



World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organisation working alongside children, families and communities to fight poverty and injustice.

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# MONGOLIA'S MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN

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# Why this Booklet?

Mongolia's rapid economic development since the nation's shift to a democratic government has transformed the country, impacting every level of society. GDP in this lower middle income country is expected to increase by a staggering 11.6%<sup>i</sup> in 2014 due to the booming mining sector; simultaneously, poverty rates sit at over 27%<sup>ii</sup>, confirming the vast chasm between rich and poor.

We have all heard the old proverb, 'children are the future of our nation'. The reality is that our investment in this future is tainted as too many of our children are amongst society's worst-impacted by the nation's poverty and inequality. Together we share responsibility for the fate of this future.

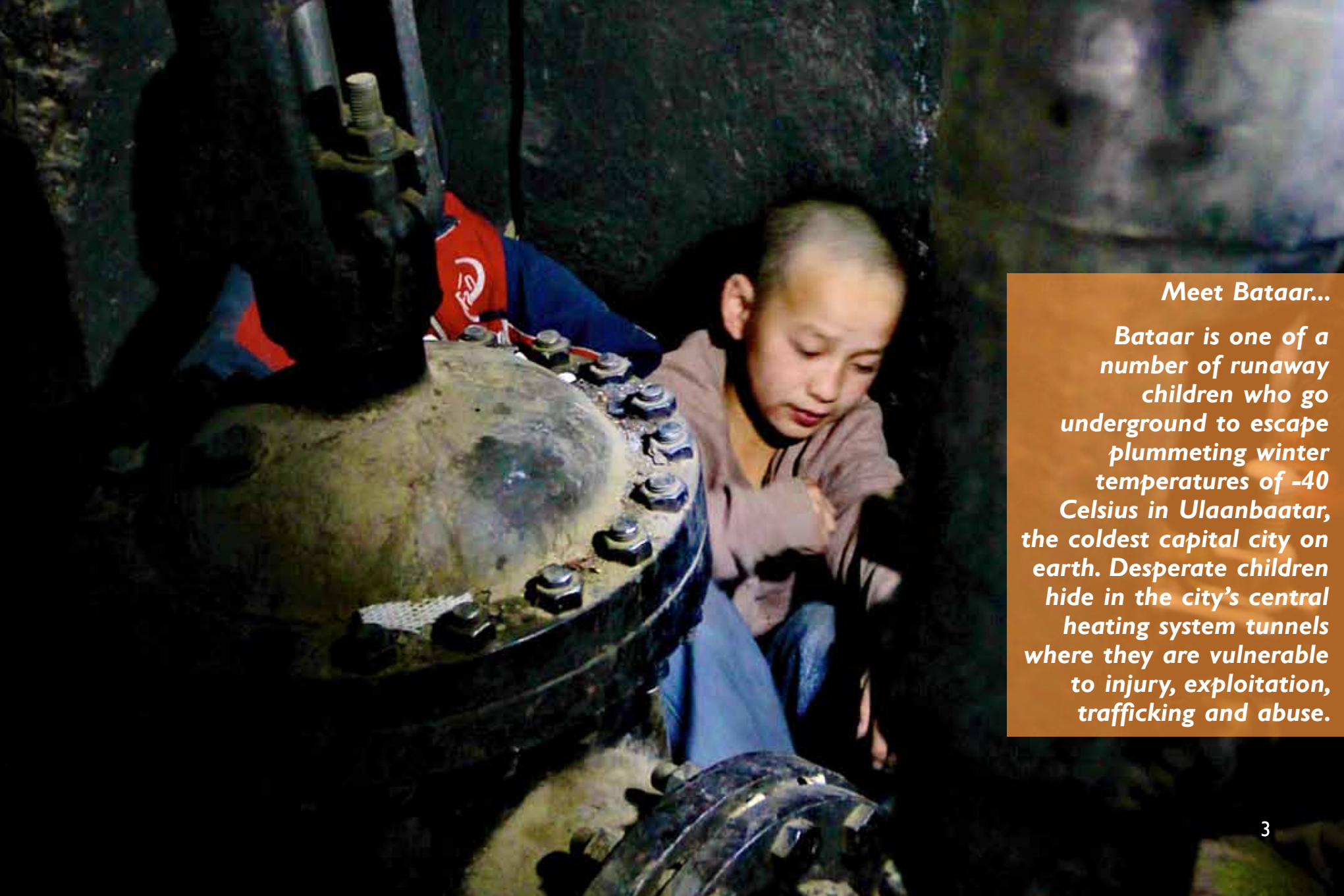
World Vision has worked alongside Mongolia's most vulnerable children for nearly 20 years, partnering with government, communities and children themselves to find solutions to poverty-based issues. We believe that no one should have to face deprivation, discrimination, abuse and catastrophic situations, least of all children. Every child has rights – to protection, education and health care, amongst others.

