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A Future, but at what Cost? Cuba and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Quest for Sustainable Development

This paper looks at the question of development by focusing on both Cuba and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. At the heart of the project is the notion of sustainability, and how to achieve well-being even in the most challenging conditions, isolated economies, and sanction-laden realities. This is done by tracing both countries' engagement and development in the fields of health and education. We suggest that political engagement with these countries should be prioritised, without challenging an established political order but with its consent, and with the hope that future generations are socialized to a culture of openness.

Keywords: Cuba; DPRK; Development; Sustainability; Rogue States

Introduction

In 1992, James Blight and Aaron Belkin were busy trying to make sense of the new landscape created by the end of the Cold War. They were particularly concerned with the state of nuclear deterrence now that the Soviet Union was disintegrating, and what would become what they called 'the USSR's Third World Orphans.' For them, former Soviet clients were also, just like the rest of the world, entering their own period of uncertainty. Some states were more concerning than others: Cuba and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (thereafter DPRK) were thought to be at the 'leading edge of a multidimensional process of deterioration whose ingredients include unrelenting anti-American rhetoric, untimely ideological commitment, and aging charismatic leaders.'¹ This was of importance to the United States and how it was to delineate a new international relations and interactions perimeter, and define its own role in this unipolar moment. George H.W. Bush's 'Toward a New World Order' speech given on September 11, 1990 to the American Congress had already hinted at new directions, and at the fact that the United States would commit to lead the world toward a rule of law, protecting the weak with partner countries and institutions, and bring about a collectivist world order

under the moral authority of the United Nations. With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the swift United Nations military response led by the United States, international expectations rose and unstable and problematic Third World Orphans, or ‘backlash states’ such as Cuba, the DPRK, Iran or Libya could potentially, according to United States National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, be neutralized, and eventually transformed into ‘constructive members of the international community.’²

A quarter of a century later, a lot has changed: few backlash or ‘rogue’ states remain, and a number of dictators such as Iraq’s Saddam Hussain and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi have passed away. Yet, much remains the same for Cuba and the DPRK, two Third World Orphans often described as ‘unrepentant, unredeemable, old-fashioned Marxist-Leninist states with one foot in the grave’.³ Both states have continued to be heavily sanctioned by the international community⁴ and the United States in particular for their violation of freedom of speech, assembly and press, engagement with narcotic traffickers and lack of democratic engagement. Nevertheless, both states have also been engaged by the international community: Pope Francis’ diplomatic brokering paved the way for American President Barack Obama’s visit to Cuba in 2016 and its involvement in the 2017 FARC peace deal in Colombia, while the DPRK has more recently featured heavily in the news when its leader Kim Jong Un met with US President Donald Trump in a bilateral summit organised in Singapore. In some cases, they have also signed treaties, such as the now-defunct 1994 Agreed Framework or the Six-Party Talks September 15, 2007 Agreement aimed to freeze Pyongyang’s nuclear programme. Both countries have also had to face and manage the death of their founding fathers and leaders, and settled into a pattern of patrimonial transitions, from one father onto his son and grandson (for the DPRK, with Kim Jong Il upon Kim Il Sung’s death in 1994 and with Kim Jong Un upon Kim Jong Il’s death in 2011), or from one brother to another (for Cuba, with Raul Castro in 2006 due to Fidel Castro’s deteriorating health). Although the Caribbean country has gone recently through an additional transition with its new president Miguel Díaz-Canel, it was clear from his first address to the Cuban National Assembly that he is committed to the continuity of the socialist revolutionary principles and to the safeguard of Fidel Castro’s legacy. At first sight, Cuba might seem less isolated to the world due to its numerous international partnerships linked to the export of professional services, but the DPRK’s diplomatic engagement, albeit less talked about, exists vividly too. Indeed,

in 2018 alone, North and South Korea renewed dialogue following the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, and the DPRK released three American citizens following visits from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Pyongyang, thus presenting potential avenues for post-Cold War reconciliation.

Yet, reducing Cuba and the DPRK to residuals from the Cold War, and summarising them in relation to their singular political systems, rhetoric, marginal economic patterns and leading figures negates the story of resilience and ultimately survival that provides for the basis of their existences. For example, economic estimates situated the DPRK's GDP per capita at around US\$1,000 in 1991, and at US\$1,300 in 2016⁵ while the World Bank situated Cuba's GDP per capita at around US\$2,280 in 1991, and at US\$7,602 in 2015.⁶ While those figures put the DPRK squarely in the bottom 190th and Cuba in the bottom half of the world table when comparing all countries by GDP per capita, it does not negate the fact that if they have managed to survive beyond the construct of the Cold War and Soviet system and network, evidence of societal transformation ought to exist. It is understood that these lines of inquiry are often not the focus of research agendas that seek to explain how rogues can be handled, silenced, and reformed. Hence, this paper considers Cuba and the DPRK as principal actors, and considers their own policies to develop and to modernize, all within the construct of an international world order that, for the better part of the last four decades, was largely led by the Washington Consensus. Both the DPRK and Cuba have maintained a warm diplomatic relationships with one another since 1960, and both countries have exchanged regular delegations. Yet, there are few evidence of in-depth economic and political partnerships and recent reports from the Economist Intelligence Unit show that Cuban exports to the DPRK were almost 8 times less than to South Korea (US\$9m to Pyongyang in 2016 as opposed to US\$67m to Seoul that same year).⁷ While it is likely that diplomatic dialogues touch on economic policies, we do not possess evidence that both countries have shared knowledge and resources with one another, and we will therefore treat both countries separately, though analysing them via a similar lens, which is the notion of sustainability, and how it is considered and when possible, implemented within Cuban and North Korean societies. Both countries have already committed to the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (thereafter MDGs) by inscribing them within their national policies, and received assistance from the United Nations Development

