



General Assembly

Distr.: General
5 February 2025

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Fifty-eighth session

24 February–4 April 2025

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Elizabeth Salmón*

Summary

The present report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Elizabeth Salmón, is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 55/21. In the report, the Special Rapporteur provides an overview of the current human rights situation, the interlinkages among human rights, development and peace and security, building on her previous reports, and also provides an analysis of the overall approach of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to economic, social and cultural rights and relevant Sustainable Development Goals in relation to the normative content of human rights.

* Agreement was reached to publish the present document after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



I. Introduction

1. It has been five years since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea shut down its international borders in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Due to its prolonged isolation, the absence of international monitoring and the further restricted exchange of information, the human rights situation of people in the country, particularly their access to basic services, is a serious concern. The country has been engaging with United Nations mechanisms to a certain extent and reported on its policies and progress in the context of the voluntary national review in June 2021 and the universal periodic review in November 2024. In the present report, relying on the Government's reports and information from escapees, civil society organizations and the United Nations, the Special Rapporteur delves into the systematic approach of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to economic, social and cultural rights and to development, both of which are closely linked to peace and security. In section III, the approach to basic services is analysed in terms of sustainable development, particularly the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In section IV, it is examined in terms of the State's compliance with economic, social and cultural rights based on normative content, including availability, accessibility and quality. The focus is on four central rights: to adequate food, health, education and water and sanitation. The approaches to development and to economic, social and cultural rights are mutually reinforcing and overlap in many areas.

II. Current situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

2. In recent years, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has introduced several laws to further restrict the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of movement, work and freedom of expression and opinion. Many include death penalty provisions and the reintroduction of public trials and public executions. Enacted laws include the Law on Epidemic Prevention (2020), the Law on the Elimination of Reactionary Thought and Culture (2020), the Law on Emergency Anti-Epidemic Work (2021) and the Pyongyang Standard Language Protection Act (2023). On 6 November 2024, the Special Rapporteur and other mandate holders sent a joint allegation letter¹ to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea regarding the reported public trial on 31 August 2024 of 11 women who were forcibly repatriated from China. Allegedly, 2 of the 11 women were sentenced to death on charges of trafficking in persons, operating adult entertainment establishments, prostitution and "insulting the dignity of people". Both women were reportedly executed on the same day. The other nine women were sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly being involved in the trafficking of persons in China. The mandate holders requested the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to share information on the fate and whereabouts of the women but have not yet received a response.

3. In November 2024, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency stated that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was advancing its nuclear programme by continuing to commission a light-water reactor and enriching uranium at a second undeclared facility. In 2024, the Security Council held six meetings to discuss peace and security, disarmament and the involvement of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The United Nations continues to call on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula and fully comply with its international obligations. On 12 June 2024, the Security Council also held an open briefing on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the sixth briefing held since 2014, at which the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Rapporteur reported on the ongoing human rights situation in the country and its impact on peace and security. The continuation of those discussions is important to ensure the centrality of human rights in peace and security deliberations regarding the Korean Peninsula.

4. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation strengthened their military and strategic cooperation, including through the signing of the Treaty on

¹ See communication PRK 3/2024, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29428>.

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in June 2024. There are reports of military personnel of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea being deployed in the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. On 23 December, the President of Ukraine stated that, according to preliminary data, the number of soldiers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea killed or wounded in the Kursk region had already exceeded 3,000.² The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has a national military service system under which the entire population is obliged to perform military service in regular or reserve forces or civilian forces under the Military Service Act (2003). In accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), of the International Labour Organization, compulsory military service is not a form of forced labour. The conditions in which soldiers perform military service, however, including access to food, healthcare and safety measures and the use of compulsory non-military labour,³ can constitute human rights violations. All military personnel should be protected under international law if they are captured. The Special Rapporteur stresses that the alleged involvement of soldiers of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine should not necessarily have a spillover effect on peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. During the reporting period, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea also continued to fortify its borders along the demilitarized zone that it shares with the Republic of Korea, destroyed sections of roads near the demilitarized zone, sent balloons containing trash over the border and resumed loudspeaker broadcasting across the border. For the first time since 2018, the Republic of Korea also resumed loudspeaker broadcasting near the military demarcation line, including criticism of the leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and information about the development of the Republic of Korea.

5. As the Special Rapporteur discussed in her 2023 report to the General Assembly,⁴ extreme militarization, the increased repression of human rights and violations of labour rights are all related because of the widespread use of forced labour in and by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to generate free labour and income for the State.⁵ The controlled labour and quota systems are designed to support the militarization of the country. At the same time, such militarization further exacerbates the violations of the human rights of the population. According to a civil society organization's research, a licensing system known as *waku*, which imposes foreign currency quotas on the country's foreign trade companies and the corresponding ministries, is linked to the "top State leadership" and the operation of those companies is based on forced labour and slavery.⁶

6. In November 2024, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea participated in the universal periodic review, during which several States Members of the United Nations made a wide range of recommendations. Out of the 294 recommendations, the country agreed to consider 206.⁷ In its opening remarks, the delegation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stated that, for the country, human rights meant national sovereignty.⁸ The Special Rapporteur reiterates that promoting and respecting human rights, the rule of law, good governance, accountability, guarantees of fundamental freedoms for all without distinction based on race, sex, language or religion and ensuring economic, social and cultural rights strengthens and supports national sovereignty.⁹ The State delegation also stated that it did not recognize or engage with the Special Rapporteur because the mandate of the

² Volodymyr Zelenskyy (@ZelenskyyUa), "I held a meeting of the Staff. We thoroughly analyzed our work with Syria after the fall of Assad and his escape. Today, the intelligence services presented their reports – the Foreign Intelligence Service and the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine – as well as the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs", 23 December 2024, available at <https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1871216838585016699>.

³ See Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Forced Labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Seoul, 2024).

⁴ A/78/526, para. 18.

⁵ See OHCHR, *Forced Labour*.

⁶ Joanna Hosaniak, *Made in China: How Global Supply Chain Fuels Slavery in North Korea's Prison Camps* (Seoul, Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, 2024).

⁷ See A/HRC/58/11.

⁸ United Nations Web TV, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea review", *Forty-Seventh Session of the Universal Periodic Review*, webcast, 7 November 2024, at 16:50, available at <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1siu17x8h>.

⁹ Charter of the United Nations, art. 1 (3), and international human rights treaties.

