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# **The Paradox of Unsustainability in UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The North Korean Case in the Context of Accountability and the Fragile States under Sanctions\***

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## **Abstract**

This study examines whether North Korea can be a part of the SDG process as a fragile state under sanctions. The paper focuses on the accountability mechanism of the SDG implementation process, and analyses how North Korea has engaged in the process and what needs to be addressed to achieve ‘leave no one behind’ principle of the SDGs. The findings of the study reveal that North Korea can engage in the SDG process, but only when a culture of accountability develops in its society and government structure. This study suggests employing the concept of ‘transitional accountability’. Finally, the study argues that a constructive accountability approach can be more effective than a punitive one, especially in fragile states under sanctions.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Accountability, Fragile States, Sanctions, North Korea (DPRK)

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## **I. Introduction**

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In September 2015, member countries of the United Nations (UN) agreed to continue to pursue a platform of global goals, named the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as a successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Before the SDGs were agreed, there was a series of international meetings on the implementation process of global goals, based on their predecessors, the MDGs. Four High Level Forums (HLFs) were held by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). This series of meetings began in 2003 with a donor harmonisation discussion in Rome, Italy, and continued in the 2005 discussion about aid effectiveness in boosting MDG implementation in Paris, France. In 2008, the discussion continued during the third OECD DAC HLF in Accra, Ghana, by emphasising the importance of new actors like civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), new aid modalities including South-South Cooperation and Triangular Cooperation, and new approaches to fragile states, followed by the fourth OECD DAC HLF, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), in Busan, South Korea, in 2011.

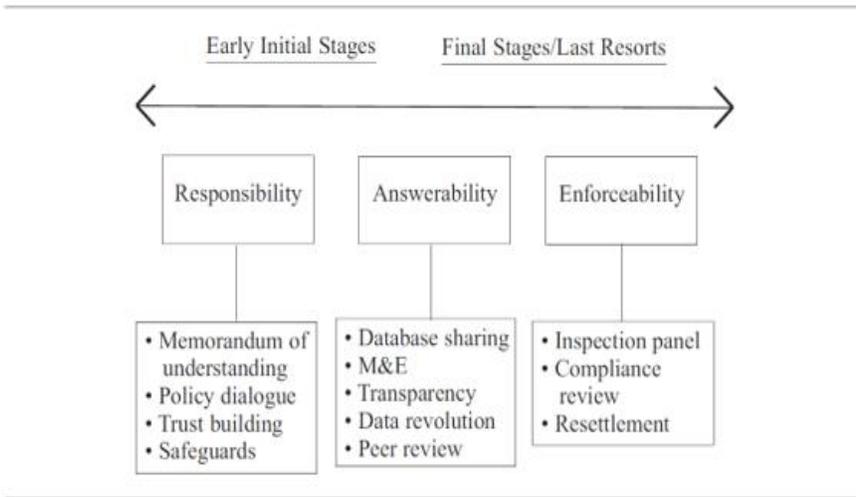
These OECD DAC HLFs were converted into the format of the series of the GPEDC high level meetings, not only led by OECD but also with the UN. The very first meeting was held in Mexico in 2014 to discuss the unfinished business of MDG implementation in review of what was met and what was not met, and provided lessons learned for SDGs. One of the main areas where the implementation principles still lagged behind MDG implementation, and thus, needed to be continued in the SDG implementation mechanism, was mutual accountability. However, accountability in development cooperation has not been fully analysed yet in academic discourse. At the same time, while attention to fragile states was heavily emphasised during the third OECD DAC HLF in 2008, this seems to have faded, and it has remained an orphan pillar in the international goals' implementation process. Even though an increasing amount of research has been conducted in terms of fragile states and development cooperation, little of it has dealt with North Korea as a case in this area of study. Furthermore, even though SDGs have set out the fundamental principle of 'leave no one behind', countries like North Korea do not seem to be a part of the SDGs in terms of donor support, especially when it comes to the people at grassroots level under sanctions. Existing sanctions have limited even the basic level of requirement of international development support in the country (FAO/WFP, 2019).

