The Project Context

Mongolian general education system reform started in 2005 to extend it from 10 years to 12 years to align it with international standards. Since the SY 2008-2009, early childhood education (ECE) has been provided for 2-5 years old children, followed by 12 years of primary and secondary education. With this structural reform, the primary school entry age was lowered from 8 years to 6 years of age within a short period of timeframe.

Despite this good intention, these reforms have brought about a new set of concerns and challenges for nomadic families in rural Mongolia, who make up nearly 30% of the country’s total population. Primary education is compulsory in Mongolia, so each year since 2008, thousands of herder families across the country have been faced with the ethical dilemma of making difficult choices so that their child can attend school at age six. Although school dormitories in soum centers (i.e. the equivalent of an administrative district or county in other countries) have always played an important role in providing nomadic children with access to education, they were not yet really welcoming environments for very young children. Now when it comes to meeting the educational needs of 6-8 year-old children, thousands of nomadic herder families have the hard task of deciding between:

- Sending their child to the school dormitory at the age of 6, and being completely or partially separated from their child for 9 months a year;
- Having the father herd animals while the mother migrates to the soum center with their 6-8 year old child, so that the child can attend school without staying in a dormitory;
- Sending their child to live with relatives at the soum center to attend school;
- Delaying their child’s school entry until the child is 7-8 or older.

Most of these children have had to enroll in primary school without having attended formal ECE, thereby increasing their chances of having undetected learning difficulties and poor school performance. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports (MECSS), in 2011, more than 38% of all pre-school aged children in Mongolia (most of whom reside in rural areas) entered primary school without having had any formal ECE. While some alternative forms of delivery of ECE were operational in urban and semi-urban places of the country, children from rural nomadic herding communities had only 2 to 3 weeks of exposure to the “Ger” mobile ECE service before enrolling in school. This was completely inadequate for preparing children for schooling. There were neither specific programs, textbooks nor any other resource materials which could have helped herder parents to prepare their children for school in their home environment. Consequently, a large majority of rural herders’ children enroll in school without being properly prepared and supported.

Furthermore, the challenges these young children experience during this school transitional period present a detrimental risk to their psycho-emotional well-being if they’re not carefully and adequately cared for.

Therefore, in consideration of these issues, the World Bank and Save the Children Japan came up with new project ideas to tackle the very specific challenges of delivering quality education to children of nomadic herding families.
The Project Development Objective

The World Bank with financial assistance from the Japan Social Development Fund (JSDF) is supporting Mongolia in improving access to quality education for the nomadic herders’ children in rural Mongolia. As a result of the project “Improving Primary Education Outcomes for the Most Vulnerable Children in Rural Mongolia (2012-2017)”, implemented by Save the Children Japan, the education outcomes of more than 7,500 most vulnerable children (aged 5 to 10) in four educationally under-performing and under-served rural provinces of Mongolia are expected to improve.

Coverage areas: The project is being implemented in 30 target soums (out of 330 nationwide) of four provinces (out of 21 in total) namely: Arkhangai (10 soums), Uvurkhangai (10 soums), Dornod (5 soums), and Sukhbaatar (5 soums) provinces.

The target reach: The project aims to serve 22,974 beneficiaries directly over a five-year period, including:

- 7,500 children (5-10 year olds);
- 15,000 parents and caretakers;
- 400 school employees (school administrators, teachers, social workers, and dormitory teachers/staff members);
- 34 life-long education teachers; and
- 40 soum governors and other local government officials.

The project consists of three main components:

Component 1: Strengthening school preparation programs for new school entrants (5-6 years of age) in hard-to-reach rural communities.

This component focuses on introducing and strengthening school preparation programs for children who enter primary school with limited or no ECE. The main purpose of this component is to improve the children's readiness for school and dormitory-life, thereby lowering their chances of emotional distress, falling behind in school learning, and dropping out in primary grades.

Component 2: Introducing extracurricular after-school programs in rural schools for vulnerable children (6-10 years of age) living away from home.

This component introduces a constructive, enabling and child-friendly environment in rural schools that incorporates child participation, play and learning, as well as care and protection during after-school hours. This component’s interventions are designed to reduce the target children’s emotional and psycho-social challenges that result from family separation at a young age, and also to improve their school transition experiences and ensure their optimal development.

Component 3: Pilot compensatory education programs for lower primary out of school children (8-10 years of age) in rural communities.

This component contributes to universal primary education enrollment and completion by piloting compensatory distance education programs for lower primary out of school children (school dropouts and non-school enrollers aged 6-10). This component of the project aims to enhance the substance and reach of the existing Life-long Education (LLE) program of the government by targeting lower-primary age children who have either dropped out of school (before completing grade 3) or do not have the opportunity to study in the formal school system.
Ensuring that the Project reaches out to the most disadvantaged children in Mongolia

The project’s locations have been selected on the following criteria:

i) Being one of the highest populated provinces in the country with a high proportion of nomadic people;

ii) Being one of the lowest reported formal preschool enrolment rates;

iii) Having higher than the national average reported school dropout rates;

iv) Being one of the provinces most severely impacted by the Dzud (winter) disaster of 2009-2010.

Additional factors considered were:

i) Primary Education Teacher Training Colleges being located in Arkhangai and Dornod provinces (strategic locations to scale up program actions and outcomes to the surrounding provinces during and after the project period); and

ii) Ensuring efficient project operations (i.e., ease of access from Ulaanbaatar).

Target children are being identified by local Community Education Councils (CECs) with the active participation of the communities. Under the project, 30 CECs have been established in 30 target soums.

