

## **Abstract**

This study explores the nature of education for pastoralists in Mongolia as it has changed with the introduction of a market-based economy. Pastoralists face the challenge of sustaining their livelihoods in the wake of modernization and its ideologies embedded even in the education available to pastoralists. This study explores the strengths and weaknesses of non formal education and its ability to provide education for Mongolian pastoralists. Perhaps thinking outside the box about education and learning in Mongolia can shed light on global education issues.

# **Education for Pastoralists in Mongolia: The role of Non-Formal Education**

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## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

MDG – Millennium Development Goal

UN – United Nations

IDS – Institute of Development Studies

GoM – Government of Mongolia

NFE – Non Formal Education

SA – Structural Adjustment

ODE – Open and Distance Education

## **Introduction**

Education can be liberating, but it can also act as a tool to oppress, integrate and even assimilate non-mainstream groups. In either case education is not neutral. The ambitious 2015 MDG to reach universal primary education illuminates the need for alternatives in educational provision in order to reach marginalized groups (UN, 2008). Marginalized groups include those who are missed by formal education provision (UN, 2008), sometimes as a result of being labelled as ‘uninterested, isolated or simply traditional’ (IDS, 2007). Such assumptions are well-known to Mongolian pastoralists who pose challenges to education provision with their traditional livelihoods, mobility, and isolation in distance and harsh climates.

The situation for Mongolian pastoralists was not always so bleak. Prior to introducing a market-based economy the GoM viewed education as a priority and ensured that formal provision could be accessed by most of their populace. The shift to a market-based economy challenged the GoM to re-establish its priorities causing formal education provision to fall in national development plans. This study explores the accomplishments and challenges of providing education to pastoralists in pre and post market Mongolia and critically examines the potential for implementing NFE. I will employ two examples of NFE provision in Mongolia

before analysing two possible explanations for the shortcomings of NFE by pastoralists. Finally, I will offer policy implications to understand the way forward.

## **Theory**

### *Pre-Market Pastoral Education*

Pre-market Mongolia saw high literacy rates with full state provision of education. State provision of schooling made primary, secondary and tertiary education accessible and compulsory for Mongolians, which led to the nation achieving a 100% literacy rate prior to the 1990s (Dyer & Krätli, 2006; Krätli, 2001). Formal education was delivered through nation-wide boarding schools accessed by pastoralists who were almost 50% of the population (Dyer & Krätli, 2006). Steiner-Khamisi & Stolple (2005) highlight four reasons why boarding schools were successful, those being: (1) continuation of the existing organisational structure of schooling, (2) child-friendly, (3) integrative of the socialist education system, and (4) close to families. Pastoralists were regarded as an important part of the economy and an integral part of Mongolia's national identity. Mongolia's pre-market economy reflected value in pastoralism; the GoM supported pastoralists in the purchase of pre-made goods and services in addition to education (Krätli, 2001).

### *Economic Transition*

In the early 1990s Mongolia undertook SA to 'catch up' to the western world by following a global blueprint of development that required a rapid transition to a market-based economy (World Bank, 2007). Mongolia's transition required government decentralisation, economic liberalisation and privatisation (Steiner-Khamisi & Stolple, 2005). A roll-back in state action in favour of market forces resulted in a reduction in government-provided services including education.

## *Market-Led Pastoral Education in Mongolia*

Economic transition affected pastoralists who comprised the backbone of Mongolia's economy. The policies of market-led development carved out the educational investments previously made by the GoM (World Bank, 2007). Withdrawal of the GoM in education occurred in both state expenditures and governance, ultimately undermining the existing nationwide boarding schools that provided education for pastoral children (Steiner-Khamisi & Stolple, 2005). Krätli (2001) notes that boarding schools deteriorated due to a lack of infrastructure maintenance and a decline in teachers' salaries. To meet boarding school resource requirements, the GoM imposed a meat tax of 70kgs per student, per term. Other school user fees included expenses such as books, materials, uniforms, and transport. School enrolments declined due to poor learning conditions and high costs. This transition to a market economy compromised the educational opportunities available to Mongolian pastoralists.

In addition to direct changes in education provision, the transition brought about a shift in livelihood strategies from collectives of animal herders to privatisation of livestock (Krätli, 2001). Privatisation diversified the previously homogenous herds contributing to the demand for labour and knowledge required by pastoralists to manage heterogeneous herds of sheep, goats, yaks, cattle, and camels (Robinson, 1999). Exacerbating the situation, a decline of public sector jobs encouraged people to turn to pastoralism, increasing the number of herders (Humphrey & Sneath, 1999). A deteriorating education system and increasing household labour demands are two factors associated with the transition to a market-based economy that had a negative effect on the pastoralists' schooling opportunities.