We cannot hope to address the issues faced by these children if we do not first identify who they are. This booklet aims to identify Mongolia's most vulnerable children and to highlight the factors that cause their vulnerability, in the hope that this can provide a foundation for their better protection.

Let us together build a brighter future for every child in Mongolia.

Vincent Edwards | National Director | World Vision Mongolia

*Our investment in this future is tainted as too many of our children are amongst society's worst-impacted by the nation's poverty and inequality.*



### ***Meet Bataar...***

***Bataar is one of a number of runaway children who go underground to escape plummeting winter temperatures of -40 Celsius in Ulaanbaatar, the coldest capital city on earth. Desperate children hide in the city's central heating system tunnels where they are vulnerable to injury, exploitation, trafficking and abuse.***

# Who are the Most Vulnerable Children?

Mongolia's Most Vulnerable Children are children whose quality of life and ability to fulfil their potential is most affected by **extreme deprivation** and **violations of their rights**. These children often live in **catastrophic situations** and **relationships** characterised by violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, exclusion and discrimination.

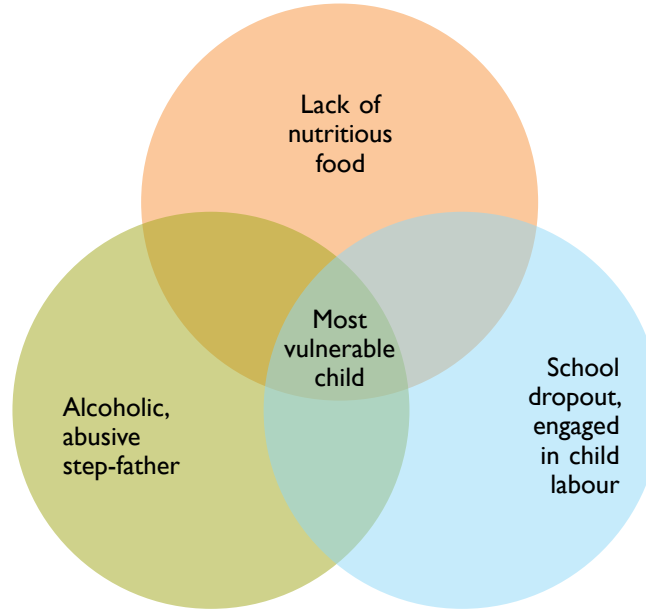
These four key factors are at the roots of a child's vulnerability:

- Extreme deprivation
- Abusive relationships
- Serious discrimination
- Disasters and catastrophes

In spite of his or her tender years, one child could face multiple vulnerability factors.

The **more factors** a child experiences,  
and the **longer** a child experiences any factor,  
the **more vulnerable** he or she becomes -  
until he or she is among the **most vulnerable**<sup>iii</sup>.