Results achieved to date:

✓ All new programs developed under the project, namely (a) the home based school preparation program; (b) extra curricula programs specifically targeting the primary children living in dormitories and at relatives’ homes away from their own families; and (c) home based compensatory education programs for out-of-school children, have been successfully piloted and refined and have become fully operational in all 30 project communities in the four project provinces;

✓ The home based school preparation program has been enriched with the School Readiness Toy and Book Mobile Kits (packaged in 10 different sets) specifically designed for children in the mobile herding communities. These were made available at “My Book Palace” at the local school or public library in each community so that the herder families could take them home to use with their children;

✓ Community Education Councils (CECs) with active participation of parents and community members and local education stakeholders have become effective in each participating community. They play a crucial role in addressing the specific challenges faced when delivering quality primary education to children of nomadic herding families;

✓ Under the CEC leadership, local schools and communities have successfully implemented small projects with 106 small scale community initiative grants.

✓ Local capacity has been built for better coordination, planning, outreach and delivery of education services to the target hard-to-reach-children.

✓ As of November 2016, the total number of child beneficiaries reached 8,084 (108% of its target by the project closing date).

Progress made towards meeting the project result indicators (as of November 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
<th>End Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1: Number of target children who have been successfully prepared for schooling through home-based school preparation program</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>1,701</td>
<td>2,791</td>
<td>3,808</td>
<td>3,300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indicator 2: Number of target children enrolled in extracurricular after-school programs, with improved learning achievements</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2,355</td>
<td>2,877</td>
<td>3,535</td>
<td>4,196</td>
<td>4,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 3: Number of target children enrolled in compensatory education program, with improved learning abilities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 4: Number of direct beneficiary children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2,846</td>
<td>4,629</td>
<td>6,393</td>
<td>8,084</td>
<td>7,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 5: Percentage of female direct beneficiary children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Including the number of children have newly enrolled in SY 2016/2017 (expected to successfully complete) the programs by May 2017.
Mr. B. ADYASUREN, a herder of Yosonzuil soum, Uvurkhangai aimag, whose two children benefitted from the Home-based School Preparation Program

“We could not enroll our daughter in a kindergarten because we live far away from the soum center. As parents we were worried a lot when we thought of school. Luckily, people from the CEC reached us and introduced the home-based school preparation program. My eldest daughter A. Nomin-Erdene was prepared for schooling through this program and now is studying in the soum school. In the beginning, teaching our child was the most difficult thing for us, but thanks to teachers we learnt how to teach and encourage our children. We understood that parents can develop our children at home. When A. Nomin-Erdene was enrolled in school, we actually did not worry about her because we were sure that she was well prepared for school like other children who had attended kindergartens. Based on our experience we have also prepared our youngest daughter A. Nominjin through this program and she is now enrolled in the 1st grade this September. We think that this program is really useful to all herder families who have the same issues.”

Besides achieving the specific target results, in the process of implementing the project we have observed:

- Solid commitment from parents, children and facilitators;
- Increased parents, especially fathers’, involvement with their children;
- Positive outcomes from providing mobile kits, facilitating regular teachers’ visits and providing counselling in herders’ homes;
- Greater participation by different stakeholders, such as parents, school employees, community and local governors, in providing quality education, especially for marginal children;
- Strong advocacy activities at international, national and local levels;
- Good management at local level through the establishment of a CEC in each target soum as well as Local Project Committees at provincial level;
- Broader acceptance and increased ownership of the programs by the Government (i.e. MECSS);
- Increased commitment to sustaining the project’s innovative interventions and local initiatives.

Ensuring Sustainability in the project target areas:

- At local level, technical capacity has been sufficiently developed to continue the home-based school preparation program, the extracurricular after-school program, and the compensatory education program. Community involvement is assured as the CECs are well established and well able to continue to strengthen public awareness and facilitate participation of parents and the community.
- The project’s approaches and methodologies have been well adopted by relevant institutions within the government education system, such as Life Long Education Centers and Aimag Education Boards etc.
- (Although limited) there is some financial support from the local governments.

The project has been implemented in 30 soums in Mongolia, less than 10 per cent of all rural soums. Although local governments, education authorities and local communities in the project sites have all shown strong commitment to maintaining the project initiatives, implementation beyond the project sites requires stronger commitment from the government.

Given the proven success of the project and the specific local needs, in 2016 the MECSS requested WB financial support for a nationwide replication of the project.
B. BAZARDARI, 5th grade student, Bayandelger Soum, Sukhbaatar aimag (in the middle of the photo)

“I live in school dormitory. I have learned a lot from extracurricular after-school program, learned to make cars, write poems, draw pictures and express my opinions and introduce myself. I also write comments about the activities that we have at the Child Development Center. I write things like what I have learned and how I have helped others. Sometimes I read my comments in front of children and sometimes the teacher reads. When we communicate with others my teacher taught us to be patient and listen to others.

Before enrolling the program, I used to fight often with other children. But now I made many friends. I got 75% on Mongolian language on the 2nd term of the school year. And at the end of the school year I got 85% on Mongolian language and 90% in math”.

Mr. B. GANZORIG, a herder of Undur-Ulaan soum, Arkhangai aimag

“My son G. Turbat was born deaf and never attended kindergarten or primary school until he was 10 years old in 2014. When the compensatory education program was introduced then my son lived in the soum center in order to study the compensatory education program. He learned a lot through the book and toy kits for disabled children. He became good at drawing.

My son enrolled in the 1st grade in the soum school in 2015 and in 2016 he moved to Ulaanbaatar and started studying at school #29 for children with disabilities. He successfully passed assessment exams and was enrolled in 4th grade and is doing well at his school on his own. We are so proud of him. Before the project reached us, we did not even think that we could ever have a chance to send our son to school. I am very grateful that this project has made such a great difference to my family and especially to the future of my son.”

JSDF Project: Improving Primary Education Outcomes for the Most Vulnerable Children in Rural Mongolia (2012-2017)