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North Korea and the United Nations: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Context of Fragile States

Sojin Lim

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Series Editors

Dr Sojin Lim – [Email here](#)

Dr Niki Alsford – [Email here](#)

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**North Korea and the United Nations:
Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
in the Context of Fragile States²**

Dr Sojin Lim³

I. Introduction

In September, the member countries of the United Nations (UN) agreed to continue to pursue the platform of global goals which was named as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), successor of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While MDGs were implemented during the period of 2000 – 2015, SDGs are aimed to be achieved by 2030.

Before SDGs were agreed, there was a series of international meetings on implementation process of global goals, based on its predecessor MDGs. During MDG implementation process, four High Level Forums (HLFs) were held by the second Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The discussion began from donor harmonisation issue in Rome, Italy, in 2003, and continued to the effectiveness of MDG implementation in Paris, France, in 2005. This second OECD DAC HLF resulted in the Paris Declaration with five principles of aid effectiveness, such as ownership, alignment, harmonisation, results and mutual accountability. In 2008, the discussion continued and the agreement was published as the Accra Agenda for Action during the third OECD DAC HLF in Accra, Ghana, by emphasising importance of new actors like civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-government organisations (NGOs), new kinds of cooperation methods including South-South Cooperation and Triangular Cooperation, and new approach to fragile states, followed by the fourth OECD DAC HLF, Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), in Busan, South Korea, in 2011. More detail about the third OECD DAC HLF have been provided later in this paper.

In light of this, the OECD DAC HLFs were converted into the format of GPEDC High Level Meetings, not only lead by OECD but also with UN. The very first meeting was held in Mexico in 2014 to discuss unfinished business of MDG implementation in review of what have met and what have not met, and provided lessons learned for SDGs. One of the main areas where the implementation principles were still lagged behind from MDG, and thus, which needed to be continued to in SDG implementation mechanism is mutual accountability. However, accountability has not been fully analysed yet in development cooperation academic discourse, even though its importance has been emphasised more than enough in practice. At the same time, on one hand, attention to fragile states seemed to be fainter, which has made it remain as an orphan pillar in the international goals implementation process. On the other hand, even though increasing number of research have been done in terms of fragile states and development cooperation, few of them have dealt with North Korea as a case analysis. Furthermore, even though SDGs have set out the fundamental principle of ‘leave no one behind’, countries like North Korea does not seem to be a part of SDGs in terms of donor

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³ Senior Lecturer, University of Central Lancashire, UK

support, especially when it is under sanctions. Existing sanctions have limited even basic level of requirement of international development support into the country.

With this in mind, this paper aims to fill this gap by answering its research question whether we can still apply SDG discourse to North Korea even though it is under sanctions. And if so, the research questions in what context and how it could be. This study aims to address two interweaving unfinished pillars of accountability and fragility from the MDGs by exploring recent development in SDG implementation mechanism. It analyses SDG implementation process in the case of North Korea by focusing on accountability mechanism in the context of fragile states. This paper defines North Korea as a fragile state based on various fragile index, resilience level in the case of natural disaster, such as floods, and people living in extreme poverty, environmentally vulnerable and political fragile situations. In the end, it intends to provide implications for fragile states with the case of North Korea, which is one of severely ignored country with an excuse that we do not have access to data to analyse in development cooperation context as well as it is not appropriate to discuss it under nuclear threat and the sanction status.

II. Development Cooperation Accountability in Theory and Practice

Scholarly discussion on the accountability in development cooperation can be understood in two pillars: one to discuss accountability mechanism process; and the other to discuss national and global accountability in development cooperation policy and practice. First, in terms of the mechanism procedural approach, it is categorised in three stages: responsibility; answerability; and enforceability. Accountability can be achieved by policy dialogues and trust building activities between partners mutually at the initial stage (responsibility), while data and information sharing, peer review and/or mutual assessment follow when the accountability mechanism between partners becomes more mature (answerability). When there are any legal claims occurred in this process, accountability among partners can end up with inspection panel, compliance review and/or resettlement (enforceability) (Kim and Lim, 2017).