Special Rapporteur was created by “a politically motivated, confrontational anti-DPRK human rights resolution, which was aimed at eliminating the DPRK socialist system on the pretext of human rights”.¹⁰ The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea also rejected recommendations from Member States to engage with the Special Rapporteur. The Special Rapporteur reiterates that her mandate is guided by the principles of neutrality, objectivity and impartiality and is independent of any Government and political influence. She stands ready to engage constructively with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to support the promotion and protection of the human rights of its people.

7. In the latter half of 2024, international diplomatic staff of some embassies, including those of Cuba, India, Poland and Sweden, were able to return to Pyongyang and resume their operations. Yet international staff of the United Nations and humanitarian and development organizations have not been able to return to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. That means that the humanitarian and development assistance that the United Nations could provide is constrained and an independent assessment of the humanitarian situation is not possible. The country has not accepted any visit by the human rights mechanisms since 2017, when the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities made an official visit. While the Government has been reporting to some extent on its achievements on human rights and development to the United Nations mechanisms, the United Nations and other international organizations have not been able to meet with rights holders inside the country and independently assess the situation. It is the State’s responsibility to ensure that it is making every effort to use the maximum available resources to meet at least its minimum core obligations regarding economic, social and cultural rights. Since the Special Rapporteur has been unable to visit the country, she has continued to visit other countries to discuss the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. In November, she visited the headquarters of the European Union, where she exchanged views with relevant actors. In February and July, she visited the Republic of Korea, where she met with victims of human rights violations committed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

8. In addition, stricter border control in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has made the escape of its citizens from the country and the movement of information to and from the country extremely challenging. From January to September 2024, 181 escapees (159 women and 22 men) arrived in the Republic of Korea,¹¹ of whom only a few were estimated to have left the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 2024, while more than 1,000 escapees had arrived every year prior to 2020.

III. Human rights, development and peace and security

9. The three pillars of the United Nations are human rights, development and peace and security. The pillars work in unison to serve the purposes of the United Nations, which are to maintain international peace and security, to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character and to promote and encourage respect for human rights.¹² As the Secretary-General has stated, “you cannot have development without peace, or peace without development, and you can have neither without full respect for human rights”.¹³

A. Human rights and development

10. Development itself is an inalienable human right and can contribute to improving the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom.¹⁴ The human rights framework approaches that objective in terms of developing

¹⁰ United Nations Web TV, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea review”, at 2:50:16.

¹¹ Republic of Korea, Ministry of Unification, Policy on North Korean Defectors database, available at www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relation/statistics/defectors.

¹² Charter of the United Nations, art. 1.

¹³ United Nations, “Secretary-General denounces ‘false dichotomy’ between human rights, national sovereignty at event to mark fortieth anniversary of Inter-American Court”, press release, 17 July 2018.

¹⁴ Declaration on the Right to Development, preamble.

the capacity of duty bearers, primarily States, to fulfil their obligations and empowering rights holders to claim their rights. Development is not a purely economic but a holistic process, requiring the inclusive participation of individuals and communities in shaping policies that affect their economic, social and cultural futures.¹⁵ The human rights framework can guide development efforts informed by the human rights principles of universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability. The human rights-based approach is also aimed at analysing inequalities that lie at the heart of development problems and redressing discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress.¹⁶

11. The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, are strongly grounded in international human rights norms and highlight the need to address discrimination and prioritize persons in marginalized situations. The Goals explicitly seek to realize the human rights of all. They also put the principle of equality and non-discrimination at their centre, with the cross-cutting principle of data disaggregation, and include two dedicated Goals on equality (Goal 5, on gender equality, and Goal 10, on reducing inequality within and among countries). Many targets under the relevant Goals reflect much of the core content of economic, social and cultural rights.¹⁷

12. It is extremely concerning, however, that five years before the deadline of 2030, the world is far off track from what is needed to meet the Goals¹⁸ due to the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating conflicts, geopolitical tensions and growing climate variabilities. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not an exception and is also unlikely to meet its targets. One example is in the area of food security. The prevalence of undernourishment in the population was 45.5 per cent from 2020 to 2022,¹⁹ with 11.8 million people estimated to be undernourished during that period.²⁰ The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has called for a human rights economy where economic policies, such as taxation and budget policies, address and redress the extreme inequalities within and between countries and are grounded in everybody's rights.²¹ The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has also affirmed the need for a shift away from the profit-driven economy to a human rights economy.²²

B. Peace, security and development

1. Disarmament and development

13. The Sustainable Development Goals highlight the linkages between disarmament and development. For example, indicator 16.4.2 measures the proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin or context has been traced or established by a competent authority in line with international instruments. The indicator specifically captures the relationship between disarmament and an environment of security, which enables sustainable development.²³ The draft convention on the right to development, which is currently being negotiated by the General Assembly, includes an article on international peace and security in which it is stated that States parties undertake to pursue collective measures with the objective of achieving general and complete disarmament under strict and effective

¹⁵ Ibid., para. 9.

¹⁶ OHCHR, "Frequently asked questions on a human rights-based approach to development cooperation" (New York and Geneva, 2006) p. 15.

¹⁷ See https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/SR/AddisAbaba/SDG_HR_Table.pdf.

¹⁸ *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024* (United Nations publication, 2024), p. 2.

¹⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO), *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: Urbanization, Agrifood Systems Transformation and Healthy Diets across the Rural–Urban Continuum* (Rome, FAO, 2023), p. 152.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 167.

²¹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/04/statement-un-human-rights-chief-human-rights-economy>.

²² A/HRC/56/61, para. 38–48.

²³ See General Assembly resolution 77/45.

international control so that the world's human, ecological, economic and technological resources can be used for the full realization of the right to development for all.²⁴ Available resources for development and for realizing economic, social and cultural rights are also closely linked to disarmament. In the Declaration on the Right to Development, it is stated that progress in the field of disarmament would considerably promote progress in the field of development and that resources released through disarmament measures should be devoted to the economic and social development and well-being of all peoples and, in particular, those in developing countries.

14. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has integrated the Sustainable Development Goals into its national goal 16 on the consolidation of the socialist system. The national goal emphasizes a people-first policy focused on consolidating the socialist system and ensuring that governance and resources serve the masses under a centralized structure. During the universal periodic review, the delegation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea mentioned that the policies of the country on building up defence and improving people's "living" were based on the principle that the State would not give up national defence for the sake of people's living, nor would it pay less attention to people's living in favour of national defence. The delegation added that the country was building up national defence capabilities to have a war deterrent effective enough to repel any provocative attempts of hostile forces and create environments conducive to the full enjoyment by all the people of their rights.²⁵ The Special Rapporteur stresses that the rights of people should be prioritized on the basis of international human rights law, to which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is committed.

