Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. A man walks to his yurt, overshadowed by a new housing complex. More and more rural poor are joining the urban poor in Ulaanbaatar to survive in a world that for many Mongolians has changed dramatically in the past 15 years. “I was forced to leave the countryside seven years ago, but I know others who are arriving all the time. For us this city is the only chance for employment,” said one migrant.

Image: Justin Guariglia / Getty Images

Chapter 11

cultural change
ulaanbaatar: painful transitions

In contrast to the popular image of Mongolia as a nation of traditional herders, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) calculates that well over 60 percent of the population live in urban centres, with between 800,000 and one million people in the capital. A high proportion of these live well below the official poverty level; countrywide, 36 percent live below the national poverty line, but in the capital the proportion is more than double this figure.

All over the world, particularly in developing countries, hyper-cities, megacities, 'million' cities and tens of thousands of provincial towns and urban centres are drawing in millions of people annually like powerful magnets. Behind every individual's movement from the countryside or village to the large town and city is a story of both loss and gain. Urban centres are powerful engines driving people towards increased homogeneity as they find their place in an increasingly globalised world. Many aspects of culture are rapidly becoming casualties in this process as traditional pastoralists, herders, farmers and craftsmen join the ranks of the formal and informal urban economy.

Ulaanbaatar is, at first, deceptive. The Mongolian capital spreads out over a plain along the banks of the River Tuul; the medium-height buildings forming the city centre are overlooked by low green mountains, which roll over the vast landscapes making up much of Mongolia's 1.5 million square kilometres.

Beneath the surface

India is twice the size but has more than 50 times Mongolia's 2.6 million people, half of whom are younger than 20. In Mongolia there is none of the chaos and overwhelming sense of numbers one feels in Tokyo, Beijing, Dhaka or Delhi, and in the balmy summer months, at least, tall grass and wild flowers grow up between well-proportioned housing blocks and fenced compounds, and along the wide roads all over the city. Shaggy-maned horses and sheep graze the grasslands on the outskirts of the city that always seems close. Urban apocalypse this is not, and yet a harder reality lies beneath the surface.

Living below the line

The proximity to nature and lack of congestion belie the fact that a remarkably high proportion of Mongolians live in cities – in particular, Ulaanbaatar. In contrast to the popular image of Mongolia as a nation of traditional herders, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) calculates that well over 60 percent of the population live in urban centres, with between 800,000 and one million people in the capital. A high proportion of these live well below the official poverty level; countrywide, 36 percent live below the national poverty line, but in the capital the proportion is more than double this figure.

More and more rural poor are joining these urban poor to survive in a world that for many Mongolians has changed dramatically in the past 15 years. "I was forced to leave the countryside seven years ago but I know others who are arriving all the time. For us this city is the only chance for employment," explains Erdenbileg, who had to fend for himself after the state-run abattoir in western Mongolia closed down and he and hundreds of others lost their jobs.

The Soviet Union dominated the Mongolian social, economic and political system when the country became a communist state in 1924. With the fall of the Soviet empire and the collapse of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, whose members were Mongolia's main trading partners, the country was forced to begin its rapid transition to a market economy. Before 1990, the command economy meant all property and livestock were owned by the state but people were guaranteed work, free education and healthcare, with affordable housing, transport and commodities. Poverty was virtually unknown. Private enterprise was banned and there was no freedom of movement between the countryside and cities or between cities.

The dramatic shake-out of labour from uneconomic state-owned enterprises has been largely absorbed by the expanding informal economy. Urbanisation in Mongolia has been rapid and concentrated. Already 57 percent urbanised, in a small number of urban centres, of which Ulaanbaatar is the largest by far, the population exceeds employment opportunities. Before the break-up of the Soviet system, migration was strictly controlled and restricted. The first wave of rural-to-urban movement took place in the late 1980s and intensified in the 1990s. According to Hubert Jenny of the World Bank, it continues at a rapid pace.

Poverty in ger settlements

Jenny traces the urbanisation in Ulaanbaatar and the two secondary cities of Erdenet and Darkhan to the growth of peri-urban, spontaneous 'ger', or traditional circular tent, settlements. "With little or no planning by local government, the uncontrolled growth [of] the ger areas has impeded the efficient delivery of public services."

