

Korea as Commons. Where is the Peninsula heading in the Political, Economic and Cultural Senses

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Could an emergent North Korea provide the world with a new, from-scratch benchmark of sustainable, collaborative economic and social development? With geopolitical change and emerging technologies, the idea of a national “commons” now looks increasingly feasible.

Relations between North and South Korea are changing so rapidly, the pressing question is no longer what the next step in this process of reconciliation will be, but rather where the peninsula is heading in the political, economic and cultural senses.

A door is opening for the institutional transformation of the “Hermit Kingdom” with new concepts and technologies. The implementation of new approaches to government and the building of new infrastructure could make North Korea an inspiring experiment that other nations can model.

However, amid promising developments on the Korean Peninsula, media report that multinationals are planning to establish an extractive economy that will generate quick wealth from the exploitation of North Korea’s rich mineral resources and cheap labor.

The profits will not benefit impoverished North Koreans, but rather international investors. This suggests that Wall Street, or its Japanese or Chinese equivalents, will develop North Korea’s economy according to the blueprint offered by postwar Iraq.

But North Korea does not have to choose between following the backward economic policies of North Korea’s Labor Party, which have produced stagnation and poverty, nor must it embrace a consumption-based neoliberal “development” policy run by global investment banks and the consulting firms that they fund.

There is an alternative: a third way for North Korea to leapfrog dirty and exploitative “growth” but still reach sustainable economic and political success.

Embracing the 21st-century commons

This “third way” for North Korea is a collaborative economy and society. This means embrace of the emerging global commons in education, politics, manufacturing and economics made possible by P2P (peer-to-peer) systems and commons-oriented production (for example Linux, Wikipedia). Because North Korea is, in essence, starting from scratch, it can adopt the Internet of Verification (such as blockchain and holochain) in a more comprehensive manner than has been done elsewhere.

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This approach will allow North Korea to benefit from the advantages of internationalization without allowing international finance to dictate what North Korea will become. Concrete proposals for such a sharing economy that are viable alternatives to exploitative and extractive market economies have been made by the P2P Foundation in Amsterdam and the Commons Foundation in Seoul.

North Korea can empower its people by integrating them into the global P2P economy that links individuals with their peers in South Korea and around the world, so that they can realize their full potential through commons-based micro-manufacturing controlled by neither the state nor by Wall Street. Rather than being exploited for cheap labor, or cheap mineral resources, North Korea can develop a model for positive globalization powered by people, not by capital.

Pre-modern Korea provides an example of the kind of fundamental conceptual shift required. The Japanese colonial strategy of 1910-45 demolished the shared communities of mutual support that once thrived in Korean villages, by means of the Japanese equivalent of enclosure acts that deprived most Koreans of their land and traditional means of production.

Choi Yong-gwan, founder of the Commons Foundation, explains how the commons is no new idea in Korea. “The village contracts (hyanghak) ... defined roles in the community, but did not assign absolute ownership. Those village contracts were destroyed during the Japanese colonial period. The deepening inequality born of inhuman competition and the resulting concentration of wealth started then.”

The commons could provide a model for how wealthy nations can work with those less developed in a constructive, non-exploitative manner by creating shared economies focused on citizens. Moreover, because a commons economy is not about foreign investment or about exploiting labor, it does not fit into the standard models of economic interaction

described in the current United Nations sanctions against North Korea. It therefore offers a realistic window of hope.

Although Western media portray North Korea as a bizarre, isolated and mysterious nation, recent negotiations with South Korea have revealed that it is like other developing nations struggling to find a place in a ruthless globalized order dominated by financial institutions. The innovations the authors of this article are proposing do not consist of a particular technology, but rather of an open platform that gives North Korea access to knowledge, to technology, to expertise and to financial resources from around the world that will permit it to make an economic transition without falling under the domination of oligarchs.

Commons 101: What to do

North Korea has little modern technology – but also has little of the commercialism or the consumer fetishism that have ripped apart the cultures of other nations. It offers unprecedented opportunities for institutional innovation of which other countries are not capable, precisely because North Korea's start point is zero.

North Korea could require that all buildings employ solar power; that manufacturing allow for open-source innovations at the local level; that services be shared between families without a middleman; and that local governments be allowed to develop ties with other local governments in other countries for education and social exchange.

North Korea could establish innovative financial systems that nourish local cooperatives employing cryptocurrencies and crowd funding as means to build local economic autonomy while also allowing foreign investment in the form of crowd funding, or micro-investments by supporters around the world.

North Korea could put together a shared economy wherein everything, from vacuum cleaners and saws, to washing machines and solar power generators, is held together in trust for the community. It could set up programs for the barter of services (from caring for children or the elderly to cleaning and cooking) that recognize the contributions of all citizens. It could pair elderly people with young people, and farmers with city dwellers, to create new cultural and economic synergies.

The adoption of a commons – of a shared economy rooted in regional agriculture and micro-manufacturing – is essential to reduce the unsustainable overproduction that plagues East Asia today and which not only promotes waste and economic disparity but is also a major factor behind military conflicts.

North Korea lacks quality highways and related dependencies on automobiles. Therefore, cities with shared transportation, all-electric transportation, or even urban planning that eliminates the need for automobiles are possible in North Korea.

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Asia today and which not only promotes waste and economic disparity but is also a major factor behind military conflicts.

North Korea's opening could present a priceless opportunity to establish a healthy model of P2P internationalization.

Commons 101: How to do it

South Korea should play a major role, not only because it shares a common language, but also because it has established powerful precedents for a P2P economy.

South Koreans have displayed tremendous enthusiasm for participatory politics, culminating in the "Candlelight Revolution" of 2016 that brought millions of citizens together to demand an end to corrupt politics.

Seoul launched a program to create local villages across the city four years ago that provides a powerful platform for a sharing economy. And the city has recently committed US\$54 million to establish blockchain systems throughout Seoul and to train a new generation of experts to use them effectively.

North Korea needs a P2P advisory committee that focuses on the ethical implications of economic and technological change, not on short-term profits. South Koreans can play this role, but it will also be important to obtain advice from around the world about how to avoid the traps emerging economies fall into.

North Korea has extensive deposits of coal, uranium, iron, gold, zinc and rare-earth minerals worth around \$6 trillion, according to South Korean mining company Korea Resources. One of the first recommendations of the P2P advisory committee might be a freeze on the exploitation of subsurface resources until Pyongyang possesses sufficient expertise to assess the long-term environmental impact of such efforts.

The vetting of all proposals for the mining of resources; for the building of transportation infrastructure; and for the development of urban spaces by a P2P network of experts could be important first steps.

North Korea must avoid getting into heavy debt during the first stage of its opening. The committee could help it craft policies that ensure short-term returns for investors are not a factor in planning, while also assuring that there is no risk of capital flight. To prevent a situation in North Korea similar to the rise of oligarchs after the fall of the Soviet Union, people should be empowered to form community banks and create participatory financing mechanisms.

North Korea does not have to be a mysterious, closed, inscrutable remnant of the Cold War that must "catch up" with the "advanced" industrialized world. Rather, North Korea can be an inspiring experiment – a space wherein blockchain technologies, micro-manufacturing, a

sustainable energy infrastructure and a P2P approach to internationalization ushers in a new era for itself, for Northeast Asia – and for the world.

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