2. Impact of sanctions on human rights

15. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is subject to Security Council and bilateral sanctions due to its nuclearization and missile programmes.²⁶ Sanctions have restricted trade, investment and financial transactions. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has raised the imposition of sanctions as one of the biggest obstacles to the achievement of its national development goals.²⁷ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has made it clear that the sanctioned State continues to be the primary duty bearer in the realization of economic, social and cultural rights. In that regard, making progress towards denuclearization could lead to the easing of sanctions, which would remove several barriers to humanitarian and development cooperation and open up potential trade and investment opportunities. That would increase the resources available for investment in realizing human rights. Global partnerships, economic integration and international cooperation are also emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goals as core measures for achieving the Goals, with inclusive economies, private sector participation and public-private partnerships for sustainable development encouraged. At the same time, the sanctioning States have an obligation to establish effective monitoring and take steps to mitigate any disproportionate suffering experienced by vulnerable groups within the targeted country.²⁸

16. In March 2024, the Security Council did not extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1874 (2009) to monitor United Nations sanctions implementation. In its last report, the Panel of Experts stated that there could be little doubt that United Nations sanctions and their implementation had unintentionally affected the humanitarian situation and some aspects of aid operations, although their relative role remained impossible to disaggregate from many other factors.²⁹ In October 2024, 11 States announced the establishment of a multilateral sanctions monitoring team for the implementation of the Security Council resolutions on the

²⁴ [A/HRC/WG.2/23/2](#), annex, art. 22.

²⁵ United Nations Web TV, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea review", at 1:33:29.

²⁶ Security Council resolutions 1718 (2006), 1874 (2009), 2087 (2013), 2094 (2013), 2270 (2016), 2321 (2016), 2356 (2017), 2371 (2017), 2375 (2017) and 2397 (2017). The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is also subject to bilateral human rights sanctions and other human rights sanctions, including under the European Union Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

²⁷ Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda* (2021), p. 6.

²⁸ [A/HRC/36/44](#), appendix II, para. 13 (a); and [A/HRC/39/54](#), paras. 14–19.

²⁹ [S/2024/215](#), summary.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea.³⁰ It is important for monitoring to cover humanitarian and human rights consequences.

IV. Economic, social and cultural rights and relevant Sustainable Development Goals in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

17. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has voluntarily committed to realizing economic, social and cultural rights by ratifying key United Nations treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

18. The State is required to take steps progressively to improve the situation and to utilize its maximum available resources to realize those rights, including through international assistance and cooperation.³¹ Despite the progressive nature of the realization of economic, social and cultural rights, the States have immediate obligations. Firstly, progressive realization implies the prohibition of retrogression. Secondly, the State is required, with immediate effect, to ensure the enjoyment of minimum essential levels of each right. Thirdly, discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status is prohibited in the exercise of economic, social and cultural rights.³²

Commitment to development by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

19. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has emphasized the importance of pursuing economic growth and improving the population's standard of living. It has also acknowledged the importance of engagement with neighbouring countries and the international community to achieve economic development. The country has been isolating itself from the international community, however, on an unprecedented scale since the border shutdown in early 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government has expressed its full support for the Sustainable Development Goals in conformity with the national development policy for building a powerful socialist country.³³ It has also signed the "Strategic framework for cooperation between the United Nations and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2017–2021" (extended until the end of 2025).³⁴ The implementation window for the framework has been extended annually since 2022 owing to the absence of the international staff of the United Nations in the country. The framework includes the statement that the Government and the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are determined to build a strong, prosperous and self-reliant nation in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals and in line with its commitments to international agreements and conventions.³⁵ In the framework, it was noted that the objective of the United Nations in the country was to support national efforts to improve the well-being of its people, especially the most vulnerable, adopting a human rights-based approach, ensuring gender equality and promoting environmental and institutional sustainability, all of which are central principles of the international human rights framework.

³⁰ See <https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-on-establishing-multilateral-sanctions-monitoring-team-for-implementation-of-un-security-council-resolutions-regarding-the-dprk>.

³¹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 2.

³² International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 2 (2); and Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 3 (1990), para. 18.

³³ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 5.

³⁴ See <https://dprk.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/UNDPRK-SF2017-2021%28ext%20Dec%202025%29%20-revised%20PDF%20copy%28with%20notice%20of%20extension%29.pdf>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20. In the framework, the United Nations and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea recognized four priority areas: (a) food and nutrition security; (b) social development services; (c) resilience and sustainability; and (d) data and development management. The first two priorities are directly linked to the rights to adequate food, education, health and water and sanitation, which are examined in the following section from the point of view of the normative content of each right, typically encompassing the requirements of availability, accessibility (including economic accessibility, that is, affordability), quality or adequacy and equality, and non-discrimination as a cross-cutting principle.

A. Right to adequate food

21. The Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea guarantees that the State will provide all working people with every condition for obtaining food, clothing and housing. State policy continues to entail a public distribution system managed and controlled by the Government.

1. Availability

22. The right to adequate food requires that food be available via either natural resources or sale in markets and shops. Sustainable Development Goal 2 is aimed at ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture; it includes the elements of equality and adequacy. Target 2.3 is aimed at doubling the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers.

23. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea appears to be taking a consistent approach, focusing on increasing food production and self-sufficiency in food. It has integrated Goal 2 into its national development goals, namely, to develop sustainable agriculture and self-sufficiency in food production.³⁶ It has also emphasized its efforts to increase cereal production, as well as other food production.³⁷ In its national report submitted to the Human Rights Council in the context of the fourth cycle of the universal periodic review, the Government reiterated its objective of becoming self-sufficient in food in the near future and highlighted its efforts to increase agricultural production.³⁸

24. Despite its focus on increasing the domestic production of food, the country faces chronic food insecurity due to old infrastructure, capacity gaps in technology and skills, natural disasters and a lack of investment in addressing those issues. The prevalence of undernourishment increased from 34.3 per cent of the population during the period 2004–2006 to 45.5 per cent during the period 2020–2022.³⁹ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and other United Nations and humanitarian organizations, which in the past have provided technical support to address food security and nutrition, have not been able to enter to the country for over four years. Ensuring food availability also requires well-functioning distribution, processing and market systems that can move food from the site of production to where it is needed in accordance with demand.⁴⁰ The Government seems to have shifted from accommodating informal markets (*jangmadang*), which have been people's coping mechanism to deal with shortages of food and daily necessities, to retaking control of food distribution by restricting private commercial activities and establishing a monopoly to sell staples (rice and corn) at State-run shops only. While the human rights framework does not prescribe specific models for ensuring the right to adequate food, such policy changes, if not accompanied by a public distribution system that guarantees people's right to adequate food, may constitute a retrogression, which is prohibited under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.⁴¹

³⁶ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15 and 16.

