SHIFTING LIVELIHOODS:
TRENDS OF PASTORALIST DROP-OUT AND
RURAL TO URBAN MIGRATION IN MONGOLIA

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Shifting Livelihoods:
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Table of Contents
INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 3
SUMMARY .................................................................................................................................. 4
METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................................................... 5
PASTORALISM – TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOODS BASED ON MOBILITY ......................................... 7
RECENT HISTORICAL TRENDS ..................................................................................................... 7
PROFILES OF PASTORALIST DROP-OUTS .................................................................................... 9
PUSH – PULL FACTORS IN MONGOLIAN MIGRATION ................................................................ 9
PHASED MIGRATIONS .............................................................................................................. 11
HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIC STABILITY POST DROP-OUT ............................................................ 11
EXTENDED TRANSITIONS ......................................................................................................... 12
FOOD CONSUMPTION PATTERNS – “URBAN HERDER DIETS” .................................................. 13
PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS ............................................................... 14
CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................ 15
Introduction

Following early warnings from the government of Mongolia (GoM) indicating a potential dzud\(^1\) developing in Mongolia during the winter of 2012-2013, a rapid needs assessment was conducted in January, 2013, focusing on rural pastoralist livelihoods in Uvurkhangai and Arkhangai provinces. Trends of “pastoralist drop-out”, their causes and effects, were widely cited by a variety of stakeholders – both local and international. In order to strengthen our understanding of the issues surrounding this phenomenon, a separate assessment was organised in March, 2013 in the ger districts of Ulaanbaatar, as well as the provincial capitals of Tsetserleg and Arvaikheer, and smaller, semi-urban district (soum) centres.

The duration of this assessment – which ran in conjunction with an additional follow-up assessment revisiting certain issues linked to rural pastoralist households and the evolving winter – did not allow for the depth and breadth of analysis that this subject warrants. However, a basic profile of urban migrants as well as some basic comparative analyses of food security and livelihoods pre and post drop-out is presented in this report. It should be noted that this report focuses specifically on pastoralist drop-out and the impact at a household level and broader trends in migration within Mongolia - province to province or those driven by the current mining boom, for example - are only briefly touched upon.

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\(^1\) A dzud is a complex, long-lasting, slow onset, natural disaster in which a summer drought is followed by heavy snowfalls and unusually low temperatures in winter, and then by a dangerous spring thaw (http://www.infomongolia.com/ct/ci/5368).
1) **Summary**

“Pastoralist drop-out” – an abrupt cessation of traditional pastoralist livelihood activities, whether dictated by circumstance or more voluntary in nature – and the subsequent rural to urban migration that it entails has been rapidly increasing in Mongolia over the past two decades. This relatively new phenomenon is accompanied by profound and comprehensive demographic, socio-economic, and socio-cultural changes. This increasingly apparent and problematic shift is sure to have lasting implications for Mongolian society.

Mongolians have been “a mobile people” for millennia. Virtually every aspect of the established Mongolian society has been influenced to some extent by a strong tradition of nomadic-pastoralist livelihoods. Modern diets, social ceremonies, cultural identity, and even the tourist industry all have their roots in a longstanding nomadic lifestyle.

More recently, however, “Mongolian mobility” has taken on a new dimension. Rural to urban migration has been one of the defining demographic trends of Mongolia for nearly a half century; however, during the two decades since the end of the socialist era, the rate has increased enormously. While rural to urban migration in more industrial countries may be linked to economic development and rising affluence, *Mongolia’s trend in urbanisation is much more strongly correlated to increasing vulnerability resulting from a progressive deterioration of rural livelihoods systems*, most notably the livestock sector. In a sense, rural to urban migration is driven by long-term, slow-onset stress migration, resulting from a lack of viable livelihood options in rural areas.

The declining productivity of the pastoralist livelihood system is frequently amplified by natural disasters, most notably drought and *dzuds*, which result in periodic surges in rural to urban migration rates – most recently following the *dzuds* of the late 1990s and early 2000s and again in 2009-2010. With 1.3 million currently living in the capital, or just under half of the entire population, the city is continually expanding as “ger districts”, the Mongolian form of slums, spread haphazardly into the surrounding hills. Ulaanbaatar’s growth rates were miniscule through the 1940’s. The first major wave of rural to urban migration did not occur until the late 1950’s (due to the socialist state’s need for certain human resources in certain sectors) and the numbers of new arrivals has continued to rise in every decade since.

