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Rural to urban migration in Mongolia

**Social-ecological conditions
for a stepwise process**

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About this text

Since the 1990s, Mongolia's capital city Ulaanbaatar has recorded steady and rapid population growth due to rural-urban migration. So far, little is known about how the social and ecological conditions of migration interact.

Thus, in our study we investigated the rural-urban migration process from the countryside to the capital in the Eastern Steppe conducting semi-structured interviews.

Our results show that this rural-urban migration often follows a stepwise process from smaller settlements to larger urban agglomerations. The results also demonstrate a complex interplay between the prevailing social, economic, and ecological factors. While social factors (kinship, education) show the same relevance at each step of migration, ecological factors such as the occurrence of dzud seem more relevant at the early stages, from the steppe to the sum centres. Ecological factors only seem to rank second in importance, after social reasons. Economic reasons are also revealed to be very significant but seem most relevant the closer the migrations are to the capital.

These results are essential in order to cope with current and future challenges of population development and find solutions to enable traditional Mongolian nomadism even under a modern lifestyle.

Keywords

Dzud, Kinship, Migration, Mongolia, Nomadism, Social-ecological Conditions.

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1. Introduction

The Mongolian Steppe is one of the largest grassland regions in the world with a mostly intact ecosystem and is characterised by a close coupling of societal and natural processes (Batsaikhan et al. 2014; Karsten Wesche et al. 2016). This social-ecological system has experienced apparently sustainable land use by nomadic pastoralists for thousands of years (M. Fernández-Giménez 1999). Mobility is key here for both wildlife and nomadic pastoralists with their herds in order to cope with high spatial and temporal variability in resources (Bilegsaikhan 2015).

However, continuing major social-ecological developments have caused dramatic transformations in recent times (Batsaikhan et al. 2014). Over the course of the last three decades, Mongolian society has undergone substantial changes. In 1990, Mongolia transitioned from a communist one-party system and central planned economy to a free market and multiparty parliamentary system. Since then, the Mongolian economy and society have altered substantially, leading to changes in lifestyle (Yembuu 2016). The most notable process in recent years has been the ongoing rural to urban migration, which has led to an ever-growing population in the capital Ulaanbaatar. Nowadays, the capital city of Ulaanbaatar accounts for a population of 1.3 million out of a total of 2.9 million Mongolians (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). Since the 1970s, the city of Ulaanbaatar has seen steady growth and it is estimated that over the last decades about 600,000 herders have migrated to the capital, especially from the western part of the country (Kingsley and Levene, 2017). Compared to other Asian countries, the percentage of urban population in Mongolia and the percentage of people living in its largest city are particularly high. In addition, the resulting fundamental decline of nomadic pastoralism (Humphrey and Sneath 1999) is bringing with it social, economic and environmental difficulties (Long, 2017).

Most of the rural-urban migration research in Mongolia has so far focused either on economic aspects or, recently, the role of climate change. Often seen as a livelihood strategy agreed at household level, rural-urban migration in Mongolia is in many cases initiated by an individual family member who aspires to personal development (Blom 2014). When families decide to move to the capital city due to the influence of their social networks based there, a direct move is less common (Save the Children International 2013). There is evidence that migration occurs in a stepwise pattern, often starting at soum or aimag centres and leading to the capital city (Dore and Nagpal 2006; Save the Children International 2013). Families often make several stops, a phase which can last several years, before ultimately moving to the capital (Dore and Nagpal 2006). Many factors influence whether a person or family will migrate, and their effects are closely intertwined. It therefore makes no sense to consider any of them in isolation (Black et al. 2011). In the case of Mongolia, there is little concrete evidence about the interrelation between the different factors along the migration process from the rural areas to the urban centre.

The aim of this article is i) to better understand the aspects of the rural-urban migration process in Mongolia, and ii) to analyse the social-ecological conditions of the rural-urban migration process.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Study area

The study area is located in the Mongolian Eastern Steppe, which is the last remaining intact grassland of its size in the world (Fig. 1). It is a remnant of an imperilled ecosystem and among the least protected of all terrestrial types.

