# (Re)Engagement with the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK): Dialogue and planning for future opportunity

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Cover image: A woman stands in front of a mural at a subway station in Pyongyang, in the Democratic Peoples's Republic of Korea (DPRK). © Gavin Hellier / Alamy Stock Photo

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief draws on the experiences of a group of individuals (see Table 1, p. 6) who have significant experience working as foreigners in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea) in varied people-focused fields. It harnesses past experiences to consider how organisations, donors, and policymakers may consider (re)engagement that centres on North Korean people's wellbeing in the context of the COVID-19 border closure and potential re-opening. The brief presents nine principles for engagement (Box 1).

**Box 1: Principles for engagement**

General principles

- International staff should encompass *transparency and trust* in their interactions with North Korean colleagues, as this will then improve implementation in the field.
- Foreigners working with people in the DPRK should practice *active patience*, as processes in the DPRK can be of long duration.
- Donors and international organisations should be aware that *engagement is a pendulum* that may swing from one end to the other, due to changing political decisions inside and outside the DPRK.

Soft skills

- Internationals working with North Korean people should respect that people are the *experts of their own lives* and often know how to improve their situation.
- International staff must work with *sensitivity and respect* as they are often a key 'window to the world' for North Korean people.

Operational advice

- Donors, international organisations, and North Korean counterparts should *clearly define success indicators* and measure them jointly, in order to show (good yet realistic) impacts.
- International organisations should *tailor recommended solutions to local conditions* in the DPRK. These conditions may differ from those of other countries and contexts.
- Successful actions in the DPRK might need a *longer preparation* than those in other countries.
- International organisations should conduct risk analysis — including of political, operational, environmental and social dimensions — prior to each larger action.

# INTRODUCTION

Since the DPRK closed its borders in January 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been limited international and inter-Korean engagement. Valuable people-focused work inside the country, including in the realms of agriculture, health, environmental cooperation, and peace dialogue, has since ground to a near standstill. At the same time, reports of ongoing food insecurity, health concerns, outbreaks of COVID-19, and other threats to the wellbeing of people in North Korea suggest that such engagement could continue to have a positive impact on their lives. As of the time of writing (September 2023), the first phase of the border reopening has begun, with North Koreans who have been overseas returning to the DPRK. However there remains no confirmed timeline for later phases of reopening, including when and how travel to (and from) the DPRK will resume for professionals, volunteers, and diplomats engaged in such people-focused work.

It is in many ways a particularly challenging moment for international organisations working in and with the DPRK. In addition to the usual geopolitical challenges, sanctions, and the nuclear issue, the border closure has resulted in not only a lack of ability for non-North Koreans to travel into the country and for North Koreans to leave, but also an extremely reduced amount of information about the life of normal people inside the country. Many diplomatic, United Nations, and non-governmental organisations (NGO) had staff living full time in the DPRK before the pandemic. Additional staff and visitors would come into the country for short-term visits — sometimes very regularly. The border closure has brought an extreme reduction of both resident and non-resident expats in North Korea.[1]

Despite the challenges, this brief asserts the enduring value of people-focused international cooperation with the DPRK for four main reasons. First, engagement is not static. The DPRK has previously been through waves of pulling back and then pushing forward with renewed interest in international integration. Second, isolationist approaches have both practical and conceptual flaws. Practically, such approaches cannot work so long as the government of the People's Republic of China continues to cooperate with the government in Pyongyang. But equally importantly, isolation precludes advances in the DPRK's interactions with the rest of the world. Such advances can have tangible, measurable impacts on North Korean wellbeing, as the next point shows.

The achievements of the work of wellbeing-focused organisations since the 1990s are numerous. Assessments carried out by international organisations reveal improvements in rates of both chronic and acute malnutrition, effective vaccine initiatives, and progress in combating malaria and tuberculosis spanning the period from before the mid-1990s famine (known as the 'Arduous March') to the mid-2010s (Smith, 2016). While it is incorrect to attribute these accomplishments solely to international involvement, they do demonstrate the positive impact of collaborating with international organisations that have provided needed goods, such as agricultural inputs, health equipment, and other humanitarian actions. Worryingly, unfavourable weather conditions endanger these positive trends. The aggregate 2018-19 food crop production (the latest reliable figures before the pandemic) was only 4.9 million metric tons, the lowest since the 2008-09 season. In addition to unfavourable climatic conditions, limited supplies of agricultural inputs, such as fuel, fertilizer and spare parts have had significant adverse impacts (World Food Programme[WFP]/Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2019).