At the stage of responsibility, exploring shared responsibility and policy integration need to be addressed by analysing who is capable of responding to the targeted issues. Based on a strongly shared responsibility, partners can enhance accountability of their activities, which continues to the next stage (Kim and Lim, 2017). At this level, conceptualizing accountability must be accompanied (Das, 2018). In answerability process, partners normally set up monitoring process, along with continuous integration and information sharing in a way to measure behavioural efforts and objectively verifiable indicators of outcomes (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015; and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, Dahl and Persson, 2018). Because this stage involves the ‘measuring’ progress against target indicators, in some literature, answerability is interchangeably used with ‘countability’ (for example, Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015). In order to achieve the maturity of accountability mechanism, conducting answerability stage successfully is critical. However, more importantly, securing transparency at this stage can be very critical in terms of empowering people by free information flow available to the populace. For example, in the case of fragile state, in particular, it has been proved that transparency can reduce state fragility (Dutta and Roy, 2016). The enforceability stage comes as the last resort because it is hardly possible to impose any formal enforcement between independent sovereignty partners (Kim and Lim, 2017; and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). However, while establishing formal process of ‘punishment’ at the enforceability stage works as the biggest challenge of the accountability mechanism, it can be understood as the loop for creating

an opportunity within the ‘act and remedy’ process (Das, 2018; and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Based on the answerability process (monitor and review), if there are things went wrong, based on the formal investigation, necessary changes can be applied based on ownership of each partner in the process, at least in theory.

Second, at the national level, accountability can be understood in ‘different forms’ at the national level, including administrative, political, national legal and international procedures. For example, Das (2018) emphasises the importance of political/legislative accountability, legal accountability, and individual and constructive accountability in order to create a ‘culture of accountability’ at the country level, especially when the country lacks of historical avenue for accountability. Similarly, accountability can be also understood within the scope of ‘policy integration’ at the national level (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). If there is negligence of accountability in historical account, it is easy for a country to lack the ‘administrative’ accountability. Also, it is easier for a country to impose punitive measures rather than provide a constructive enforceability, which could limit necessary systemic reforms in place (Das, 2018). In the end, these will depend on how much state power can create the enabling environment of state accountability. In other words, a strong political will to bring necessary legislative reforms or create administrative culture of accountability needs to be addressed. At the same time, conceptualising accountability needs to be in consensus; otherwise, it can complicate the process of legalising and constitutionalising accountability mechanism in the government system (Das, 2018).

At the international level, especially with global norms such as SDGs, it becomes more critical to materialise and integrate the global norms and understandings into the national level accountability process and structure. For example, as global norms do not normally provide enforceability as they work as soft law, engagement of the global accountability mechanism amongst relevant accountees at the national level would be required to achieve actual accountability realised (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Also, often times, global norms are not automatically integrated into the national level norm creation process (Bowen et al., 2017). This, in turn, means that either global norms and processes need to be more robust so that they can be embedded at the national level, or a formal enforceability needs to be enforced through parliament or audit institutions at the national level (Bowen et al., 2017; Das, 2018). With this in mind, global governance and state accountability may need to be reformed by bringing actual necessary enforcement in place rather than playing with languages in development debates (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015). In other words, a legally binding domestic accountability needs to be established in line with global norms, but based on each nation’s circumstances, as global norms cannot enforce accountability as a concrete form at the international level as well as they cannot fit into the national structure because one size cannot fit all.

It is not a consensus among scholars who deal with SDG agenda that SDGs cannot be achieved without a robust accountability, especially for equality and human right goals (for example, Williams and Hunt, 2017). Instead, the global partners have agreed to create the Follow-up and Review Architecture (FRA) of the SDGs. The FRA was suggested by the international body based on lessons learned from the implementation experience of MDGs. There was criticism that MDGs were not successful partially due to the lack of accountability. As mentioned in the previous section, the final stage of accountability can be achieved by the enforceability. However, as there was no such accountability system for the MDGs, countries were free from non-binding MDGs – there was no such sanctions or other kinds of reactions even though countries did not meet the MDG targets by the end of 2015. For example, there was a reporting process based on annual statistical review by the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) in most of developing countries, but there was no such agreed mechanism in the case of failure in achieving MDG targets (Donald and Way, 2016).