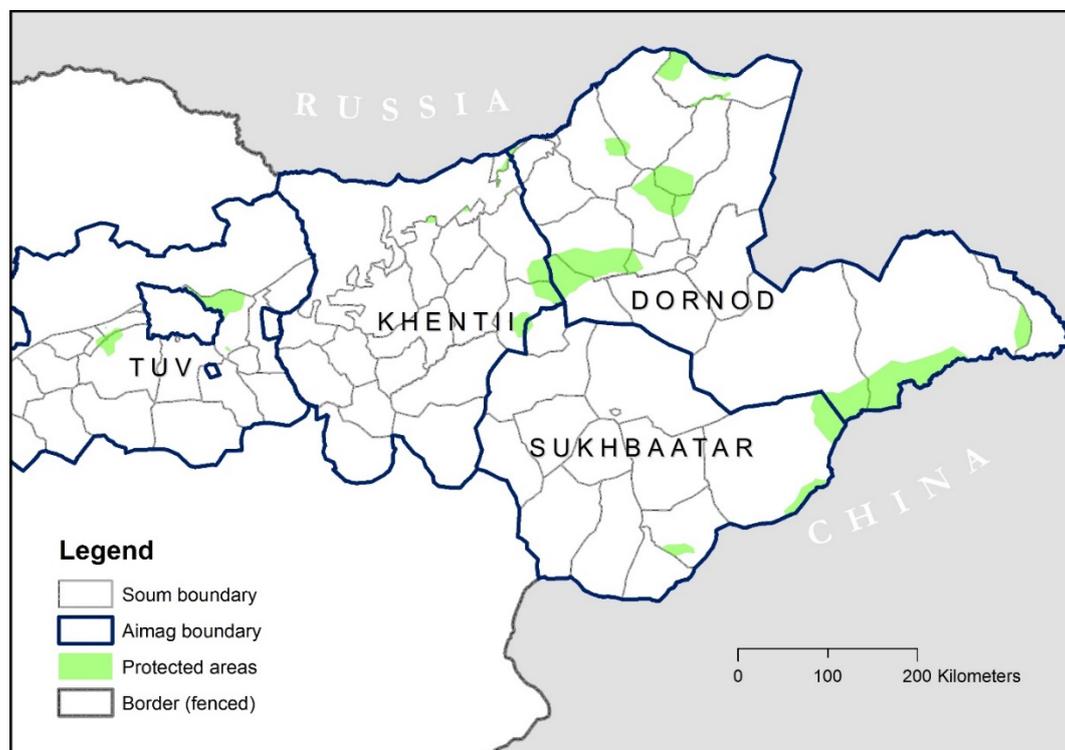


Fig. 1: Map of administrative boundaries of the study region. The map shows provinces (aimags) and local administrative units (soums). Dornod and Sukhbaatar, the eastern aimags, feature much lower human population densities than aimags closer to the capital (Ulaanbaatar) of Mongolia (Source: research project's own presentation)

The research area covers a region of roughly 291,000 km², from the capital city of Ulaanbaatar to the easternmost city of Choibalsan. Choibalsan is Mongolia's fourth biggest city, with a population of 38,537 inhabitants (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). The study area includes the three eastern provinces of Dornod, Khentii, and Sukhbaatar, the central province of Tuv and the provincial municipality Ulaanbaatar. In order to analyse the rural-urban migration from the eastern provinces to the capital city, we subdivided the region into three areas based on their respective distances to Ulaanbaatar and its urban agglomerations. First, the bordering area of the Hustai Nuruu national park in Tov aimag at a distance of 50 to 100 km from the capital city,

second, the Eastern aimags Dornod, Sukhbaatar and Khentii at a distance of up to 800 km from the capital city, and third, areas up to 400 km from the next city. With this division, it is possible to assess intention to migrate at different distances to the capital city and observe prevailing lifestyles in the areas.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The research design was as follows: literature search, primary data collection, and analysis (Fig. 2). Qualitative empirical social science research methods were applied.

Between September and November 2017, 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted – 35 in Mongolia and one in Germany. Of these, twenty-six were with members of the Mongolian population, selected along the above-described gradient from the rural areas to the capital (see chapter 2.1). Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and took place at a location of the interviewee's choosing. This was nearly exclusively at the home of the migrant (either gers, houses, or apartments). The gender split was evenly balanced. Twelve interviewees were male and eleven female, while three couple interviews were also conducted, with both partners present. These three couple interviews enabled the consideration of partner perspectives and possible compromises made in the decision-making process. The respondents were drawn from all age groups, from 20 to 98. All interviews were conducted in Mongolian, with the help of a female Mongolian interpreter who has experience of qualitative interviews.

