

Quality and equity in the Mongolian education sector

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Abstract This case study identifies four target groups that are specific to the achievement of the EFA Millennium Development Goals in Mongolia: boys, out-of-school children, vulnerable children and minorities, and children of herders. Boys from herder families in remote rural areas are at the greatest risk of drop-out or non-enrollment. The case study therefore focuses on problems with access to education for boys from nomadic herder families. The inverse gender gap in the Mongolian education sector is a well-explored topic in educational policy research. What is lacking, however, is a more comprehensive look at how, and why, the combination of gender, household income and location of school—urban, semi-urban, rural—affect access to education in Mongolia.

Keywords Mongolia · Nomadic education · Gender and education

This case study highlights the main challenges of the 1990s that have left a deep mark on issues related to equity and quality of education in contemporary Mongolia: poverty, internal migration (from rural to urban areas), neglect of students with special needs, inverse gender gap (fewer school enrollments and lower educational attainment of males), rapid decline of vocational and technical education, and massive expansion of higher education.

The most important structural change has been the gradual extension of schooling from 10 to 12 years by lowering the school entrance age first from 8 to 7, and then from 7 to 6. The Government of Mongolia spends 19.1% of all its expenditures on education. This

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share corresponds, more or less, to the EFA FTI Indicative Framework, which recommends a level of commitment ranging around 20%. The commitment to public education is also discernible in the great proportion of the GDP (7.5%) that is spent on education. This proportion is high compared to other low-income countries in the Asia and Pacific region, but it is not out of the ordinary when compared to countries in the post-socialist region of Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia.

The target groups for the EFA millennium development goals

The Mongolian case study relied on the *Guidelines for the Asia and Pacific Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment* (UNICEF, UNESCO, Education for All—Asia and the Pacific 2006) to identify the relevant indicators for assessing progress in Mongolia with regard to the EFA goals. Educational development in Mongolia lags behind the EFA goals in the following areas: (1) the gross enrollment ratio in crèches and kindergarten (2–6 year olds) is approximately 50%; (2) the survival rate from grade 1 to 4 (primary school) is 88.3%, and from grade 1 to 8 (basic education) 83.0%; (3) the gender parity indices for all levels of education, from preschool to higher education, are consistently greater than 1, indicating a disparity in favour of females; (4) the annual number of instructional hours is small compared to the benchmark of 850–1,000 h/year proposed in the EFA FTI Indicative Framework: in Mongolia, the annual duration of contact hours in class is 720 h for students in primary school (grades 1–5), and 782 h if extra-curricular activities are included (MECS 2006a); (5) both adult and youth literacy rates are approximately 98%. However, the statistics for adult literacy, youth literacy, dropouts, and never enrolled children and youth need to be interpreted with caution. According to government statistics, adults or youth over the age of 15 years old who enroll in a short-term, non-formal education programme are considered literate. Similarly, school-aged children who enroll in non-formal education are subtracted from the number of dropouts or never enrolled children and youth. As a result, the figures for literacy tend to be over-reported, while those for dropouts and never enrolled children and youth are under-reported. We identified the following groups that are currently underserved in the Mongolian education sector, both in terms of access and quality of education:

Boys

Boys are still disproportionately dropping out of school or do not enroll in school, but the current gender imbalance is less extreme than it used to be a decade or 15 years ago. Nevertheless, the sons of poor herder families continue to be frequently used as child labour (animal husbandry). They constitute the educationally most disadvantaged group among the rural poor. 60% of all dropouts—in the age group 8–15 years old—are boys.

Out-of-school children

School dropout is mainly a rural phenomenon and is closely linked with the shortage of dormitories and schools in remote rural areas. As part of the structural adjustment reforms in the mid- and late 1990s, many small primary schools in remote villages (*bagh schools*) were shut down. Access to schooling became a problem for families in rural areas, in particular for nomadic herder families that used to accommodate their children in the school dormitory. Only in 2002 did the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

(MECS) draw greater attention to rural school development, securing funds to rehabilitate schools and dormitories in remote rural areas. The dropout rates for children of poor herders were highest from 1996 to 2000, when MECS charged fees for meals in the school dormitories, known as the Meat Requirement. The massive dropout problem in rural areas gradually recovered after 2000, when the Meat Requirement policy was abolished. For example, the proportion of 10–14 year old working children who were among the poorest two quintiles fell from 8.2% to 4.6% of households between 1998 and 2002. The recovery is also reflected in the decrease of out-of-school children. In school year 2003/04 9.6% of all school-aged children were out-of-school, whereas in school year 2005/06 their number dropped to 6.8%.

Vulnerable children and minorities

It is cause for great concern that the literacy rates have fallen over time for children and youth with disabilities. According to the 2004 Census of Disabled People, more than half of the children and youth with disabilities are not enrolled in any school. Only 41% of children with disabilities in the age group 8–11 year olds are enrolled in primary school. The education sector review (ADB and MECS 2005) highlights the absence of access ramps and other provisions that would cater to students with disabilities. It is striking how little progress has been made with regard to ensuring access to and quality of education for students with special needs. Besides the complete lack of provisions and inadequate teacher preparation, schools also lack special equipment and books that would enable blind or deaf students to be integrated in regular classes. The need for action has been acknowledged in the education sector review, the Master Plan (2006–2015), and in the third education sector loan (2006–2011). In stark contrast, no progress has been made with regard to official reporting of street children.