For example, the following combination of vulnerabilities is sadly true-to-life for some Mongolian children:



**Most vulnerable children are those who face multiple accumulated vulnerability factors over a period of time.**

## The Mongolian context

Engaging local cultural and social norms is at the heart of child protection<sup>iv</sup>. Whilst vulnerable children across the globe face similar struggles, vulnerabilities need to be defined locally as contexts and cultural perceptions of childhood are unique, and vary greatly. The prevalence of some of Mongolia's social issues is specific to its context. The World Health Organisation notes that alcohol abuse could be the country's most significant stumbling block to social and economic progress, with 22% of Mongolian men dependent on alcohol and 72% of violent crime being alcohol-driven<sup>v</sup>. In addition, an increasing number of school-age youth report drinking alcohol. The ever-growing mining and horse riding industries impact the daily lives

of many local children through exploitative child labour, health risks or lack of supervision.

The harsh winter dzuds (drought, extreme cold and snowfall) threaten the health and economic resilience of families, with far-reaching impacts on the well-being of children.

## Asking the right questions

Traditionally, the government, INGOs and other child-focused organisations have categorised vulnerable children as ‘street children’, ‘children impacted by mining’, ‘orphans’, etc. These labels are useful to an extent, but can often misdirect well-intentioned stakeholders away from the real heart of the issues, causing us to judge according to surface problems rather than digging deeper to the root causes of vulnerability. For example, a child with a physical disability may actually be well-functioning and resilient with an excellent support system, demonstrating that labels alone can be highly misleading.

The question we should really be asking is, ‘Why are children vulnerable?’ Now is the time to re-frame the discussion so that we can truly impact the lives of Mongolia’s most vulnerable children for good. We start with the four vulnerability factors as our foundation from which to identify causes. This booklet is intended not as a comprehensive discourse on the topic, but to inform further exploration.

As we go, we will hear the real-life stories of children who are amongst Mongolia’s most vulnerable (NB: names have been changed). Each of them has faced multiple vulnerability factors during their young lives.

*The question we should really be asking is, ‘Why are children vulnerable?’*



**Meet Buya...**

*When she was 11 years old, Buya and her alcoholic mother lived in the house of her abusive, drunken stepfather. Buya behaved aggressively, often missing school, wandering the streets and engaging in petty theft. Her life on the streets made her vulnerable to further abuse, trafficking and violence.*

*Three years later, Buya is almost unrecognisable. She flashes her open smile as she expresses her hopes for the future, "I want to be a policewoman to protect children from crime and violence."*



## Vulnerability Factor:

# Extreme Deprivation

### *What is it?*

Extreme deprivation refers to severe material poverty or the deprivation of caregivers.

### *In what ways are children deprived in Mongolia? What is the impact?*

Deprivation comes in many forms; children may be deprived of basic necessities, an education, protection, good health, nutrition and water.

The UN reports that only 30.5% of people in Mongolia have access to a centralised water supply system, which presents potential water-related diseases to those without. More than 20% of children under five years of age experience stunting which reflects chronic malnutrition,<sup>vi</sup> or a series of diseases that affect a child's physical growth over an extended period of time. Malnourishment is caused by a lack of food quantity and quality and can negatively impact the physical and mental growth of a child, with long-lasting effects into adulthood<sup>vii</sup>.

Children who drop out of school are robbed of their future potential and in some cases, even basic literacy. The majority tend to be boys who often end up wandering the streets, with no adult care. These and other unsupervised and neglected youth may engage in petty theft, alcoholism and violent crime.



*All children should have adequate healthcare, education, protection and the chance to participate.*

The long working hours of struggling parents can negatively impact a child as they accompany their parents to dangerous working environments, or are left behind at home, unsupervised.

### **What are the causes of deprivation?**

**Chronic poverty** lies at the roots of extreme deprivation. The major health problems of stunting and malnourishment are most likely to affect children living in rural areas. This is largely due to diet, which is impacted by **extreme temperatures** as low as  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Whilst city-dwellers can more easily access imported food including fruit and vegetables for sufficient nutrition, nomads and rural families rely mostly on dairy and meat products for sustenance. Harsh winter 'dzuds' (extreme weather) of recent years have wiped out millions of livestock, leaving rural families with spiralling economic and health problems. In addition, **water infrastructure challenges** come in the form of the country's vast geography and nomadic lifestyles.

