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## Report for American Planning Association International Division

### *Executive Summary*

Thanks to an International Division grant I was able to travel to Mongolia to research my master's thesis on efforts to manage and plan for rapid urbanization in the country's capital, Ulaanbaatar. Ulaanbaatar is, by most measures, the coldest and most polluted capital city in the world. The harsh climate makes sustainable planning particularly difficult and cultural and historical circumstances particular to Mongolia have created an unusual planning context. Nevertheless, Ulaanbaatar's pattern of urban growth and expansion has much in common with other rapidly growing developing-world cities. I was interested in Mongolia because I thought its experience could reveal implications for how urban planning is approached in other countries experiencing rapid urbanization.

Ulaanbaatar's population boom is driven by resource-fueled economic growth, a series of harsh winters that have devastated livestock herds, and the decline of Mongolia's rural economy in the transition from Soviet-style central planning to a market-based economy. Mongolia's history of nomadism and pastoralism has combined with an unusual land administration system to create a unique urban form, the ger district, on the periphery of Ulaanbaatar. These sprawling districts take their name from the traditional felt tents that are their principal housing type and are characterized by limited services, a lack of physical and socioeconomic infrastructure, and poor health and environmental conditions for their residents.

In response to Ulaanbaatar's rapid growth and associated issues, a number of domestic and international organizations from the public, private, and civil-society sectors have converged on the city to try and address the set of problems generated by its unique pattern of urbanization. However, these efforts have, so far, met with limited success.

My research looked at the approaches and strategies adopted by different organizations as they sought to provide services to Ulaanbaatar's residents and to combat the externalities imposed by rapid urban growth. Support from the APA International Division and Harvard University allowed me to travel to Ulaanbaatar in January 2014 to conduct interviews with 17 organizations. Interviewees

were asked a standard series of questions that formed the basis for a wider-ranging conversation about urbanization, international development and specific policies being pursued in Ulaanbaatar. The interviews were analyzed qualitatively in an effort to develop an accurate assessment of urban development in Ulaanbaatar. Responses to individual questions were coded into mutually exclusive categories in an effort to analyze patterns and commonalities/differences across different stakeholder types. Analysis of these categories was then expanded and corroborated through a close reading of their narrative data transcribed from the interviews as well as the large volume of publications, plans, and evaluations produced by each organization.

The results of the interviews suggest that, despite strong agreement about the problems facing the city, there is a lack of consensus about how best to tackle them. This has led to a proliferation of plans as each organization obeys its own institutional prerogatives at the expense of widespread coordination. The interviews also suggest that local actors' perspectives on urban management are not reflected in many of the resulting plans or policy documents. Local government, for instance, responds to Mongolian perspectives on land use and housing. These perspectives often differ from approaches advocated by multilateral and bilateral donor organizations leading to a divergence between plans and implementation.

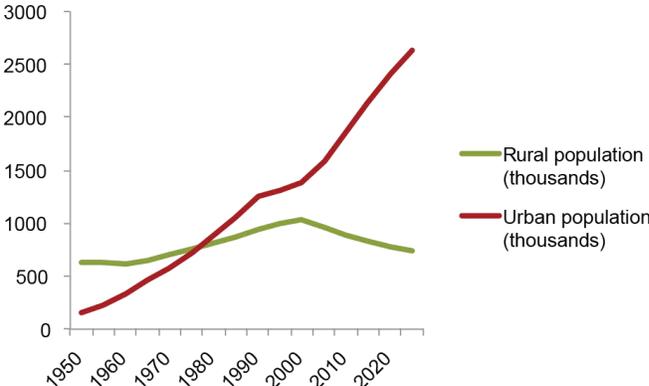
Academic and practice-oriented explorations of urban planning in the Global South have analyzed our discipline's limited success in addressing issues of poverty, inequality, spatial fragmentation and rapid urbanization. As the world continues to urbanize these issues will become more acute. It is my view that if changes are not made to the structure of urban planning efforts in the developing world then the *status quo* will persist with grave consequences for many urban residents. There is thus a need for international development and urban planning organizations to examine their organizational cultures and the incentives for planning and policy implementation. This shift could have substantial benefits for addressing the issues generated by rapid urbanization in cities like Ulaanbaatar.

The thesis was recognized with the thesis prize in urban planning by the faculty of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Given the limited success of planning efforts to address pollution, infrastructure provision, spatial fragmentation and urban poverty in Ulaanbaatar, I am currently interested in community perceptions of urban growth and development and the possibility of more participatory and locally appropriate forms of planning. I am now working on a Harvard University funded research project that explores these issues in greater depth through an extensive survey of ger district residents. It is my hope that these efforts could suggest steps for more effective, equitable, and participatory urban planning in Ulaanbaatar and cities like it.