³⁸ [A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/1](#), paras. 53–55.

³⁹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023*, p. 152.

⁴⁰ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 12 (1999), para. 12.

⁴¹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 3 (1990), para. 9.

2. Accessibility

25. Accessibility includes both economic and physical access to food. Food must be affordable for all, including vulnerable populations, people living in remote areas and prisoners, in other words, enabling individuals to maintain an adequate diet without compromising other basic needs. Physical accessibility ensures that food is available to all, including vulnerable populations, groups such as children, the sick, persons with disabilities and older persons, for whom obtaining food may be difficult or physically challenging. It also includes ensuring access for prisoners.⁴² Furthermore, target 2.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals is aimed at ending hunger and ensuring access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food year-round for all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants.

26. As the public distribution system in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is discriminatory and irregular, it does not guarantee access to food for the vast majority of the population. Disparities between provinces, between rural and urban areas and among wealth quintiles in access to food and other rights are also a long-standing human rights concern. Only elites and those who are considered loyal to the national leadership, considered a "core" class, are permitted to live in Pyongyang and if a family member commits a so-called crime of a political nature, the entire family can be expelled to a rural area and labelled as members of a "hostile" class. Geographical disparities are, therefore, also related to discrimination based on the *songbun* system.⁴³ Only those who are considered loyal to the national leadership receive regular public distributions.⁴⁴ The vast majority of people must find their own means of access to food by earning money through commercial activities, cultivating small plots of land and picking wild herbs in the mountains. Under the strict border shutdowns in place since early 2020, many people have lost economic accessibility to food because they have been unable to make a living due to limited commercial activities and restrictions on movement amid the border closure. Moreover, State-assigned jobs are rarely paid or are paid very little, making it harder for families to afford food. Some instances of starvation have been reported during the border shutdown, particularly among older persons, persons with medical conditions, persons in rural areas who were poor or had no savings, persons living alone and families without any means of generating income.⁴⁵ Recently, it was reported that the Government was reinforcing the attendance of individuals at State-assigned workplaces by strengthening punishments or, in some case, introducing and increasing wages and rations.⁴⁶ For many people, however, staples sold at the State-run shops are unaffordable without the means to earn money. The irregular distribution of food through the public distribution system and the small ration sizes continue to be far from sufficient to meet the minimum nutritional requirements.

3. Adequacy

27. Adequacy means that the food must satisfy dietary needs, taking into account, inter alia, the individual's age, living conditions, health, occupation and sex. Target 2.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals is aimed at ending all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and addressing the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.

28. It is encouraging that, during the universal periodic review, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea reported its efforts to improve people's diet⁴⁷ by increasing the variety of foods, including vegetables, poultry and cow's milk. Malnutrition, caused by a combination of food insecurity and a lack of access to basic services, including quality healthcare and

⁴² Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 12 (1999).

⁴³ *Songbun* is a classification system based on the political, social and economic background of a person's direct ancestors as well as the behaviour of a person and his or her relatives.

⁴⁴ See <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Civil%20Society%20Working%20Group%20Spotlight%20Report%20-%20A%20Human%20Rights-based%20Approach%20to%20the%20SDGs%20in%20the%20DPRK%20%281%29.pdf>, pp. 13 and 14.

⁴⁵ See <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/06/society-economy/interview-9>.

⁴⁶ See <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/01/society-economy/wage-increase>.

⁴⁷ A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/1, para. 56.

water and sanitation, remained a leading cause of maternal and child mortality in the country.⁴⁸ Since the border closure, United Nations agencies and other international humanitarian organizations have not been able to deliver food assistance, inclusive of supplementary feeding to the most vulnerable groups, including children under 5 years of age, pregnant and lactating women and older persons, and their nutritional situation is a serious concern. International cooperation is one of the key tools for fulfilling the right to adequate food by addressing immediate humanitarian food needs, improving the nutritional status of vulnerable populations, strengthening the national capacity to boost food production and providing food security assessment and monitoring. The Special Rapporteur re-emphasizes the urgent need for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to enhance international cooperation on food and nutrition. She also highlights that people in vulnerable situations, including persons in detention and persons living with disabilities, should also be prioritized. The inadequacy of the food provided in detention facilities has been well documented by the United Nations and other organizations⁴⁹ and it could be an area for international cooperation.

29. The Government has reported on the reduction in the prevalence of malnutrition among children under 5 years of age as a “remarkable improvement”.⁵⁰ The national average for stunting has been rapidly decreasing (from 25.7 per cent in 2021 to 16.8 per cent in 2022).⁵¹ No reliable disaggregated data has been available, however, since the publication of the 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, when disparities were large,⁵² and the situation of children in rural areas or in lower wealth quintiles is unknown, which is a concern.

B. Right to health

30. Legislation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea guarantees a universal free medical care system for all citizens.⁵³ In its 2021 report in the context of the voluntary national review, the State reported that, thanks to that system, all people had access to medical services without any charge, irrespective of sex, age, occupation or residence.⁵⁴

1. Availability

31. The right to health requires that functioning public health and healthcare facilities, goods and services, as well as health programmes, are available in sufficient quantity within the State party. Such facilities and services should include the underlying determinants of health, such as safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities, hospitals, clinics and other health-related buildings, trained medical and professional personnel receiving domestically competitive salaries, and essential drugs. The targets under Sustainable Development Goal 3 also address aspects of availability, such as to achieve universal health coverage and access to medicines and vaccines for all (target 3.8).

32. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea appears to be focusing its efforts on the availability and quality of medical services through the improvement of the infrastructure of medical institutions.⁵⁵ In its national report in the context of the universal periodic review,

⁴⁸ See https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/2020_DPRK_Needs_and-Priorities_Plan.pdf, p. 14.

⁴⁹ OHCHR, “*I Still Feel the Pain*”: *Human Rights Violations against Women Detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Seoul, 2020), pp. 15 and 16; and Lee Wootae and others, *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea in 2023* (Seoul, Korea Institute for National Unification, 2024), pp. 116–120.

⁵⁰ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 16.

⁵¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023*, p. 152.