Despite the draw of urban centres – with the perception of more stable and lucrative income, increased access to quality medical care and other basic services, as well as better education opportunities for children – the day to day realities of urban living often prove just as challenging, involve many of the same risks for families and children as would be encountered in more traditional, rural settings and do little to improve the quality of life for pastoralist drop-outs. Even decades after the initial migration, most indicators show that life rarely improves for pastoralist drop-outs.

Despite difficult and prolonged transitions, many of these households, especially those in larger urban centres (Ulaanbaatar or provincial capitals) stated that, given the choice and the means, they would not return to their former lives as herders and would instead stay in their new and challenging urban context in order to provide opportunities for the next generation outside of the pastoralist livelihood system – providing a future for children, based on education and skills that will give them...
a solid foundation to secure lives as non-herders is increasingly becoming the ultimate, and in a sense only achievable goal of pastoralist drop-outs.

In terms of the comparative analysis of households pre and post pastoralist drop-out, the main findings may be summarized as follows:

- Household profiles “pre drop-out” indicate that all wealth groups are at risk of pastoralist drop-out, which highlights both the fragility of the pastoralist system as it is currently managed in Mongolia as well as the immense impact that a single dzud may have on a household level;
- While the abrupt “push” out of pastoralism is obvious, the main “pull factor” towards certain urban centres is not perceived economic opportunities or access to better quality services. The existence of social networks remains the strongest determinant of migrant destinations;
- Migrations occur in a phased manner – often starting in soum² or aimag³ centres – and often over several years and follow existing social networks as described above. A move straight to Ulaanbaatar is much less common;
- Job opportunities for migrants are low paying and sporadic, purchasing power is a chronic issue and the majority of pastoralist drop-outs rely on some form of social welfare; however, the main financial burden for migrants is more linked to higher expenses in urban areas;
- Household food consumption may be worse among pastoralist drop-outs due to the loss of animals (i.e. subsistence livestock rearing), chronic lack of purchasing power, and the lack of awareness about nutritious food; however, their diets remain relatively unchanged in composition following their migration given their continued preference for a traditional herder diet based on animal protein;
- Perceptions of the quality of life pre and post drop-out are more strongly correlated to the amount and composition of livestock holdings prior to migration than they are to current income or living conditions;
- Transitions from rural to urban contexts should be seen as spanning generations – first generation migrants will likely not see the benefits of migration and are especially interested in providing future opportunities for their children outside of the pastoralist livelihood system.

2) Methodology

A similar approach – including a modified household questionnaire – as was used in the initial rural needs assessment⁴ was also applied to the urban component. However, given time constraints, focus group discussions were not conducted and key informant and household interviews were the focus of this assessment.

The main sources of information for this assessment included the following:

- A total of 22 household interviews were conducted with former pastoralists living in Ulaanbaatar, 2 provincial capitals, as well as 4 soum centres;

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² District or county in rural Mongolia.
³ Province.
Pastoralist Drop-Out & Rural to Urban Migration in Mongolia

- Key informant interviews with social workers, educators, and health care professionals working in the khoroos of Ulaanbaatar and provincial capitals with high concentrations of former herders and urban migrants;
- Key informant interviews with soum (district, or county) governors;
- Secondary data review of both internal documents produced by Save the Children as well as external documents, including those produced by the government, on the subject of rural to urban migration.

The urban districts and neighbourhoods visited in Ulaanbaatar included the following:

- Songino-Khairkhan district;
  - 24th and 30th khoroos.
- Chingelbei district;
  - 17th and 19th khoroos.
- Bayanzurkh district;
  - 17th and 27th khoroos.

The neighbourhoods visited in the aimag centres were:

- Erdene-Bulgan – in Tsetserleg, Arkhangai provincial centre;
- Arvaikheer – in Arvaikheer, Uvurkhangai provincial centre.

The soum centres visited were:

- Burd and Ulzuut in Uvurkhangai Province, and
- Khoton and Khashaat in Arkhangai Province.