Programmes.⁸ They have also committed to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (thereafter SDGs) and are engaged with the United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platforms (thereafter SDKPs).⁹ The ramifications created by such a commitment are crucial for both Havana and Pyongyang: with Global Sustainable Development defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,’¹⁰ the SDGs provide a useful framework to focus on specific key pillars of development for both countries. In order to understand how both countries have engaged with sustainability, the paper will proceed in three steps. First, it will retrace Cuba and the DPRK’s circumstances and history to paint the contemporary portraits of developing states at the periphery of the international system. Second, it will present a contextualised account of both countries’ survival environment post-Cold War and their strategic narratives in the fields of education and healthcare, two key pillars in the reduction of inequalities. Third, it presents a picture of two states who deal with similar political and economic constraints, and initiatives at times supported, tolerated or repressed by the political elites, and which provide a window of opportunity for change within societies that are more than the sum of their pasts.

Lastly, and as a word of caution, it is important for the authors to address, at this point in the paper, potential discussions and reservations on suitability of comparison and the question of regime type by addressing both points in a candid and upfront manner. In regards to the suitability of comparing Cuba and Pyongyang, two countries located far away from one another and without obvious historical, or ethnic links, four central criteria of commonalities emerge: both countries have been colonized and dealt with political and societal reconstruction in the 1950s, both countries’ current political orders have been built on revolutionary paths and leading strongmen, both countries have crystalized their policies in light of a perceived common enemy embodied by the United States, and both countries face uncertain futures with their own leadership, economic, and societal organization with neo-patrimonial communist leadership that carry legacies, and that have fostered arrested development. In regards to the question of considering development, progress, and potential success within countries that have a difficult record on questions of human rights, political freedom and individual agency, the research presented here acknowledges the nature of both the Cuban and DPRK leadership and does

not seek to condone or condemn, but merely to objectively look and assess situations, politics and outcomes.

A Traditional Understanding

As noted earlier, there are no particular links that tie Cuba to the DPRK beyond their history and entanglement within the confines of the Cold War. Both countries are of similar sizes, but the DPRK's population, at over 25 million, is more than twice that of Cuba while the Cuban GDP per capita is a little under USD\$6,500, five times more than estimates for the DPRK.¹¹ Pyongyang and Havana are separated by more than 7,000 miles, belong to two different continents, and would therefore had very little chance to interact with one another, let alone develop a relationship if not for unforeseen historical events.

Prior to the Cold War, both countries were small, and relatively irrelevant in terms of powers at a time when Great Britain was starting to decline, Japan was starting to rise, and the United States was mending its wounds after the American Civil War (1861-1865). Yet, Cuba and the DPRK share similar roles in history: their geographical locations and resources meant they could be of use to great powers. So, their story is tainted by being the objects of colonialism: After several attempts of independence wars, Cuba gained independence from Spain in 1898 after four centuries of colonization. The US intervention at the end of the war in 1898, also known as the Spanish American war, led however to a new era of unequal international relations. The island was under US occupation until 1902, when it gained its formal independence, but the US maintained a position of dominance through the Platt Amendment for several decades. At that time the DPRK did not exist, as it was just called Choson, the historical name for the Kingdom of Korea, and was on the verge of being annexed and then colonized by the Japanese empire after having been pried open by the United States in the late 19th century. When Japan surrendered in 1945, Choson was split into two zones of influence to remove colonial structures, before both Koreas created their own governments and fought a bitter brotherly war that only ended in an armistice and a status quo. In both cases, the United States was far from being a distant bystander: American economic interests in Cuba were often touted as needing protection, thus involvement, while American military presence

during the initial partition of the Koreas, during the Korean War via the United States' command of the United Nations contingent, and up until now with its bases in Japan and South Korea, and in Guantanamo in the case of Cuba, have only helped fuelled rhetoric. As a result, both Cuba and the DPRK developed strong 'anti-imperialist' narratives they claim were stoked and fuelled by American meddling. This also led both countries to develop relationships within the Third World and with other anti-imperialists governments that were receptive to the idea of economic and political independence.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the DPRK was a poor country attempting to rebuild its infrastructure following the Korean War. Its leader, young and charismatic Kim Il Sung, had fought the Japanese with passion and had offered dreams of peace, reconciliation, and equality to the Korean people upon the creation of the DPRK in 1948. Kim had been a member of the Chinese Communist Party¹² and Soviet input over the North after the initial partition into two zones of influence in 1945 influenced economic development. Because the DPRK was economically crippled, it was imperative to generate wealth quickly. Hence, the Soviet answer was to bring out collectivization of the land, and introducing the Plan mentality.¹³ In essence, Marxist-Leninist principles were brought to the DPRK when it was in its infancy, before it developed later on, under Kim Il Sung's influence, into a specific ideology called Chuch'e. By the end of the 1950s, Kim's cult of personality had created a serious rift with Moscow, and cracks started to appear in the partnership. At the same time, Fidel Castro was leading a revolution against Fulgencio Batista based on middle class dissatisfaction at the lack of employment opportunities and political repression in a country that was relatively wealthy at the time. Shortly after the triumph of Castro's Revolution, the Soviet Union sought to place missiles on Cuba to gain a strategic advantage over the United States and be within range of some of its largest cities. Fidel Castro welcomed Moscow's offer, and the links between the two countries were tightened, especially after Fidel Castro declared in 1961 that his revolution was a socialist one.