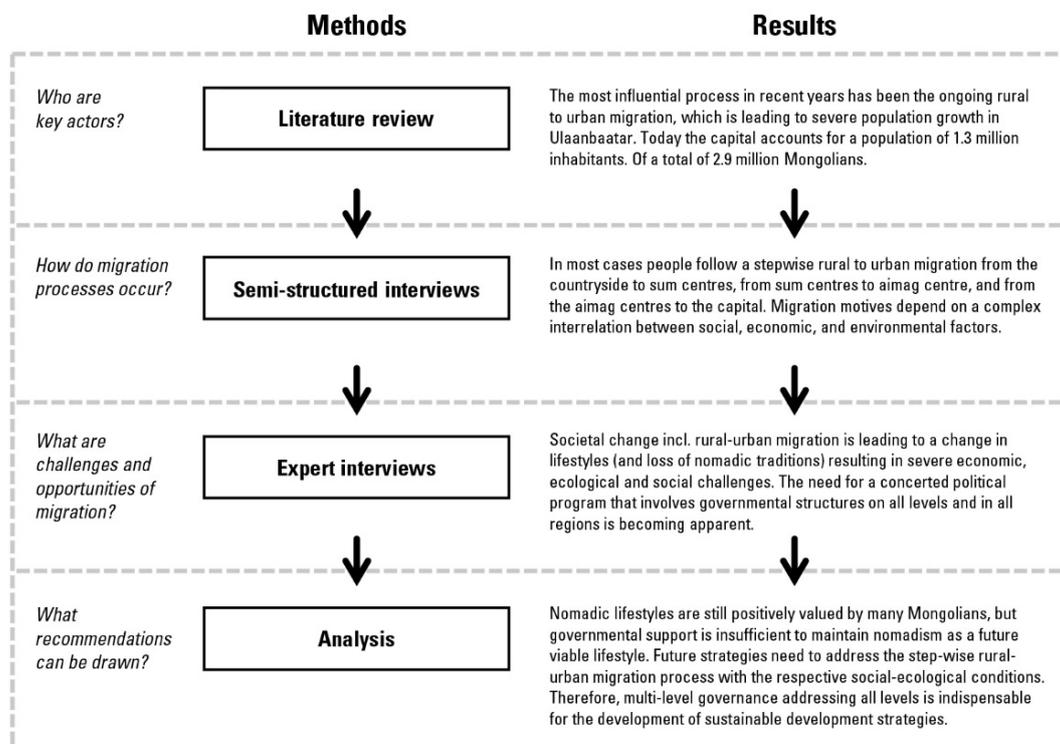


Fig. 2: Research design of the study

In addition to the interviews with the local population, ten expert interviews were conducted with stakeholders and experts for migration in Mongolia. The aim here was to identify the challenges, future trends and opportunities surrounding rural-urban migration in Mongolia. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and later coded with the software MAXQDA 12 and MAXQDA 2018. A data content analysis according to Mayring (2014) was conducted. Through close reading of the transcripts, emergent themes were identified and analysed as part of the analytical research process. All extracts from these interviews use a pseudonym in order to protect identity and ensure anonymity.

3. Results

3.1 Stepwise migration process

Data analysis of the semi-structured interviews clearly revealed that the predominant pattern of migration has been a stepwise process towards the capital. Many interviewees stated that they migrated towards the capital city in stages. One example for this was a middle-aged woman who lived around 100 km outside Ulaanbaatar with her mother and her brother, in the border zone of the Hustai National Park. The family planned to sell their livestock and move to the city within the next couple of months in order to live closer to medical institutions and other social services, as the mother was already of an advanced age and less mobile.

...She [the woman] is waiting for the right moment to really make sure that they feel the benefit and then she wants to bring her mother and her brother close to the city slowly, you know. That is why they moved from Zavkhan to another soum in Tuv province, which is about 100 km away, and then they moved here. So they are slowly moving to the city to seek better health services and also for better market opportunity. (herder household)

In this specific case, the middle-aged woman had left her family to go to college and work in finance after she graduated from high school. However, she returned to the countryside to take care of her mother and brother after the father had passed away. At the time of our study, she was in the process of adjusting them to the urban lifestyle in order to bring them to Ulaanbaatar with her for convenience reasons.