Whilst health care is available to all in theory, migrants and the unregistered poor usually **cannot afford** the tests necessary for diagnosis. This has a sustained impact on children with long term illnesses and disabilities.

School overcrowding in cities due to **rapid urbanisation**, as well as **outmoded teaching styles**, drive some children away from education. Others dropout due to issues in the home, such as alcoholism, poverty and abuse; these are caused variously by parental **alcohol addiction and violence, a lack of parenting support and overcrowded family homes** where several generations live together.

# Meet Tuugii...

**A**t two years old, little Tuugii follows his older brother Tuvshin, 8, everywhere. Tuugii does not notice the dirt on his own face and clothes; instead his sad eyes follow Tuvshin as he runs to pat the scruffy family dog, Tuugii scampering behind to imitate his sibling.

During the school holidays, the pair helps their mother and older sister to pull vegetables from the dirt in their garden greenhouse, occasionally sneaking a cucumber or two to munch. The family lives on a plot of land in an impoverished ger district of Ulaanbaatar, their new wire fence built to deter some of the fiercer neighbourhood strays. A pile of wood for the stove is barely enough to heat the ger (traditional Mongolian home) during colder months.

Less than a year ago, the family's economic situation was dire. The children's mother worked at the city rubbish dump, collecting litter to recycle in exchange for a paltry

amount of cash. Instead of attending day-care, Tuugii accompanied his mother and siblings to the dumpsite, which put his health at serious risk.

Big brother Tuvshin dropped out of school, and day after day, the children were exposed to hazardous waste, polluted air and disease-carrying vermin, amongst other risks.

Thanks to a home visitor programme initiated by World Vision and local government, the children's mother has now been trained in good parenting and vegetable growing. The family now rely on their vegetable garden as a source of nutrition and income, and have stopped working at the rubbish dump.

They face a long road ahead as they put the years of deprivation behind them, but with Tuvshin ready to return to school and little Tuugii starting kindergarten, the future already looks brighter.



*“The children were exposed to hazardous waste, polluted air and disease-carrying vermin.”*

## Vulnerability Factor:

# Abusive Relationships

### *What are they?*

Abusive relationships are those which are characterised by violence, intentional harm and negligence, or the use of a child to benefit others sexually or commercially.

### *In what ways are children engaged in abusive relationships in Mongolia? What is the impact?*

A significant number of Mongolian children face abusive relationships in their homes, at school, and for those engaged in child labour, at work. In addition, there are incidences of Mongolian children being trafficked for labour and sexual exploitation.

Children suffer greatly from the violence they experience at home; a staggering 79% of children aged 2 to 14 are psychologically or physically punished in this context<sup>viii</sup>. The physical and psychological effects of abuse vary in severity, but have in some cases resulted in the death of a child. Impacts are long term and have a 'ripple effect', as abuse and violence tend to 'spill over' - children release their anger and pain on siblings, peers and the next generation.

Approximately 77,000 children in the country are engaged in some form of work<sup>ix</sup>, whether in markets, domestic work, construction, herding, or the mining industry. Child jockeys and those impacted by the horse riding industry are of significant concern. Instead of playing and learning, tens of thousands of children are robbed of their childhood, facing exhaustion and



**We must create safe home and school environments for all children in Mongolia where they are cared for and protected.**

injury in often dangerous environments.

The commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children within and outside the country continues, with reports of Japanese and South Korean tourists engaging in child sexual exploitation.<sup>x</sup>

### **What are the causes of abusive relationships?**

Violence and abuse in the home is often due to **high levels of alcoholism**, with 22 percent of Mongolian men and 5 percent of women dependent on alcohol - rates three times higher than in Europe<sup>xi</sup>. Tensions run high as several generations squeeze into **overcrowded gers** that are not built for privacy. Caregivers **lack positive parenting skills** to support and educate their children.