Finally, working with people in the DPRK means dealing with different actors that can have different agendas, keeping in mind that the DPRK is not the monolithic state it may often seem to be. Policies and approaches usually need to address different partners for interactions. Since the 1990s, for example, Germany has implemented humanitarian aid, transition aid and capacity building activities with numerous partners in the DPRK in the fields of food security, agriculture, forestry, climate change and others. These realms provide a good example of the diversity of actions that are possible.

[1] According to a January 2023 *NK News* article, only about 100 foreigners (including family members) were living and working in Pyongyang in the business, private, and diplomatic sectors. Before the pandemic, about 250 diplomats and other personnel (not including family members) were active in Pyongyang (O'Carroll 2023a). The last foreign United Nations and NGO staff left the DPRK in March 2021 (O'Carroll 2021).

After the reopening of the DPRK to outside aid workers, there will be a need for concepts and tools to sustain capacity to engage in people-focused work in the DPRK — both in the context of the collaboration with the DPRK counterparts following the resumption of travel, but also more broadly in the context of 'business as usual' challenges. This includes the restriction of travel inside the DPRK. For example, it was always difficult for foreign aid workers to visit the sites of their projects and to observe the progress of implementation. Such 'monitoring', elsewhere part of every humanitarian and development action, faced significant challenges in the DPRK before — at times being hardly permitted — and it is reasonable to expect that these limitations will not be eased soon. New concepts to overcome these difficulties may include trust building with DPRK counterparts so that they can take over the responsibilities of project monitoring, and possibly the responsibilities of overall project management as well.

Another challenge will be banking and sanctions-related issues, which are now much stricter than a decade ago. Sanctions compliance impacts every single commodity, person, and action in the DPRK, even for people-centred and humanitarian activities. Due to secondary sanctions, it is almost impossible to get foreign cash into the country and aid organisations are forced to find long and arduous detours to finance their work in the country. Lastly, a new way of dealing with a country that has resisted many forms of international integration needs to be developed. Previous trustful relationships with colleagues might have suffered from the disruption brought by the border closure and old routines of collaboration that had been mutually developed since the early 1990s when international aid started, may have disappeared. According to the experience of many aid workers, local partners do however appreciate the re-engagement of their international partners. This was the case in 2005, when the DPRK suddenly did not permit the work of NGOs anymore. Almost a year later, activities were taken up again under a different label.

This brief provides a set of tools in the form of principles for engagement, built on foundations of experience. The principles presented here do not aim to prescribe what to do or how exactly to act, but instead provide frames for approaching problem-solving and building relationships in the country. The next section outlines the methodology in further detail, and presents a set of 'micro-scenarios' which practitioners and policy makers can use in exercises to apply the principle. The brief then features principles in three groups: general principles, soft skills, and operational advice. A final section provides recommendations and a conclusion.

# METHODOLOGY

The project's approach draws from the principles of experience-based learning (EBL) pedagogy, adapted for the DPRK scenario. EBL has two distinguishing dimensions: first, students have an opportunity to practice the topic of their learning, and second, this experience is transformed into learning through critical reflection and analysis (Hedin, 2010). 'Practicing' working in the DPRK has obvious challenges, prompting the research team to consider alternative options for how experiences can support robust engagement. They landed on harnessing past experiences to support learning for future interaction.

This brief draws on the experiences of a group of individuals (Table 1) who have significant experience working in the DPRK in varied people-focused fields, including agriculture and development work, entrepreneurship, training, tourism, environmental cooperation, and social enterprises. These individuals have worked in both resident and non-resident capacities, and at different times. The research team convened a 2-day workshop in Seoul in July 2023. The purpose of the workshop was to create a forum for actors to discuss their experiences, share knowledge, and think innovatively. It focused on the daily, micro-level politics and practices of engagement.

The five experienced practitioners independently drafted their own set of four to six principles for working with the people of the DPRK. They presented these principles at the workshop to a group of invitees interested in and experienced with people-focused work in the DPRK. Many of the workshop attendees would normally have travelled to the DPRK in their roles but have not been able to do so because of the border closure in 2020. Following the presentations, the experienced practitioners and the research team members met to discuss how their principles overlapped, interacted, and differed. This process of 'charting'[2] included identifying overarching themes and grouping a streamlined set of principles into the three final thematic areas — general principles, soft skills, and operational advice.

