

Herders in Mongolia and the market economy (1)

As we mentioned in AAI News Volume 45, in the early 1990s Mongolia saw the end of the socialist era, which had lasted for nearly 70 years, and joined the world of the market economy. However, the economy of the country has been unstable due to reasons such as over-concentration of wealth in the capital Ulaanbaatar, increasing poverty and natural disasters. Therefore, the most important challenge in international cooperation for Mongolia is regional development that is in balance with development in urban areas; i.e. the revitalization of nomadic pastoral system. Nomadic pastoral system is the traditional land use in Mongolia and has long maintained the vast highlands of Mongolia in a sustainable fashion. Nomadic pastoral system has a very different dimension to it compared to the modern civilizations based on agricultural farming. Due to this reason it is still largely unknown how a nomadic pastoral society will sail through the mighty ocean that is called the market economy. For example, for nomadic pastoral system, it is desirable

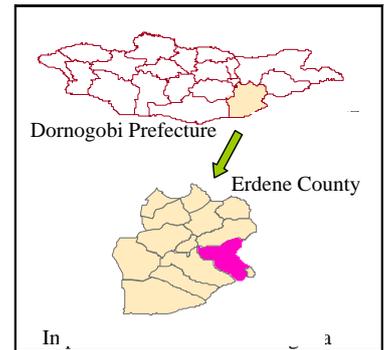
to keep a low population density, and for the population to disperse into a large area of land rather than live close together. By contrast, the market economy tends to favour markets with high population densities and therefore tends to thrive in large cities and their suburbs. Long-term stays in one place would degrade pasture and therefore would go against the basic principle of natural resource conservation that is inherent in the nomadic pastoral lifestyle. What is needed now is a brave challenge to achieve integration and co-existence of two very different principles; i.e. traditional nomadic pastoral system and market principles.

The current development study in Mongolia is exploring a number of possible interventions, ranging from improvement of production and processing of livestock products and joint shipments of the products to various possibilities for distribution and sales. These activities aim primarily to expand and stabilize cash income for people. At the same time, it is essential to ensure ecological sustainability of pasture utilization and nomadic pastoral system. This mini-serial essay will introduce two examples of dairy products shipment and sales projects which have been implemented with due care for environmental management in order not to over-utilize grassland resources.

The first example is the attempt to create a shipment and sales base in remote and low-impacted pasture in the Erdene County of the Dornogobi Prefecture that borders China. The central western part of Erdene is called Burdene, and is an area of supreme beauty with wetland valleys among small hills dotted with a bush called Zag (*Haloxylon ammodendron*). There is a retreat for those suffering from kidney ailments, and every year from June to August, many patients gather from all over Mongolia for treatment and recuperation. At this retreat, Mongolia's traditional treatment is offered, promoting perspiration by covering one's body with sands from dunes that are scorched by the sun. After that, water in the body is replenished using sour milk from camels called Botsalgaa. This increases demand for camel milk during the summer months and therefore creates a business opportunity for nomadic pastoral herders around the area to sell camel milk.

Study team was fielded and it aimed at distribution and sales of milk and dairy products at the retreat. In collaboration with the Mongolian authorities, the study team contributed to multi-dimensional improvement of resort management, assisting with improvement of water supply by digging wells, and with the reexamination of administration of the retreat including the wholesale price of milk and price setting for the facility's use. It also offered suggestions, guidance and advice regarding other aspects of the running of the retreat. However, they are still in the stage of trial and error, and not everything is moving as desired. Moreover, certain vulnerabilities such as condition of plant growth, which is influenced by the climatic conditions of each particular year, inevitably exist. Within these constraints, they are aiming to establish a management system for the vibrant retreat which can satisfy both retreat users and nomadic farmers. Furthermore, our ultimate goal is balanced pasture utilization.

An artificial structure, be it a retreat or a city, are only small dots within vast pastures. However, if seasonal livestock markets are established in remote areas, rather than around cities and convenient road and railway stations, it will not only lead to effective utilization of unused pastures, but also will alleviate the concentration of nomadic pastoral herders in particular pasture areas. There are some similar retreats for kidney ailments other than the Burdene in Mongolia. On the other hand, there is an increasing interest in ecotourism development such as setting up camping sites with Ger tents (traditional tents made of felt), and there is a growing expectation for economic development in the regions. If these facilities attracting tourists and patients for retreats are to be consolidated in future, it is highly likely that opportunities to sell livestock products in remote low-use pasture areas will grow dramatically, in contrast with the business as usual scenario of these opportunities concentrated in urban areas. This is what is in the root of our interventions to promote milk and dairy products sales and distribution at the Burdene retreat.



¹ The term nomadic pastoral system has a certain connotation and is often used confusingly. Pastoral system is defined as a type of livelihood activity in which people keep social hoofed livestock and rely on livestock products for their housing, clothing and food. It is one of the four most basic livelihood activities, along with gathering, hunting (including fishing) and farming, which have been sustaining human kind for a long time. However, pastoral system- has taken various forms depending on the region and time period. The term nomadic pastoral system in this article is used as a form of pastoral system. In principle regardless of the regularity of movement of people and livestock, it refers to pastoral system with seasonal movement of herders who do not own land.