With this in mind, this paper aims to fill this gap by answering its research questions of whether we can still apply SDG discourse to North Korea even though it is under sanctions, and if so, in what context and how this could be done. This study addresses two interweaving unfinished pillars of accountability and fragility from the MDGs by exploring recent developments in the SDG implementation mechanism. This paper defines North Korea as a fragile state based on various fragile indices and its status as a country under sanctions. This has been dealt with in more detail in the later section of the paper. In the end, it intends to provide implications for fragile states deriving from the case of North Korea, which is one of the most severely ignored countries with the excuse that we do not have access to data to analyse in the development cooperation context and that it is not appropriate to discuss it pending the nuclear threat and the country's sanctioned status. It is noteworthy that this paper does not intend to examine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of sanctions, but rather attempts to provide policy recommendations for how fragile states, especially under sanctions, can be a part of the SDGs by promoting 'tailored' accountability.

## **II. Accountability in Development Cooperation**

### ***1. Accountability in Theory***

As seen in Figure 1, 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 any legal claims occur in this process, accountability among partners can end up with an inspection panel, compliance review and/or resettlement (enforceability).



*Note:* M&E, monitoring and evaluation.

**Figure 1.** Accountability Mechanism in Development Cooperation  
(Kim & Lim, 2017: 198)

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 & Lim, 2017). At this level, the process of accountability conceptualisation must be accompanied with (Das, 2018).

In answerability processes, partners normally set up a monitoring process, along with continuous integration and information sharing in a way to measure behavioural efforts and objectively verifiable indicators of outcomes (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2015; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Because this stage involves ‘measuring’ progress against target indicators, in some existing literature answerability is interchangeably used with ‘countability’ (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2015). In order to achieve the maturity of accountability, conducting the answerability stage successfully is critical. However, more importantly, securing transparency at this stage can be very critical in terms of empowering people through free information flow available to the populace.

The enforceability stage comes as the last resort because it is hardly ever possible to impose any formal enforcement between independent sovereignty partners (Kim & Lim, 2017; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). However, while establishing the formal process of ‘punishment’ at the enforceability stage is 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; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Based on the answerability process (monitor and review), if there are issues which go wrong, based on the formal investigation, necessary changes can be applied based on ownership by each partner in the process, at least in theory.

Accountability can be understood in ‘different forms’, including administrative, political, national legal, and international procedures at the international level. 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 a historical avenue for accountability. Similarly, accountability can be interpreted within the scope of ‘policy integration’ at the national level (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). If there is negligence of accountability in the historical account, it is easy for a country to lack ‘administrative’ accountability. Also, it is easier for a country to impose punitive measures rather than provide 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 an environment that enables state accountability. At the same time, conceptualising accountability needs to be in consensus; otherwise it can complicate the process of legalising and constitutionalising accountability mechanisms 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 accountability process and structure at the national level (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Also, global norms are often 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 putting actual necessary enforcement in place rather than playing with language in development debates (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2015).

## **2. Accountability in Practice**

There was criticism that the 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 system. 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 their MDG targets by the end of 2015. Based on this background, the UN High Level Forum began to talk about a paradigm shift from ‘data revolution’ to ‘accountability revolution’ (UN, 2013). Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon also pointed out that the biggest obstacle was the lack of accountability in achieving the MDGs (Donald & Way, 2016). Initially, there was a consensus that we needed to have stronger accountability mechanisms at the initial discussion, such as ‘multi-layered accountability architecture’, which addresses all 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 decide upon a concrete accountability mechanism but compromised the current Follow-up and Review Architecture (FRA) as an accountability platform for the SDGs in the form of the Voluntary National Review (VNR), which is in between the global and national levels (Donald and Way, 2016).

The VNR of the FRA was not designed as ‘states-to-people’ accountability, but rather as a ‘peer review’ mechanism, mainly due to the lack of political will (Donald & Way, 2016). According to the theory mentioned previously (Figure 1), peer review can work well in the accountability process at the answerability stage because it can provide a new avenue of conditions (also see Donald & Way, 2016). While enforceability is based on a ‘punitive’ approach, which tends to provide punishment rather than offer conditions to revise failure, a ‘constructive’ approach in accountability proposes processes to ‘monitor, review, act and remedy’ based on the peer review exercise (Das, 2018).