In short, based on all the interviews conducted with both migrants and experts, it can be maintained that the typical process of migration in Mongolia happens in four stages: from the periphery to the bag centre, from there to the soum centre, then to the aimag centre, and finally to the capital city Ulaanbaatar (Fig. 3). Most interviewees confirmed that their initial decision to migrate was not made with the intention of moving directly to the capital city. The idea to migrate closer to Ulaanbaatar tended to emerge in the course of the migration process.

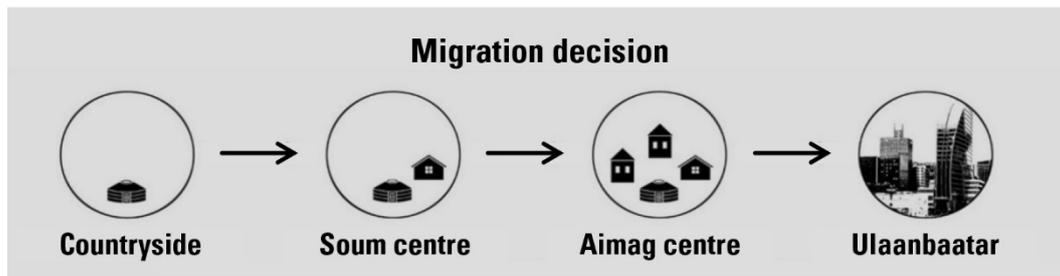


Fig. 3: Stepwise process of rural-urban migration in Mongolia

3.2 Social-ecological conditions of rural-urban migration

It clearly emerged from the interviews that the reasons at each particular stage of migration were distinct from each other. Analysis showed that there are different reasons for each step of migration. In particular, this means that the reasons for leaving the countryside can differ a lot from the motivation to leave an aimag centre (Fig. 4).

The prevailing reasons for migration were of either economic or social origin. Ecological reasons only played a minor role, especially in the later stages of migration. Interviewees in the capital city predominantly referred to economic aspects as key arguments when taking decisions. Education was mostly mentioned as a priority in all interviews at each site. It is also important to say that kinship, family ties and family cohesion are important issues in the migration process. In addition, interview partners often mentioned the career path of an individual in the family as an important factor. It was common in such cases for the whole family to migrate in order to keep the family together.

The first step of migration when initially moving away from the countryside (associated with giving up the herding lifestyle) and moving to the next soum centre seems largely driven by ecological and social reasons. The loss of livestock due to extreme weather events (dzuds) was reported as one major motivation to abandon the countryside. The loss of livestock also means the loss of the main source of income for herders, which means they are forced to move to an urban agglomeration that offers other opportunities to make a living. Nevertheless, this migration cannot be equated with abandonment of the herding lifestyle out of free will. It became clear from the interviews that many people still value a nomadic lifestyle, but it is the lack of governmental support that makes nomadism no longer a viable lifestyle: the loss of livestock in harsh winters forces herders to migrate. Another reason, particularly for the first step of migration, was education. Rather than sending their children to boarding school very young when they reach the age of compulsory school attendance, many families decide to accompany their children and move to the next soum centre with a primary school in order to stay together as a whole family and support their children.