Based on this background, Ban Ki-Moon, former Secretary General of the UN, began to talk about accountability in the process of SDG formation. It started with the term of the 'data revolution' and continued to the 'accountability revolution'. He also pointed out that the biggest obstacle was the lack of accountability in achieving MDGs (Donald and Way, 2016). Initially, there was a consensus that we needed to have stronger accountability mechanism at the initial discussion, such as 'multi-layered accountability architecture', which addresses all of the local, national, regional and global level accountability, in the form of states-to-their people. However, due to the 'politics of accountability', the member countries of the UN could not reach upon with a concrete accountability mechanism, but compromised current FRA as an accountability platform for SDGs in the form of the Voluntary National Review (VNR), which is in between global and national levels (Donald and Way, 2016).

At the same time, it was not designed as 'states-to-people' accountability, but rather as 'peer review' mechanism. It is also due to the lack of political will. For example, the term of 'monitoring and accountability' even became a taboo (Donald and Way, 2016). According to the theory as aforementioned, peer review can work well in the accountability process at the stage of the answerability because it can provide a new avenue of conditions (also see Donald and Way, 2016). While enforceability becomes based on 'punitive' approach, which tends to provide punishment than offer conditions that can revise failure, 'constructive' approach in accountability proposes 'monitor, review, act and remedy' processes based on the peer review exercise (Das, 2018).

Yet, as mentioned above, the VNR under the FRA is a compromised version, and thus, is not strong enough to make accountability realised for SDGs. In this sense, further global and national level accountability mechanisms that contains subnational data in both quantity and quality are necessary, based on strong political commitment and leadership (Barroso et al., 2016). As the FRA is voluntary based, it is loosely bound by UN members. For example, North Korea have also agreed to produce VNR in 2019 or 2020, but it has not clearly figured out how North Korea can collect necessary data for the SDGs. Hence the reason, the importance of the national judicial mechanism has been emphasised especially under the accountability mechanism like SDG FRA, which is not legally binding (Donald and Way, 2016; Das, 2018). A robust national judicial mechanism which addresses SDGs in the system can bring national, corporate and social accountability happen within the SDG format. At the same time, not only informal, but also a formal accountability system can be imposed in both hierarchical and horizontal accountability mechanism at the national level by imposing a formal mandate (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Here, while hierarchical can mean punitive enforceability, such as sanctions, horizontal can mean constructive enforceability including incentive function or voluntary based approach, such as FRA. In other words, at the international level, accountability mechanism can be imposed at both punitive or horizontal, it is important to guarantee that the accountability mechanism is embedded in the domestic legal system as a formal mandate.

Also, it can be also offered to incentivise the engagement of SDG accountability rather than imposing enforceability, which does not possible happen in reality. For example, by accepting the limit of SDG accountability platform, we can utilise a constructive accountability rather than punitive accountability. In this way, as Donald and Way (2016) suggests, we can provide reverse conditions, such as more financial and/or technical support to those countries which

achieve SDG targets in the given timeframe. From the experience, soft law or non-binding commitment, such as VNR, cannot work as external pressure for the member countries, and thus, it needs to be reconsidered in a way to bring up with constructive accountability and incentive mechanism into the SDG FRA platform.

In the SDG accountability mechanism, it is pointed out that it is unclear how to collect data and information and how to develop data collection methods to make accountability successful in the process (Williams and Hunt, 2017). It does not seem that existing SDG indicators were not designed for accountability from the beginning. This suggests that we need to introduce additional indicators which dedicated to data and information collection for accountability, and to develop accountability capacity of countries (Williams and Hunt, 2017). In this sense, Williams and Hunt (2017) discusses the importance of Big Data and the way how to include the concept into the SDG streamline. This would be critical for us to trickle down global accountability down to the national level. If a country does not have sufficient data collection capacity for SDGs, this needs to be addressed. For example, whether a country's survey registration system is weak, or a country does not have basic statistics functionality have not been fully considered in SDG accountability mechanism (Williams and Hunt, 2017). This, in turn, reminds me of whether we should insist so-called Western-inspired neoliberal structure of the accountability in all country cases (Lim, 2013; Das, 2018). It can be a good timing for us to think about more flexible approach for countries with little capacity, which can even fulfil the conditions for responsibility and answerability stages of the mechanism.