As the FRA is voluntary, it is loosely bounded by UN members. Therefore, the importance of the national judicial mechanism has been emphasised especially under accountability mechanisms like SDG FRA (Donald & Way, 2016; Das, 2018). A robust national judicial mechanism which addresses SDGs in the system can bring national, corporate, and social accountability. At the same time, both informal and formal accountability systems can be

imposed in hierarchical and horizontal accountability mechanisms at the national level through the imposition of a formal mandate (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). At the international level, accountability mechanisms can be imposed either punitively or horizontally. It is important to ensure that the accountability mechanism is embedded in the domestic legal system as a formal mandate.

Furthermore, engagement with SDG accountability can also be incentivised, rather than imposed through enforceability measures which are in fact difficult to implement in reality. Therefore, by accepting the limits of the SDG accountability platform, we can utilise constructive rather than punitive methods to ensure accountability. In this way, as Donald and Way (2016) suggest, we can provide conditions such as more financial and/or technical support to those countries which achieve SDG targets in the given timeframe. History shows that soft law or non-binding commitments such as VNR cannot work as external pressure for member countries, and thus, need to be reconsidered in such a way as to introduce constructive accountability and incentive mechanisms into the SDG FRA platform.

In the SDG accountability mechanisms, it has been pointed out that it is unclear how to collect data and information and how to develop data collection methods to make accountability a successful part of the process (Williams & Hunt, 2017). The existing SDG indicators do not appear to have been designed for accountability from the outset. This suggests that we need to introduce additional indicators dedicated to data and information collection for accountability, and to develop the accountability capacity of countries (Williams & Hunt, 2017).

### **III. Fragile States in Development Cooperation**

#### ***1. Fragile States in Theory***

While there was a level of consideration of state fragility in development cooperation in the late 1990s, a systemic approach was only initiated during the second OECD DAC HLF in 2005. After the second OECD DAC HLF in 2005, the OECD DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations (also known as Fragile States Principles) were

adopted in 2007, and the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) was established in 2008 (Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012). Since then, the INCAF has published ‘States of Fragility’ reports annually to maintain the importance of a differentiated approach to fragile states in the context of development cooperation. When the third OECD DAC HLF was held in 2008, aid stakeholders discussed three new agendas (OECD, 2008). The representatives in the third OECD DAC HLF invited CSOs and NGOs as critical partners in development cooperation, revisited the effectiveness of South-South Cooperation and Triangular Cooperation, and considered the need for a differentiated approach to fragile states (OECD, 2008; Lim, 2019a). In particular, the international development community agreed to establish a new set of approaches 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, thereby recognising the urgent need to address challenges in fragile and conflict-affected states (Williams et al., 2017).

Since then, academics as well as policymakers in the field of development discourse have reflected state fragility in their discussion and analysis (Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012). From the various fragile indexes produced by different entities, it also seems that state fragility is now understood in a more specific way based on various indicators which much more specific than other categorisations of developing countries (Nussbaum, Zorbas, & Koros, 2012; Alonso, Cortez, & Klasen, 2014). However, no definition of fragile states has yet found a concrete common ground (Nussbaum et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, academic research on fragile states appears to split into three main categories: discussion of the definition and concept of fragile states (Grimm et al., 2014; Kaplan, 2014; Carlsen & Bruggemann, 2017); situational analysis of development cooperation in fragile states and its implications (Besley & Persson, 2011; Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012; Cartier-Bresson, 2012; Call, 2016); and how or what to do for fragile states in development cooperation policy and practice (Brinkerhoff, 2010; Bennet, 2013; Bøås, 2017). The main takeaway from this contemporary fragile state discussion is that we need to address the core causes of fragility in fragile states. At the same time, the definition of fragility needs to be distinguished between endemic and situational/episodic (Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012). In order to provide appropriate development cooperation to fragile states, it is critical to fo-

cus on country-led sustainable capacity development to achieve socio-economic change, including external development aid management capability (Brinkerhoff, 2010; Newbrander et al., 2012).

## ***2. Fragile States in Practice***

While it is argued that accountability is necessary for successful SDG implementation, it is also claimed that addressing fragility is critical to provide a smarter development assistance for SDGs (OECD, 2015; 2018). MDG progress was very slow in fragile states in general, and most fragile states failed to achieve the MDGs (OECD, 2015; Williams et al., 2017). This was because there was a lack of focus on fragile states when the MDGs were delivered (OECD, 2015).

