

INSIGHT

Sow, reap, grow

Roy Prosterman says North Korea's new leader can transform the hunger-ridden nation by breaking up its collective farms, converting to household farming, and using China's example as a blueprint for success

Just seven months after taking the helm of the hermit kingdom, Kim Jong-un, with his advisers, appear to have set in motion a process that could transform the moribund and hunger-ridden nation through the break-up of its collective farms.

Although no final decision has yet been made, and the end result is still uncertain, a specially charged high-level committee of the North Korean government is now expected to recommend by late summer the path forward for the agricultural sector.

Three options are known to be under consideration:

- A "production contracted to each household model", similar to the "household responsibility system" introduced by Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) in China at the end of the 1970s. This would break up the collectives into small family-size farms.

- Maintain the present system of large collective farms, roughly parallel to what China had from 1958 to 1962, but with various reforms to production and distribution.

- Divide the collective farms into smaller collective units that would function at the level of the production team, typically as a unit encom-



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passing one hamlet or natural village. This would parallel what China had in place from 1962 until it was superseded by the introduction of the household responsibility system.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this decision. At a time when the average North Korean is about three inches shorter than his cousin south of the demilitarised zone, and one out of every three children is stunted from chronic malnutrition, the North can ill-afford more meagre harvests.

At this moment, it is desperately important that the high-level North Korean committee use the lessons of not only Chinese but of global experience to choose the household-farming model and reject the other two.

Household farming has proven itself globally to support increased and diversified production. In country after country across Asia, when farmers have been provided with secure land tenure, they have not only filled bellies, but also sparked an economic transformation.

In China, the first years of the household responsibility system saw average annual increases in grain production (1980-1984) of 8.6 per cent and in rural income (1979-1984) of

11 per cent. Between 1981 and 1987, while 70 per cent of the population made its living from agriculture, the proportion of Chinese people living below the US\$1-a-day poverty line fell from 64 per cent to less than 30 per cent, the largest mass decline in poverty ever experienced on our planet over a comparable period.

Meanwhile, in Taiwan, during the decade after the land-to-the-tiller reform was completed in 1953 – when tenant farmers became secure owners of small plots of land – grain production increased by 60 per cent and average farm income by 150 per cent. Parallel Asian success stories occurred in Japan and South Korea (with ownership replacing tenant farming) and in Vietnam (with secure family farming in the southern region and the break-up of the collective farms in the northern region).

The second and third options being considered by North Korea's high-level committee, in contrast to the family-farming option, promise no significant relief for the 25 per cent of North Korea's population that makes its living on the collective farms.

Nowhere on the planet has tinkering around the edges on production, distribution and compensation on collective farms produced viability. This includes attempted downsizing, to production-team-sized units, which was tried and failed in China between 1962-1977.

There is one further lesson North Korea might want to take from the Chinese experience: our own fieldwork, carried out in rural China beginning soon after break-up of the collectives was completed, found that the chief reason for the initial rapid increases in farm production was that farm households were then making the kinds of improvements in annual and seasonal farming practices that had been missing on the collectives. They were flexibly making wise choices as to when to plant; carefully selecting seed; applying fertiliser correctly; pulling up weeds as soon as they appeared and other factors.

However, when asked about potential "next generation" improvements taking the form of multi-year capital investments – micro-irrigation, land-levelling, tree planting, trellis crops, fish ponds, animal husbandry, greenhouses – the general answer was "no, we can't risk making them". The reason soon became evident: farmers had received individual plots of land, but had been given no assurances that they would remain there from year to year.

This problem has been corrected to a substantial degree by a series of laws, beginning with the Land Management Law of 1998, whose intention is to give farmers 30-year (and now



renewable) land rights, generally not subject to any "readjustment" by local cadres, and embodied in legal documents. Close to half of China's 200 million farm households now possess such 30-year land rights, and recent surveys that we carried out across 17 provinces indicate that mid-to-long-term land improvements are now being made in large numbers, boosting harvests and income.

Globally, tens of millions have died of starvation and hundreds of millions have gone hungry under the failed experiment of collec-

tive farming. And such farming systems have now been almost universally abandoned – the two big exceptions being North Korea and Cuba. Hopefully, North Korea will now join those who have decisively rejected this tragic and failed experiment.

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