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Mongolia, Urbanization

**Mongolia: Reimagining Urbanization**

Mongolia is a central Asian country with one of the lowest population densities of any country in the world (*Countries*, n.d.). The traditional way of life of the Mongolian people is a nomadic herding lifestyle; however, with the development of the country and the expansion of the mining industry, urbanization has begun to increase. The rapid growth of Mongolian cities, especially the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, has caused several issues, one of those issues being food security for those who immigrate from rural to urban areas. For the welfare of the Mongolian people and the environment, the lack of opportunity and infrastructure to accommodate this rapid city growth should be addressed with development of rural areas, city planning, and development of outer-city districts.

To examine the effects of rapid urbanization, we can consider a typical family that immigrates to an urban area. A typical Mongolian family has 3 to 4 members, so most families include children. In rural areas, these children are far less likely to finish school, an underdeveloped road system blocks travel and economic opportunities, and there is lower access to clean water. Furthermore, weather phenomena such as the *dzud*, an extreme winter that blocks grazing access, damage the livelihood of herders and further restrict access to education and services (*Mongolian dzud*, 2024). In search of better opportunities, this family may immigrate to the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. However, the average wage in Mongolia is just $581 USD per month (*Mongolia Household*, 2022), and many are unable to afford an apartment in the city proper. Instead, they move into the *ger* district on the outskirts of the city. A *ger*, also known as a yurt, is a traditional style of Mongolian housing, used by 61% of the urban population and 90% of the rural population (*yurt,* n.d.). In the *ger* district, residents have little access to heat, passable roads, education, or running water. To stay warm during freezing winters, those who live in the *ger* district burn rubber or plastic, creating heavy pollution. Finally, a staggering 68% of households in Ulaanbaatar suffer from food insecurity, mostly in the *ger* district (Schulder-Battis, 2023). The poor qualities of roads make it difficult for residents of *ger* districts to make their way to a supermarket, which are far more numerous in permanently settled areas of Ulaanbaatar (Hamiduddin et al., 2021). The Mongolian diet is mostly based on animal products such as meat and dairy from sheep or goats (Edge, 2023). Rural Mongolians raise their own livestock to sustain themselves, and urban residents can get food from a supermarket, but *ger* district residents do not have easy access to pasture land or markets, thus significantly limiting availability of food and contributing to food insecurity.

Combatting this rapid urbanization will require the combination of several proposed solutions, each of which is not sufficient to address the challenges that Mongolia is currently facing. To begin with, residents of Ulaanbaatar’s *ger* district most commonly suggest developing the Mongolian countryside, providing more educational and employment opportunities (Engle, 2015). This would slow the rate of urbanization, making the issue more manageable for the government of Ulaanbaatar, and could be achieved by increasing the number of rural schools, developing the Mongolian road system, and providing more opportunities for employment in the countryside. For example, the USDA’s Rural Development program provides loans to rural communities in the United States for water infrastructure and electricity (*Rural Development,* 2024). Water infrastructure is particularly necessary for rural development in Mongolia, as drought is one of the major factors that causes Mongolians to leave rural areas for urban communities (Swarup & Ghosal, 2023). However, this solution would not solve the problem of rapid urbanization, only make it more manageable. The United Nations considers urbanization a necessary step in a country's development, so the goal of this solution should not be to stop urbanization entirely. Furthermore, climate change will continue to make the rural lifestyle in Mongolia more difficult, increasing the frequency of extreme weather events like *dzud* and reducing the availability of water and pasture, making herding far less profitable and more dangerous (Swarup & Ghosal, 2023). Developing the countryside is not a complete solution to complex problems caused by rapid urbanization.

For instance, a large portion of the population has already moved to the *ger* districts, and slowing the rate of urbanization will not solve the problems that they currently face. To provide food security to those already living in the *ger* districts, the government of Mongolia must make efforts to build markets within the *ger* district and provide a means to access these markets. To increase the number of markets in the *ger* district, the government should provide subsidies for those looking to create a food market within the *ger* district. Not only will this create an incentive to provide easily accessible food for *ger* district residents, it will also create job opportunities for those creating or working in these new markets. To provide access to these markets, reliable and high-quality roads must be constructed so that residents can easily move through the *ger* district to access food.