The Cold War cemented Cuba and the DPRK's positions as Soviet proxies, which created a deep ridge between them and the free world. The DPRK slowly took charge of its own military development after it had received substantial support from Moscow and Beijing during the Korean War, but especially after the Cuban missile crisis that had

Pyongyang concerned about a potential Soviet capitulation to the United States (Kim 2014). The DPRK also engaged in diplomatic competition against its Southern brother in a bid to capture United Nations votes regarding which of the two Koreas was the legitimate one: this meant developing many diplomatic and economic relationships with countries that were newly independent in the 1950s and 1960s, and which would earn voting rights with the UN system. The DPRK benefitted from another advantage over South Korea: it was largely more industrial than the South (CIA declassified documents state that by 1972, the DPRK possessed 65% of the peninsula's heavy industry¹⁴). This meant it could offer industrial goods to partners, and receive agricultural products it found itself short of. Meanwhile, Cuba found itself ensconced in a web of sanctions imposed by Washington for its involvement and support of Moscow during the Cuban missile crisis. The embargo, initially put in place in 1958 to prevent sales of arms to Cuba during the revolution, is estimated according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to have cost Cuba a loss of US\$130 billion.¹⁵ It also has become the most visible political and economic statement from the United States, and has, in many aspects, defined the decades Fidel Castro spent as Cuba's leader. Both Cuba and the DPRK were singled-out as states sponsors of terrorism by the United States and put on the US Department of State 'unofficial hit list' though they have now both been removed.¹⁶ The DPRK withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003 and tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006. This led to a slew of sanctions that were initiated by the United Nations Security Council aimed at isolating Pyongyang and force its regime to change (see Table 1). In both the Cuban and North Korean cases, sanctions have been enacted in a multilateral environment, by actors such as the United Nations or the European Union, but individual countries have also supplemented these by their own unilateral, or autonomous sanctions. The reasons for sanctions have been diverse: Havana and Pyongyang have been singled out because of their political systems, the political support they have given and received from other countries, their own policies that have limited personal freedom, their geostrategic importance, the danger they might represent because of specific military capacities but also because of their political longevity.

Table 1: Sanctions Regime

<i>About here</i>

Source: Compiled by authors using public domain, governmental and news resources.

The legacies of the Cold War are particularly salient for both Cuba and the DPRK as unlike many countries that have moved into a post-Communist phase, which has often involved political and economic liberalization, Havana and Pyongyang's own political and economic systems have changed little. Thus, Fidel Castro and Kim Il Sung, as original leaders and founders of contemporary Cuba and DPRK, have generated much debate within the academic community. The arguments have mostly centred on the concepts of status quo versus reformism: the status quo school suggests that the Cold War and the Soviet collapse have not factored in decisions made by the leaders, while the reformist schools sees an adjustment in their own beliefs and policies.¹⁷ If there is a degree of change within the countries, it has usually been overshadowed by an overreliance on qualifying Cuba and the DPRK as rogue states. Definitions in this realm abound, from Anthony Lake's suggestion that rogue states 'exhibit a chronic inability to engage constructively with the outside world'¹⁸ to Jasper Becker's suggestion that rogue states internalized an insanity that could potentially upset the diplomatic world.¹⁹ Paul Hoyt's 2000 study defined an initial set of criteria based on a close reading of American public speaking records and policy documents, highlighting four categories of rogue behaviours: developing weapons of mass destruction capability (seeking to acquire, develop, and/or utilize WMDs and missile technology), posing a threat (political, military, regional and/or global), having linkages with terrorism (supporting and/or sponsoring, and using terrorism to undermine the Middle East Peace Process) and challenging international norms (weapons proliferation, UN/international sanctions, crimes against humanities, narcotics trafficking).²⁰ According to him, Cuba and the DPRK feature prominently in

this narrative. Stuck within this rogue rhetoric that calls for imposing sanctions and maintaining isolation, the West and especially the United States as the main architect of the rogue state doctrine have dictated an order in which very little latitude is possible for current leaders Miguel Díaz-Canel and Kim Jong Un to operate in, whether they intend to follow in their predecessors' footsteps or not. If anything, this had led to two unwelcomed developments. First, alienation has provided fodder for both the Cuban and North Korean leaderships to mask some of their poor economic choices and continue to legitimize some of their more oppressive policies by galvanizing popular support in light of perceived American unfair and restrictive directives.²¹ Second, it has created a smokescreen that has masked attempts to consider Cuba and the DPRK's own policies and development efforts in anything that does not pertain to how they relate to irrationality, belligerence and all around craziness. What is expected, when confronting a rogue state, is for the rogue to change so that its current system is no more. As a result, it is often difficult to talk about change within Cuban and DPRK society unless it means complete regime change, and to analyse degrees of change at face-value, without political framing and bias. Yet, there is evidence of reforms with both countries launching partial liberalization efforts in specific market sectors, changes within their legal framework to accommodate Foreign Direct Investment²² and even in some cases, the emergence of a civil society²³ and the emergence of private market initiatives, sometimes prodded by international forces.²⁴ Finding how these compare to the traditional approaches presented by the Cuban and DPRK leadership is of importance when considering the notion of change and development within such seemingly close-off and isolated countries.

