

Chapter 15

Questions Concerning Values and the Sustainable Livelihood of Rural Mongolians

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Editor's introduction: As a country in which protection of the environment and of sustainable pastoral livelihoods has a long and deep history, Mongolia is now faced with major challenges of land degradation caused by extensive and sometimes illegal mining operations, overgrazing, water depletion, the strong negative impact of climate change, and climatic disasters that include drought and dzud (harsh winter conditions that can quickly kill large numbers of livestock). In this contribution, the Head of the Labor Relations Division of the Employer Association of Mongolia assesses the relationship between long-standing rural values of environmental management, the stresses of modern development and social change, and alteration of social values in relation to current policies and intervention programs.

Emphasizing the disjunction between traditional values and the response to current conditions, Dr. Damdinjav, highlights the need for greater integration of rural collective decision-making with environmental management programs and greater legally-mandated land remediation by mining operations. Government programs are assessed as relying too heavily on direct welfare payments or their equivalent and as further eroding traditional values of social and environmental responsibility. At larger issue is a reinforcing cycle of poverty, debt, and economic dependency that fosters short-term materialism rather than encouraging longstanding Mongolian cultural values of social and environmental respect and responsibility.

The purpose of this contribution is to examine the Mongolian tradition of ensuring sustainable living against contemporary changes in governmental and private sectors that have altered these patterns.

Mongolian traditional values of protecting nature and the environment

Economy, society, and nature were considered the main three pillars of life among nomadic Mongolians. Given their rich pastoral heritage, Mongolians have been deservedly considered to have rich customs and traditions of adapting to, revering, and protecting their natural environment. In this regard, O. Amarkhuu has classified these Mongolian customs and traditions into the following five deeply interrelated value orientations:

1. benevolence and respect for nature
2. prohibition against environmental misuse or degradation
3. teaching and education concerning nature
4. religious reverence for the landscape and geographic features
5. observation and cognizance of natural change

Traditional customs of protecting the environment are arguably a valuable achievement of nomads' intelligence, customs, and morality. Although the new Constitution, approved in 1992, obligates every citizen to protect the environment, many have not restored traditions and customs of protecting nature. How to resurrect the nature-protecting traditions and customs of Mongolians in urban areas and in places where mining is being actively developed emerges as a serious question. This issue is made poignant by recent Mongolian sayings and attitudes which suggest, in essence, that Mongolians should live for today and not for tomorrow.

Lifestyle and family values

Mongolian life ideals traditionally emphasized the importance of love, faith, family, parents, and children. To these have been added contemporary aspirations of living a healthy and long life, education, and elevated economic status and its associated lifestyle. However, these aspirations are difficult to satisfy or accomplish, and a significant segment of the population has broken with traditional social norms and distorted their orientation by resorting to activities that are generally agreed to be socially illegitimate or unacceptable.

Newly expanded orientations include bribery, cheating, misappropriating, stealing, robbing, threatening, and attempting to escape from difficult conditions by becoming homeless wanderers, alcoholics, devaluing life, and/or joining extremist or revolutionary groups. Due to overly generous and one-sided social welfare policies, the number of aimless, effortless, and passive people has increased, thus weakening the value of hard work and life values of those Mongolians who are striving for property, wealth, and success. In 2010, 39.2% of the Mongolian population and 29.8 % of Ulaanbaatar population were considered poor.

The tendency or at least the desire to become rich without effort is noticeable among people of all social levels. For many, material possessions, including money, a house, apartment, and car have become the most important goals in life. Against these, social and cultural values such as love or dedication to one's profession are frequently becoming "second place."

According to the research on "The Contemporary Situation of Mongolian Family Relations," conducted in 2009 by the Ulaanbaatar Institute of Philosophy, Sociology, and Law, 31.5% of the respondents (which is 19.5% higher than the previous survey result), answered that financial independence, material needs, money, and living environment have an

important role in their happiness. Concerning the values of families participating in the research, traditional values held dominant sway for 51.2% whereas contemporary values were dominant for 48.2%. Countryside residents, married people, and cohabitants placed more emphasis on traditional values, whereas citizens of urban areas, single persons, divorcees, and widowers give more importance to contemporary values.

I concur with Professor T. Namjil, who concluded that an increased emphasis on money and on financing material acquisitions has influenced family style. Under present conditions, the low or impoverished level of material living endured by many Mongolians leads many to increase rather than reduce their value emphasis on financial resources, and to reduce their respect for the values of the older generation.

Changes and trends in state, private sector, and public sector activities

Mongolia has drawn up a sustainable development plan based its own unique cultural heritage, and the country has been attempting to implement this plan since 1990, when Mongolia started reforms across virtually every sphere of social life, including politics, economy, culture, and society itself. The new constitution, enacted in 1992, ensures the human right to live in a healthy and secure environment and at the same time obligates every citizen to protect the environment. The concept of sustainable development is included in the Development Concept of Mongolia of 1996. This objective is also reflected in the 1990's Poverty Reduction Program, the 1998 Program for Sustainable Development of Mongolia, the 2008 Millennium Development Goals, and the Comprehensive National Development Strategy of Mongolia. Policies, institutions, and activities that influence living values have been studied and appropriate measures have been taken.

However, there has been lack of comprehensive consideration concerning actual problems such as poverty in relation to the environment, lack of coordination between sectors, and lack of sustainable funding for them.