Limitations of the assessment

- As this comparative analysis has been carried out in conjunction with an on-going needs assessment focusing on rural pastoralist households, time constraints were a major difficulty in fully developing the analysis. Certain steps were abbreviated and the number of stakeholders and households that were interviewed was limited;
- A high rate of turnover of social workers and other administrative staff at the khoroo level as well as a lack of a clear handover following recent elections in many districts and khoroos led to a lack of detailed knowledge in regard to recent migrant numbers, their exact locations, as well as many of the difficulties that they face;
- Pastoralist drop-outs are but one of several groups of migrants in Mongolia. Other substantial populations moving to urban centres include students, seasonal labour migrants, and those working in the mining industry. As such, very little in terms of secondary data exists that specifically examines the pastoralist drop-out category.

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5 Neighbourhoods, or lowest administrative units in urban centres.
3) Pastoralism and Traditional Livelihoods Based on Mobility

Pastoralism, in Mongolia as in other parts of the world, is a highly complex livelihood system which is particularly well adapted to environments marked by extremes in temperature and precipitation, and resulting fluctuations in availability of key natural resources. A foundational principle of pastoralism is mobility and the ability to move away from threats and towards opportunities, allowing the population to exploit the variation in the availability of natural resources, especially pasture and water. Surviving on their livestock (and in a sense, surviving for their livestock), pastoralist households move several times a year in search of these key resources.

This mobile and adaptive livelihoods system passed down through generations results in what may be seen as a “natural problem solving ability” among many pastoralist societies around the world. At the same time, this lifestyle tends to result in limited long-term planning, few permanent settlements, and very little land cultivation (or ownership) or material accumulation. Indeed, many have commented that, given the harshness of the environment and numerous ecological constraints, large sedentary societies based on agriculture were likely not possible in a country like Mongolia in the past.

Despite the mobility of the pastoralist livelihoods systems, population movements within this system differ enormously with modern migration trends, which are often more permanent in nature and involve an abrupt break with this traditional livelihood system.

4) Recent Historical Trends

During the socialist era, population movements were regulated by the government in order to assure the availability of labour in certain developing sectors – such as crop production or light industry – or to assure adequate skilled professionals in a given area, such as educators or health professionals. Partially due to the need for an efficient allocation of human resources, urban populations began to grow slowly in the 1940’s and 1950’s as job opportunities created under the centrally planned economy became available. The collectivisation movement, railway construction as well as the development of Erdenet and Darkahn urban centres enhanced these early trends of migration and urbanisation.

Substantial easing of these controls occurred following a non-violent revolution in 1990. The relaxed regulations of population movements, however, coincided with a new set of challenges within the pastoralist livelihood system. While the sector is extremely important to the Mongolian economy and still employs as much as 40% of the Mongolian work force, as well as providing the foundation of food security for hundreds of thousands of households and remains a common source of cultural identity, it has suffered from a series of interrelated complications since the transition to privatization began in 1993.

Some of the main challenges for the livestock sector may be summarized as follows:

- The processes of privatization have resulted in less state support to quality livestock extension and management services – which becomes particularly obvious during natural disasters.

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7 The 16th article of the Constitution of Mongolia states that “people have a right to move freely and to choose where to live in the territory of the country, as well as to migrate abroad and return to the country.”
The current system encourages strategies of continual herd growth as opposed to high quality livestock by-products resulting in severe overstocking of the national herd.

The convergence of increasing goat numbers – given the income generated by cashmere sales – with more harmful grazing behaviour, and general overgrazing leading to pasture degeneration on a large scale.  

These and other challenges are contributing to a progressive deterioration of the livestock sector, especially for the most vulnerable households. While some households are able to grow their livestock holdings every year, a much larger portion of households are experiencing a progressive reduction in their livestock holdings – putting them at much greater risk of dropping out of the sector in any given year.

The livestock sector is also increasingly subject to recurrent, slow-onset natural disasters, most notably drought and dzuds, which periodically create punctual, though substantial, hikes in the pastoralist drop-out rate. These drop-outs are making up an increasing percentage of the rural to urban migrants in modern Mongolia. While the numbers of pastoralist drop-outs are not disaggregated from the overall numbers of migrants, some government statistics may speak to the impact that the deterioration of the livestock sector is having on rural to urban migration trends and likely to the overall composition of migrant households.

The following table shows the percentage of the total Mongolian population residing in Ulaanbaatar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Ulaanbaatar’s share of the entire Mongolian population</th>
<th>Percentage increase over the previous decade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the table above, Ulaanbaatar’s share of the total population grew by 4.5% between 1969 and 1989 (the year before the socialist system ended). During the next 21 years, from 1989-2010, Ulaanbaatar’s growth was nearly 4 times as fast, increasing its proportion of the national population by 16.8%.