Cuba and DPRK: Surviving Post-Cold War

In 2006, severely ill, Fidel Castro decided to cede power to his brother Raul. Two years later, once officially elected president in February 2008, Raul Castro unexpectedly started to put in place a number of much needed diplomatic, economic and social reforms. The most striking one was without any doubt the restoration of diplomatic relations with the US in December 2014 leading to the visit of President Obama in March 2016, the first American president to visit its southern neighbour in nearly a century. Putting aside these recent changes, Cuba has for the past almost sixty years been a country on the periphery

of the world. Under economic pressure due to the US embargo, and even more since the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba has had to find other ways to face a challenging economic situation. The island had not only lost a major political ally, but also its main source of economic support.

To counterbalance this loss, Fidel Castro implemented in August 1990 what he called the ‘Special Period in Time of Peace,’ essentially a set of austerity measures typical to a country in war. Meanwhile, the United States took advantage of the vulnerable situation of the island to tighten further the embargo with the Toricelli Bill in 1992 and the Helms Burton Act in 1996, hoping to finally put an end to the Castro era. This made international trade with Cuba even more difficult, thus making the 1990s a very dark period for Cuban society as a whole. Little by little, the critical situation started improving with the new political and economic ally, Venezuela, and its then president Hugo Chávez. For years, Venezuela was supplying cheap oil to Cuba and purchasing medical and other professional services at very high rates from its communist counterpart. The relief was short-lived as Venezuela’s own economic struggles initiated a new economic crisis within Cuban society, and recurring power cuts and public transport shortages reminded the population of the struggles during the Special Period in Time of Peace. With Donald Trump taking office as president of the United States, the normalization of international relations between the US and Cuba has been put to a halt too. But even though he announced in his June 17, 2017 speech that he was cancelling the Obama Administration deal with Cuba, the current US posture is not as drastic as Trump presented it. There is, however, a reversal when it comes to individual people-to-people tourism, which has now been banned, but also in the case of American businesses dealing with Cuban military services. This brings a further layer of uncertainty on the future of economic development initiated by international investments on the island, as can be seen mainly in the tourist sector but also in the telecommunication, construction and banking sector, among others, since some of these are facilitated by a Cuban company that is part of the military (*CNN*, June 17, 2017). When talking about uncertainty, it is also worth mentioning the recent acoustic attacks on American diplomats in Cuba, which have led to many of them being sent back to the US and the American embassy not issuing visas to Cuban citizens for an unspecified period of time,²⁵ as well as the recent change in leadership in Cuba, with Miguel Díaz-Canel being sworn in as new president on April 19, 2018.

Fidel Castro managed to play a leading role in Cuban politics for 49 years, first as prime minister from 1959 to 1976 and later as a president until 2008 which is 3 years longer than North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung. As a young guerrilla fighter opposing Japanese colonialism in the 1930s and 1940s, Kim Il Sung's rise to power in North Korea was bolstered by the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union upon the Korean partition in 1945. Becoming president of the DPRK in 1948, Kim Il Sung embraced collectivization to develop the North's economy, welcomed Soviet and Chinese military support to fight a civil war with the Republic of South Korea and developed a unique ideology called Chuch'e to support his cult of personality in spite of the USSR and the PRC frowning upon this new development. During the Cold War, the DPRK received extensive support from its Communist allies and benefited from technological assistance and purchasing credit. When the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the system and the DPRK had to reorganise its economy at a time when Kim Il Sung was getting physically weaker. A hereditary succession process was put in place in the 1970s in order to install his son Kim Jong Il in his place, and continue the family legacy. This could only be achieved, however, via tight legitimization processes that included a retrofitting of the North Korean myth narrative into everyday propaganda. In order to ensure its own security as well as to generate revenues, the DPRK had also slowly transitioned from a weapons recipient in the 1950s to a weapons producer by the 1980s. By the end of the Cold War, Pyongyang was developing nuclear energy, and was being engaged by the international community, worried about these potential developments. Upon Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, the DPRK had signed the Agreed Framework with an international consortium led by the United States, and which would see North Korea dismantle its nuclear reactors so that it would receive new, more efficient light-water reactors to balance its energy needs. Mistrust and miscalculations marred the 1990s, and the DPRK also suffered the collapse of its economy, further precipitated by severe floods and draughts that led to several million deaths. A large number of countries donated aid, which was administered via the World Food Program, and a number of NGOs. It seemed that by the end of the 1990s, the DPRK was receptive to international engagement, and a visit by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang was swiftly followed by a historic meeting between Kim Jong Il and South Korean president Kim Dae Jung during a weekend organised for

long-separated Korean family members from the North and the South to meet for a few hours.

In the past decade however, the DPRK had actuated its rogue status. While the United States suffered at the hands of terrorism and the 2002 Axis of Evil speech outlined North Korea as a dangerous country, the DPRK was further alienated despite a number of engagement prospects such as the Six-Party Talks that sought the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. It was too late, however, as the DPRK tested its first nuclear weapons in 2006 after it had left the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003. Alienated and dangerous, the DPRK was also going through a number of domestic uncertainty as Kim Jong Il appeared gravely ill. Upon his death in 2011, the same hereditary succession process was applied, and Kim Jong Il's son Kim Jong Un came into power. In Washington, President Barack Obama appeared to favour engagement but very little dialogue has occurred since then. Despite many international sanctions and seemingly few economic opportunities, the DPRK has managed to muddle through, using illegal channels to raise foreign currency while continuing to test nuclear weapons. As of 2018, the Agreed Framework is no longer active, but renewed dialogue between the two Koreas and a new diplomatic foray from the Trump Administration into the DPRK has led to renewed talks about potential denuclearisation.