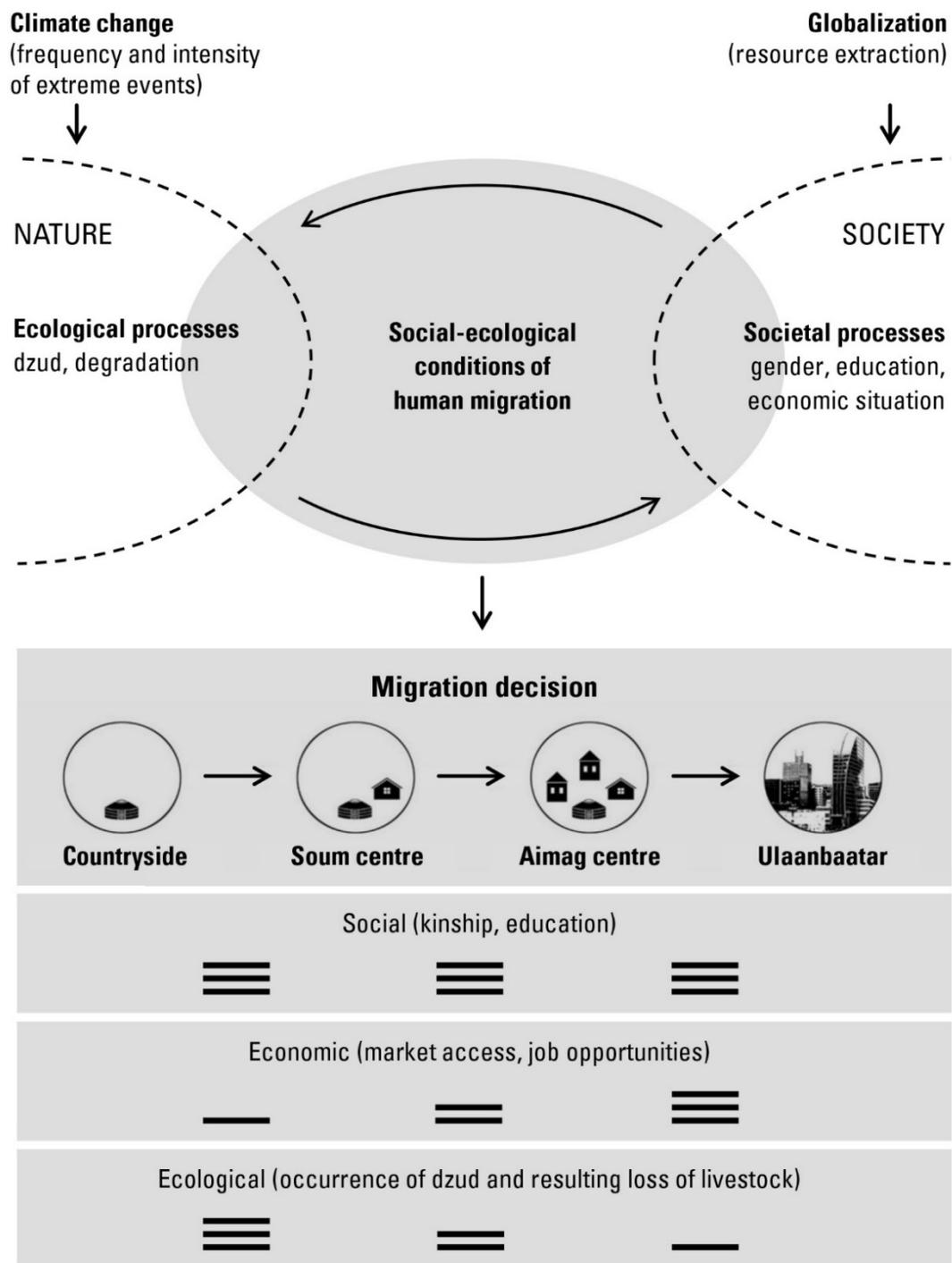


Fig. 4: Social-ecological conditions of the stepwise process of rural-urban migration in Mongolia (Source: Marion Mehring et al. 2017, adapted)

The second step of migration, from the soum to an aimag centre, seems to be mainly triggered by social reasons. Interviewees reported that they had followed close relatives, or, and in this case primarily, had acted for educational reasons. Similarly to the first step of migration, many families accompany their children as they move from primary school to the Mongolian equivalent of a high school. In many cases there are either no high schools in smaller soum centres or those that do exist are thought to offer a lower quality education than the bigger schools in aimag centres. Therefore,

many families decide to move as their children move on to high school, especially when their economic situation allows it.

The third and often last step of migration, from the aimag to the capital, is largely characterised by economic circumstances. In many cases, the decision to migrate to the capital city Ulaanbaatar is based on the desire or need to earn more money and avail oneself of the greater labour market and job opportunities. Many interviewees reported that they had migrated either to find a (better) job or to seek higher education and go to college in order to qualify for higher grade employment. This again was accompanied by social reasons such as following family members who had accompanied an individual of the family on their journey. Even in the case of high school graduates who moved to Ulaanbaatar to attend university, many relatives decided to accompany their children and stay united as a family.

4. Discussion

Our analysis provides evidence that in general people follow a stepwise rural to urban migration from the countryside to soum centres, from soum to aimag centres, and from aimag centres to the capital city. Their reasons differ along this migration process. Thus, the decision to migrate is influenced not only by conditions in the region of origin or at the final destination of the capital but also by factors from the intermediate steps involving soum and aimag centres. However, the decision to migrate is rarely taken for one particular reason and instead tends to result from an interplay of various different social, economic and ecological reasons.