## **Empirical Analysis**

### *Seeking Alternatives*

The educational challenges resulting from Mongolia's transition demanded alternative solutions. First, it is imperative to define NFE, as it is an increasingly nebulous term (Rogers, 2004). Coombs & Ahmed (1974) explain that NFE is "any organised, systematic, educational activity, carried on outside the framework of the formal system, to provide selected types of learning to particular sub-groups in the population, adults as well as children" (p.8). As Hall (1986) complements, the purpose of NFE is to increase the number of people taking part in educational programmes, thus targeting those who have been excluded from formal provision of education.

When pursued in partnership with international agencies and government, NFE was expected to (1) enhance the lives of pastoralists instead of transforming them as formal education has been accused of; (2) be responsive by using a two-way process of interaction in order to (3) understand the diverse needs of recipients (Dyer & Krätli, 2006; Zakama, no year). NFE emerged as a solution for pastoralists because of their nomadic nature (moving to pastoralists), values (including pastoral cultural values) and innovation (using radio and print technologies) (Dyer & Krätli, 2006). NFE was expected to fill the gaps left by the failing formal educational system. Therefore, NFE formed part of an alternative to formal education provision that was meant to specifically address the current lack of education for pastoralists.

#### *Gobi Desert Project Putting NFE on the Radar*

The Gobi Desert project is one example of a NFE program in Mongolia. Undertaken in partnership with the GoM, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), this project sought to address the disproportionate effects of the economic transition felt by Gobi Desert women (Robinson, 1999; Yembuu, no date). The project used travelling teachers supported by radios,

print and booklets, showcasing the mobility and innovative edge of NFE, while developing a national capacity for NFE using techniques traditionally associated with ODE. (Robinson, 1999).

According to Robinson (1999), the project enjoyed overall success due to the use of radios, a needs analysis to reflect local interests in material development, existing high literacy in remote areas, confident external project funding, and technical assistance. The project used local women as learners and teachers ensuring materials reflected local inquiries including family planning and handy-tasks in addition to literacy and numeracy (Robinson, 1999; Zakama, no year). The project's success however, was limited by its dependency on external funding. Overall, the project brought the potential for NFE to the attention of the GoM as it paved the way for future improvements in education provision for pastoralists (Robinson, 1999).

#### *UNICEF Addressing Access to Education*

Contributing to NFE provision, UNICEF increased access to education by using travelling schools to bring education to pastoral children (Nettleton, 2007a). School was held in traditional *gers* (semi-mobile felt tents), literally taking the school to the students to boost enrolment (Nettleton, 2007a). While this innovation in NFE provision appears to be a solution for pastoralists who could not access formal schooling, other challenges remain.

The greatest challenge in pastoralists accessing NFE continues to be the privatisation of livestock ownership which amplifies the demand for household labour and the need for child involvement in the family business, as discussed above. These challenges outweighed the increased access provided by UNICEF's education in *gers*. This adds depth to our understanding of the challenges of NFE beyond the obvious technical solutions within education, as one must consider the larger household economic challenges that accompany the transition to a market economy.

#### *National Commitment to NFE*

The GoM created a national program on NFE in 1997 to address an increasing dropout rate. This commitment is a landmark for NFE in Mongolia (UN, 2003). The purpose of the program is to determine the content, form and methodology of education based on human needs and interests (UN, 2003). From 1999-2003 the GoM prioritised increasing enrolment, as well as the certification and standardization of NFE while bridging it to secondary school (UN, 2003). These goals were accomplished by expanding primary and secondary cycles to 11 years, and lowering the entry age from 8 to 7, and adding a 12<sup>th</sup> year (World Bank, 2007). With the institutionalisation of NFE, the lines between NFE and formal education (FE) become blurred, perhaps in a helpful way. As Rogers (2004) explains, FE is “aimed at national needs” while NFE is “aimed at personal growth” (p.99). The GoM’s NFE program goes beyond the notion of NFE as ‘personal growth’ education to include it as a part of national development. This is perhaps a key step in building pastoralist interest and value in education.

#### *Education for...*

As illustrated, technical achievements in providing NFE to pastoralists have been made. However, a discussion on education as an ideology exposes the non-technical challenges of NFE provision for pastoralists in Mongolia. The literature has exposed two aspects of education that are worth considering: (1) education can be a right in itself to fulfil the accomplishments of a human being; (2) education can be used as a development tool to integrate nomadic groups into a wider context (Dyer & Krätli, 2006). Education is not ideologically neutral and is therefore malleable for diverse purposes (Dyer, 2001). This sheds light on three important assumptions often made about education in Mongolia: (1) it is equated with progress (2) nomads are at the bottom of development requiring education to reach the top, which is associated with agriculturalists and (3) mobility indicates certain degrees of evolution (Dyer & Krätli, 2006).