Sustainable Future Trajectories as a way to survive isolation

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, all 189 United Nations and a large number of organizations committed to achieve specific goals by 2015. The goals were organized along a number of target areas: economic development (eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, developing a global partnership for development), education (achieving a universal primary education), societal (promoting gender equality and empowering women), health (reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combatting HIV/AIDS, malaria and a number of other diseases), and the environment (ensuring sustainability).²⁶ Even though Pyongyang and Havana often appear to be at the margins of the political and economic world order, both countries are members of the United Nations. Cuba is an original United Nations member, since the latter's foundation in 1945. North Korea's relationship with the United Nations has been more convoluted:

the United Nations authorized force for the first time in its history after United Nations Security Council Resolution 82 on June 25, 1950 failed to stop North Korea's invasion of the South.²⁷ Both Koreas were eventually admitted, though separately, as full members on September 17, 1991 via Resolution 46/1.²⁸

Both the DPRK and Cuba have seized upon the 2015 MDGs, and more recently on the 2030 SDGs. Such attitudes might be surprising given their isolation and belligerent attitudes in a number of sectors, but for two countries that have funded their ideology and legitimacy on a political discourse based on socialist principles, it is unsurprising to see a clear match between the social policies they advocate and several global United Nations goals. Indeed, there are a few global areas in which the DPRK and Cuba can be vocal and involved in a narrative of progress, development and change. This is especially salient in regards to two goals: Quality Education (SDG 4) and Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3). Both goals also feed into the broader scope of Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) –and consequently Gender Equality (SDG 5), which can be considered a basic principle of the socialist ideology. To this effect, and even more in the post-cold war era, Pyongyang and Havana have managed, each in their own way, to expand some of the social policies they had always advocated. We suggest in this paper that this is albeit –and possibly due to– a tumultuous political and economic environment at times, and realign them to fit with the various SDKPs advocated at the United Nations level.

Education

The DPRK's engagement with education efforts is radically different from countries with similarly low GDP per capita and development indexes. Yet, the DPRK's commitment to education is far from new. As early as the 1950s, Pyongyang utilized political ties with its Soviet partners to provide learning opportunities for its people. The DPRK's Education Commission calls itself a 'country of learning and education' with more recent endeavours focusing on Information Technology, and a broadening of teaching methods and contents.²⁹ But the DPRK's education system is one of the most developed part of the country's system, though it is true that it has, and still is used to a great extent to manage the North Korean population by focusing also on political education and indoctrination. Upon the creation of the DPRK, Kim Il Sung developed an

education system that was based on the Soviet system, and transformed the country from what was largely an illiterate population into a country boasting solid educational achievements. Indeed, the state-sponsored education system offers free education from kindergarten to university, and more than 70% of North Koreans have achieved secondary school qualifications and a further 10% with graduate and post-graduate university qualifications.³⁰ MDG indicators are especially strong when it comes to rate of students who were supplied with textbooks (over 68%).³¹ North Korean sources assess their own progress in an often candid manner, and have praised the World Organization and other international humanitarian efforts for their support. They also conversely blame a large part of the socio-economic difficulties on natural disasters that occurred in the 1990s as well as on economic sanctions.³² SDG4 features in the new 2017-2021 Strategic Framework as a priority – Social Development Services, and the DPRK is recognized for having achieved MDG2 as it ‘possesses a comprehensive nationwide infrastructure, which has enabled free and virtually universal primary and secondary school enrolment, up to the twelfth year, including gender parity.’³³ The DPRK has engaged in a number of education partnership with foreign entities, in order to tip the scale and influence its own development by injecting more current technological content within its education system. In 2004, the Goethe Institute opened in Pyongyang and was the first foreign reading room of its kind in North Korea and was comprised of a large number of technological resources before it closed in 2009. More recently, Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (thereafter PUST), which opened in 2009, offered a technical and business curriculum to North Korean elite students, and taught in large part by foreign faculty in the fields of food engineering (*NK News*, 20 May 2014). Recent UNSCR sanctions on specific metals and chemicals make it difficult for PUST to operate as fully-fledged university, and the recent American travel ban to the DPRK has reduced PUST faculty heavily since a large number of teaching staff were US citizens who were working pro-bono (*UPI*, April 7, 2016). This is particularly unfortunate as a large part of PUST’s work toward stabilizing the DPRK’s future development was done in the field of health, dentistry and medicine, as the university opened its medical school in 2015. As a result of the travel ban, no medical-school classes were scheduled to be offered in Fall 2017 (*Korea Herald*, August 13, 2017).

