

10

MONGOLIA'S TRANSITION FROM A PASTORAL TO A MARKET-DRIVEN ECONOMY: A THREAT TO THE RIGHT TO FOOD

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“Who is rich, if not Mongolia, with its language, border and livestock?”

Zunduin Dorj

The phrase of the poet Zunduin Dorj, born to a nomadic Mongolian pastoralist family, expresses strongly, yet succinctly, how livestock is a crucial element for the country's sovereignty and security. Mongolia lies between Russia and China and has a population of three million, almost half of which depend on pastoral livestock, making it central to the country's economy. Over 80% of land is grassland, providing home to fifty million heads of livestock, including horses, sheep, goats, cattle, yaks, camels, and reindeer.² Pastoralism in Mongolia is a way of life, adapted to the prevailing harsh climatic conditions, which range from extremely cold winters down to -50°C and hot summers up to 35°C, and the meagre ecological conditions. Nevertheless, Mongolian pastoralism is currently under threat due to the impact of climate change, the expansion of mining, and a lack of adequate public policies.

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Special thanks to Monika Agarwal (WAMIP), Claudio Schuftan (People's Health Movement) and Bernhard Walter (Bread for the World) for their support in drafting and reviewing this article. This article was originally written in English.

2 Suttie, James M. “Grazing Management in Mongolia.” In *Grasslands of the World*, edited by James M. Suttie, Stephen G. Reynolds, and Caterina Batello, 265–303. Rome: FAO, 2005. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/008/y8344e/y8344e0e.htm.

3 *Constitution of Mongolia*, 1992, article 16, paragraph 2. Available at: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_protect/@protrav/@ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_117392.pdf.

4 *Food Law of Mongolia*, 1999. Available at: www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=179617. See also, land ownership legislation from the beginning of the 2000s, such as the Law of Mongolia on Land, 2002. Available at: faolex.fao.org/cgi-bin/faolex.exe?rec_id=046825&database=FAOLEX&seqrch_type=link&table=result&lang=eng&form_at_name=@ERALL.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE RIGHT TO FOOD

Although Mongolian constitutional law does not explicitly recognize the human right to adequate food and nutrition (right to food or RtAFN), the Constitution stipulates that “the citizens of Mongolia shall be guaranteed the privilege to enjoy the right to a healthy and a safe environment, and to be protected against environmental pollution and ecological imbalance.”³ This is consistent with the right to food principles. National legislation does, to a certain extent, strengthen this right.⁴ Moreover, the State of Mongolia has ratified several international conventions that are directly and indirectly linked to the right to food, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). However, as clarified below, despite the State's obligations under domestic and international law, there is no concrete application or development of public policies that makes the right to food a reality or, specifically, to protect and promote the rights of pastoralists in Mongolia.

THE HARSH REALITY OF FOOD AND NUTRITION INSECURITY IN MONGOLIA

Mongols' traditional diet is based on meat, flour and milk. Vegetables and fish do not play a significant role. Although consumption of animal products in Mongolia is among the highest in the world, cereals, like flour, are still the main source of energy, providing on average 55% of the daily intake.⁵ Meat and meat products constitute a further 20% of daily intake, while milk and other dairy products amount to 11%. Within the latter category, fermented mare's milk, *airag*, is very important in the Mongolian diet. It contains five times more vitamin C than cow's milk and also

provides vitamins A, B1, B2, B12, and D.⁶ *Airag* is said to have many health benefits and is used to treat tuberculosis and other lung ailments.⁷ A traditional food made of barley, milk, butter, tea and sugar, *arvain guril*, is also a popular staple.

Livestock is vital for the Mongolian diet. However, the cultural and traditional food system of pastoralists is disintegrating. This has a great impact on food and nutrition security in the country. According to official statistics, one quarter of the population in Ulaanbaatar, the capital and largest city in Mongolia, one third of that in the *aimag* (provinces) centres and almost half of that in the *soum* (districts) centres has been classified as poor.⁸ About 60% of households live with inadequate daily food and nutrition requirements.⁹ In addition, at least 25% of children under five suffer from growth problems, 32.1% suffer from malnutrition and 43.2% lack vitamin D.¹⁰ Furthermore, 37.1% of pregnant women and 30.5% of breastfeeding mothers lack vitamin D.¹¹

PASTORALISM: A WAY OF LIFE UNDER THREAT

Pastoralism is under threat due to the impacts of climate change, which result in severe droughts, storms and even harsher winters, locally called *zuds*. The 2010 *zud* was the worst ever and resulted in the death of 20% of the national herd.¹² Under these unpredictable severe climatic conditions, it is estimated that, according to international standards, the daily calorie intake in Mongolia should be 2,700 kilocalories. As explained above, the Mongolian diet is directly connected to pastoralism, as it is largely based on meat and dairy products.

The situation of pastoralists is also being exacerbated by new land use policies and the recent spurt in mining and mineral industries. These adversely affect the life-sustaining pastures and water springs, while the accompanying pollution poisons grasslands and livestock and affects human health.¹³ Moreover, seasonal pastoral camps are being lost to open-pit mines, road building, waste dumping and water extraction.¹⁴ There are also fears that the government may declassify currently designated Protected Areas so that mining can commence in pastoral areas. As a result, pastoralists are forced to migrate from rural to urban areas. However, young pastoralists frequently do not find suitable jobs in urban areas. This migration thus contributes to undermining the centuries-old pastoral culture, as well as to increasing the rate of food insecurity in the country. It is clear that the Mongolian pastoralists' right to food is directly related to whether or not they are able to continue practicing pastoralism.