It is important to note the limitations of the experience-based, thematic approach. Firstly, the experienced practitioner group carries a wealth of knowledge from many years of constructive interaction in the DPRK. However, their experiences are not representative. Just as the DPRK is not monolithic, experiences in the country are not homogenous and are mainly built on 'anecdotes'. This is the case for most of the information the international community gets on the DPRK, since reliable data gathering has rarely been permitted by

**Table 1: Contributors (in alphabetical order)**

| Name | Nature of experience in North Korea | Project role |
|---|---|---|
| James Banfill | Tourism, agriculture, cultural exchange | Research team member |
| Jasmine Barrett | Social enterprise, disability support | Experienced practitioner |
| Ian Bennett | Entrepreneurship training | Experienced practitioner |
| Craig Boljkovac | Environmental issues | Experienced practitioner |
| Karin Janz | Field implementation in agriculture, forestry and water, resident in the DPRK | Experienced practitioner |
| Bernhard Seliger | Environmental issues | Experienced practitioner |
| Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings | Academic | Research team member |

2 Charting is "a technique for synthesising and interpreting qualitative data by sifting, sharing, and sorting material according to key issues and themes" (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005, p. 26).

the DPRK government. One of the few exceptions were the annual joint food security assessments of the UN organisations, which provided reliable data on weather, crops and nutrition. These were usually enriched by the field experience of the individual aid organisations and discussed in weekly inter-agency meetings in Pyongyang.

Secondly, the combined pool of experience represents an 'international' perspective, rather than inter-Korean perspective. None of the contributors are South Korean or members of the Korean diaspora. All of the experienced practitioners are white European, North American, and Australian individuals, while the research team is comprised of two Americans with no ethnic Korean background. There are marked differences in both the available opportunities, historical underpinnings, and on-the-ground experiences for South Koreans, Korean diaspora, and non-Korean internationals. For example, South Korean organisations are subject to national security laws when interacting with the DPRK, and they are not able to freely engage in people-focused work without permission from the government in Seoul. This brief is available in both English and Korean, but it is important to recognise this positionality, and to reiterate the importance of readers creating their own learning through their interpretation of what resonates, what applies, and what does not hold to their own situations.

# MICRO-SCENARIOS

The research team developed a set of micro-scenarios based on the real-life experiences of NGO, diplomatic, and other international staff who have worked in the DPRK. The purpose of these micro-scenarios is to: 1) provide examples of the types of dilemmas faced in the DPRK, 2) encourage problem solving in a low stakes environment, 3) promote dialogue and reflection on how to apply learnings from the principles, and, 4) generate discussion and reflection about different approaches to the same scenario. There is no one-size-fits-all 'solution' to each scenario, and, to revisit the issue of representativeness, not every person working in the DPRK will experience such scenarios. In fact, some people will have had very different or even opposing experiences. It is thus important to treat these as an opportunity for reflection grounded in some individuals' experience, rather than based on inevitable or universal experiences.

Table 2 contains a set of decontextualised micro-scenarios, ranging from the more mundane to serious matters of 'life and death.' Readers are invited to reflect on the micro-scenarios before continuing. Consider not only what you would do, but why. What are the assumptions and understandings underpinning your approach to the dilemma? Then, after reading the principles, revisit the micro-scenarios.

**Table 2: Micro-scenarios**

| |
|---|
| On arrival in the DPRK, customs officials ask to open and search the laptop of a consultant travelling with your organisation. The officials find an e-book on the Korean War, indicating that the DPRK started the conflict. A customs official says he must take away the laptop because it contains offensive materials, but the consultant is welcome to continue the trip. What do you do? |
| You meet an important North Korean contact and exchange business cards. The contact asks you to send a follow-up e-mail in a week. The business card includes an e-mail address for a ministry registered to a DPRK domain name (.kp). What other information could you exchange on the spot? Why? What should you take into consideration when emailing the contact? |
| You are visiting a city outside of Pyongyang. At dinner, a member of your team informs you that she is feeling extremely unwell. Your local staff are nowhere to be found. How can you contact your Korean counterparts? What information can you ask for ahead of time to prepare for this scenario? |
| After a long vacation outside of DPRK, you return to find one of your local staff, with whom you have worked closely in the past and has knowledge critical to your project, has not attended your first staff meeting. When you ask where he is, one other staff member replies: "He is in the hospital". When you ask to follow-up with him about an important piece of information, other staff are visibly nervous. They say he is recovering at a rest home in the countryside and unreachable. In time, his absence begins to affect your work. How would you approach this situation? |
| Upon inspecting a shipment of foreign medicine to a hospital, you find five boxes (out of 2,000) are missing. The hospital director insists you have miscounted. After a long recount, you find you are correct. The hospital director admits in private that he gave five boxes to a provincial official to ensure the rest of the shipment arrived. What would you say? |

# PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PEOPLE OF THE DPRK

This section presents ten principles, grouped into three themes. They are summarised above in Box 1 (p. 3). The themes and principles are not exclusive — many relate to one another and overlap.