However, with the adoption of the New Deal, some fragile states began to benefit from it. While it was reported that no single fragile state achieved the MDGs by 2009, certain progress has been observed since 2011 based on fragility assessment and country-tailored development strategies in fragile states, especially g7+ countries (Mayar, 2014). The categorisation of 'g7+' was created in opposition to 'G7' countries in order to indicate fragile states with a small 'g', while a capital 'G' stands for the world's leading countries. Accordingly, the New Deal has been further developed into the SDG implementation process, especially through contributing to the creation of SDG Goal 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (Williams et al., 2017). An SDG core principle is 'leave no one behind', and the IDPS has made it clear that the 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 need to address both technical and political obstacles to development progress by identifying the root causes of fragility in countries. In light of this, 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, the UNDP has implemented SDG-ready projects, which is a tailored support to SDG implementation in the context of fragility. In relation to this, the UNDP has provided the Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support (MAPS) for member states to take a common approach to fragile states. MAPS was not designed under the MDG paradigm, but when the SDGs were agreed they were integrated into the process. The UNDP has

also established the fragility-sensitive approach (FSA) which can be applied to MAPS in order to support SDG implementations in fragile states. The FSA of the UNDP makes it clear that not only conflicts, but also factors such as levels of resilience against natural disaster, risk of shocks and stresses, and people dynamics need to be taken into consideration when defining state fragility (UNDP, 2016). In comparison, OECD has suggested we re-consider the way fragility is measured in achieving SDGs by focusing more on risk diversity and vulnerability in fragile states. This 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 the monitoring process is a ‘particular burden’ for fragile states as they lack the required capacity to monitor the progress of SDG implementation. Likewise, it has been proven 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). Nevertheless, 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. Methodology and Analytical Framework**

This paper has been conducted using a qualitative methodology, including case study and interview methods. As there was highly limited access to information regarding North Korea, interviews played a critical role in this paper, in particular for the purposes of triangulation. However, it needs to be addressed that conducting interviews, especially with international organisations, was particularly difficult as the situation surrounding North Korea during the research period was very unreliable. For example, it was clearly stated that the UNDP has experienced a very sensitive period on issues relating to North Korea (Interview 18). Similarly, interviewees expressed their concerns of revealing information such as their affiliated organisations and position titles. They agreed that the knowledge and information obtained from the interviews can be used only indirectly. Accordingly, much of the content from the interviews has not been explicitly stated in this research due to such requests from the interviewees. Furthermore, details about each interviewee have been carefully encoded, and the list of interviewees in the reference shows limited personal information about them. However, the context is fully

reflected in terms of approach and understanding of the issue related to the research. On top of that, a series of interviews has provided fruitful insights in this research and helped this study to become stronger in terms of balancing different views and understandings.

This research defines FRA with the VNR as the SDG accountability mechanism. In the SDG paradigm, the FRA as a data sharing platform can be interpreted as the process in the answerability stage of the accountability mechanism. As explained, accountability can be understood as three main stages, emphasizing the importance of transparency and free information flow to empower people. While transparency can contribute to less state fragility, capacity development also needs to be paralleled. However, as the global level SDG accountability mechanism, which is FRA, remains purely voluntary, a legally binding accountability mechanism needs to be established at the national level. In light of this, this paper sets out an analytical framework based on the argument analysed from the existing literature that the independent thematic expert groups need to be introduced at the international level in conjunction with the SDG FRA system, while legalising and constitutionalising accountability mechanisms in the government system that need to be practiced, by drawing political attention to the SDG accountability at the national level.