III. Fragile States in Theory and Practice

While there was a level of consideration of fragile context into development cooperation in the late 1990s, a systemic approach was initiated during the second OECD DAC HLF in 2005. Based on the 2005 Paris Declaration, the OECD DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations (also known as Fragile States Principles, FSPs) were adopted in 2007, and the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) was established in 2008 (Baranyi and Desrosiers, 2012). Since then, the INCAF has published 'States of Fragility' reports annually to maintain the importance of differentiated approach to fragile states in development cooperation. When the third OECD DAC HLF was held in Accra, Ghana, in 2008, aid stakeholders discussed three new agendas (OECD, 2008). As briefly mentioned in Introduction of this paper, the representatives attended in the third OECD DAC HLF invited CSOs and NGOs as a critical partner in development cooperation, revisited the effectiveness of South-South Cooperation and Triangular Cooperation, and provided the need of differentiated approach to fragile states (OECD, 2008; Lim, 2019a). In particular, the international development cooperation community agreed to establish a new set of approach to fragile states, and the 'New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (also known as New Deal)' was introduced in 2011 (Nussbaum et al., 2012; Hingorani, 2015). The New Deal was agreed by the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) in the middle of the MDG implementation process by recognising urgent needs to address challenges in fragile and conflict-affected states (Williams et al., 2017).

Since these two OECD DAC High Level Forums, academics as well as policy makers in the field of development discourse have reflected fragility context in their discussion and analysis (Baranyi and Desrosiers, 2012). From the several fragile index produced by different entities, it also seems that state fragility is now understood in more specified way based on indicators such as human security, peace building, development performance, governance, corruption,

conflict, legitimacy, economic management, and other diverse attributions, which is a lot more specified from the rest of developing countries categorisation (Nussbaum, Zorbas and Koros, 2012; Alonso, Cortez and Klasen, 2014). In other words, while the rest of developing countries are grouped based on GNI as low-income countries (LICs), upper middle-income countries (UMICs), lower middle-income countries (LMICs), and high income countries (HICs), by the World Bank, or based on GDP as least developed countries (LDCs) by the United Nations, we distinguish fragile states with main causes of state fragility as aforementioned, by various organisations and institutes, rather than simply categorising them as countries in conflict or post-conflict (Alonso et al., 2014). However, definition of fragile states has not found a concrete common ground yet (Nussbaum et al., 2012).

At the same time, academic research on fragile states in development cooperation discourse tend to show three main routes: discussion on the definition and concept of fragile states (for example, Grimm, Lemay-Hébert and Nay, 2014; Kaplan, 2014; Carlsen and Bruggemann, 2017); situational analysis of development cooperation in fragile states and the implications (for instance, Besley and Persson, 2011; Baranyi and Desrosiers, 2012; Cartier-Bresson, 2012; Call, 2016); and how to or what to do for fragile states in development cooperation policy and practice (for example, Brinkerhoff, 2010; Bennet, 2013; Bøås, 2017). Main takeaway from these contemporary fragile state and development cooperation discussion is that we need to address core causes of fragility in fragile states. At the same time, fragility needs to be categorised between endemic and situational/episodic ones (Baranyi and Desrosiers, 2012). At the same time, in order to provide appropriate development cooperation to fragile states, it is critical to focus on country-led sustainable capacity development to achieve socio-economic changes, including external development aid management capability (Brinkerhoff, 2010; Newbrander et al., 2012).

Likewise, it is argued that accountability is a must for the successful SDG implementation, it is also claimed that addressing fragility is critical to provide a smarter development assistance for SDGs, especially judging by the fact that MDGs were highly challenging in fragile states (OECD, 2015 & 2018). MDG progress was very slow in fragile states in general, and most of fragile states failed in MDG achievement (OECD, 2015; Williams et al., 2017). It was because there was lack of focus on fragile states when the international development community delivered MDGs (OECD, 2015). In other words, fragile states were left behind.

