideological interpreter between external and DPRK entities, and facilitate communication during negotiation and implementation phases;

- Provide a venue and mailbox for interaction between external knowledge providers and DPRK entities in search of knowledge;
- Take care of the many practical arrangements that are involved in establishing and implementing knowledge sharing projects (including mundane, yet indispensable tasks such as facilitation of travel arrangements for project personnel, procurement of visas, air travel booking, etc.)
- Monitor and advise the knowledge sharing activities of external providers and strive to expand their number and activities;
- Accompany delegations of sponsoring organizations who visit the DPRK and, as appropriate or desired, act as adviser to DPRK delegations going abroad for study;
- Monitor the progress of knowledge sharing projects and provide periodic and final reports to sponsoring organizations.
- Maintain documentary and statistical data on knowledge sharing projects (preferably accessible digitally via the Internet), including evaluation of completed projects and, as permitted, follow-up surveys/interviews with beneficiaries.

--END--