⁵² Central Bureau of Statistics of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and UNICEF, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017: Survey Findings Report* (Pyongyang, 2018), available at <https://www.unicef.org/dprk/media/156/file/MICS.pdf>. As of 2017, the percentage of stunting among children under 5 years of age in Ryanggang Province was 31.8 per cent, while in Pyongyang, it was 10.1 per cent.

⁵³ Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, art. 56; and People's Public Health Law, art. 2.

⁵⁴ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ [A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/1](#), para. 40.

the Government reported on the five-year plan for national economic development to reinforce its material and technical foundations, improve the quality of medical services and build a strong anti-epidemic infrastructure.⁵⁶ The country has a high ratio of physicians to population (317 per 100,000 persons) and a comprehensive network of hospitals and clinics throughout the country.⁵⁷ The medical facilities, however, lack essential medical supplies and equipment and adequately trained medical personnel.⁵⁸ Under the strict border closure, the availability of medicine, in particular, has declined and there has been a significant reduction in international cooperation on health, except for the supply of vaccines and sexual and reproductive health supplies, such as reproductive health and midwifery kits and essential drugs and medicines provided by the United Nations Population Fund.

2. Accessibility

33. Health facilities, goods and services must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of the population, without discrimination against any sections of the society. Sustainable Development Goal 3 is aimed at: (a) reducing the maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births (target 3.1); (b) reducing the under-5 mortality ratio to at least as low as 5 per 1,000 live births (target 3.2); (c) achieving universal healthcare coverage, including financial risk protection (target 3.8); (d) ending the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combating hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases (target 3.3); and (e) ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes (target 3.7). Target 5.6 is aimed at ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

34. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, health facilities at the primary and secondary levels exist in a physically accessible location for most people. Access to higher-level or specialized facilities, however, is restricted on the basis of the patient's political and social status.⁵⁹ In addition, many escapees' accounts indicate that, while health services are free of charge in principle, patients have to bear the cost by bringing in necessary items for surgery, paying for heating or electricity because hospitals or clinics are not equipped with uninterrupted electricity, giving gratuities to doctors because they are not paid by the Government and purchasing prescribed medicines in informal markets.⁶⁰ Economic accessibility (affordability) is, therefore, not guaranteed for the majority of the population, which results in disparities in the level of medical services that people receive depending on their economic and social conditions. Escapees have also recounted that the medicines sold in informal markets is expensive, making it difficult for people to obtain even basic medicine.⁶¹ The widespread misuse of drugs, including methamphetamine and opium, as a substitute for taking painkillers or seeking medical assistance has also been reported.⁶²

35. Regarding communicable diseases, the World Health Organization (WHO) lists the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as one of 30 high-burden countries for tuberculosis and one of 30 high-burden countries for multidrug/rifampicin-resistant tuberculosis as of 2023.⁶³ There are some reports that tuberculosis is increasing due to severe malnutrition and exposure to cold weather.⁶⁴ After the border shutdown, the number of people provided with preventative medicine dropped by half, from 14,090 household contacts of people diagnosed

⁵⁶ Ibid., para. 37.

⁵⁷ A/HRC/49/74, para. 22.

⁵⁸ A/76/242, para. 35.

⁵⁹ Wootae Lee and others, *In the Kim Jong Un Era Are Human Rights in North Korea Improving?* (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2023), p. 72, available at https://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/module/report/view.do?idx=114339&nav_code=eng1691113830.

⁶⁰ See <https://en.nkdb.org/researchreport/?bmode=view&idx=19215895>, pp. 160 and 161.

⁶¹ Hanna Song, Juyeon Ok and Yeosang Yoon, *Third Time's a Charm? North Korea's Implementations of Its Recommendations during Its Third Universal Periodic Review* (Seoul, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2024), p. 165.

⁶² Lee and others, *Are Human Rights in North Korea Improving?*, pp. 75 and 76.

⁶³ WHO, *Global Tuberculosis Report 2024* (Geneva, 2024), p. 44.

⁶⁴ See https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/food_international_org/north-korea-tuberculosis-patients-medicine-shortage-12052024085032.html (in Korean).

with tuberculosis in 2019 to 6,761 household contacts in 2020.⁶⁵ International funding available for tuberculosis prevention, diagnostic and treatment services also decreased significantly, from \$14.7 million in 2020 to \$1.6 million in 2021.⁶⁶ No data on funding has been available since that time. Preventable diarrhoea and pneumonia continue to be the major causes of death in children under 5 years of age.⁶⁷ There is no reliable data on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

36. While the national immunization rate exceeded 96 per cent before the COVID-19 pandemic, it had dropped to below 42 per cent by mid-2021. In 2022, no child was vaccinated against major diseases, including tuberculosis, and no pregnant woman received immunization against tetanus and diphtheria; a significant number of children born in 2023 are still waiting for necessary vaccinations.⁶⁸ In September 2024, the Government, with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), launched a nationwide campaign to vaccinate more than 800,000 children and 120,000 pregnant women⁶⁹ in a catch-up vaccination campaign following the pandemic.

37. In its voluntary national review report, the Government noted that reproductive health services had been improved in the country.⁷⁰ WHO estimates that 107 women died per 100,000 births in 2020, declining from 186 deaths per 100,000 births two decades earlier.⁷¹ The unsafe practice of abortion at private clinics as a means of contraception has been reported, however, and attributed to the lack of modern contraception and the absence of education.⁷² Out of 150 women escapees surveyed by a victims' organization in 2023, 50 per cent answered that they had experienced dilation and curettage, abortion, miscarriage or childbirth and 63 per cent of those women had experienced medical malpractice complications due to the inadequate healthcare system.⁷³

3. Quality

38. Healthcare facilities, goods and services must also be scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality. That requires, among other things, skilled medical personnel, scientifically approved and unexpired drugs and hospital equipment, potable water and adequate sanitation. Target 3.8 of the Sustainable Development Goals is focused on quality essential healthcare services and quality essential medicines and vaccines.

39. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea reported on the quality of healthcare services in its national report in the context of the universal periodic review, although it focused more on higher-level or specialized medical facilities, which are accessible to a very limited population, mainly in Pyongyang and other big cities. Despite the Government's efforts, it is reported that people increasingly rely on private doctors because of the deterioration in quality and the lack of trust in the public health system.⁷⁴ The chronic lack of investment in goods, medical personnel, medicines, water and sanitation and the operation of healthcare facilities has affected the quality of healthcare services in the country. The most recent assessment by the United Nations suggests that nearly 8.7 million people have limited

⁶⁵ See https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/tb_profiles/?_inputs_&tab=%22charts%22&lan=%22EN%22&is_o2=%22KP%22&entity_type=%22country%22.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *2020 DPRK Needs and Priorities Plan*, p. 14.