However, with the adoption of the New Deal, some of fragile states began to benefit from it. For example, while it was reported that no single fragile state achieved MDGs by 2009, certain progress was observed since 2011 based on fragility assessment and country-tailored development strategies in fragile states, especially g7+ countries (Mayar, 2014). In accordance, the New Deal has been further developed into the SDG implementation process, especially by contributing creation of SDG Goal 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (Williams et al., 2017). As SDGs core principle is 'to leave no one behind', the IDPS has made it clear that SDGs should consider different aspects of countries, including national capacities and development levels, and thus, must provide differentiated approaches to fragile and/or post-conflict and in conflict countries. This embraces the needs of addressing both technical and political obstacles to development progress by identifying the root causes of fragility in country. With this in mind, it has been emphasised that the New Deal must be included in the process of SDG implementation in fragile states (New Deal Ad hoc Working Group on Agenda 2030 and the New Deal, 2017).

In accordance, UNDP has implemented a 'Ready Project', which is a tailored support to SDG implementation in fragile states. Apart from this Ready Project, UNDP has also provided MAPS for fragile state support, but not specifically focusing on SDGs. In comparison, OECD has suggested to re-consider the way how to measure fragility in achieving SDGs by more focusing on risk diversity and vulnerability in fragile context. It is because even among fragile states, capacity needs and development levels are different (OECD, 2015). However, in the SDG context, it has been pointed out that monitoring process is a 'particular burden' for fragile states as they lack required capacity to monitor the progress of SDG implementation. For example, G7+ countries are experiencing challenges in data collection, which is the basic level of monitoring and review of the SDG accountability (New Deal Ad hoc Working Group on Agenda 2030 and the New Deal, 2017). Likewise, it has been proved that capacity enhancement can be highly important for fragile states to achieve socio-economic progress by finding a path from fragility to development (Brinkerhoff, 2010). However, it is noteworthy that capacity development also needs to be differentiated by country's capacity levels, and also by areas of capacity (Newbrander et al., 2012).

IV. A Case Analysis: Accountability in North Korea as a Fragile State

According to various existing fragile states index, North Korea is a de facto fragile state. For example, the OECD's 'States of Fragility' report series defines North Korea as a fragile state (for instance, OECD, 2018). OECD measures criteria against security fragility, social fragility, political fragility, environmental fragility, and economic fragility, and North Korea has been one of the fragile state recipients with lowest level of donor ODA support (OECD, 2018). In comparison, the World Bank also produces fragile index with the 'Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA)'. CPIA uses four clusters, including economic management, structural policies, policies for social inclusion, and public sector management and institutions, which are relayed to 16 policies criteria to measure state policy and institutional frameworks in relations to state fragility (Feeny, Posso and Regan-Beasley, 2015: 1075). However, these fragile indices by the international organisations have a political nexus (Grimm, 2014; Nay, 2014), and thus, it is critical to triangulate these indices with those produced by more independent bodies as following.

Among many, Global Peace Index (GPI) by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), Fragile States Index (FSI) by the Fund for Peace (FFP), Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) by the CIFP Project, and Index of State Weakness in the Developing World (ISW) by the Brookings Institution have been leading fragility indices, and North Korea has been categorised as fragile state by all of those indices. In more detail, GPI measures 163 countries' peacefulness level based on 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators. These include indices of safety and security, ongoing conflict, and militarisation (IEP, 2018). In comparison, FSI ranks 178 states' fragility by using FFP's Conflict Assessment System Tool (CAST). CAST uses the method of 'comprehensive social science approach' based on content analysis, quantitative data, and qualitative review process. Indicators used for CAST includes security apparatus, factionalised elites, group grievance, economic decline, uneven development, human flight and brain drain, state legitimacy, public services, human rights and rule of law, demographic pressures, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and external intervention (FFP, 2018). In the case of CIFP, the CIFP Project has employed so-called 'ALC approach', which measures authority, legitimacy, and capacity of countries as fragility measures (Carment, Samy and Landry, 2013). Finally, ISW uses 'state weakness' rather than 'fragility' in its measurement,

by ranking 141 countries. It examines economic, political, security, and social welfare performance of states (Rice and Patrick, 2008).