In fact the challenge of infrastructure delivery is compounded by the extent of poverty in ger areas: 78 percent of residents live on less that US$30 a month, with the poorest 8 percent living on less than $12 per month.[1] According to the European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO), increasingly severe climatic conditions that are making rural life hard for humans and livestock alike have "led to a massive rural exodus towards the cities, in particular the capital … which is totally incapable of responding to the basic needs of the new population." Despite the semblance of modernity in Ulaanbaatar, aid workers claim that those who have lost everything from natural disasters "live in a dramatic state of poverty, lacking food, water, shelter, non-food items, heating, healthcare and education. Alcoholism, violence and prostitution are spreading, external support is very limited."[2] In recent years articles have been written on the increasing number of street children in the capital and the families who live in sewers during the bitter winters, as they are unable to afford housing or fuel to keep warm in their traditional tents. According to a June 2003 study by the NGO Action Contre la Faim, many children in the ger peri-urban areas are not immunised and suffer from malnutrition.

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Ger settlements epitomise spontaneous and unplanned urban growth around the outskirts of the capital. Normally they start as a tent within a spacious fenced compound, but as friends and relatives join the original family in the city, the number of ger within a compound

A Mongolian nomadic herder chaperons his flock of sheep as they graze near downtown Ulaanbaatar, with a giant billboard featuring a presidential campaign advert by the Revolutionary party. For many Mongolians the cultural transition from rural to urban life is painful and irreversible.

Image: Stephen Shaver / courtesy of AFP

Slumming in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia: Urban apocalypse in the style of India or Nigeria, for example, this is not, and yet a harder reality lies beneath the surface. 'Ger', or traditional circular tent, settlements epitomise spontaneous and unplanned urban growth around the outskirts of the capital. The challenge of infrastructure delivery to these settlements is compounded by the extent of poverty in ger areas: 78 percent of residents live on less that US$30 a month, with the poorest 8 percent living on less than $12 per month.

Image: Justin Guariglia / Getty Images

In 2005 a government census in Upper Egypt found that in almost every village, 60 percent of the homes were boarded up. The explanation was the same everywhere: "They've gone to Cairo." Many cultural traditions are rapidly becoming casualties in the urbanisation process, as pastoralists, herders, farmers and craftsmen join the ranks of the formal and informal urban economy. Here, a camel herder in Cairo appears to resist that trend.

Image: Manoocher Deghati / IRIN

increases. Some families manage to build two-storey houses in their compounds over the years, but most cannot afford to do so. Migrants are forced to start a new life in the city due to lack of employment and the harsh climate in rural Mongolia. Some also come to be with relatives or children and for education, and some live in traditional tents without facilities on the outskirts in order to gain an income from their rented apartments in city centres.

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According to John Sparrow of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, "For former herders a major obstacle is simply getting registered. They do not bring the necessary documents. But unless they are registered they cannot get state health or social care, or education for their children." In the settlements it is common to see people hauling plastic drums of water from standpipes to their homes. Queues reminiscent of other more congested areas of Asia surround the standpipes. Baasansuren, a 38-year-old mother of four, sits outside a ger with her friend who migrated with her to the city some years earlier. "She lost all their ID documents so officially she doesn't exist in the city," Baasansuren explains. "Her kids can't go to school or get any healthcare and she doesn't have enough money to bribe the offices to give her new papers."

Stepping off the steppes

Many Mongolians complain of the imminent end of their centuries-old nomadic lifestyle. "Now you cannot survive herding livestock. If you have 200 or less you can forget it. You will not survive and you will have to come to the city like us," explains Erdenbileg. "It's too tough. Only those with 1,000 or more will make it, and they are the few rich ones."

ECHO estimates there are approximately 160,000 herders with 25 million animals in Mongolia. The number is diminishing every year as people give up their traditional nomadic life. "Past *dzuds* [freezing winter cold snaps] have resulted in an increasing rural-urban migration, especially towards the swelling suburbs of the capital, where unemployment causes further severe destitution," it states.