At the same time, this paper reflects a constructive approach rather than a punitive one at the level of enforceability. While effective in theory, punitive measures can rarely be imposed in reality and thus a constructive approach can be more effective and efficient in practice. By adopting an international incentive system at the domestic level, more engagement of the SDG implementation and data sharing process can be promoted. As previously noted, accountability needs to be embedded in the culture, and appropriate process of conceptualising accountability is required in consensus. Experience has shown that the neo-liberal approach of 'one size fits all' is not effective, and therefore we need to consider the different situations prevailing in each country and thus apply 'transitional accountability' in conceptualising accountability in the culture by taking more flexible range, time, and resources. When applying the 'transitional accountability' approach to fragile states as one of the forms of international incentives, the international community can boost the capacity development of fragile governments as another form of incentives for engaging and providing data and information related to the SDGs. As measurable and customized information and data collection methods are required in the FRA process, those who actively participate in this process can bring more attention to capacity development as incentives from donor

governments. In the end, it is evident that external soft law pressure, such as global norms and the FRA, cannot force governments to comply, and therefore providing reverse conditions through incentive mechanisms can be more effective.

## **V. A Case of North Korea**

### *1. North Korea as a Fragile State*

According to various existing fragile states indexes, 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). In comparison, the World Bank also produces a fragile index known as the 'Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA)' (Feeny et al., 2015: 1075). However, these fragile indices by 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 follows. In comparison, the UNDP fragility definition includes resilience levels in the case of natural disaster, such as floods, people living in extreme poverty and the context of their dynamics, and environmentally vulnerable and political fragile situations (see also UNDP 2016). In this paper, we include such factors as vulnerability of people at risk under international sanctions in the definition of fragility, especially in relation to the latter part of the UNDP definition.

Among others, the Global Peace Index (GPI) published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), the Fragile States Index (FSI) published by the Fund for Peace (FFP), the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) published by the CIFP Project, and the Index of State Weakness in the Developing World (ISW) published by the Brookings Institution have all been leading fragility indices, and North Korea has been categorised as a fragile state by all of these indices. In more detail, the 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, the FSI ranks 178 states' fragility using the 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 (FFP, 2018). In the case of the CIFP, the CIFP

Project has employed the so-called ‘ALC approach’, which measures Authority, Legitimacy, and the Capacity of countries as measures of fragility (Carmen et al., 2013). Finally, the ISW uses ‘state weakness’ rather than ‘fragility’ in its measurement ranking 141 countries. It examines economic, political, security, and social welfare performance of states (Rice & Patrick, 2008).

However, some scholars who deal with North Korean issues have expressed perceptions and understandings that differ from the aforementioned fragility indices. According to them, North Korea is politically stable despite its long-term dictatorship – some say that ironically North Korea is stable due to its strong dictatorship, and thus, it is not fragile in a sense of potential state collapse (Interviews 11; 12; 14; 15; 16; 23). At the same time, it was also said that North Korea’s continued economic survival even after tremendous natural disasters in the 1990s and continued international sanctions prove that this country is not fragile (Interviews 9; 10; 11; 14; 21; 22; 23). However, these academics were not fully aware of existing fragile states indices as their very first question was always ‘what does “fragile states” mean?’. Due to this lack of familiarity with the concept of fragile states, they tended to provide their individual views on North Korea as a non-fragile state, except one academic among interviewees. According to this interviewee, North Korea is fragile at least in the social development context based on the interviewee’s experience of visiting North Korea – not major cities but villages (Interview 13). Another interviewee who was a secondee from the South Korean government to the World Bank mentioned that the concept of fragile states was unfamiliar to her even though she was working for the World Bank long enough (Interview 9). This confirms the findings from the existing study arguing that the concept of fragile states has not been universal (see Grimm, 2014; Nay, 2014).

In the case of international organisations, views on North Korea’s fragility vary. It is said that the UNDP does not consider North Korea to be a fragile state (Interviews 7; 8) while the European Union (EU) does classify North Korea as a fragile state (Interview 17). While the reason why the UNDP does not classify North Korea as a fragile state was not given (Interviews 7; 8), it was said that the topic of North Korea has been highly sensitive for the UNDP at the moment as there has been discussions on whether it should maintain its office in Pyongyang (Interview 18). In the case of the EU, it treats North Korea as a fragile state based on internal characteristics by employing criteria such as economic, political, environmental, and social development (Interview 17). The unclear positioning of some 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 1; 2; 22). One interviewee who is a well-known researcher on North Korea in South Korea perceived that 99 percent of people would consider North Korea to be a fragile state as the country situation in general is highly fragile. He particularly emphasised as an example the financial sector in North Korea (Interview 20). However, this does not mean that they are aware of fragility indices, but their understanding of state fragility was limited to the sectors in which they have been involved. Common ground for those who perceive North Korea as a fragile state derives from the fact that North Korea cannot achieve necessary levels of development by itself, but only through external support. In comparison, at the ministry level, opinions vary once again. For example, among those interviewed, junior level officials in the South Korean government tend to define North Korea as a fragile state due to its economic, social, and human rights status (Interviews 4; 5) while a senior official clearly stated that North Korea is not a fragile state, especially when it comes to its political stability (Interview 3). Again, none of these officials were familiar with the various fragility indices at the international level.