However, some scholars, especially in South Korea, who deal with North Korea issues have shown different perceptions and understandings from aforementioned fragility indices. According to them, North Korea is politically stable regardless its long-term dictatorship – some said that North Korea is stable ironically due to its strong dictatorship, and thus, it is not fragile in a sense of state collapse possibility (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 7, 11 & 20). At the same time, it was also said that North Korea's persistent economic survival even after tremendous natural disasters in the 1990s and continuous international sanctions prove that this country is not fragile (Interviews 1, 6 & 20). However, these academics were not fully aware of existing fragile states index as their very first question was identically 'what fragile states mean'. Due to this non-understanding about fragile state concept, they tended to provide their individual views on North Korea as non-fragile state. However, an academic showed somewhat different viewpoint. According to this interviewee, North Korea is fragile at least in social development context based on the interviewee's experience to visit North Korea – not major cities but villages. This interviewee was also not clear about the concept of fragile state and fragile indices (Interviews 3). Interviews with other experts in North Korea in the US and the UK also show similar result (Interviews 15, 16, 17 & 18). Among them, one interviewee was a secondee from South Korean government to the World Bank, but even though she was working at the World Bank, the concept of fragile states turned out unclear (Interview 15). This confirms the findings from the existing study arguing that the concept of fragile states has not been universal (for example, see Grimm, 2014; Nay, 2014).

In the case of international organisations, views on North Korea's fragility vary. It is said that UNDP does not consider North Korea as a fragile state (Interviews 13 & 14) while European Union classifies North Korea as a fragile state (Interview 19). While the reason why UNDP does not classify North Korea as a fragile state was not given (Interviews 13 & 14), it was said that North Korea topic has been highly sensitive for UNDP at the moment as there has been discussion whether to maintain its office in Pyongyang or not (Interview 22). In the case of the EU, it treats North Korea as a fragile state based on internal purpose by employing dimensions such as economy, political and social situation, and environment (Interview 19). The unclear positioning of some of international organisations about state fragility has been discussed in the existing research as well (Grimm, 2014; Nay, 2014). Contrary to this, aid workers or researchers in the government sector in South Korea tend to categorise North Korea as a fragile state (Interviews 4, 5 & 21). One interviewee who is a well-known researcher on North Korea in South Korea perceived that 99 percent of people would consider North Korea as a fragile state as the country situation in general is highly fragile. He particularly emphasised an example of financial sector in North Korea (Interview 21). However, this does not mean that they are aware of fragile indices, but their understanding of state fragility was limited to the sectors which they have been involved with. Common ground for those who perceive North Korea as a fragile state is based on that North Korea cannot achieve necessary development progress by its own, but with external support. In comparison, at the ministry level, views vary again. For example among the interviewed, junior level officials in South Korea government tend to define North Korea as a fragile state due to its economic, social and human right status (Interviews 9 & 10) while a senior official clearly stated that North Korea is not a fragile state, especially when it comes to its political stability (Interview 8). Again, none of these officials were clearly recognised various kinds of fragile indices at the international level.

The series of interviews have confirmed that views on North Korea in the context of fragile states tends to lie in individual understanding or experience, and thus, existing fragile states indices have not been thoroughly explored yet when it comes to the case of North Korea. This implies that it is necessary to build up more consensus approach towards North Korea, especially in the process of development cooperation. It is only international organisations which use fragile indices, but government sector or aid workers, particularly in South Korea, do not seem to use the same language when they deal with fragile states. In light of this, this study argues that North Korea should be considered as a fragile state based on more objective categorisation such as GPI, FSI, CIFP, and ISW, rather than relying on individual conceptualisation of the country.

As mentioned, North Korea is working on its VNR to be published in 2019 or 2020. In more detail, North Korea made its request to the President of UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to present its VNR in 2019; however, by the time the interview was conducted in 2019, the 2019 list was closed but North Korea did not submit its VNR yet. Based on this, UN asked North Korea to submit its VNR in 2020, and thus, we expect North Korea's VNR to be published in 2020 (Interview 23). It was said that a task force team was set out to comprise different Ministries to reflect progress on all of 17 SDGs, and a draft outline was prepared. However, the interviewee demonstrated her perception by saying that North Korea's VNR will be at the level of more of a baseline report (Interview 23). Yet, one of the benchmark examples can be found with Global Burden of Diseases (GBD) 2015 SDG Collaborators (2016) which analysed 33 health-related SDG indicators in 188 countries from 1990 to 2015 period. Based on the GBD 2015 SDG Collaborators research, North Korea has been ranked as 116th out of 188, while its sister country, South Korea was ranked as 35th (GBD 2015 SDG Collaborators, 2016: 1825-1830).