In a similar way, Fidel Castro made clear from the very beginning of the Cuban

Revolution that one of his top priorities was to provide free education to all. As Cuba declared itself a socialist country in 1961, it also initiated a countrywide literacy campaign. Its goal was to eradicate illiteracy from Cuba, which was quickly achieved on December 22, 1961, when Castro announced Cuba a territory free of illiteracy.³⁴ This priority can also be seen in the high share of its national budget that Cuba has placed in education from the very start, providing free universal education to its population. This has also continued through with Raul Castro, and even though economic reforms have reduced the extremely high percentage spent in education to 9% of its GDP (*Cubadebate*, January 6, 2017) it is still much higher than first world countries such as the United States or France.³⁵ Although it is true that here also the education system has been used as a way of politically educating and indoctrinating the Cuban people, the quality of Cuba's education system has been praised by many including the World Bank in 2014: "No Latin American school system today, except possibly Cuba's, is very close to high standards, high academic talent, high or at least adequate compensation, and high professional autonomy that characterize the world's most effective education systems, such as those found in Finland; Singapore; Shanghai, China; South Korea; Switzerland; the Netherlands; and Canada."³⁶

While the diplomatic ties of North Korea and the international community regarding education are rather inward-facing, Cuba has managed not only to achieve SDG4 within its own territory, but also to play a key role in the achievement of quality education at a global level. During the Special Period in Times of Peace, Cuba went through a very serious economic crisis. Fidel Castro had lost its main political and economic ally and it was time to think of new ideas to save Cuba from its current situation. Cuba's export of professional services had been a success since the start of the revolution, as soon as it was set up, and the oldest Castro brother saw an opportunity here to find a way out of its economic struggles. Cuba's achievement of universal education had already been successfully exported in Africa during the Soviet years. With the rise of Hugo Chavez and of the left in other Latin American countries, there was a sudden opportunity for exporting these services as well as the Cuban education professionals to the island's southern neighbours. In 2001, Fidel asked a previous teacher of the 1961 literacy campaign, Leonela Relys Días, to set up the literacy programme "Yo sí puedo" [Yes, I can]," directed to people older than 15 years-old who have never attended school, or could

not be considered literate due to a very limited access to education. “Yes I can” was set up as an internationalist programme, which could be applied to other cultures and languages. The programme, which has been called “a model of literacy” by Unesco³⁷ and led to Cuba being awarded the Unesco King Sejon Literacy Prize in 2006, has since been used in 28 countries, leading to the literacy of more than 9 million people worldwide (*Granma*, November 6, 2015). With this initiative, Cuba not only helped heal its economy³⁸ and developed educational diplomacy countering in such a way the isolation imposed by the US embargo, it also did it in such a way that showed a clear global concern for universal education, as well as a continued engagement with the MDGs and the more recent Global SDGs.

Healthcare

The DPRK’s commitment to healthcare also goes back to the very beginning of the country’s political creation. At the 37th Session of the People’s Committee of North Korea that took place on May 21, 1947, a young Kim Il Sung published ‘On Improving the Public Health Service’, and extolled the commitment the country had to improve anti-epidemics, medical treatment as well as training for health workers (*KCNA*, May 20, 2017). Seventy years later, it is difficult to evaluate the extent of the health crisis in the DPRK, mainly because the country is reluctant to provide specific information on health care, and especially numbers that might be seen as unflattering, as opposed to the high literacy numbers, for example. Coupled with the fact that few external agencies can have ground access to the DPRK, it is not always possible to have an accurate picture of the DPRK’s situation and many agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Program (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) echo these concerns.³⁹ The latest figures to evaluate the DPRK’s situation can be found in the ‘Humanitarian Needs and Priority 2015’ and suggest target lag in areas of diet, food security, nutrition source as well as general access to health service, especially when it comes to services to disabled population. Access to clean water is also reported to be difficult in some areas, with direct links with education and child development as the report talks about poor health conditions in schools as well. The 2017-2021 SDKPs

stresses the importance of connecting the local to the global by building relationship and national capacity, but this might be difficult in light of more recent sanctions rounds as well as the lack of interest on the part of donors to support projects in the DPRK: only about 16% of projects needed received funding in 2015 (\$18 million-worth out of an requested \$110 million).⁴⁰ Yet, the DPRK can still, at times, count on time-tested relationships with partners remaining connected to the DPRK. This is the case with Poland, who signed a number of cooperation plans on health and medical sciences with the DPRK in 1992 (*PAP News Wire*, July 28, 1992).

Even though sanction rounds have made it more difficult for the DPRK to have access to specific products, infrastructures are basic but functional, but a lack of specific drugs has made it difficult for the DPRK to provide sustainable care for new-born and for their mothers for example,⁴¹ and the DPRK has suffered from donor fatigue, as noted earlier. Pyongyang is thus seeking to address this development priority by positioning itself within the SDKPs and considering resource transfer. The DPRK has worked in partnership with a number of agencies such as WHO and UNICEF, especially on vaccination campaign. The DPRK's use of pentavalent vaccine to combat meningitis, tetanus, Hepatitis B, pneumonia and diphtheria was also highlighted by public figures such as the Minister of Public Health Choe Chang Sik who suggested that this would leave to 'a good prospect for the reduction of child mortality and morbidity and for achieving MD goals' (*KCNA*, July 12, 2012). Recent external international reports have highlighted the process achieved in a number of areas, especially when it comes to the reduction of global health risks: this is particularly notable in regards to vaccination programme and tuberculosis control, with diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP) vaccine coverage rising from 37% in 1997 to 96% in 2013,⁴² thanks to international partnerships and support from the GAVI Alliance and Global Fund.⁴³ The DPRK is also engaged in a number of health partnerships abroad, and especially with a number of African countries: this pattern is based on the premise that the DPRK, despite its economic shortcomings, has, according to the World Health Organization, a rather large density of physicians for its own population (3.507 per 1,000 inhabitants). Those physicians lack access to drugs and practical training because of the DPRK's economic and sanction situation and as result, the DPRK has sent a number of physicians abroad to provide medical services in exchange for money: this has been the case in the Republic of Congo