# Mongolia's Planning Context

Mongolia is a traditionally nomadic, pastoral country whose process of urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon. It began under the socialist government in the second half of the 20th century and accelerated considerably in the 1990s as the country transitioned from Soviet style-central planning to a market economy (Figure 1).

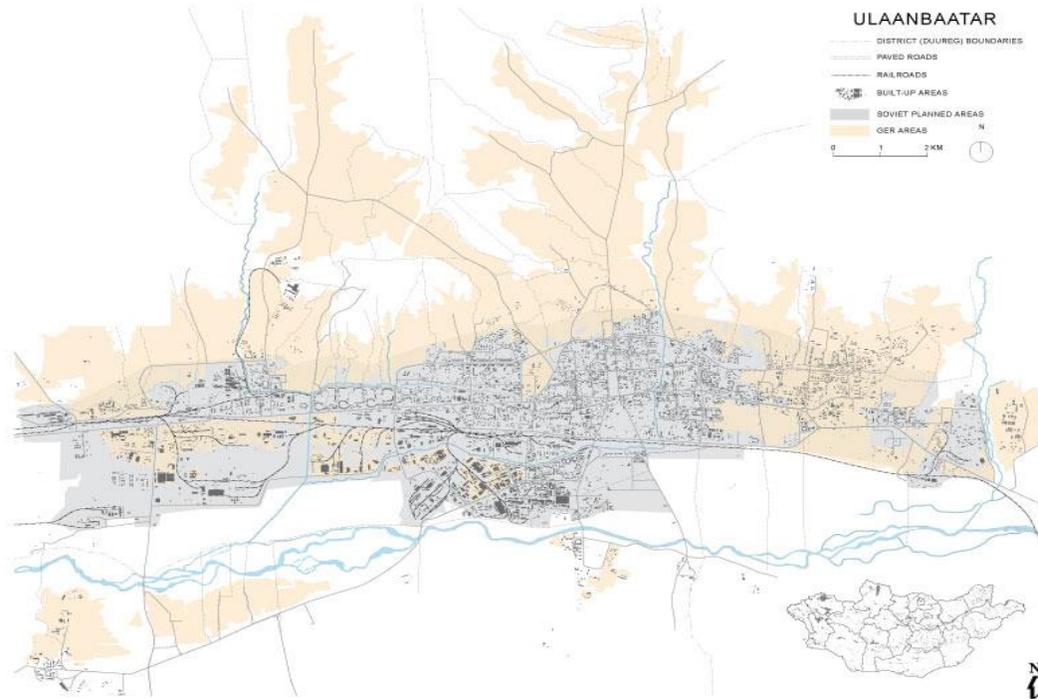
Figure 1.



Source: Elaborated for this report based on United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division data (2012)

Mongolian urban development has historically been concentrated in the capital, Ulaanbaatar; this trend continues today. The city's population has grown from 600,000 in 1989, to 1 million in 2007, to 1.3 million today. This growth has strained Ulaanbaatar's infrastructure and ability to deliver physical and socioeconomic services to its residents. It has also led to an unsustainable development pattern, exemplified by the dangerous levels of air and soil pollution that constitute a legitimate public health crisis. Successful public service provision is affected by the growth of ger districts. For perspective, the central, traditionally planned area of Ulaanbaatar comprises some 130 km<sup>2</sup>, but the total administrative area of Ulaanbaatar, including the ger districts, is now estimated to be around 4,700 km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Map of Central and Peripheral Areas of Ulaanbaatar



Source: Elaborated for this report using World Bank administrative data

While ger districts are more economically diverse than many peripheral areas in developing-world cities, they are severely underserved, lacking waste and water infrastructure, schools, health resources, and regular employment opportunities. Their residents also experience negative health, environmental, and socioeconomic conditions. In addition, Mongolia's dangerously cold winters require them to burn coal, wood, and trash for heat, leading to severe pollution and the degradation of local wood and grass resources, placing urban residents at risk for respiratory problems, flooding, and mudslides.