**Teachers lack training** on modern styles of discipline, causing them to resort to abusive archaic methods.

The prevalence of child labour can in part be attributed to its **low cost** as well as **low levels of family income**. School dropouts who go to work are not followed-up. Child labour legislation is not closely implemented, with a **lack of monitoring** on the ground.

Child sex tourists devastate children's lives through exploiting the **looser child protection reporting standards** in the country.

# Meet Batbold and family...

“I want to be a good person...someone with a warm heart, like a police officer or doctor. Many people have been kind to me and I want to be kind as well,” says Batbold, 12 years old [pictured, second from right].

The excited voices of Batbold and his four siblings, aged six to 14, fill the bright play room. Behind their smiles is a deep pain that is just beginning to heal.

The siblings used to live with their parents and three year old brother. Two years ago, the siblings watched in horror as their drunken father beat his own three year old to death, throwing him against the wall.

Their father was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Depressed, their mother began drinking and would leave the children for three to four days at a time, hungry and confused. They were finally taken into care by

the police and then by World Vision’s interim children’s home, where they are now healing psychologically.

“When the kids came here they were in deep shock because the incident happened right before their eyes,” describes Oyunchimeg, the programme coordinator.

The children are showing improvements in their physical and mental development as they regularly attend school and take part in creative activities. Orgil, 6, loves to paint and dreams of being a construction worker, while Bolormaa, 11, desires to be a dancer. Bold, 14, excels at chemistry and exclaims, “When people are good at chemistry they become doctors!” Batbold and his brothers and sisters may never forget the traumatic images of that horrific event, but they are recovering day by day and reclaiming their right to dream of a better future.



*“Behind their smiles is a deep pain that is just beginning to heal.”*



## Vulnerability Factor:

# Serious Discrimination

### *What is it?*

Severe social stigma which prevents children from accessing services or opportunities that are essential to their development or protection.

### *In what ways do children face discrimination in Mongolia? What is the impact?*

The Child Rights International Network notes that, “Discrimination involves treating an individual or a group of people unfairly in comparison to others because of who they are, or their circumstances”<sup>xii</sup>. Deliberate discrimination against children can come from a variety of sources, including community members, peers and even public services.

Poverty, stigma and exclusion characterise discrimination against individuals and groups of children. These groups include children with disabilities, unregistered children, migrant children, young male herders and school dropouts. They are vulnerable to being bullied by their peers and communities who view them as ‘different’, or excluded from services, causing physical, emotional and psychological damage.

UNICEF reports that, “Children living in poverty are among the least likely to attend their local school or clinic, but those who live in poverty and also have a disability are even less likely to do so”<sup>xiii</sup>. In Mongolia, there are an estimated 32,516 children living with disabilities<sup>xiv</sup>. Missed opportunities for education will present difficulties when young disabled people



**Habits of stigmatisation of those who are 'different' must be broken.**

enter the workforce, and even educated youth with disabilities are discriminated against by employers. A lack of access to health services has an immediate effect on children's health, particularly for those with long term illnesses.

### **What are the causes of discrimination?**

Mongolia's rich nomadic heritage is being affected by the **rapid rate of migration** to urban areas; this currently stands at 2.8% of the population per year<sup>xv</sup>. The movement is triggered by a combination of low incomes, unemployment and natural disasters. Expensive land, particularly in Ulaanbaatar, leads to overcrowding in 'ger districts' on the city's peripheries. Many children in these poverty-stricken areas come from nomadic backgrounds and take time to settle into city life; this can create **friction in communities**. Some rural migrant children are unregistered, creating a barrier to accessing government services.

Discrimination between peers can be attributed to **differences in family status** and a **habit of stigmatisation** of those who are different. Caregivers who **lack parental skills** and who do not use positive discipline practices instead use violence to educate their children. Children who live in these environments **replicate their home experiences** amongst their peers, releasing their stress and anger through bullying.

In many rural areas, boys (and some girls) are **expected to forego education** in order to take care of family livestock, whilst most girls are sent to school.