(where the domestic physicians density is 0.108 per 1,000 inhabitants), Uganda (0.093), and Tanzania (0.022).⁴⁴ The physicians have, at times, operated at the margins of legality, with poor command of either local language and English, no business license, and a latent usage of fake drugs: in the case of Tanzania, the government has recently ordered the closure of two Korean clinics in Dar es Salaam⁴⁵ while the Republic of Congo has sought to manage the problem of illegal licenses by signing a bilateral health protocol with the North Korean government on March 24, 2017, with the Health and Population Minister Jacqueline Lydia Mikolo suggesting avenues for improved health cooperation for both parties.⁴⁶ The DPRK has signed a number of health protocols in recent years, including with Angola and Gabon. While they were about 180 North Korean physicians working in Angola, and regular DPRK delegations visited hospitals and medical facilities (*Angola Press Agency*, December 15, 2015), public health delegation visits have also taken place in Gabon to review infrastructure (*BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific – Political*, March 31, 2010). It is unclear what exact arrangements have been taking place, but it is likely that the DPRK would seek opportunities to place some of its medical contingent to guarantee revenues as well. As suggested in an article from *The Diplomat* by Dr Shannon Perry, an epidemiologist who has spent extensive time in the DPRK to work on tuberculosis laboratories, DPRK doctors are isolated from the international medical community and are seeking ways to stay connected to the medical world, conferences, as well as international standards (*The Diplomat*, April 10, 2015). To this extent, the DPRK's own health sector and the DPRK's ability to implement some of the SDGs will require engagement with the international community: while maintaining doctors in third countries enables the DPRK to raise revenues, it also offers the possibility to engage with the international medical community, and with some more advanced actors such as Cuba as well.

The Cuban communist society has always received a lot of praise for its own system (*Minrex*, July 16, 2014), and is exemplar in its commitment to a number of the global SDGs. Cuba's priority of providing universal healthcare and access to affordable medicine goes back to the early years of the Revolution and it also reflects the socialist ideology of the revolutionary regime. Cuba's primary healthcare system is based on preventive medicine, which has led to extremely low level of infant and maternal mortality⁴⁷ as well as high levels of life expectancy⁴⁸ in each case comparable to those of

first world countries (*El País*, February 10, 2017). Although it lacks efficiency and its infrastructure needs to be urgently updated, the share of Cuba's GDP invested in health (11.1% of its GDP in 2014)⁴⁹ is much higher than many other countries in the world, and here again competes with first world countries. For the same year, Germany spent 11.2% of its GDP on health, Belgium 10.6%, and Spain 9%, to give a few examples. This is noticeable in surprising results in medical research, such as the recent discovery of a treatment for prevention of mother-to-child HIV⁵⁰ and syphilis transmission (*The Guardian*, June 30, 2015), or the Cimavax vaccine⁵¹ for lung cancer patients, as well as in the medical education system. According to the WHO, Cuba had in 2014 a density of physicians of 7.519, when first world countries such as the United States had 2.554 (2013), the United Kingdom 2.806 (2015) and Spain 3.819 (2014).⁵²

If North Korea's health agreements with other countries intends to increase access to healthcare and medicine for its own people, Cuba's concern for universal healthcare here again was internationalized from very early on. In 1960, Fidel Castro sent a first medical brigade to Chile to help out with the local needs to treat those who had been affected by a major earthquake. Since then, Cuba has sent more than 32,500 healthcare professionals in a total of 158 countries⁵³ (*Granma*, July 15, 2016) all over the world to help communities in need, either due to natural disasters, epidemics or to a shortage of doctors in specific regions. Cuba's International Solidarity Programme went through a drastic increase after Hugo Chavez became Venezuela's new president in 1999 and agreed rapidly with Fidel Castro to establish close ties between both countries. His newly implemented ideology, which he called, "Socialism of the 21st century" found its main inspiration in Castro's revolution. The Cuban government rapidly saw there an opportunity to regain economic growth, and signed several agreements with its Caribbean neighbour, one of them being the oil-for-doctors program. Castro would send doctors to Venezuela to provide free healthcare to the poor and in underserved areas, while Chavez would pay for Cuban services with oil. Thousands of Cuban doctors were needed in Venezuela, which led to a mass production of physicians in Cuba. Not only had Cuba found a way to start healing from the economic crisis of the Special Period, it was doing it while showing at the same time a clear engagement with global universal healthcare and the MG. This Cuban healthcare mission in Venezuela, also known as Misión Barrio Adentro [Inside the neighbourhood], has been referred to as an example of Primary

Healthcare by bodies such as the Pan American Health Organization and Unicef, among others.⁵⁴