⁶⁸ WHO and UNICEF, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea: WHO and UNICEF estimates of immunization coverage: 2022 revision", 1 July 2023, available at <https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/cp/immunisation/kor.pdf>.

⁶⁹ UNICEF, "Nearly one million children and pregnant women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to receive life-saving routine vaccines – UNICEF", 3 September 2024.

⁷⁰ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 20.

⁷¹ WHO, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2020: Estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division* (Geneva, 2023), p. 83.

⁷² Lee and others, *Are Human Rights in North Korea Improving?*, p. 100; and Daye Gang and Joanna Hosaniak, "They Only Claim That Things Have Changed...": *Discrimination against Women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Seoul, Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, 2018), p. 30.

⁷³ Tongil Mom/Rights for Female North Koreans, *UN UPR DPRK Universal Cases of Medical Malpractice and Women's Rights Violation in North Korea* (2024), p.18.

⁷⁴ Lee and others, *Are Human Rights in North Korea Improving?*, pp. 72–74.

access to quality health services.⁷⁵ Limited international cooperation has further affected the availability and quality of basic medicines and vaccines. The Government seems to be failing to fulfil its obligation to use the maximum available resources to ensure the right to health. Furthermore, it may be demonstrating retrogression in meeting its obligations.

C. Right to education

40. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, compulsory 12-year universal and free education is guaranteed by law.

1. Availability

41. Functioning educational institutions and programmes must be available in sufficient quantity within the jurisdiction of the State party, including sanitation facilities for both sexes, safe drinking water and trained teachers receiving domestically competitive salaries. As of 2017, the completion rate for compulsory 12-year education was nearly universal (99.9 per cent),⁷⁶ and both women and men had a very high literacy rate.⁷⁷

2. Accessibility

42. Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, educational institutions and programmes must be accessible to everyone, without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party. Accessibility has three overlapping dimensions: (a) non-discrimination; (b) physical accessibility; and (c) economic accessibility. Sustainable Development Goal 4 is aimed at achieving the completion of free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all boys and girls leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (target 4.1), ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education (target 4.2), ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university (target 4.3) and eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and children in vulnerable situations (target 4.5).

43. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, access to compulsory 12-year education, including one year of pre-primary education, is not truly free, as students and parents are required to contribute items and funds for the operation of the school, including the salaries of teachers. As a result, education is often unaffordable for children from low-income families. Children with disabilities face multiple barriers in access to education, in particular in mainstream schools, although the Government has reported that it is making arrangements for persons with disabilities to pursue learning either in "ordinary schools" or "special needs schools".⁷⁸ Many children with visual or hearing impairments are kept at home rather than being sent to far-away boarding schools and many children with intellectual disabilities are also kept at home because of stigma and low expectations for them in the school system.⁷⁹ Access to higher education is becoming much more inaccessible, determined by region, gender and social and economic status. As of 2018, 18.3 per cent of women as compared to 35.7 per cent of men were enrolled in higher education.⁸⁰

3. Quality and objectives

44. Education must be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity. Target 4.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals is aimed at ensuring

⁷⁵ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2020*, p. 10.

⁷⁶ See Central Bureau of Statistics of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and UNICEF, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017*.

⁷⁷ The literacy rate was 100 per cent among both women and men in 2017. See Central Bureau of Statistics of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and UNICEF, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017*, pp. 27 and 28.

⁷⁸ [A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/1](#), para. 81.

⁷⁹ [A/HRC/37/56/Add.1](#), para. 56.

⁸⁰ See <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-ter-enrr>; and <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-ter-enrr?gender=male>.

that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Target 4.a. is aimed at building and upgrading educational facilities that are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

45. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the objective of education is to prepare all the members of society to be "intelligent workers" who have the "intellectual level of a university graduate" who are "prepared politically and ideologically".⁸¹ To reflect that policy, in its national reports in the context of the voluntary national review and the universal periodic review, the Government reported on its focus on improving educational conditions and environments at both the central and local levels, in particular making education information technology-based and modern.⁸² That policy corresponds to some accounts of escapees, who have mentioned that they had computer rooms and classes but that actual learning was not possible as there was no Internet service due to the lack of electricity.⁸³ Also, it is not clear whether such efforts to improve facilities are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive.

46. The emphasis in the objectives for education appears to be placed on roles within State functions, rather than on empowerment and the full development of individuals. Dedicated classes to teach ideology are included in the curriculum⁸⁴ and ideology is integrated into other subjects. For example, in language and history classes, the content is limited to the issue of loyalty to Kim Il Sung and his family, and in music classes, songs are mostly about loyalty to the leadership.⁸⁵ Children are regularly mobilized to work at farms during school hours. The focus on ideological education has recently been further strengthened. For example, the Youth Education Guarantee Act, adopted in 2021, is aimed at facilitating the understanding of a "socialist lifestyle" among young people, putting responsibility on their families and communities to monitor them. Article 19 of the Pyongyang Cultural Language Act, adopted in 2023, provides that once children join the Socialist Patriotic Youth League (starting in secondary school), they must refrain from using non-socialist Korean terminologies.⁸⁶

D. Right to water and sanitation

47. The human right to water and sanitation is derived from the right to an adequate standard of living under article 11 (1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. On 28 July 2010, the General Assembly adopted a historic resolution recognizing the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that was essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights.⁸⁷

1. Availability

48. The water supply for each person must be sufficient and continuous to cover personal and domestic uses, which comprise water for drinking, washing clothes, food preparation and personal and household hygiene. There must be a sufficient number of sanitation facilities within or in the immediate vicinity of each household and all health or educational institutions, workplaces and other public places to ensure that all the sanitation needs of each person are met.

49. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has admitted that progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6, on water, sanitation and hygiene, has been slow despite its

⁸¹ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 52.

⁸² [A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/1](#), paras. 46–52.

⁸³ See Asia Press, "Investigation: current living conditions of N. Koreans (2) How is public education corrupting", 2 July 2024; and Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, *2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights* (Seoul, 2024), pp. 508 and 509, available at https://unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/news/Publications/ronkhr.

⁸⁴ Three hours every day on the childhoods of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un in primary school. See Ministry of Unification, *2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights*, p. 513.

⁸⁵ See <https://pscore.org/life-north-korea/forced-to-hate>.