Immediately after the fall of communism and the privatisation of herds there was a brief but environmentally unsustainable increase in herders and animals. The forces of economics and the severe freezing winters of 2000-2002 soon reversed that trend. In 2000, about 3.4 million animals (10 percent) died and in 2001 another 4.7 million (15.7 percent) froze. In 2002 another lethal cold snap killed 2.9 million animals (11 percent).

The transition has been tough but many see it as inevitable. "It's the end of a long tradition and we are still adapting. We miss the old life," says Baasansuren, pointing to the hills outside the city, her wind-blown face tanned from the summer sun. "I often think of the wide landscapes and the horses but we are here to stay. We cannot go back to it. We get jobs in the city and life is less precarious. Anyway, young people today don't want to be herders and the weather in Mongolia is changing."

Climate change appears to be altering previous accepted cycles and taxing traditional coping mechanisms. Exceptionally cold winters – previously experienced once every 50 years – are contrasted by hotter summers and lower rainfall. Drought is also a severe problem facing herders, who watch large numbers of their animals die from lack of grazing and water. Scientists warn these extremes of weather are likely to continue and are part of the global change in climate.

Irreversible trends

Across the Sahel in Africa, in the highlands of Latin America and even in Europe, rural lives are becoming harder to sustain and so, too, are traditional ways of life. It is the same for the Somali or Kenyan pastoralist as for the Mongolian herdsman: Without adequate social safety nets or informal means of insurance, people whose animals die and who lose their livelihoods are forced to drop out of the pastoral system. This often has detrimental consequences since they are usually ill-equipped to succeed in more urban settings, which struggle to absorb an influx of unskilled labour.[3] In parts of Kenya in 2006, some pastoral

communities lost 60 percent to 80 percent of their livestock in the drought and many warn that "the pastoral way of life is everywhere under attack."[4]

According to the ADB, the main causes of poverty in Mongolia are "harsh natural conditions, geographical isolation, difficulty to access financial resources and unemployment." Low incomes are compounded by inadequate social services, particularly poor medical facilities, urban services and education. The challenge is to broaden and sustain Mongolia's growth and provide opportunities for the many poor Mongolians who have not yet benefited from the transition to a market economy.[5]

There is optimism, however, as Mongolia is "successfully transforming into a market economy and in 2006 remained strong, with gross domestic product [GDP] growth at 8.4 percent and per capita GDP above $1,000 for the first time." Even so, the ADB recognises that these gains have been "insufficient to ameliorate living conditions for a large percentage of the population that fell into poverty in the early transition years."

High education standards have been maintained, and Mongolians rank fourth globally with a 97.8 percent literacy rate even though 50 percent of the population lack access to potable water, according to figures from the international NGO, Save the Children UK.

These years, and decades, will doubtless be seen as the transition period not only for Ulaanbaatar's socioeconomic profile, but also culturally, as the traditional herding lifestyle wanes with the rise of other economic opportunities. But the chances are that Mongolia will find a balance and poverty will be reduced as more urban migrants are absorbed by the growing economy. Employment is key to addressing urban poverty. There is no sense of the pervasive or endemic poverty in the ger settlements that one feels in many other capitals.

For the millions of people who move to cities and towns all over the world, the transition is normally born of crisis or emergency. Whether people make the move because of a deterioration in their ability to survive, economic changes that make their previous livelihood untenable, or to escape natural or manmade crises, it is often a one-way ticket. For some, particularly the rural youth, the cities are magnets of hope and opportunity that contrast with the predictable narrowness of traditional rural life.

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The world's climate is changing and so is its socioeconomic framework, with each affecting and being affected by the other. At the same time, the absolute number of people continues to rise rapidly. The paddy farmer of rural Bangladesh becomes a rickshaw puller in Dhaka, a wooden wheel-maker in rural Cambodia works in the garment factories of Phnom Penh and a horse herder of the Mongolian steppes works in the capital's tannery. Traditions are lost and ancient crafts and established patterns of interaction vanish with the disappearance of social rituals and ceremonies as the hegemony of city life dominates and people adapt.

A Rajistani woman in traditional costume living in pitiful slum conditions in Hyderabad, India. As more rural people move to cities, traditions are lost and ancient crafts and established patterns of interaction vanish with the disappearance of social rituals and ceremonies as the hegemony of city life dominates.

Image: Jenner Zimmerman