The private sector has not established good governance, and this is particularly true with respect to social impact on the environment. The ministry of Nature, Environment, and Tourism established that a total of fifteen thousand hectares of Mongolian land has been damaged since 1990 due to the mining. Land remediation was made in only four thousand hectares of land. The results of the land inspection, which included investigation of more than two hundred economic entities, showed that of these, 15% had made sufficient, 47.7% made insufficient, and the remaining 32% made fair land remediation.

Approximately 80% of Mongolian territory is natural pasture land, and this supports the livelihood of some 160,000 households and 32 million head of livestock. Seventy percent of Mongolian pastureland has deteriorated to some degree. In the “Study on Mongolian Herders’ Living” conducted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Association of Mongolian Pastureland Management, it was noted that “...Although climate change is one of the main reasons, uncontrolled usage is the main cause of pastureland deterioration.”

Along with pastureland deterioration, the number of livestock has been fluctuating greatly due to drought and dzud. Although the Mongolian Government is taking measures such as setting up an emergency fodder fund, broadcasting weather forecasts, and developing programs to insure livestock, government measures have not and apparently cannot sufficiently decrease the present risk to pastoral livelihoods and to the Mongolian environment.

The Government of Mongolia and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation have jointly initiated and been implementing a “Green Gold”, Pastureland Ecosystem Management Program since 2004. The basic goals of the first phase of this program are:

1. To test advanced technology and help it be adopted by herders
2. To introduce, promote, and facilitate pastureland co-management principles
3. To test and explore the legal environment for pastureland co-management and improvement

The first phase of the program demonstrated that less severely damaged pastureland can be easily recovered by improving its usage; on the contrary, it is difficult and expensive to recover heavily damaged pastureland under current climate conditions. Territorial principles of pastureland management were formulated during this phase of the program. Moreover, many herders of soums joined the Pastureland User Group (PUG), and these groups joined the Association of Pastureland User Groups (APUG), which became a new structural organization of herders. Establishing common interest use territories, PUG found that its Associations at the soum level were best suited to implement sustainable management of pastureland. This principle was included in the draft law on Pastureland.

Traditional values of relying on local homeland and kinship relations, and of attending to the development of children within rural areas, continue to be important among Mongolian pastoralists. More attention is now being paid to improve and upgrade education and knowledge, to ensure food safety, and to promote local business and jobs, and encourage savings. Yet loans, money transfers, grants, and allowances still constitute the bulk of family income, resulting in high levels of debt. By establishing local group associations and

non-governmental organizations, pastoralists are developing some participatory mechanisms that allow collective decision-making and planned contributions to development. As such, herders' initiative and participation continue to play an important role in protecting the environment, including management of water and of livestock, and combatting pollution and land degradation.

Mongolia now relies heavily on mining and natural resource based economic development. This path of development is fraught with risk to the environment, and all the more so in light of global and regional climate change and climatic disasters (such as drought and dzud). These latter appear to be happening more frequently and are further compromising the environment. The goal of the Mongolian government is to effectively use profits from mining to develop a more diversified economy, to improve Mongolians' living quality, and to create sustainable growth. However, the human development index of Mongolia continues to be low; with an index of 0.622, Mongolia is in 100th place out of 169 countries. Lack of effectiveness of institutions and governance, lack of citizen's real authority to participate in decision making, and lack of social responsibility of private sectors put Mongolia at the risk of encountering "the curse of wealth."

Mongolia has drawn up a "National Program on Climate Change Influence" and a range of other programs and projects to adapt to climate change and protect the environment. It is important to arrange and implement these programs and projects in an orderly manner, phased in by priority, and with assessment to ascertain the best means to ensure the participation and duty of private sectors, civil society, and citizen to implement them

Conclusions

Mongolia's climate change in the context of greatly increased mining-industry-based economic growth is accompanied by policies that may be overly populist and too strongly based on the provision of direct social welfare payments. There is strong need to tighten coordination between various strategic goals that have been designed to respond to climate change, to effectively manage the economy, and to reduce poverty.

Although it is important to educate Mongolians concerning global issues and world-level concerns, it is more important to train and educate people to live and work successfully at the local level. We are facing the test of "whether we can be a united Mongolia that can both think at a global level and work successfully at the local level by adapting to globalization and climate change." Mongolia is at an intersection or the crossroads of whether to become a dependent country that has "the curse of wealth" and disunity, or to become a country with economically, socially, culturally, politically, and ecologically interrelated and integrated development that can meet current needs without bringing damage to the resource needs of future generations.

It is praiseworthy that social control and participation have increased in state decision-making concerning the interrelationship of economy, society, and ecology. Yet, individual and family level decision-making should be more firmly integrated into the larger relationship between economy, society, and ecology. At present, amid increased mining and other forms of intrusive development, we are losing time to establish and strengthen the legal basis to put limits on industries and services and to ensure adequate compensation for and remediation of environmental degradation. Resources and possibilities that should meet the needs of the future generation are presently being depleted due to the degradation

of the environment. We have been using the entrails of the earth, animal, and plants while exporting our raw materials too cheaply to provide for local people, who can barely survive given their limited employment options and income.

Paying more attention to the problems of poverty and nature should now become our main strategy to ensure sustainable development.

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