⁸⁶ See https://www.dailynk.com/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/03/Pyongyang-Cultural-Language-Protection-Act_English-and-Korean-Versions_Daily-NK.pdf.

⁸⁷ General Assembly resolution 64/292.

active measures.⁸⁸ The Law on Public Hygiene, adopted in 1998, regulated the public hygiene system, including water and sanitation.⁸⁹ According to UNICEF, only about 50 per cent of schools and 62 per cent of nurseries have adequate water and sanitation facilities.⁹⁰ In addition, no data is available on access to hygiene, including menstrual hygiene. Girls often miss school due to poor facilities for menstrual hygiene.⁹¹

2. Accessibility

50. Water and sanitation facilities must be physically accessible and within safe reach for all sections of the population, taking into account the needs of particular groups, including persons with disabilities, women, children and older persons. Target 6.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals is aimed at achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all and target 6.2 is aimed at achieving access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and ending open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. Water and sanitation services must also be affordable to all.

51. According to the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the percentage of the population with access to safely managed drinking water services was 67 per cent in total (49 per cent in rural areas and 77 per cent in urban areas) in 2022.⁹² While no data is available on access to safely managed sanitation, 85 per cent of people had access to basic sanitation (73 per cent in rural areas and 92 per cent in urban areas) in 2022.⁹³ Due to an irregular electricity supply, access to water is not consistent even in Pyongyang. For schools and healthcare facilities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, there is insufficient updated data regarding access to water, sanitation and hygiene.

3. Quality and safety

52. Water for personal and domestic use must be safe and free from microorganisms, chemical substances and radiological hazards that constitute a threat to a person's health. Sanitation facilities must be hygienically safe to use and should prevent human, animal and insect contact with human excreta. Target 6.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals is aimed at improving water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing the release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally.

53. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 52 per cent of households practise incorrectly managed sanitation (unimproved sanitation facilities and the unsafe disposal of excreta from improved sanitation),⁹⁴ causing diarrhoea and exacerbating malnutrition. Due to that practice, nine out of ten people in rural areas live in environments carrying potentially deadly health risks.⁹⁵ Diarrhoea, one of the leading causes of death among children and one of the key underlying causes of acute malnutrition,⁹⁶ is an example to show that water and sanitation play a key role in multiple sectors, including health, food security and nutrition, education and economic development. In that regard, the Government acknowledges the need to improve the water quality, assessing that, due to the imperfect technical conditions of the sewage disposal plants and lack of equipment and reagents, industrial and household wastewater is released into rivers and streams and drained into the soil without full treatment in some regions, resulting in pollution.⁹⁷

⁸⁸ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ "Strategic framework for cooperation between the United Nations and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", p. 19.

⁹¹ [A/HRC/52/65](#), para. 30.

⁹² See <https://washdata.org/report/eapro-2023-regional-snapshot-households>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *DPR Korea Needs and Priorities Plan 2020*, p. 19.

⁹⁵ See https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/DPRK_NP_2019_Final.pdf, p. 27.

⁹⁶ See https://dprkorea.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/2020_DPRK_Needs_and-Priorities_Plan.pdf, p. 44.

⁹⁷ *Voluntary National Review*, p. 25.

V. Cross-cutting challenges to realizing economic, social and cultural rights and related Sustainable Development Goals

A. Lack of targeted measures to address inequality and discrimination

54. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has publicly committed to pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals in conformity with international human rights norms, including the principle of equality. While the Government has engaged with the United Nations mechanisms on Goal implementation and monitoring, it has not fully incorporated all the Goals and targets, in particular elements of non-discrimination, into the national sustainable development goals. For instance, in its national goal on food, sustainable development of agriculture and self-sufficiency of food, there is no reference to targets under Goal 2, which draws special attention to the poor and persons in vulnerable situations, including infants and children under 5 years of age, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons. The Government also takes the position that it achieved gender equality a long time ago⁹⁸ and that, therefore, the measures being taken to achieve gender equality are very limited. The Government has not presented credible data to demonstrate gender equality, either. Leaving no one behind is central to the 2030 Agenda. It is about ending discrimination and exclusion and reducing the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind. Achieving the Goals requires specific and targeted measures to ensure the protection of the rights of people in marginalized situations as a priority. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has not adequately prioritized reaching out to specific and marginalized groups and determining what obstacles and challenges remain to ensure inclusion and address systematic discrimination.

55. The Government claims that the main obstacles to achieving its national development goals are the continued sanctions and blockade imposed on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, heavy natural disasters in consecutive years and the world health crisis.⁹⁹ Regarding the promotion and protection of human rights, the Government has listed the ongoing moves of isolation, stifling, military threats, blockades and pressure that have been perpetrated by forces hostile to the country for centuries¹⁰⁰ as the most serious challenge and the biggest obstacle. If isolation or military threats are obstacles to human rights, the Special Rapporteur considers that it is also the responsibility of the Government to overcome those obstacles through policy changes and diplomatic and peaceful engagement. Secondly, the Government should identify challenges to reaching people in marginalized situations and develop tailored plans to realize their rights as a priority.

B. Absence of disaggregated data

56. The lack of data, particularly disaggregated data, in areas of essential services, such as food, health, education and water and sanitation, are limitations to developing a data-driven human rights-based approach to programming. The principles of non-discrimination and equality are at the core of human rights, and the international human rights framework requires disaggregated data based on the prohibited grounds of discrimination in order to identify population groups in marginalized situations and give priority to those groups.¹⁰¹ Disaggregated data is also essential for achieving the central principle of leaving no one behind of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁰²

57. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Human Rights Committee both require States parties to monitor progress and identify disaggregated statistics based on prohibited grounds of discrimination and the list of illustrative indicators

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/1, para. 93.

¹⁰¹ OHCHR, *Human Rights Indicators: A Guide to Measurement and Implementation* (New York and Geneva, 2012), p. 68.

¹⁰² See

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/HRIndicators/GuidanceNoteonApproachtoData.pdf>.

for the rights set out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.¹⁰³ In addition, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires States parties to address disparities between localities and regions. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is party, also require States parties to monitor progress based on disaggregated data on women, children and persons with disabilities. In that regard, both the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in their review of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 2017, raised a serious concern about the overall absence of publicly available data disaggregated by age, gender and location.¹⁰⁴ The Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities also reported in 2017 that there was very limited data, across all sectors, disaggregated by disability and other parameters, including age, gender and geographic location.¹⁰⁵

58. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the United Nations have acknowledged ongoing challenges in the availability of and access to data for ensuring equality and non-discrimination in programming and decision-making for development, human rights and humanitarian activities.¹⁰⁶ In the area of disaggregated data collection and the design of targeted measures, the United Nations could provide technical cooperation for conducting surveys, strengthening data collection and ensuring a human rights-based approach to data collection.