How much these increases are due to the devastating dzuds of the late 1990s and early 2000’s and the most recent in 2009-2010 or to the overall deterioration of the livestock sector is debatable. However, the Ulaanbaatar City Statistical Department states that 116,518 people have moved to Ulaanbaatar since 2009 alone, with the highest annual total, 39,701 people, occurring in 2010. Further, when other urban centres are considered, the total urban population of Mongolia now stands at 67.9%.  

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8 More information on the livestock sector is available in the Save the Children’s Rapid Needs Assessment Report, from March 2013.

5) Profiles of Pastoralist Drop-Outs

In terms of livestock holdings and relative wealth, the previous standing of drop-out households was examined in an attempt to provide a basic profile of herders before dropping out of the pastoralist livelihood system. The findings were incredibly varied amongst the assessed households and indicate that no standard categorisation, linked to wealth or implied vulnerability, can be made given the number of assessed households. This variation shows both the systemic fragility of the livestock sector in Mongolia, as well as the extreme impact that a single dzud event may have even on the wealthiest households.

In line with initial assumptions, many households were previously marginal herders who had experienced a progressive reduction of their livestock holdings over several years and had finally dropped out of pastoralism during a dzud or otherwise harsh winter. Other households, however, would have been classified as “wealthy” or even “very wealthy” herder households, with previous livestock holdings of over 500 animals and in one case more than 800 animals. These households did not experience a progressive deterioration of their herds and were instead devastated by a single dzud event (most commonly the dzuds of 1999-2001 or 2009-2010).

While marginal herders with limited livestock holdings are more at risk in terms of the proportion of their herds that they may lose during a single event and thus at an elevated risk of dropping-out of pastoralism in any given year, wealthy households are not entirely safe from pastoralist drop out when weather conditions are particularly disadvantageous – especially if the winter was preceded by a drought, as many of the most damaging dzuds have been. These findings also highlight the importance of individual initiative in regards to heeding early warning and taking adequate preparatory steps during the run-up to winter.

However, despite the variety of wealth groups “dropping out” – the current living conditions and food security and livelihood profiles become much more uniform once migration to urban centres occurs.

6) Push – Pull Factors in Mongolian Migration

Any decision to migrate, in any context, is influenced by a set of factors in both the area of origin as well as the destination. These factors are routinely referred to as “push” and “pull” factors – or those negative factors that “push” a household out of a given area or lifestyle, and those positive factors that “pull” them into a new location. However, as several household interviews indicated, the realities of urban settings for recent arrivals rarely live up to the initial expectations. Finding indicate clearly that the most important driver of rural to urban migration is not the “pull” of the urban centres, it is much more so the “push” (often abruptly) out of previous rural livelihood systems.

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10 A rural herder needs assessment running in conjunction with this pastoralist drop-out assessment indicated that not all households who “drop-out” will migrate. Some will be able to restock their herds, either through government funded restocking programmes, social network support or through other means. Interestingly, the ability to restock herds does not necessarily follow prior herder wealth ranking profiles either.
The following table summarises many of these factors, some of which are further elaborated upon in separate sections below, as they relate to the decisions surrounding rural to urban migration in Mongolia:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Push Factor</th>
<th>Pull Factor</th>
<th>Perception vs. Reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete or partial loss of livestock and pastoralist livelihood – accompanied by the lack of alternative income sources in the area of origin.</td>
<td>Alternative income generating opportunities – more stable household financial situation.</td>
<td>Lack of marketable skills and education greatly reduce income generating potential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Saturated labour markets lead to difficulties finding work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased expenses (fuel, electricity, registration, etc.) result in reduced financial stability for extended periods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties accessing education – especially during winter.</td>
<td>Closer proximity to schools and ability to have children stay with the family throughout the school year.</td>
<td>Lack of income results in difficulties paying for certain school related expenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher quality educators and more opportunities for children.</td>
<td>Frequent movements within the destination city due to land tenure issues lead to children frequently changing schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulties registering may lead to some difficulties with enrolment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties accessing health care – especially during winter.</td>
<td>Closer proximity to better quality facilities which are better stocked and employ better quality health care professionals.</td>
<td>Primary care is generally free and of higher quality. However, the lack of registration may lead to difficulties with secondary or tertiary care when necessary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The push factors described in the table above obviously apply for all pastoralist drop-outs. The pull factors, however, or the perceptions of job opportunities as well as the benefits linked to education and health facilities in urban settings, is much more varied. Many of the migrant households interviewed in soum and aimag centres seemed to be aware of the difficulties that a move to Ulaanbaatar or another large urban centre would entail – especially the financial difficulties related with saturated labour markets and increased expenses.