Cuba has however gone even further in its commitment to global universal healthcare. Not only is Cuba exporting physicians, it also offers a sustainable way of providing healthcare by training local doctors, but also by helping founding medical schools in other countries, such as Ethiopia, East Timor and Haiti, among others.⁵⁵ In addition, Fidel Castro created in 1999 the Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina (ELAM) [Latin American School of Medicine]. His intention was to develop its internationalist commitment with the improvement of healthcare in the world, and in particular, for the poorer communities. ELAM offers free medical education to students, mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds, who come from all over the world, even from the United States. Upon graduation, ELAM students are expected to go back to their often underserved communities to provide healthcare, contributing in such a way towards the goal of global universal healthcare. Latest numbers state that 24.000 physicians from 84 different countries have graduated from ELAM since it opened its doors almost ten years ago (*Granma*, April 8, 2016). There is no doubt that the Cuban international healthcare program has had a tremendous impact on the Cuban economy.⁵⁶ Some also refer to it as medical diplomacy,⁵⁷ stating that while offering their services to other countries, Cuba also exploits the situation to counter the isolation imposed by the US sanctions, while at the same time expecting these countries to vote in their favour at the UN when the vote against the US embargo takes place. In 2015, the two only countries still voting in favour of the US embargo at the UN were the United States and Israel⁵⁸. Having such an impact on global healthcare has also helped shifting the international discourse on lack of basic human rights in Cuba towards a discourse of admiration and praise about their healthcare system and international solidarity program. Others have also criticized the selective humanitarianism of Cuban internationalism, reducing the number of doctors on the island due to the high number of physicians working abroad.⁵⁹ However, putting aside the possible non-humanitarian interests that might be at the origin of this solidarity programme, Cuba's way of treating healthcare at a national and international level undoubtedly corresponds to several of the objectives listed under the third SDG.

Conclusions: What Development Possibilities in a Politically-Fragmented World?

Despite their many differences, both Cuba and the DPRK have a lot in common, and not only from an ideological point of view. Some key aspects of the UN SDGs agenda are clearly reflected in both countries, despite their isolated economies. Two of them stand out, encapsulated in a third: education, healthcare and reduction of inequalities. We argue that the main difference between the two countries and their position towards the achievement of the SDGs is that while the DPRK is struggling to achieve it within its own territory and uses diplomatic ties to increase access to quality education and quality healthcare for its own population, Cuba has not only achieved SDG3 and SDG4 for its own people, but it has also developed a strong network of diplomatic relations all of the world by exporting health and education services where these were needed. Both countries' socialist ideologies have led to them prioritizing universal health, education for all, and equality, yet more recent initiatives have also shown their strong commitment to the SDGs.

In Cuba, for example, both the education and the health care system have gone through recent changes, which reflect in each case their engagement with the 2015 MDGs and the 2030 SDGs. Both the *Yo sí puedo* literacy program, as well as Cuba's mass production of healthcare workers in order to deploy many of them abroad as part of their international solidarity programme are in line with the UN Sustainable Development agenda, increasing access to global universal education and quality health care. In the DPRK, it is the education system that has shown important recent changes. Opening it to foreign involvement and setting up joint academic programmes with international universities has led to conferences taking place in the DPRK. On the health front, but deeply connected to education, opportunities to rent-see abroad by sending doctors also enable the DPRK's medical corps to be exposed to new environments, new techniques and potentially new opportunities. Despite their different approaches, in both cases the MDGs and SDGs are clearly used for political and economic purposes, with catch-phrase reprised in both countries' official publications and propaganda outlets geared toward its own citizens. What is also important to highlight is that both countries currently operate, when it comes to the education and health sectors, without the impetus and direction of a patron: this was not the case in the past where the Soviet Union, as well as the People's Republic of China were supporting some of the infrastructure in both Cuba and the

DPRK. This is particularly crucial when it comes to Pyongyang: there is an underlying assumption that China, because of the size of its economy and its investment potential, is able to manipulate the DPRK, but most of Chinese investment into the DPRK is organised by private Chinese individuals under joint-venture enterprises that focus on sectors that can be profitable (i.e. textile industry, natural resources). There is little scope for China to invest in the DPRK's educational or health sector as there just isn't enough financial return in such endeavours.

It is also not surprising that both Cuba and the DPRK have made clear that, despite their commitment to the MDGs first, and the SDGs more recently, the UN should not attempt to impact on their own vision of security and sovereignty. Most studies on Cuba and the DPRK have not managed to move away from the rogue state discourse, making it difficult for their analysis to focus on the sustainable activities taking place in both countries as well as their impact at a global level. Although there are still many unanswered questions, this paper has intended to initiate the discussion on how seemingly economically and politically isolated countries, such as Cuba and the DPRK, do indeed also work towards achieving the notion of sustainability and well-being at national and/or global level, and it has shown that there are undeniably agents of change in both societies that support sustainable transformations. Leaving politics aside, it is unfortunate that despite these recent changes, new sanctions impacting both countries seem to restrain these transformations to develop further. As mentioned in the report on Cuba published by The Economist Intelligence Unit in 2017, the two main barriers to development are the "island's dilapidated infrastructure" and US sanctions.⁶⁰ This applies to the DPRK too.⁶¹ As long as the sanctions remain in place, both countries will have to continue finding other pathways to survive economically and politically, while at the same time maintaining their commitment towards the UN SDGs.

Based on these initial conclusions, there are a number of new inquiries that should be looked at. We will highlight two here. First, there is an underlying amount of cooperation that also takes place between Cuba and the DPRK because of the nature of their communist development: studying how much cooperation exists between the two, and whether or not there is an amount of coordination that takes place in order for them to sustain their position within the system is important. Second, we believe the

international community should look more in detail at new patterns of cooperation and endeavours where international help and support is needed, and the degree to which this support is then integrated within both the Cuban and North Korean societies. At a time when providing evidence of impact is so crucial for the viability of many projects, it seems necessary to also concentrate on tracing potential changes within both societies, to see how it is possible to have a positive impact on people's life, with the caveat that this impact will most likely have to occur within the constraints of, for better or worse, the existing leadership.

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- ⁵⁸ In 2016, in order to show the new position of the US towards Cuba, the US and Israel abstained for the first time in the UN vote against the embargo. As in previous years, all the other countries voted against the embargo.
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