Children of herders (“nomadic pastoralists”)

Approximately 40% of herder families wish to have their child accommodated in a school dormitory. Other living arrangements include splitting the household during the school year, whereby the mother stays with the school-aged children near the rural school, or accommodation of the school-aged children with relatives, friends or on their own. There is a lack of dormitory space, especially for students in primary schools. The report also addresses the problem of over-aging of children of herders in primary school, which is likely to be exacerbated by the most recent school reform: the extension of schooling from 10 to 11 years or the lowering of the school age from 8 to 7. A sizeable number of herder families take their child out of school after the end of the first school year, either because the child performed poorly and was required to repeat the grade (repetition rates are significantly higher in grade 1 than in any other grade), because of bullying by other students, because the dormitory space was unhealthy (cold) and child-unfriendly, or because the child missed his/her family. The last two reasons—inappropriate dormitory accommodation or emotional distress—are frequently solved by re-enrolling the child at age 9 or 10, when the child is physically stronger and emotionally less dependent on its family. For the eldest children of herder families it is not uncommon to stay at home and delay school enrollment until the second-born child also reaches school age. Given that the school entrance age was lowered twice in recent years—in 2005 from 8 to 7, in 2008 from 7 to 6—the problem of over-aging in remote rural areas is more pronounced today than it was a few years ago.

Access for boys and for children from nomadic herder families

Two equity concerns are specific to the Mongolian context, and these are not sufficiently reflected in the EFA Millennium Development Goals: the inverse gender gap (favoring girls) and access to education for children from nomadic herder families.

Three of the six Millennium Development Goals explicitly mention the need to draw more attention to the education of girls and women. In other words, the MDG framework assumes gender inequality favoring males. As mentioned before, the opposite applies to the Mongolian educational system. The inverse gender gap in education was greatest during the period of economic crisis in the early 1990s and it is likely to decrease continuously over the course of the next decade. This optimistic outlook is nourished by the observation that the gender gap in general education is gradually closing. This applies both to enrollment and dropout rates. The greatest imbalance was at the height of the economic crisis in the early 1990s: male students constituted 72.5% of all dropouts in lower secondary school in 1991/92 (Steiner-Khamsi and Nguyen 2001, p. 31). The situation gradually improved. In 1997/98, 66.4% of all dropouts in lower secondary school were males. In 2005/06 the number of boys who dropped out of school decreased further; they constituted only 62.1% of all dropouts in the age group of 12–15 year olds. Boys are still disproportionately dropping out of school or do not enroll in school, but the current gender imbalance is less extreme than it used to be a decade or 15 years ago.

Similar to the inverse gender gap, the EFA Millennium Development Goals are not sufficiently tailored to educational systems that accommodate nomadic populations, including children of nomadic herder families in Mongolia. The Mongolian educational system had a well-functioning dormitory system in place for these children during the socialist period. The system collapsed in the 1990s, triggering massive drop-outs and a surge in the number of never enrolled children in remote rural areas. Apart from a 4-year period (1996–2000) during which herder families had to pay for the food/meat in the dormitories (known as Meat Requirement), children from herder families are accommodated free of charge in school dormitories. After a decade of ignoring the importance of rural school development throughout the 1990s, MECS started in the first years of the millennium to draw attention to the rehabilitation of schools and dormitories in rural areas. In contrast, in the 1990s all external assistance for education was channelled into urban and semi-urban schools. Rural-urban migration was massive in the first part of the 1990s and urbanization continues to be a social and economic problem, and there was an urgent need to build more facilities, including schools and health posts, in urban and semi-urban areas. At the same time, rural development was completely neglected, generating additional factors pushing migration and leading to a policy-induced or school-related emigration from rural to urban areas (see Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe 2006). In other words, there was a mass exodus from remote rural areas in the 1990s, first for economic reasons and then later for lack of adequate infrastructure, notably a lack of heated, healthy and child-friendly schools and school dormitories.

Looking beyond donor-led and donor-supported reforms

In retrospect, the Master Plan 2006–2015 (education sector plan) and the EFA-Fast Track Initiative in Mongolia have had a positive impact on donor coordination. MECS has taken on a more active role in coordinating grants and loans provided by donors.

The Mongolian case study has drawn heavily from sector reviews and other studies on Mongolian education. The most important sources of information were the education sector

review (ADB and MECS 2005), the Master Plan 2006–2015 (Government of Mongolia 2006), the EFA assessment for the Fast Track Initiative (FTI Secretariat 2006a, b, 2007), the baseline survey on child labour (ILO 2006), a study on internal migration in Mongolia (Save the Children UK & National University of Mongolia 2005), the public expenditure tracking survey (World Bank 2006), the country gender assessment study (ADB and World Bank 2005), policy notes based on secondary analyses of the Living Standards Measurement Surveys 1998 and 2002 and Household Income and Expenditure Survey 1999 (World Bank 2005a, b), as well as statistical information on the education sector provided by MECS (2005, 2006b).

It would be wrong to assume, however, that all educational reforms in Mongolia aimed at increasing equity and quality are supported, and in many cases initiated, by international donors. The “action plans” or “national programmes” represent national ownership of educational reform. Mostly written in Mongolian and frequently launched during pre-election periods, these plans have had a great impact on educational development in the country. In contrast to donor-initiated and donor-supported programmes, these national reforms are rigorously enforced by all levels of the administration and last beyond the duration of an actual loan or grant. With the massive economic growth in Mongolia over the last few years, the Government initiated several national educational reforms with little or no input from international donors. Examples include increasing the salary of teachers, attracting and retaining teachers in rural areas, increasing English and computer literacy. A study of such national action plans and programmes would reveal a difference in policy agendas between the national and international stakeholders in the Mongolian education sector. In retrospect, many donor-led structural adjustment reforms of the 1990s, notably the neglect of rural school development, were ill-conceived and are now being reversed by donor-supported projects as well as by national reform programmes.

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