As well as dwindling traditional food production systems, domestic markets do not favour Mongolians. Pastoralists and peasants are not able to deliver their produced food to markets directly due to the lack of a direct supply system; middlepersons manage the food distribution system. Furthermore, the production of basic food, such as meat, milk, wheat and poultry, receives little State support. The government prioritizes the importation of cheap products, instead of developing a favourable environment of national loans and tax policies to benefit family farming and smallholders. In this context, poverty is a severe problem in rural areas, especially due to the lack of public policies on capacity building for nomadic communities to empower themselves, influence policy and develop local food production.

- 5 Adapted from: Flintan, Fiona. *Women's Empowerment in Pastoral Societies*. Addis Ababa: WISP, Global Environmental Facility, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 2008. Available at: cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/gender_format.pdf. See also FAO, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP). *Joint Food Security Assessment Mission to Mongolia*. Rome: FAO, 2007. Available at: fao.org/docrep/fao/010/i9883e/i9883e00.pdf.
- 6 Olsen, Sandra. *Nomadic Pastoralists, their Livestock, and their Landscape*. Available at: www.ucis.pitt.edu/mongolia/pdfs/01.5_olsen.pdf.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Supra* note 5, FAO, UNICEF and UNDP.
- 9 Right to Food Thematic Working Group of the Human Rights NGO Forum. *Mongolia—Stakeholders Submission on Right to Food to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for Universal Periodic Review*, 2010. Available at: lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session9/MN/HC_Hunscoalition.pdf.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Vernooij, Ronnie. "How Mongolian Herders Are Transforming Nomadic Pastoralism." *The Solutions Journal* 2:5 (2011): 82–87.
- 13 "Inner Mongolia suffers from the 'resource curse', experts say. The easy money generated by mineral wealth produces a narrow elite with little interest in the welfare of common citizens and often lower levels of spending on education and healthcare." Denyer, Simon. "Inner Mongolian Herders Feel Force of China's Hunger for Minerals." *The Guardian*, April 10, 2015. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/10/inner-mongolia-pollution-grasslands-herders.
- 14 Dugersuren, Sukhgerel. "When I Was Herding I Had a Plentiful Life. Now I Am Working for Another and Have Lost My Independence." *The Guardian*, March 9, 2015. Available at: www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/09/mongolian-nomads-displacement-mining-impact-development-projects.

EMERGING RESPONSES FROM MONGOLIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

There are various factors hindering a strong response to the situation in Mongolia. Policy makers, civil society and local communities do not yet have a critical unified approach. These actors generally lack human rights knowledge and do not realize the contribution of indigenous or nomadic food systems to food security in the country. On the other hand, mineral resources are often seen as a tremendous economic opportunity, while its negative impacts on the environment and culture are only slowly being understood and acknowledged.

However, some positive signs are emerging. There are sporadic protests by herders, and an increasing number of people are also raising their concerns in favour of pastoralists. Furthermore, a number of civil society organizations and social movements are supporting and fighting for land and water rights in Mongolia.¹⁵ The Mongolian Alliance of Nomadic Indigenous Peoples (MANIP) was recently constituted by nomadic pastoralist communities themselves. It aims to build a strong pastoralist network at the national level, build the capacity of pastoralists and bring their voices to regional and international dialogues and consultations, as well as to influence government policy.¹⁶ Its Board includes gender-sensitive focal members from each region, as well as youth representatives. Under the Pastoralist Knowledge Hub,¹⁷ an initiative supported by the FAO, MANIP will host the first Central Asian Meeting of Pastoralists in July 2015 to discuss food and nutrition security, as well as issues related to land tenure and ways to sustain traditional knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Mongolia is a striking example of a country where centuries-old traditional livelihoods are at odds with 'industrial' market-based State development policies. There is tremendous pressure on historic pastoral land rights and pastoralists' way of life, and hence on the survival of the pastoral culture in Mongolia. Its continued existence will depend on the policy environment and on people's capacity to influence change. For this reason, partnership and understanding between the government, pastoralists and all other supporting organizations will be essential to build a strong mechanism for strengthening food and nutrition security and ensuring the realization of the right to adequate food and nutrition for all in Mongolia.

15 Examples are the United Movement of Mongolian Rivers and Lakes (UMMRL), Baigal Ekhiin Avral San, the Mongolian Association of Environmental Protection, the Mongolian Council of Environment, My Mongolia Land, Onon Ulz River Residentials, and the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Centre.

16 MANIP is a member of the Central Asia group of WAMIP. For more information, please visit:
www.centralasiapastoralists.weebly.com.

17 The Hub aims to facilitate the creation of national and regional pastoralist mechanisms for policy advocacy, knowledge sharing and dialogue. For more information, please see the Pastoralist Knowledge Hub's website. Available at:
www.fao.org/pastoralist-knowledge-hub/en.