Mongolia is one of the coldest countries in the world and Ulaanbaatar is, by most measures, the coldest capital city on earth. The heating season lasts for eight months, from September to May. As a result, reliable and affordable heat is vital for the livelihoods of Mongolia's urban residents. Mongolia's system of land administration also presents hindrances to typical approaches to urban planning and development. According to the Law on Allocation of Land to Mongolian Citizens for Ownership, adopted in 2002, Mongolian citizens are entitled to a land allocation whose size varies depending on the region in which they wish to settle. In Ulaanbaatar, citizens are entitled to between 0.07 and 0.03 hectares of urban land. This system incentivized mass migration to urban areas and generated a number of unresolved property disputes and ambiguities that limit the government's ability to conduct accurate cadastral surveys and implement infrastructure and redevelopment projects.

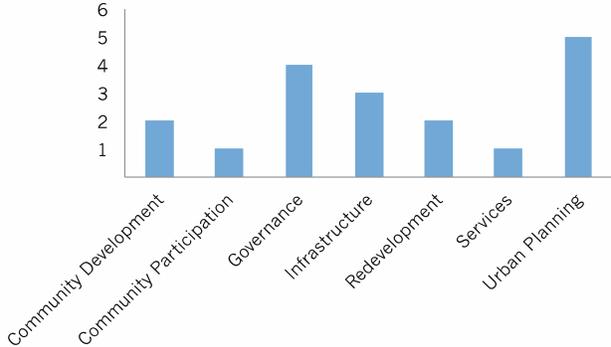
# Research Methodology and Results

To look into efforts to address these issues I traveled to Ulaanbaatar to interview 20 representatives from 17 organizations involved in urban development. The interviewees represented the variety of organizations engaged in Ulaanbaatar’s urban development.

The results show that the different organizations interviewed share a relatively common understanding of the main challenges facing the city. Overall, 78 percent of interviewed organizations named air pollution as the most pressing issue facing Ulaanbaatar and every organization named air pollution as one of the top four issues.

While there was broad agreement about the most pressing challenge facing Ulaanbaatar, there was considerable disagreement among interviewees on how this, and other challenges, should be addressed. This is evident in the variety of approaches adopted, and advocated for, by interviewees and their organizations. Figure 3 lists the range of different approaches to the city’s challenges and the number of organizations focusing on each. The diversity in approaches is striking in light of the broad agreement about the city’s most critical challenge.

Figure 3: Organization Approaches



The third result from the interviews is that there is a wide variety of urban plans and polices being developed by the range of organizations interviewed. This proliferation of plans is corroborated by a review of existing Ulaanbaatar planning documents. The proliferation of plans reflects a lack of coordination and awareness of the work of other actors engaged in shaping Ulaanbaatar’s urban realm. As one Mongolian international development worker put it, “In my opinion, there are many different organizations and

institutions who are engaging themselves in this sector and all of them have different purposes, goals and objectives.” Explanations for plan proliferation varied. Some interviewees pointed out that each individual organization wanted to distinguish itself from the rest while others offered the diversity within their own organizations as a cause of plan proliferation. The different approaches are occasionally reconcilable with one another, however they are more often representative of different priorities or visions for the city’s built environment. They are also the result of an ever-changing funding and political environment, responding to incentives created by politicians and donor institutions. It’s worth considering the possibility that having multiple actors advocating for different solutions could create an environment where the best approaches ultimately win out. However, I think the multiple approaches are a response to perverse funding, political, and institutional/career incentives rather than differing philosophical or technical considerations and are therefore unlikely to lead to better planning outcomes.

The interviews also reflect disagreement about some key dimensions of how urban planning should unfold in Ulaanbaatar, specifically the ideal density of the city and whether the current land administration system is a positive or negative influence on urban planning. Foreigners and international development workers were unanimous in their preference for density. However Mongolian interviewees were split, with some preferring diffuse development or sprawl. Differences between Mongolian and non-Mongolian interviewees also extended to perspectives on the current land administration system. Non-Mongolians viewed the existing law negatively or ambivalently. Mongolians were more evenly split. Five interviewees viewed it as good and six as bad, with one ambivalent and one who did not answer the question

The interviews made me aware of my own professional preconceptions towards density and compact city development. While compact development has proved to be a desirable city form in other parts of the world, Mongolian planners and urban residents do not consider it an amenity. It is my view that the problems of air pollution will become worse if the city continues to sprawl. But I also believe it is worth considering whether the experiences of Singapore, Seoul, New York and elsewhere is truly applicable to Mongolia’s social, cultural, and built environment context. Also, the fact that informal heating solutions – as opposed to traffic or congestion – is the primary cause of Ulaanbaatar’s pollution should be taken into account by anyone who advocates densifying the city.