## General principles

The three principles in this theme — transparency and trust, active patience, and engagement is a pendulum — speak broadly to approaching people-focused work in the DPRK.

### Transparency and trust

*International staff should encompass **transparency and trust** in their interactions with North Korean colleagues, as this will then improve implementation in the field.*

North Korean counterparts are indispensable colleagues. They can guide non-North Koreans through complex systems to ensure common goals are met. Finding the right partner and looking after them is an important cornerstone to engagement, and it is thus the subject of a number of principles.

Transparency and trust comprise the first principle because they are necessary foundations for fruitful working relationships. It serves no one to have any kind of 'hidden' agenda. Transparency helps foster trust, which in turn supports having a strong team — both non-North Korean and North Korean — in the country. With trust, teams are more able navigate difficult issues and resolve arguments. This is a theme in other published work: trust can help foster engagement. Kathi Zellweger, formerly with Caritas and now running her own NGO out of Hong Kong, explained that trust helps NGOs gain realistic information, factual data, and a more accurate picture of the country (in Zadeh-Cummings, 2019). Former World Vision International (WVI, USA) staff member Ed Reed (2004) has also highlighted trust in his work, arguing that trust is a key element for being able to work in the DPRK.

Academic definitions of trust vary, and different fields can place emphasis on different stakeholders and elements of relationships. In international relations, Kydd (2005, p.4) defines trust as "a belief that the other side is trustworthy, that is, willing to reciprocate cooperation", and mistrust as "a belief that the other side is untrustworthy, or prefers to exploit one's cooperation". Ouellette (2013) draws on sociological concepts of trust, emphasising the need to view trust as a process. Ouellette and Kydd's understandings can work in tandem to conceptualise trust in the DPRK. Trust motivates stakeholders to cooperate with their counterparts, but is built slowly over time. The next principle considers the element of time in more detail.

### Active patience

*Foreigners working with people in the DPRK should practice **active patience**, as processes in the DPRK can be of long duration.*

The COVID-19-related border closure has demonstrated the need for patience, but a common theme across the practitioners' dialogue was the need to not meet patience with passivity. This led to the term 'active patience', which encourages practitioners and policy makers to balance patience and proactivity. It considers how to best prepare for and create new opportunities. Such preparation can support individuals working on people-focused work in North Korea to be more agile and flexible.

The workshop from which this brief is derived is one example of active patience in practice but is by no means the only way organisations and individuals have been using the border closure period in productive ways. Some groups have pioneered new forms of online interaction with their North Korean counterparts, exercising both patience for restarting their on-the-ground work but also practicing innovation in their portfolio. Active patience has clear implications for the current border situation, but even without pandemic restrictions the concept holds salience. When negotiating programs, active patience can support non-North Koreans to find opportunities and to be prepared for previously impossible ideas to later come to fruition.

As one practitioner explained, the need to be patient "may be true for work in any country. But with the sensitivity of our work in the DPRK, it might be truer here".

### The engagement pendulum

*Donors and international organisations should be aware that* ***engagement is a pendulum*** *that may swing from one end to the other, due to changing political decisions inside and outside the DPRK.*

Understanding engagement as a pendulum suggests there are times of upswings and downswings.

This principle acknowledges that engagement efforts will experience lean phases and periods of relative opportunity. During the lean times, when progress seems sluggish or opportunities appear scarce, active patience and planning are important. This will help ensure readiness when the pendulum swings towards opportunity. Likewise, in times of good opportunity, it is important to remember that circumstances can change, and practitioners must be agile. Upswings and downswings can relate not only to geopolitical factors, but also more specifically to the availability of donor funding. Funding cycles flex as interest levels change, even if the needs and programming on the ground remain persistent.

## Soft skills

The following set of principles refers more directly to the daily acts of communicating and working with North Koreans.