Additionally, measures must be taken to appropriately manage the migration of rural Mongolians into cities. The most effective way to handle urbanization, promoted by the UN, is for the government of Ulaanbaatar to plan now for the expansion of the city in the future (United Nations, n.d.). For example, with a rapidly growing economy, Singapore faced similar struggles in the 1950s that Mongolia faces today, which led to the development of the Long-Term or Concept Plan, originally introduced in 1971 (NIL, n.d.). This plan began by focusing on essential infrastructure such as transportation but has developed to focus on the heritage and wellbeing of Singaporean citizens. One section of this plan that is especially pertinent to the situation in Mongolia is the Concept Plan of 1991. This version highlights the need for employment close to home and proposes developing commercial centers outside of the metropolitan area. Developing satellite cities of Ulaanbaatar with access to markets and employment near housing will increase the availability of food and economic opportunity for those outside the city center. The issue that this could pose, though, is that housing must be accessible and low-cost. The reason for the existence of the current *ger* district is that housing in the city proper of Ulaanbaatar is too expensive for migrants coming into the city to seek economic opportunity (Engle, 2015). Singapore’s Long-Term Plan also faced this problem, with the Concept Plan of 2001 addressing the need for a variety of housing options. Therefore, planning must incorporate measures to keep costs of housing low to allow migrants to utilize this housing.

In combination with city planning, the *ger* districts themselves may pose a solution. The *ger* is less expensive to build than an apartment or house, which reduces housing costs (Engle, 2015). Furthermore, *gers* are a traditional housing structure and hold cultural significance (Geoghegan, 2020). Some city residents that can afford a house actually move to the *ger* district during the summer months. *Gers* are appealing to Mongolian residents because they allow people to have more space and live in a place that they own. Around 32% of *ger* district residents stated that they liked living in the *ger* district, an equal proportion to those who stated they did not like living in the *ger* district, and an additional 8% stated that they would like living in the *ger* district if conditions improved (Engle, 2015). Planning for future housing provides the opportunity to create *ger* districts that have the infrastructure needed to support those who live there. In relation to food security, this would mean ensuring that plans for new *ger* districts include enough markets that residents have a reliable place to buy food that is relatively close to their home. Furthermore, roads must be planned and maintained to allow residents to travel to these markets. Along with measures to ensure food security, these plans should take into account the necessity for both educational and economic opportunities within the *ger* district, such as establishing schools in the district and encouraging employers to create satellite offices for *ger* district employees.

The growing mining industry of Mongolia provides an opportunity to finance the development of the *ger* district and surrounding countryside. Currently, there is a large demand for ore, oil, and other commodities from Mongolia. In 2022, Mongolia had a trade balance of approximately $2 billion and a GDP of $16.81 billion, both of which have increased significantly in the last ten to fifteen years (*Mongolia GDP Value,* n.d.; *Mongolia Balance of Trade,* n.d.). Investing the revenue generated into projects such as opening schools and providing employment in the countryside or repaving roads in the *ger* district and rural areas would significantly improve both access to economic opportunity in the countryside and mobility within the *ger* district, allowing more Mongolians the income and ability to be more food secure. Although reliance on the value and demand for exports makes this an unstable source of revenue, the current economic growth should be taken advantage of to lay the foundations for well-functioning urbanization and provide more Mongolians with food security.

Furthermore, assistance and advisement from the United Nations would support the Mongolian government in city planning. Currently, Ulaanbaatar is expanding rapidly with little planning, which leads to the lack of infrastructure and support for those living in the *ger* district. With help from the United Nations, the Mongolian government and city government can more effectively plan for future urbanization and allocate resources to those who need it. Finally, input from residents of the *ger* district is crucial to ensure that their most pressing needs are met in a way that is beneficial to them, such as ensuring that new housing is affordable to migrants. By preparing Ulaanbaatar for future urbanization, with attention to the needs of those who are most affected by this urbanization, Mongolia can provide economic opportunity and food security to the millions of people who move to their capital city.

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