C. Maximum available resources, including international cooperation

59. As stated in the Special Rapporteur's previous report to the General Assembly,¹⁰⁷ extreme militarization reduces the resources available to achieve economic, social and cultural rights. The ongoing situation of economic and social rights and development goals indicates that the Government is not adequately investing in the enjoyment of human rights of its people.¹⁰⁸ As stated above, the maximum available resources also include international cooperation and technical assistance.¹⁰⁹ Prior to the border closures in early 2020, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had made progress in several key areas in cooperation with the United Nations, such as vaccination and the provision of institutionally targeted supplementary feeding to children under 5 years of age, pregnant and lactating women and older persons. It has not been possible to implement many programmes, however, as international staff of the United Nations agencies have not been able to return to the country.

60. Partnership is at the core of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea limits partnerships, however, to only a few countries that do not question its policies or that support them at the international level. Goals on economic development and social services are approached from *juche* (self-reliance) principles. In addition, while the Goals are aimed at encouraging resource sustainability, the country's overemphasis on self-sufficiency at times does not take into consideration the needs of the general population. Regarding the principle of self-sufficiency, the Special Rapporteur on the right to food has explained that self-sufficiency is a value that can provide qualitative and principal guidance to Governments in navigating risks and fulfilling the right to adequate food but that self-sufficiency did not mean isolationism or autarky.¹¹⁰

61. In addition, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea maintains or continues to strengthen its position that the State is the primary provider of services and resources, from

¹⁰³ HRI/GEN/2/Rev.6, para. 26; and CCPR/C/2009/1, para. 25.

¹⁰⁴ CEDAW/C/PRK/CO/2-4, para. 49; and CRC/C/PRK/CO/5, para. 9.

¹⁰⁵ A/HRC/37/56/Add.1, para. 36.

¹⁰⁶ "Strategic framework for cooperation between the United Nations and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", pp. 22 and 23.

¹⁰⁷ A/78/526.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., paras. 12 and 13.

¹⁰⁹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 2.

¹¹⁰ A/75/219, para. 56.

housing and employment to food, healthcare, education and water and sanitation, with minimal emphasis on people's participation and private sector involvement. The Sustainable Development Goals framework encourages inclusive economies, private sector participation and public-private partnerships for sustainable development.

VI. Conclusions

62. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea states that it is committed to development and to economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights, development and peace and security are all interrelated. Available resources for development and the realization of economic, social and cultural rights can be affected significantly by the State's policies on extreme militarization, nuclearization and related sanctions, limited partnerships and a lack of international cooperation.

63. In recent years, the leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has publicly acknowledged food shortages and the failing national economy and widespread poverty in the country. A human rights-based approach to development, including through the realization of all fundamental human rights offers a means to achieve sustainable development. The realization of economic, social and cultural rights and the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved, however, in isolation from the international community. The right to development is a collective right but also an individual right¹¹¹ and, therefore, everyone in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is entitled to the right to development. They should not be deprived of their right to development due to sanctions imposed on the Government because of its nuclearization policy. Their economic, social and cultural rights should not be compromised by a lack of targeted measures and investment resulting from the Government's budget allocation decisions or its refusal to receive international assistance. There are many areas in which the Government could make improvements or effect change.

64. In November 2024, the Government agreed to consider some of the relevant specific recommendations made during the universal periodic review on economic and social rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, the rights of people in marginalized situations and strengthening cooperation with the United Nations and international organizations. One recommendation, proposed by Panama, was the adoption of a structural strategy to redirect military spending towards increasing social investment, the realization of all human rights, the achievement of the Goals and the promotion of a culture of peace.¹¹² The implementation of crucial recommendations made by fellow Member States can be an important means through which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea can achieve its commitment to protect and promote economic and social rights and ensure sustainable development. The country can also seek international cooperation from Member States to implement such recommendations, which could help to build trust and further international cooperation on human rights.

65. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea needs to initiate comprehensive institutional, legal and policy reforms to improve the human rights situation and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable economic development can be achieved only when people have the right to public participation and are not discriminated based on *songbun* or any other grounds, vulnerable populations are prioritized, people have the opportunity to find employment and work and people's fundamental freedoms are protected.

VII. Recommendations

66. **The Special Rapporteur recommends that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea:**

¹¹¹ Special Rapporteur on the right to development, "An introduction to the mandate", December 2017, p. 4, available at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/SRRRightDevelopment_IntroductiontoMandate.pdf.

¹¹² A/HRC/58/11, para. 130.148.

- (a) Review its budget allocation to prioritize the realization of the economic, social and cultural rights of its people, including the rights to food, healthcare, such as maternal and reproductive care, education and water and sanitation;
- (b) Collect disaggregated data to identify the most marginalized populations in terms of the realization of economic and social rights and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals;
- (c) Review the indicators for gender equality relating to each right and the Goals and take special measures to improve women's access to human rights;
- (d) Develop targeted measures to reach out to the most marginalized populations and end discrimination based on *songbun* in realizing their economic and social rights and related Goals;
- (e) Urgently allow for the return of United Nations entities, other international organizations and the diplomatic community and allow the undertaking of economic activity and the movement of people;
- (f) Review its policy on partnerships and international cooperation, including regarding disarmament, which could open up trade and investment opportunities for facilitating the realization of economic and social rights and related Goals;
- (g) Recognize the fundamental right to leave and enter the country, both in law and in practice, and ensure that those who are repatriated are not subjected to punishment upon repatriation.

67. The Special Rapporteur recommends that the international community:

- (a) Use any available opportunity for dialogue with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to create an environment that advances peace and human rights;
- (b) Provide increased support to humanitarian and development actors, including the United Nations, to enable them to respond to the needs of the most marginalized populations and to support development initiatives;
- (c) Continue to support the efforts of civil society organizations to document and address the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

68. The Special Rapporteur recommends that the United Nations:

- (a) Re-establish a monitoring mechanism for the implementation of United Nations sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that includes the function of monitoring the humanitarian and human rights consequences of sanctions;
- (b) Support technical cooperation projects on human rights with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

69. The Special Rapporteur recommends that civil society organizations continue to monitor and document human rights violations and use that information to support accountability efforts and to advocate for changes in the laws and policies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