### Expertise

*Internationals working with North Korean people should respect that people are the* ***experts of their own lives*** *and often know how to improve their situation.*

This principle emphasises the irreplaceable insights held by North Koreans about their own society and situation. It also underscores the importance of humility, and recognising who holds knowledge and expertise. This knowledge spans both the everyday and the specific. In other words, North Koreans hold both expertise on what life is like in the DPRK and in the particular areas in which they are trained. People in the DPRK are well educated and even in the countryside, many have academic degrees.

Of course, non-North Koreans also bring valuable knowledge — this is often exactly why they are well placed to do work in-country. Listening is a cornerstone of recognising North Korean expertise, but practitioners should also balance good listening with knowing when to speak. International expert knowledge can be very well received in the DPRK. In the DPRK — and on the Korean Peninsula as a whole — people can be strongly influenced by Confucian values, including respect for hierarchies and the use of a communication style that reflects these hierarchies.[3] Furthermore, in totalitarian regimes, people may use more indirect phrases in order not to put themselves in danger. For many foreigners, this might pose difficulties at first. For example, an initial 'no' response to an idea may in reality convey an invitation to discuss further, whereas people from other cultural backgrounds may give up further discussion at this point.

This principle requires balance and reflexivity. Recognising North Korean expertise does not mean that all suggestions for programming from the DPRK will be appropriate, and practicing good listening also requires non-North Koreans to contribute their knowledge.

In the past, the government of the DPRK has often requested donors deliver high technology solutions that cannot easily be operated and maintained in-country. A good example is tractors. The country needs tractors to improve its food production, but modern tractors with their complex electronic equipment, including Global Positioning Systems (GPSs), are not suitable for the conditions in the DPRK. Here, careful discussions and joint assessments of the real situation can lead to the provision of appropriate equipment.

### Sensitivity and respect

*International staff must work with* ***sensitivity and respect*** *as they are often a key 'window to the world' for North Korean people.*

Working in the DPRK requires a strong commitment to sensitivity and respect. The principle underscores that both North Korean and non-North Korean partners operate within intricate political, economic, and funding frameworks that influence their

[3] The Korean language itself uses different verbs and forms of verbs, depending on the ranking of people who speak to each other.

realities, motivations, and capabilities. For example, approaching North Korean people as underdeveloped puppets of the government forms a hidden agenda and creates a working situation of inequality, arrogance and insecurity. The experience of expats who have worked and lived in the DPRK for many years has shown that accepting, as one contributor phrased it, "that we are all human beings and have human desires and interests" forms a working environment that is much more open and productive.

Central to this principle is the recognition that both non-North Koreans and North Koreans are essential partners, each operating with their own particular conditions. Just as North Koreans are expected to respect the constraints within which their non-North Korean counterparts operate, outsiders must also respect the intricate operational landscape for North Koreans. Trying to push partners towards particular programming, for example, can weaken respect and recognition of dignity. North Korean standards of business etiquette can also vary from non-North Koreans. Emails and phone calls may not always be returned (remembering that it is very expensive to call), and planned arrangements may be cancelled. In the face of such challenges, it is important to maintain respect.

Respect for the dignity of local counterparts requires sensitivity. Being sensitive to when it is appropriate to share information and when it is not helps support robust working relationships. Information is highly compartmentalised in the DPRK, and non-North Koreans may find themselves repeating the same or similar information to a wide variety of interlocutors, particularly important information. In the same vein, it is important to be sensitive about information shared by North Korean partners. This links back to the general principle of trust.

# Operational advice

The final theme contains principles addressing how to operate in the DPRK.

## Defined success

*Donors, international organisations, and North Korean counterparts should* ***clearly define success indicators*** *and measure them jointly, in order to show (good, yet realistic) impacts.*

Practitioners, policymakers, and donors should ground their measures of impact in the specific complexities of working in the DPRK. Goals need to be realistic, and there needs to be a shared understanding of success. For example, when working in capacity building, programs with too much of an emphasis on educational foundations may meet some stakeholders' ideas of impact, but not provide practical elements that North Korean counterparts view as necessary for success. When challenges arise because donors have one language and local partners have another, organisations and individuals working in the DPRK need to act in good faith to find solutions. Territorial approaches hamper success — if other organisations are working on the same project area, thinking about complementarity over possessiveness can be useful. External organisations aiming to have an impact in the DPRK should carefully consider their sphere of influence. What change is within their capacity to effect? What efforts can they encourage and enable?

Success has internal and external dimensions. External measures of success may require negotiation with donors — evaluation techniques common in other contexts, such as longitudinal studies, may be inappropriate for the DPRK and thus require a shared understanding of what is realistic. Internally, individuals working in the DPRK may need to grapple with their own motivations. What does success mean, on a personal level?