This series of interviews confirmed that views on North Korea in the context of fragile states tend to derive from individual understanding or experience, and thus existing fragile states indices have not yet been thoroughly explored when it comes to the case of North Korea. This implies that it is necessary to build up a more consensus approach towards North Korea, especially in the process of development cooperation. In light of this, this study argues that North Korea should be considered as a fragile state based on more objective categorisations rather than relying on individual conceptualisations of the country. Also, it is noteworthy that a further study is required with more in-depth surveys among experts on North Korea in order to understand how they define North Korea's status. The number of interviewees for this study is not sufficient to generalise, which remains a limitation of the research.

## ***2. SDGs and Accountability in North Korea***

North Korea is working on its VNR to be published in 2019 or 2020. North Korea made a request to the President of the 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 had not yet North Korea

submitted its VNR yet. Based on this, the UN asked North Korea to submit its VNR in 2020, and thus, we expect North Korea's VNR to be published in 2020 (Interview 19). It was said that a task force was assembled comprising different Ministries to reflect progress on all 17 SDGs, and a draft outline was prepared. However, the interviewee stated that North Korea's VNR will be more at the level of a baseline report (Interview 19). Nevertheless, one of the benchmark examples can be found in the Global Burden of Diseases (GBD) 2015 SDG Collaborators (2016) which analysed 33 health-related SDG indicators in 188 countries from 1990 to 2015. Based on the GBD 2015 SDG Collaborators research, North Korea has been ranked 116th out of 188, while its sister country, South Korea, was ranked 35th (GBD 2015 SDG Collaborators, 2016: 1825-1830).

While North Korea's SDG VNR has not yet been published at the time of writing, two important documents can show progress, change, and anticipation in North Korea regarding 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 the VNR is being supported by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the UN Strategic Framework (UNSF) was coordinated by the UNDP (Interview 18; 19) 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 the 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 provides a framework as guidance to the UN's work in North Korea. Based on the framework depicted in the UNSF, each UN body in North Korea builds its own programmes. For the 2017-2021 UNSF in North Korea, the Team has set out four strategic priorities in which the SDG values and principles are embedded. While the four strategic priorities are food and nutrition security, social development services, resilience and sustainability, and data and development management, these are stretched under the theme of 'sustainable and resilient human development' in North Korea. The way each strategic priority is connected to the SDGs can be found in Table 1 (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018). Within the UNSF, it is clearly stated that joint efforts will be

provided in areas such as human rights-based approaches, 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. However, Goals 1, 8 and 17 are still outstanding (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018).

**Table 1.** UNSF Four Strategic Priorities and SDGs in North Korea, 2017-2021  
(Author’s own compilation based on DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018)

UNSF Four Strategic Priorities	Relevant SDGs
Food and Nutrition Security	SDG 2: Zero hunger SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure
Social Development Services	SDG 3: Good health and well-being SDG 4: Quality education SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation
Resilience and Sustainability	SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production SDG 13: Climate action SDG 15: Life on land
Data and Development Management	SDG goal is not specified in the UNSF

In particular, the reason why it is impossible to achieve Goal 17 in North Korea is due to the 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 the 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 a guideline frame-

work only by avoiding providing specific programme plans due to the uncertain financial support plan. As such, the 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 closing the UNDP office in Pyongyang (Interview 18). This makes the need for the understanding of state fragility context in this process in North Korea all the more compelling.

In Table 1, it is noteworthy that the UNSF does not provide a clear link to the SDGs on the final strategic priority; data and development management. However, it is obvious that data management is a critical part of SDG accountability, especially at the stage of answerability in the accountability mechanism, and also partially for 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 the operating principle of ‘no access, no assistance’ (DPRK and UN Office of the Resident Coordinator, 2018: 27).