While North Korea's SDG VNR has not been published yet by the time of writing this paper, two important documents can show progress, changes and anticipation in North Korea regarding to the SDGs: 'Strategic Framework for Cooperation between the United Nations and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2017-2021' (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018); and 'DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2018' (Humanitarian Country Team, 2018). While VNR is being support by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the UN Strategic Framework (UNSF) was coordinated by UNDP (Interview 22 & 23) and the Needs and Priorities report was prepared by the humanitarian country team located in North Korea.

The UNSF provides priorities to support the efforts of the government of North Korea in terms of improving well-being of the people, agreed between the UN Country Team in North Korea and the National Coordinating Committee (NCC) led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea. The UNSF does not specify detailed programmes but demonstrates framework as a guidance to the UN work in North Korea. Based on the framework depicted in the UNSF, each UN body in North Korea, such as UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNDP, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO), build up their own programmes. In the 2017-2021 UNSF in North Korea, the Team has set out four strategic priorities which the SDG value and principles are embedded in. While the four strategic priorities have been food and nutrition security, social development services, resilience and sustainability, and data and development management, there are stretched under the theme of 'sustainable and resilient human development' in North Korea (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018).

The UNSF 2017-2021 covers only half of SDG goals, by excluding Goals 1 (no poverty), 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 10 (reduced inequalities), 14 (life below water), 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and 17 (partnerships for the goals). However, within the UNSF, it is clearly stated joint efforts will be provided in areas such as human rights-based approach, gender equality and the empowerment of women, environmental sustainability, institutional sustainability, result-based management, and value for money, which covers Goals 5, 10, 14, and 16. Yet, Goals 1, 8 and 17 are still outstanding (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018).

In particular, the reason why it is limited to achieve Goal 17 in North Korea is due to current international sanctions. In the document, it is clearly stated that ‘one reason for this flexible approach is the relative uncertainty regarding the financial resources available to the UN in DPR Korea’ (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018: 11). Even though UNSF does not mention ‘sanctions’, it has pointed out the ‘challenging external environment’ (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018: 11), which clearly implies existing security concerns and sanctions. Here, the ‘flexible approach’ means that the Team sets out guidelines framework only by avoiding providing specific programme plans due to uncertain financial support plan. As such, current UNSF is about ‘transferring international principles and values, standards and know-how’, but not about ‘resource transfer’ (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018: 8). As no such concrete funding prediction can be envisaged, it is said that periodic appeals for humanitarian assistance ‘may’ be launched (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018: 9). This can be confirmed from the interview mentioned above about the possibility of removing UNDP office from Pyongyang (Interview 22). This makes it more compelling the need of fragility context in this process in North Korea. With no projectiles of budget in mid- and long-term, assistance cannot be sustainable, and thus, development cannot be achieved at its aimed level (Lim, 2013).

It is noteworthy that the UNSF does not provide clear link to the SDGs on the final strategic priority, data and development management. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, it is obvious that data management is a critical part of SDG accountability, especially at the stage of answerability of accountability mechanism, and also partially for the Goal 16. As a matter of fact, the UNSF made it clear that in its monitoring and evaluation process for the Team’s support to the government of North Korea, it maintains ‘no access, no assistance’ operating principle (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018: 27). In other words, data access for accountability has been imposed in the UNSF for SDG implementation of North Korea.

In comparison, the Needs and Priorities analysis was led by the UN Resident Coordinator by emphasising the need of continuous international financial life-saving support to the most vulnerable people in North Korea. Unlike to the UNSF, it clearly states that the sanctions imposed on North Korea has worked as a significant obstacle in humanitarian activities in practice. According to the report, about USD 111 million is required for the most ‘urgent’ food, health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene for about six million people. Among them, 1.7 million are under-five children and 342,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women (Humanitarian Country Team, 2018: 3). Accordingly, the Needs and Priorities report has set out four main priority sectors to support: food security; nutrition; health; and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (Humanitarian Country Team, 2018). As seen, the four priority sectors in needs by the Needs and Priorities report are significantly related to the first two strategic priorities of the UNSF; however, the report itself does not link its priorities to the SDGs.