Given these difficulties the main pull-factor, upon which migrant families base their decisions to relocate to certain urban centres, including Ulaanbaatar, is the presence of family or extended social networks in those centres. Social networks in the destination city not only facilitate the initial move by providing land for installing their ger but they also greatly facilitate the longer-term transition by helping with job searches and integration into the new surroundings of urban khoroos.
7) **Phased Migrations**

The various opportunities – especially perceived economic opportunities – that are available in Ulaanbaatar and other urban centres may present a substantial “pull factor” for recent pastoralist drop-outs. However, as discussed above, few households would be willing to cross the country, potentially several hundred kilometres, and move to an unfamiliar city unless they were absolutely sure of their prospects upon arrival. The fact that many recent arrivals will also likely have little choice but to spend a portion of their time, at least initially, living with relatives (an older family member who is receiving a pension, for example) as they search for work further highlights the importance of existing social networks.

Geographic isolation, transportation difficulties, and an acute lack of purchasing power following the initial loss of livestock and most especially unclear job prospects and variations in social networks lead to many migrations occurring in a phased manner and often over a number of years. The initial migration is generally towards the nearest and most familiar destination – either soum or aimag centres. The final step of onward migration to Ulaanbaatar or another urban centre is generally reserved for those households who either have family willing to support them in these centres or who are lucky enough to have clear job opportunities.

8) **Household Economic Stability – Post Drop-Out**

The households visited during this assessment, and the vast majority of pastoralist drop-outs in general, may be classified as either “poor” or “extremely poor” in their new urban settings (regardless of their previous socio-economic status as herders, as discussed above). Almost all of them had at least one, or in many cases two or more household members who were “economically active”, or working age adults, unemployed.

The official unemployment rate amongst “one year migrants” is a little over 5%. This figure however does not consider those households who are not engaging with official labour agencies (who may have recruiting practices – such as insisting upon a fixed address in an apartment – which discriminate against recent migrants) and are instead relying on unofficial social networks for job opportunities. This official figure also hides another more substantial figure among migrant households as *underemployment* is a much more accurate term to describe the sporadic income generating opportunities of pastoralist drop-out households. Many of the households visited during this assessment initially stated that all working-age adults were “unemployed”. However, upon further examination, it was found that perhaps one working age adult did have access to either seasonal or periodic work in and around their khoroo. Construction work during the summer being the most commonly cited in aimag centres and Ulaanbaatar, while shepherding (tending to others’ herds) represents one of the main income sources at the soum level.

The wages gained from these sporadic opportunities were far below what is needed to assure basic household needs – with compromises most notably made on food, clothing, education, and health related expenses – or to cover the additional expenses of registration and land certificates. Therefore, the majority of migrant households rely almost exclusively on some form of social welfare

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11 Seasonal rural-urban labour migration does occur. The main income opportunity in Ulaanbaatar and other urban centres is construction during the summer. Some of these migrants may be able to find better job prospects for more permanent migration in the future.

12 2010 Population and Housing Census of Mongolia – Migration and Settlements.
during much of the year – most notably the monthly child stipends provided by the government (roughly 15 USD per month, per child), stipends for the disabled or pensions for the elderly, for example.

The availability of work, especially in soum centres, which is little more than a small village, is a major restriction to stable household income. Perhaps a more permanent obstacle to financial stability for pastoralist drop-out households is the lack of viable skills that are applicable, or marketable, in urban centres – aside from the expertise gained as herders which may still apply in soum centres. This lack of skills is often compounded by very low levels of education and by illiteracy or semi-literacy amongst some of the pastoralist drop-out population.13

It should be noted however that the major difference in household economy is not necessarily the change in income (which is, again, normally supplemented by social welfare programmes). Interestingly, many of the assessed households actually felt that the main difficulty in urban centres is the additional expenses that households are faced with. Most notably, increased expenses on transportation (having to move around the city or district in public transportation or taxis for example), combustibles such as coal and firewood, and electricity were the main additional monthly household expenses that were most commonly cited. Many of these items and services were not paid for at all in rural areas. Combustibles, for example, are often procured for free (albeit, sometimes illegally) in neighbouring forests or by collecting animal dung; and transportation, while often expensive, was not a daily concern as it may be in urban areas.