# Meet Enkhee...

“They have been checking on him so often, the boy always asks for them. He says ‘My teachers aren’t coming. Where are they? Aren’t they going to examine me?’” reveals Norov, as she watches her nine year old grandson Enkhee receive treatment at the mobile health clinic.

Enkhee lives in a ger district of Ulaanbaatar, where high poverty rates, poor hygiene and lack of nutritious food are cause for various health problems. Children like Enkhee from poverty-stricken areas are often unregistered and have no health insurance. They often suffer from inadequate vaccinations, worms and tuberculosis.

Although the government is mandated to provide medical treatment for all children, the unregistered and poor go undiagnosed as they cannot afford the necessary tests.

The World Vision mobile clinic fills the gap, being part ambulance, part diagnosis centre. “We diagnose the children. If we confirm that a child has a certain problem then the government has to provide treatment for that child, even if the child is unregistered,” explains mobile clinic doctor Batjargal. “The main importance is that we take care of unregistered children. No family clinic doctor would go to a mountain and visit families,” states Dr. Batjargal as he carefully examines Enkhee.

Enkhee has bone cancer and had some of his leg bones removed. “He should be in 3rd grade at the school his brother goes to, but there’s no way he can go. Just walking from here to the front door makes him tired,” shares Norov. “It’s been six months since they started checking up on him. He’s getting better... I wouldn’t get medical service any other way.”



*“No family clinic doctor would go to a mountain and visit families.”*

## Vulnerability Factor:

# Disasters and Catastrophes

### *What are they?*

Disasters are natural or man-made events which seriously threaten the survival or development of a child. A catastrophe has a similar impact, but can be experienced at the household level, such as an unexpected or serious illness.

### *In what ways are children impacted by disasters and catastrophes in Mongolia?*

In the context of an emergency, children are amongst the most vulnerable in a population. Mongolia is particularly prone to severe dzuds (drought, extreme cold and snowfall), but the country also experiences other natural disasters including drought, wind storms and floods.

Winter temperatures of below -50 Celsius have been recorded in Mongolia's coldest provinces. The devastating dzud of winter 2009 - 2010 killed 17% of the country's livestock (7.8 million animals)<sup>xvi</sup>, a heavy blow for an economy dependent on agriculture.

Winter dzuds have far-reaching consequences, particularly for children living in isolated, rural communities. In the dzud of 2010, infant mortality rates in Zavkhan, the worst affected province, spiked to 32.3 per 1000 live births, as compared with the national average of 22.7<sup>xvii</sup>. Health issues included those associated with the cold and from lack of access to facilities, as well as the immense risks posed by the thawing and decomposition of animal carcasses.



*Children and communities should be given the chance to prepare for disasters.*



Herders' children living in dormitories were at high risk of becoming school dropouts. Food security issues rose with inflation. Many herders were left without any source of income and with limited access to formal financial services. Unsurprisingly, many inhabitants migrated to cities and to the central regions in search of alternative employment<sup>xviii</sup>.

In addition, a household-level catastrophe, such as the death of a parent, would change the life of a child in countless ways.

### ***What are the causes of this severe impact on children?***

Children have special needs during an emergency. They are amongst the most vulnerable should a disaster strike because of their “**susceptibility to injury and their dependence on others** for livelihood, decision making, and emotional support.”<sup>xix</sup> Their resilience to withstand the negative impacts of an emergency is lower than the average adult; they are likely to develop dehydration, malnutrition and exhaustion faster than adults. The same principles stand for household-level catastrophes: children are particularly **susceptible to the adverse affects of a catastrophe**, whether physical or psychological, due to their earlier stage of development and fewer resources for coping.<sup>xx</sup>

Children in communities who have **not prepared** for disasters are likely to be the worst-impacted.

# Meet Adiya...

“Some camels are naughty, some are nice... they scream and spit...” 15 year old herder Adiya knows a thing or two about caring for these noble creatures. His ruddy cheeks betray his rural upbringing in one of Mongolia’s coldest locations. “We milk the camels in the morning and we milk the cows in the morning and the evening. If the camels run far away, it’s difficult to find them.”