From these assumptions, I wish to explore the ideological constraints to educating pastoralists that include, but are not limited to sedentarisation and national development.

### *Education for Sedentarisation*

Negative attitudes within the Mongolian educational system toward ‘backward’ pastoralists and their “backward” culture are a significant factor preventing pastoralists from enrolling their children. In the early 1990s, education systems were ideologically geared toward sedentarisation in two ways: (1) reducing pastoral movements by ‘stopping’ children’s mobility to deliver education; (2) withdrawing children from pastoral duties in order to live a sedentary lifestyle in the school dormitories or with families that lived close by (Demberel & Penn, 2006; Dyer, 2001). This tendency lingers in part because the World Bank (2009) asserts the need to increase economic growth for poverty reduction via agricultural growth identifying the distance and isolation of (pastoral) rural populations as barriers in integrating the economy for growth.

Moreover, and as mentioned earlier, the diversification of previously homogenous herds under privatisation required diverse needs, which made it difficult to migrate throughout the year. In this way, privatisation was a strategic effort to transform the livelihood of herdsmen to animal husbandry (Dyer, 2001). These attempts were indicative of ideologies that overlooked the fact that “...mobility is a livelihood strategy and merely not a lifestyle” (Dyer & Krätli, 2006 p.11). It is no doubt that attempts to separate pastoralism as production from pastoralism as a way of life are unsuccessful.

### *Education for National Development*

Understanding that education can reflect national development priorities, it is necessary to acknowledge how pastoralism is, or is not reflected as a part of national development in the education system. Dyer (2006) explains that the perceptions of pastoral contributions to the economy reflected in education systems play a large role in the success of education provision



for pastoralists. These perceptions can be indicative of education systems that either accept or deny the values of pastoralism. Dyer & Krätli (2006) remind us that even with technical fixes, an antagonistic environment can persist as an underlying cause of low enrolments and high drop outs. Krätli (2001) elaborates that education must acknowledge pastoralists as part of a larger national development plan. In his field research, Krätli (2001) found that school culture failed to value pastoralism as a part of local and national development. He came to this conclusion based on pastoralists' first-hand experience with an education system that failed to reflect their values and way of life in any way (Krätli, 2001). The inability of education to reflect pastoralism positively in Mongolia's economy and national identity has reduced the appeal of education to pastoralists who were left to defend their livelihoods against the prescriptions of development.

Furthermore, Krätli (2001) cites that even in pre-market Mongolia when education content was generic in ideology and uninformed by pastoralist cultural values, it was still used by pastoralists to a high degree. It is also true that during this time pastoralists were held in high regard for their contribution to both Mongolian culture and economy alike (Krätli, 2001).

While, it is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that some pastoralists desire education with specific relevance to the changing environment including climate and market forces that influence livelihoods and relate to wider development (Dyer, 2001). This is increasingly the case as the *dzud* (harsh weather conditions) is challenging the lives of pastoralists and their livestock (Dyer, 2001). These factors highlight the influence of cultural values over policy that affect the success of education provision and access by pastoralists. This helps us to understand that the gap in education provision is not only about convincing pastoralists that education is 'good' or 'necessary'. Rather, it is a matter of a non-antagonistic education system that reflects pastoralism as a valuable livelihood strategy.

## **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The GoM and international agencies have made accomplishments in NFE provision for pastoralists. In light of these achievements, non-technical challenges to NFE provision continue to be a barrier to ensuring education is accessed by pastoralists.

As the analysis shows, improving education for pastoralists is a question of rekindling the political will that was present in pre-market Mongolia's state provision of formal education. Both the pre-market boarding schools that achieved full enrolment and research being conducted today indicate that pastoralists desire education. As NFE provision through ODE and mobile education indicate, education does not exist in a vacuum. Solutions that continue to isolate the challenges of education to technicalities cannot be sufficient solutions. In any case, the linkages between education and the economy must be considered.

The need to explore both technical and non-technical challenges in-depth could not be more urgent. It is evident that education must reflect the changing needs of pastoralists whose livelihoods are becoming less certain with both the market and climate that may require more diverse livelihood strategies.

Perhaps the GoM's institutionalisation of NFE will convey to pastoralists that they are indeed a part of the national economy. It is hoped that this policy commitment is a necessary part of overcoming an antagonistic education system for pastoralists.

The GoM's action to institutionalise NFE is not sufficient to ensure that pastoralists will access education; however, it may demonstrate to pastoralists that they are a part of the nation.

What is evident is that there are policies that extend beyond education provision that affect pastoralists and their decision to choose NFE. Privatisation has revealed that isolated solutions to education provision cannot be successful without simultaneous consideration of other factors that affect household labour demands, employment and other livelihood strategies.

It will be imperative that while institutionalising NFE, the GoM also re-evaluates these links between pastoralism and other parts of the economy and culture.

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