

Gasping for Breath: The Impact of Mongolian Environmental Issues on Youth

I. Introduction

For years, Mongolians have been living through the below-zero temperature winters, with the feel of the harsh sting of freezing air on their faces and inside their bodies. When people are expected to bear this with the dark flecks of burnt coal entering through the very skin of their body and into their system, it can be deadly. However, one of the people who are targeted and hurt the most are the ones with the lowest immune systems: the children. With Mongolia's future depending on its children being able to not just work, but also live in the country, Mongolia is at a time where it has to start taking responsibility for its future.

As of right now, Mongolia's population is a little over three million and half of that number is clustered into the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, capable of handling a population of only 500'000 and where the air pollution is being emitted. With the Ger Districts ("slums") ringing around the city center, acting almost like a spray that produces the noxious gas nonstop, and the Ger Districts themselves also having a ring of high mountains surrounding it, Mongolia is boxed and blanketed in the poisonous air.

II. What the Problem is

The answer to the title seems pretty straightforward: air pollution. However, the actual cause of the air pollution can be complex. As mentioned above, in an area capable of holding half a million people, the city is an attractive option for migrants coming from the countryside; with good education and job prospects, a lot of herders and farmers come to the city for many reasons, such as after losing their herd or wanting a brighter future for their children. This influx, coupled with the city population increasing rapidly, leads to people not being able to find affordable apartments or houses with central heating. For this reason, a lot of migrants decide to simply settle down on the side of a mountain in their gers (Mongolian traditional yurts), which eventually leads to more people settling around that area, effectively creating the Ger Districts. The Ger Districts produce 80% of all pollution year round.

Moreover, the completely untaxed and unregulated import of cars and vehicles is the cause of 20% of the total pollution Mongolia faces each year. In such a small city, with smaller roads, it is not hard for traffic jams to form, possibly explained by the fact that in a city of 1.5 million people, there are 2 million cars. This amount of cars leads to car fumes and exhaust exacerbating the problem of air pollution.

Besides these two, there are also six coal power plants situated right next to the city, constantly pumping out smoke. People think that this would contribute to the problem the most, however, pollution from the plants make up about 6% of all pollution; meaning the actual

catalyst happens to be the people living in the Ger Districts trying to stay warm in their homes during the winter.

III. What This Looks like in Real Life

Numbers can make it easier to conceptualize a problem, but the pain that people go through may still seem abstract to some people. In order to clear that ambiguity, let's look at what a day in the average Mongolian family's life would look like.

Most schools start at 7 in the morning. Most jobs start at 8:30. In order for the average parent to take their children to school whilst still making it for their work, they have to leave home at around 6am: morning rush hour. Stepping outside, the family looks around their surroundings, or lack thereof. The smoke from burning raw coal the whole night had wafted over into the city from the Ger Districts, tinting the white snow with dark flecks, and it had become hard to see even five feet in front of them. They scramble into the car in a desperate attempt to escape the pollution and prepare for their hour long traffic jam to a school that is ten minutes away.

For a family living in the Ger Districts, life is completely different, with only one thing in common: the pollution. A girl or boy of seven would not be having their parents take them to school. They would have to walk - through the thick smog that block their path in the bitter cold of -92F. A girl from the Ger Districts would not have the luxury of being stuck in a warm car for an hour or a parent to shield them from the toxicity, they wouldn't even have a pollution mask, as they are far too expensive. With her scarf bunched up against her nose and mouth, she would walk to her school everyday, back and forth, until she wouldn't one morning. She would be going to the hospital because her monthly lung infection started to worsen and a worried single dad would pray for a way to get them out of this situation where they were trapped: unable to move into an apartment with heating or go back to the countryside.

A. Who is Most Impacted?

As painted in the scenario above, the people who would be most affected are the children. Not only do their physical stature enable them to be more exposed to the pollution that hang low in the air, but also their immune system would not be able to effectively protect them from the particulate matter of 2.5 microns seeping into their bloodstream. This leads to almost 300 children being sent to hospitals every month.

B. What are the Harms for These People?

With the youth of Mongolia being disadvantaged and held back in this way from growing up and going to school, their health and education rests on the line. With no educated and capable citizens in the coming years, Mongolia's future looks murky and the world will be left in either the hands of people who are incapable or do not have the country's best interests in mind. The harm of this is that it would be perpetuating an endless cycle of growing an uneducated and unhealthy population, who all have the same childhood and the same future, who all have settled with how their country is to be like.

IV. Possible Solutions

In the 1950s, London's air pollution became so bad that thousands of people were dying everyday. However, in 1956 when the Clean Air Act was passed the government and the citizens started a joint rally towards a more sustainable and healthy nation.

I believe that educated and passionate citizens can be the key to finally implementing working solutions to the problem at hand. With more people bringing in air filters, solar panels, and pollution masks already, what is left for the rest of the world is to also join in the fight against pollution and help reduce our carbon emissions. In developing nations like Mongolia, funding can be a huge problem; both in acquiring it and spending it. Coming up with a rigorous framework and way of implementation in fighting pollution will be imperative to the country.

V. Conclusion

Pollution in Ulaanbaatar is hurting the people living in the city and is costing the government millions of tugriks (Mongolian money) to keep running the state hospitals, whilst also making no progress in completely eradicating the illnesses children are being diagnosed with today. The current state of affairs is driving citizen livelihood down and the few people who are making progress in stopping pollution are not being given their voices and elevated to the public eye.

Mongolia actively working to pave a brighter, healthier path for its future generation is the ideal. The current environmental issue is holding the country's development back, as infrastructures, coal alternatives, better hospitals, more schools, urbanization of the countryside are all not being regarded by the people in the higher powers.

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