Particularly in the early years of programming, evidence may be largely anecdotal. "Frustration at lack of progress" is one reason why DPRK-focused professionals suffer from high levels of attrition (O'Carroll, 2023b). This underscores the importance of reflecting on understandings of progress, which can manifest in small but meaningful ways.[4]

## Tailored solutions

*International organisations should* ***tailor recommended solutions*** *to local conditions in the DPRK. These conditions may differ from those of other countries and contexts.*

Non-North Koreans must work within the environmental limitations of their North Korean partners and audience. This principle is related

[4] For further discussion on this point in relation to disability rights issues in the DPRK, see Chubb and Zadeh-Cummings (2023).

to the previous principle that North Koreans are the experts of their own lives, but considers more concretely the implications of this idea for action in the DPRK. Effective solutions cannot readily be transplanted from other contexts. Issues relating to the upkeep and availability of replacement parts, for example, have implications for even well-meaning (and sanctions compliant) equipment imports.

## Long preparation

*Successful actions in the DPRK might need a **longer preparation** than in other countries.*

A common thread throughout these principles is the importance of being prepared. This applies to both a collective level, but also to individuals. Training that helps new staff understand the DPRK context as well as how it has changed over the years can help support people preparing for their first working trip to the country. This type of preparation is clearly useful for non-North Koreans, but also supports North Korean counterparts in having a cadre of well-trained partners.

The previously mentioned issue of attrition has implications for preparation. Due to frustration, lack of progress, and new opportunities, many people leave the field for new endeavours (O'Carroll, 2023b). This means there is a high degree of collective memory loss. Training and preparation can help socialise concepts to those new to the field, while also consolidating collective knowledge. Preparation for activities may also take longer than in other contexts as it is difficult to gather basic data on the ground and to identify the real needs of the population.

## Risk analysis

*International organisations should conduct robust **risk analysis** – including of political, operational, environmental, and social dimensions – prior to each larger action.*

Working in the DPRK carries risks for non-North Koreans, but North Korean counterparts also bear significant risk. The actions of an external organisation are the responsibility of its DPRK partner. As one practitioner explained, "If you get into any kind of trouble when you are not accompanied [in the DPRK], the worst that will probably happen is that you are told to leave the country. Your hosts would likely suffer much greater consequences to their career etc., as you are their responsibility". Thus, understanding risk is not only a safety concern, but also a partnership issue.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) can help organisations identify potential risks and mitigation strategies. One practitioner uses a risk matrix, which ranks the likelihood and severity of the risk. Cross-organisational dialogue about risk can also enhance overall preparedness across the field.

# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Working with the people in the DPRK was a challenge even before the pandemic and border closure. In this brief, five individuals with significant experience working in the DPRK, alongside members of the research team, brought together their insights, and developed nine principles for effective engagement with the people of the DPRK. These principles are summarised in Box 1 (p. 3).

At the time of writing, it is still unclear when the DPRK will open its borders again to the international (aid) community. However, once the DPRK permits foreigners to work for its people again, we can anticipate an even more challenging operational environment for foreigners engaged in this work inside the country, as well as for policy makers, and donors. The principles outlined above may provide a guiding framework in an environment that is new for all sides. Routines for collaboration, developed and well established since the 1990s, may have gone, and many experienced DPRK colleagues may no longer be in place.

It is therefore necessary that everyone who works with the people of the DPRK (again), engages in continuous reflective practice to understand their own motivations and assumptions. Moreover, it may be useful to start with a mapping of potential risks and their mitigation, including a survey of partner organisations, the definition of common goals and possible ways of coordination and collaboration.

The authors of this paper would appreciate the resumption of the engagement of international donor organisations. This requires realistic expectations. A resumption of engagement includes seeking a dialogue with DPRK organisations, if possible, and understanding their needs and challenges. It also requires understanding the real needs of the people in the DPRK. As new ways of communication must be found, this process will take time and the 'active patience' principle mentioned above will be even more necessary than before.

The practitioners and researchers authoring this brief continue to advocate for restarting people-centred projects with international donors when the border reopens to foreign passport holders. There are many organisations that have substantial experience working and engaging with people in the DPRK. They can be supported in (re-)establishing relationships, trust, and dialogue after border reopening, while putting the principles mentioned above into practice. This should focus funding on the implementation of ground level activities that improve the living conditions of the local people.

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