Even though it has appealed that support to humanitarian needs in North Korea needs to be considered exclusively from political environment, it does not define the country as in fragile situation. However, the report evidently depicts that the situation in North Korea is fragile, and thus, development cooperation support needs to be held under the fragile context. For example, the report specifies accessibility restrictions as following. As seen below, this is against various existing fragile indices in relation to the public sector management and institutions as well as the level of democracy.

“Travel within DPRK remains regulated by national authorities. International humanitarian agencies need to obtain advance clearance for field visits outside of Pyongyang, as do DPRK nationals. ... Coordination with the Government, particularly Line Ministries, is complicated by the need for government and ministries’ staff to obtain prior clearance to visit organisations’ offices and attend meetings,”
(Humanitarian Country Team, 2018: 16).

Similar to the UNSF, the Needs and Priorities report also emphasises monitoring process. The report described the challenges in physical and administrative data accessibility with a steady progress in practice. Like in the UNSF, the report also implies the need of government capacity building in data management (Humanitarian Country Team, 2018). This, in turn, implies that accountability can be achieved when it comes as ‘mutual’ based on interactive exchanges (Lim, 2019b). For instance, while the government of North Korea removes data access restrictions, international partners provide capacity development support of data and information management in North Korea (Lim, 2018).

V. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

North Korea presents an interesting case in the context of SDG implementation under the sanctions. If we truly intend to include North Korea in the SDG process, a separate accountability mechanism needs to be employed. This paper argues that a robust accountability mechanism should be there in the case of fragile context by applying a ‘transitional accountability’. Here, transitional accountability can be applied countries like North Korea which lacks state capacity for equipping required soft and hard infrastructure for accountability. In other words, North Korea as a fragile state and also with special economic condition (sanctions) needs to be taken with differentiated but constructive path of accountability. By applying constructive approach, transitional accountability can work better in fragile context. For example, in its second stage of accountability (answerability), we need to introduce incentivisability at the beginning of the process. For instance, while the Government of North Korea provides full access to data and information transparently, at least in sectors where it receives ODA, by allowing shadow reporting system, the international community can suggest a snapback process, which lifts part of existing sanctions in North Korea, as a part of incentives.

At the same time, technical cooperation for capacity development needs to be provided. In its analysis of the FRA in North Korea in this paper, findings suggests that North Korea can commit itself to data sharing and transparency as it is willing to publish VNR. However, as pointed out from the recent publications, data and information access is still highly restrained in North Korea, and the data and information included in the VNR needs to be assured by the shadow report from the independent body. A shadow reporting system is a well-known way of peer review process. For example, OECD DAC Peer Review series also offers the shadow report from CSOs and NGOs to reassure the information provided by each government.

However, as CSOs and NGOs seem to be a vulnerable body in North Korea, we can also think about establishing a steering committee so that they can be more independent from the current political system, but also can develop their capacity to become an independent body in the transitional accountability process in the country, supported by international and bilateral donor government bodies. In this way, a culture of accountability can formally and informally arrive in the society and the government. This can be critical in the case of North Korea as we cannot be sure whether current regime has any political will to achieve a culture of accountability in the government system. On top of it, defining and conceptualising accountability in the country system needs to be embedded. As the theory shows, appropriate conceptualisation of accountability must be prepared as a pre-requisite, along with the culture of accountability.

If this transitional accountability successfully work at its second state (answerability), we can move to its third stage of the accountability process (enforceability) by maintaining its constructive pathway, rather than starting from the existing punitive enforceability condition (sanctions). In other words, once North Korea reveals sufficient data and information about its development progress under the SDG mandates, and we can confirm it with the third body, we can provide more incentives by providing financial support, along with further technical cooperation.

As it was analysed, accountability is not limited to only SDG implementation issue, but can be understood in wider context of state's institutional building. Based on the case of North Korea, we can introduce transitional accountability by focusing on selective sectors. Based on its experience and practice from selective sectors of the government system, it can be expanded to the whole of government institutional development. As long as the concept of accountability is embedded and the culture of accountability is mainstreamed in the society, a state can escape from many of weak status against fragile index, and thus, can achieve de fact development in the country.

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International Institute of Korean Studies (IKSU)

AB145, Adelphi Building
School of Language and Global Studies
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, Lancashire
PR1 2HE, UK

[Visit our IKSU webpage here](#)