4.1 Rural-urban migration process

There is clear evidence from our study that in general people follow a stepwise rural to urban migration, from the countryside to soum centres and on to aimag centres, eventually leading to the capital city. Stepwise migration and resulting urbanisation are common processes, especially in developing countries. A specific feature of this process in Mongolia is on the one hand the distance over which migration occurs and on the other hand the change in lifestyle that accompanies such movement. The migration occurs from the vast Mongolian countryside to small semi-urban agglomerations and in most cases ends in the capital city, so most migrants cover a distance of many hundred or even thousands of kilometres. At the same time, they are leaving behind their traditional rural lifestyles such as herding to take on a rather modern, urban way of living. This will ultimately lead to the loss of Mongolia's traditions. Our study has shown that there are herders who are not able or not willing to give up their traditions and practices, even if their children and grandchildren have chosen the urban lifestyle over the rural lifestyle and only have little interest in keeping the traditions alive. Many middle-aged to older interviewees who reported having moved to

the capital for economic or ecological reasons have highlighted that they still value these traditional lifestyles and would prefer to return to the rural countryside if it was financially viable.

Future research should thus focus on increasing the attractiveness of the rural countryside for the younger generations and finding ways to lend government support to herders in order to keep this tradition alive. It is of utmost importance to act now, as a first generation born in the capital city is already growing up with no connection to these traditional values. Additionally, these societal changes lead not only to enormous challenges in the capital, which have been discussed in many papers but also to a steady process of sedentarisation. The fragmentation of landscapes and changes in nomadic pastoralism also pose risks to the Mongolian Steppe ecosystem and its biodiversity (Chen et al. 2018). This highlights the necessity to invest in further research on the interlinkages between societal and ecological changes.

4.2 Social-ecological conditions of rural-urban migration

While the individual importance of the respective reasons for rural-urban migration, such as the economic situation and ecological or climate change, is very well documented, the results of our study highlight that the migration process is a complex interplay of different social, economic, and ecological factors.

Education and social cohesion seem to be the most dominant individual decision factors throughout the study region. The strong familial connection serves as one of the determining factors in the household decision-making process for migration. The second most cited individual reason was economic factors such as the existence of better labour market opportunities in the city. In most cases, these were accompanied by ecological factors such as the loss of livestock due to an extreme winter event. Although thoroughly studied in the recent literature (e.g. M. E. Fernández-Giménez, Batkhishig, and Batbuyan 2012), ecological factors as a trigger for migration were mentioned to a lesser extent, behind other social reasons.

People migrate for complex reasons such as improving incomes, joining family members, or to remove themselves from environmental or other threats. In general, a move is often temporary, because although environmental change can increase the incentive to move, it can also limit the capacity to do so (Black et al. 2011). The causes of migration are highly contextual and depend on the dynamics of economic, political, demographic, social and ecological factors at the origin and destination (Tsogtsaikhan, Tumurtolgoi, and Chimedtseren 2014; Cattaneo et al. 2019). Migrating to urban centres can limit the future mobility of communities, given the different demands of living in such areas. In the case of Mongolia, a nomadic lifestyle during the pre-migration phase offers a freedom that a sedentary life associated with migrating to Ulanbaatar cannot (Blom 2014).

From a policy perspective, our results (see chapter 3.1) highlight the importance of a multi-level governance approach that targets all levels (local-aimag-national) to facilitate sustainable development strategies and increase the attractiveness of nomadic pastoralism (see also M. Mehring et al. 2018). Strategies need to address the different steps of the rural-urban migration process, with the respective social-ecological factors. Only then will government be able to cope with the challenges posed by increasing rural-urban migration, for example limited housing availability in Ulaanbaatar, worsening air pollution, land degradation and the loss of nomadic lifestyles.

Our results also provide new ideas for future research in rural-urban migration. So far, research on migration in Mongolia remains siloed and is mostly analysed from either a purely natural (e.g. Hair 2013) or social science perspective (e.g. Stolpe 2016). There is a gap when it comes to analysing the social-ecological dynamics of migration in Mongolia. Most of the recent studies have focused exclusively on urbanisation processes in towards the capital city Ulaanbaatar. We thus recommend conducting large-scale research on migration in Mongolia in future to obtain a more holistic picture of past, present, and future trends in migration processes.

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