Food expenses are another substantial change in household expenses. Herder households were able to procure at least minimal amounts of meat and dairy products from their livestock and only rarely purchased these items on local markets. Food (roughly 50%) and fuel (wood or coal accounting for 20-30%) were the main expenses for urban migrants at the time of the assessment.

Most households indicated that they did not currently have any debt. This lack of debt, however, is not an indication of financial stability, rather of the difficulties accessing institutional financial services due to low socio-economic status (i.e., unable to provide collateral). However, like rural households, they do occasionally borrow food or purchase it on credit from local traders – again, due to the lack of alternatives. Some also procure certain inputs for small scale income generating activities from market traders (ingredients for cooking, to be sold on the street, for example) though higher interest rates among some lenders is an impediment to many for diversifying their income sources.

9) Extended Transitions

Despite the fact that the initial drop-out may be quite abrupt, the transition from rural to urban living is generally a long-term transition. Indeed, even households who had migrated to urban centres more than a decade ago (following the loss of their herds during the 2001-2002 dzud, for example) had yet to completely transition into their new lives and secure stable income with which to provide for their families. Despite the larger and more diversified urban labour markets, difficulties finding a job and the reduced purchasing power that this entails leads to a variety of

13 Partially due to difficulties following the collapse of the socialist system, a high rate of school drop-outs during the 1990’s has led to a substantial portion of an entire generation of herders having lower than normal levels of education.
other complications which greatly reduces many the positive effects of urban living and effectively extends the transition out of pastoralism.

The lack of financial resources for migrant households complicates the process of registering in their new locations. In the assessed districts in Ulaanbaatar, for example, it was estimated by many stakeholders, including social workers and assessed households that the cost of registration would range from 5,000-6,000 tugriks per adult and between 2,000-3,000 tugriks per child.\(^{14}\) This would translate to a total cost of just under 15 USD to register an average household of 5 members. The fact that many households are unable to afford this necessary legal step (which facilitates their access to other basic services – including immunizations for children and vocational skills training for adults) highlights the absolute lack of financial resources following pastoralist drop-out.\(^{15}\)

Acquiring the certificates that allow families to settle more permanently on a new plot of land is another difficulty inherent in the process of transition for migrant households. Given the inability to procure land certificates, most migrant households are left to squat on others’ land – either on land provided by their social networks or often illegally – which leads to frequent disruptions when they are asked by local authorities, or neighbours to move. These frequent movements, from khoroo to khoroo or between districts, create an added instability within these households. Frequent movements within urban areas may also have an especially distressing impact on children who are forced to change schools regularly. Schools are also routinely overcrowded in many ger districts and kindergartens are especially hard to find – adding to the difficulties in educational opportunities for children.

The lack of adequate income resulting in reduced legal recognition as well as complicated access to land for resettlement leads to extended transitions for many migrant households. Many of these difficulties take years to correct – while others, especially those linked to stable income and improved living standards, may take a generation or more. For these reasons the transition from the rural pastoralist livelihood system to the urban system should be seen as a “trans-generational” transition with the full benefits of urban living and the ability to take advantage of the new opportunities rarely felt by the first generation.

10) Food Consumption Patterns – “Urban Herder Diets”

Despite the set of comprehensive and profound changes induced by pastoralist drop-out and rural to urban migration – most notably a complete shift in livelihood activities as well as a substantial shift in income and expenditure patterns – food consumption, most obviously in terms of food preference, seems to remain utterly unchanged for migrant households. Even for households who migrated to urban areas more than a decade ago, the basic elements of a herder diet are still the mainstays of their daily food consumption. Diets of urban migrants, like their rural counterparts, consist almost exclusively of wheat flour, meat (or, in many cases internal organs are more likely to be purchased) and tea.