The idea that Mongolia’s particular circumstances demands unique urban planning solutions was captured by a Mongolian professional in an international development organization who said: “Mongolia as country has its specific character and anomalies,

the people here have their typical Mongolian mentality and way of life. Therefore it is a very delicate matter to adapt all these new ideas to given conditions.” A Mongolian urban planner further articulated this viewpoint when asked if he thought the growth of Ulaanbaatar was a good thing. He said:

“I think it's bad thing because there are many different documents...and why do I have to be squeezed in a small place? This is one of my concerns. Because of this, we have the air pollution, soil and down-to-ground water pollution. Why? For instance, there are metropolitan areas like Seoul or Tokyo. You go to subway, 7 a.m. It's full of people. And then by 1 a.m., when it's closed, also full of people. I don't want such situation here. I have a hard time to walk in those cities when I go there. So I don't want a similar type of life here in Mongolia. We have enough land. I understand those people because they have small land and many people. But it's the opposite here.”

A number of Mongolian interviewees admitted that they did not enjoy dense urban life and were desirous of a different, “Mongolian” alternative. What form this should take was not specified. However, it was not proposed as an option in any of the official plans and documents reviewed during my research all of which take increased densification as a given.

### ***Implications for Planning***

The findings have applied relevance since, when plans and policies fail to align or coordinate, effective planning and implementation can prove quite problematic and there is a high likelihood of sub-optimal outcomes. The observation that plan proliferation is likely to worsen urban outcomes builds on existing scholarship on urban planning in Ulaanbaatar and elsewhere. For example, Byambadorj et al. (2011) describe how a lack of coordination among donor agencies and the government of Mongolia had far-reaching and negative impacts on the city's development during the land privatization process of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The second main finding from the interviews is that local viewpoints are not always reflected in official plans and documents. The interview narratives suggest that local voices are filtered through paradigmatic planning norms, leading to plans that reflect Anglo-American or Japanese preconceptions rather than policies that are finely attuned to the Mongolian context.

Divergence between local preferences and knowledge and international norms and “expertise” has frequently been found to lead to suboptimal outcomes in development projects. The work of James C. Scott provides numerous diverse examples of this phenomenon (Scott, 1998). Elinor Ostrom has used empirical studies of common-pool resource management to demonstrate that

local solutions frequently produce better outcomes than top-down government or private interventions that are not well-adapted to local conditions (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom et al., 1998). In a similar vein Pritchett and Woolcock (2003: 207) stress the need to “create the conditions under which genuine experiments to discern the most appropriate local solutions to local problems can be nurtured and sustained.” The interviews from this study suggest, however, that in Ulaanbaatar the practice of urban planning has not yet absorbed these theoretical insights; instead, a number of actors are engaged in planning solutions that do not fully incorporate local perspectives.

My personal view is that the ger districts are distinct from informal settlements in many important ways. They are not viewed negatively by most Mongolians, many of whom have close relatives who live in gers and a number of ger district residents are former apartment dwellers who left the city center due to economic or personal considerations (the desire for fresh air, for example, or the fact that they could retire to a ger while leaving an apartment to their children) Rather, it is urban life that is viewed as somehow “non-Mongolian” and the difficulty lies in reconciling the desire for space with the demands imposed by city life. A solution that tried to truly reconcile gers and the city would, I think, be the most effective approach. However this type of solution is not readily available in the precedents and “best practices” that professional planners rely on and is therefore difficult to conceptualize, let alone implement. Our experiences and training predispose us to view density as necessary and the institutional planning structure does not allow professional planners to really question this assumption or engage in work (ethnographies, in-depth participatory planning initiatives, historical/cultural analyses) that might suggest more locally appropriate solutions or help reconcile community preferences with the spatial and infrastructural needs of a growing city. Instead, time-pressure, the need for funding, and the desire for professional advancement lead planners to rely on solutions that have been successful in different contexts, perhaps at the expense of the best and most locally appropriate approach.

## ***Conclusion***

If the diverse actors involved in urban planning in Ulaanbaatar want to reduce the city's air pollution, provide infrastructure to more of its population, and address the socioeconomic issues afflicting the ger districts they may need to consider the fact that the current organizational situation exhibits characteristics that have led to development failure in a number of different contexts. In addition, organizations do not seem to be wrestling with the fact that local views may not be meaningfully reflected in planning and

policies. If the status quo is maintained, all indications are that Ulaanbaatar will continue to experience a number of acute urban development challenges and that efforts to confront them will fall short of expectations.

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