In comparison, the Needs and Priorities analysis was led by the UN Resident Coordinator by emphasizing the need for continuous international financial life-saving support to the most vulnerable people in North Korea. Unlike the UNSF, it clearly states that the sanctions imposed on North Korea have 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 needs for about six million people. Among those, 1.7 million are children under five 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 previously, the four priority sectors highlighted 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 the report stated that the support for humanitarian efforts in North Korea needs to be considered in isolation from the political environment, it does not define the country as fragile. However, the report evidently

depicts the situation in North Korea as fragile, and thus development cooperation support needs to be considered in the context of state fragility (Humanitarian Country Team, 2018: 16). Similar to the UNSF, the Needs and Priorities report also emphasizes the monitoring process. The report described the challenges in physical and administrative data accessibility with a steady progress in practice. As in the UNSF, the report also implies the need for government capacity building in data management (Humanitarian Country Team, 2018). This, in turn, implies that accountability can be achieved when it is 'mutual', based on interactive exchanges (Lim, 2019b).

## **VI. Conclusion**

This paper has examined whether we can still apply SDG discourse to North Korea even though it is under sanctions and, if so, in what context and how this could be achieved. The findings of the study reveal that North Korea can engage in the SDG process, but with certain conditions. North Korea presents an interesting case in the context of SDG implementation under 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 present in the case of fragile states that applies 'transitional accountability'. Here, transitional accountability can be applied to countries like North Korea which lack state capacity for equipping the required soft and hard infrastructure for accountability. In other words, North Korea as a fragile state and also with special economic conditions (sanctions) needs a differentiated but constructive path of accountability as a form of tailored approach. The very recent sanctions imposed in 2017, for example, can be understood as a maximum pressure as they are beyond smart sanctions and are negatively influencing daily life of civilians. The international community has imposed a punitive approach against North Korea regardless accountability mechanism stages and has not fully attempted a constructive one yet. By applying the constructive approach, transitional accountability could work better in the context of state fragility. For instance, in the second stage of accountability (answerability), we can introduce incentive system at the beginning of the process with an attempt of partial sanctions lift in limited sectors. Yet, this will require a change of mindset, or even a paradigm shift, from the leading policy makers on current sanctions regime.

At the same time, technical cooperation for capacity development needs to be provided. In its analysis of the FRA in North Korea, this paper has found that North Korea can commit itself to data sharing and transparency as it is willing to publish its VNR. However, as noted in recent publications, data and information access is still highly restricted in North Korea, and the data and information included in the VNR needs to be confirmed by a shadow report drawn up by a group of independent thematic experts. A shadow reporting system is a well-known method of peer review. However, as CSOs and NGOs seem to be vulnerable in North Korea, we can also think of 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 grow in the society and the government. This can be critical in the case of North Korea as we cannot be sure whether the current regime has any political will to achieve a culture of accountability in the government system. Moreover, a definition and conceptualisation of accountability needs to be embedded in the country. As the theory shows, appropriate conceptualisation of accountability must be prepared as a prerequisite, along with a culture of accountability.

If this transitional accountability works successfully at its second stage (answerability), we can move to the third stage of the accountability process (enforceability) by maintaining a constructive pathway, rather than starting from the existing punitive enforceability methods (sanctions). In other words, once North Korea reveals sufficient data and information about its development progress under the SDG mandates, and we can confirm them with a third party, we can provide more incentives by providing financial support, along with further technical cooperation. If the government of North Korea fails to provide full access to data and information transparently, then, the international community can suggest a snapback process. The whole process will need to accompany the process of legalising accountability in the government structure.

Accountability is not limited to the SDG implementation issue but can be understood in the wider context of the state's building of institutions. In the case of North Korea, we can introduce transitional accountability by focusing on selective sectors. Based on its experience and practice in selective sectors of the government system, it can be expanded to the whole of the government's institutional development. As long as the concept of accountability is

embedded and a culture of accountability is mainstreamed in the society, a state can escape from its weak status in the fragility index, and thus can achieve de facto development in the country.

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