\(^{14}\)According to the City’s State Registration Office, since July 2011, the cost of registering a child is free of charge. This discrepancy indicates an additional difficulty in migrant families having access to up to date and accurate information from local administrative authorities in ger districts which further inhibits a smooth transition to urban environments.\(^{15}\) As an example, one of the assessed households had been living in Ulaanbaatar for 10 years. However, due to frequent movements within and between districts, the inability to find adequate and regular income and the resulting lack of disposable income they were only able to register with local authorities a little over 2 years ago.
Despite the availability of vegetables and (though to a lesser extent) fruit on urban markets, these food items are rarely, if ever, consumed within the poorest migrant households. The main reasons that these consumption patterns have not changed during the transition from rural to urban living may be summarised as follows:

- Pastoralist drop out households still lack adequate purchasing power to procure these micronutrient rich foods even years after their initial relocation;
- There is still a general lack of knowledge in regard to the nutritional value and benefit of eating fruits and vegetables; and perhaps most importantly
- Herder preferences for animal protein and the view that “a meal is not a meal if it does not include meat” have migrated along with drop-out families.

In fact, despite the move to urban centres and the increased availability of micronutrient rich foods on local markets, the diet of migrant households is likely worse than many of the poorest of herder households. The main difference would be the lack of dairy products in household diets – given the fact that they no longer possess animals from which to produce them and often lack the financial resources needed to procure them on local markets. The increased expenditure on meat, as touched upon in preceding sections, is another complication caused by the loss of livestock.

Continued preference for traditional herder diets, coupled with the lack of knowledge of micronutrient rich foods as well as a sustained lack of purchasing power result in generally poorer food consumption amongst the urban, pastoralist drop-out population.

11) Perceptions of Former Lives and Livelihoods

When asked whether or not their livelihood, especially in terms of income stability, and quality of life had improved or deteriorated following their exit from pastoralism and migration to urban centres, responses varied greatly. Despite the fact that the majority of assessed households had at least one working age member unemployed, struggled to provide even the most basic needs for their families, often had at least one child out of school due to the inability to cover school related expenses, and were almost completely dependent upon some form of social welfare (especially monthly child stipends) – their perceptions of their current situation seemed to be much more in function of their previous standing as herders. The main determinant in perceived changes in the quality of life was the size and composition of their livestock holdings before they were forced to drop-out.

The following two general statements may be made about the perceptions of relative quality of life pre and post drop-out:

- Households who were formerly marginal herders with average livestock holdings numbering 100 or less\textsuperscript{16} generally (though not always) thought that their new lives in urban centres were improved;

\textsuperscript{16} Wealth ranking exercises conducted during the initial rapid needs assessment in January 2013 categorized those households with less than 100 head of livestock as “extremely poor”, while those with 100-200 head of livestock would be considered “poor”. These two socio-economic classes account for 60-80% of herder households.
• Households who formerly possessed 200 or more head of livestock, especially those whose herds were composed of cattle and horses, were much more inclined to state that they were worse off in urban centres.

These general trends in perception speak to the progressive deterioration of the livestock sector and the pastoralist livelihood system which is becoming increasingly unsustainable for the poorest households, as discussed above. While most migrant families rely on a combination of sporadic and low-paying, unskilled labour opportunities or social welfare and struggle immensely to provide food, clothes, health care, and consistent education for their families – for those who were among the “extreme poor” when they were herders, this situation is still seen as “an improvement”.

Wealthier herders, however, with the variety of income available within their larger and more diverse herds as well as the distribution of these income sources across seasons – with cashmere sales during the spring, wool sales during the summer and sale of animals occurring in the fall, for example – had a much more stable financial situation before dropping-out. Having likely lost their entire herds in a single dzud event and rapidly dropped out of the sector – as opposed to the progressive decline of households who were marginal herders when they finally dropped out – their views of what are now sporadic and limited income differs greatly with those who were previously part of the marginal herder class.

Households interviewed at the soum level, however, had similar responses to this question no matter what class of herder they may have been in the past. The vast majority had much more positive memories of herding, stated that income and food consumption were more substantial and stable, and that they were better able to provide for their children. This is likely due to the fact that most of the households interviewed at the soum level were more recent drop-outs (the majority having dropped out following the 2009-2010 dzud) as well as the absolute lack of job opportunities at the soum level, except for herding.

12) Conclusion

Dropping out of pastoralism is a brutal and traumatizing event in the life of a herder. This abrupt cessation of traditional herding activities is often accompanied by a series of subsequent displacements, chronic lack of income, increase in expenditures, problematic food security and a transition into new and challenging urban environments that may take years. Despite these difficulties, many pastoralist drop-outs would not chose to return to their former lives; even if they had the means. The transition that starts in an isolated, rural corner of Mongolia – ends with the education of the next generation, giving them the knowledge and skills that they need to fully transition to more sustainable futures.
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