Under the vast expanse of blue sky in remote Zavkhan province, Adiya and his father Delegnyam work steadfastly to care for their 150 animals. The pair may be amongst the most resilient people on the planet, part of a lineage of nomadic herders that has survived for centuries in isolated and starkly inhospitable environments, with temperatures dipping below -50 Celsius in the winter months.

Adiya’s winning smile fades as he remembers the devastating dzud of winter 2010, which claimed the lives of 7.8 million livestock countrywide, including all 300 of the family’s sheep, goats, cows, horses and camels. This left the family without a source of income or adequate nourishment, their mobility impaired due to the fierce winter conditions. Without outside assistance, the situation could have deteriorated further.

“Camels are beautiful animals...They’re clever; they live according to how we train them... Camels don’t die easily, they can usually survive a dzud,” comments Delegnyam. The family has worked from scratch to build up their herds, whose wool and dairy produce can be used and sold, but Adiya’s future health and wellbeing remains uncertain should he have to face another severe winter.



*The devastating dzud claimed the lives of all 300 of the family's sheep, goats, cows, horses and camels.*



# Meet Bayarmaa...

At first glance, Bayarmaa appears to be a regular 15 year old girl. In reality, she carries a heavy burden within her, having fallen victim to the dark side of small-scale mining.

In the small town of Zuunkharaa, 180 kilometres northwest of Ulaanbaatar, many families struggle to make a living, leaving them no choice but to turn to small scale mining for gold. Bayarmaa's family is no exception. Her mother has been working at the mine for the last six years, leaving Bayarmaa and her two younger sisters in the care of their older brother.

In her mother's absence, Bayarmaa's brother started harassing and sexually abusing her. Bayarmaa was too afraid to tell her mother,

the abuse continuing for three years until her mother herself witnessed the brother's actions. Bayarmaa's brother was sent to jail, but she still bears the consequences of his actions.

Today, Bayarmaa faces mental and emotional health challenges, and due to issues with her peers, has dropped out of school. As news travels fast in her small community, Bayarmaa prefers to isolate herself from her surroundings and refuses to socialise.

Bayarmaa's incident is just one case that surfaced to public attention, but with so many parents turning to the gold mining industry, it is difficult to ascertain how many other children fall victim to this tragedy.



*The abuse continued for three years... Bayarmaa's brother was sent to jail, but she still bears the consequences of his actions.*

# Recommendations

Let us move away from the traditional categorisation of vulnerable children simply as 'street children' or 'child jockeys'. It is time to re-frame the argument so that our actions can target the true causes of issues.

## Government:

- Increase health and educational infrastructure and manpower to address problems of urban overcrowding, adopting the innovative practices of INGOs and NGOs. Informal education, mobile clinics and home visitor programmes all 'fill the gaps' to reach the most vulnerable.
- Train teachers in active learning approaches to equip them to truly engage children.
- Strengthen Child Protection Systems at national and local levels to support existing laws:
  - Promote the importance of reporting abuse and an awareness of available reporting structures; publicise available services to the general public.
  - Build the capacity of local-level Multidisciplinary Teams and service providers, giving professional training to staff. Promote equitable treatment of all clients.
  - Promote the Child Rights Protection law, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols.
- Encourage child participation and listen to the views of vulnerable children on issues affecting their lives. Inform children of their rights.
- Improve access to formal and informal social welfare services, health and education.
- Support isolated rural communities to create disaster preparedness plans.
- Promote income-generating initiatives that will boost the financial stability of the most vulnerable families.
- Intensify anti-alcoholism campaigns and ensure the implementation of related laws.



- **INGOs & NGOs:** Collaborate closely with government and one another, providing technical expertise and sharing best practices in education, child protection and participation, health and resilience. Collect data through face-to-face programmes such as the home visitor programme to build evidence for further initiatives and to monitor progress. Provide parenting skills development to targeted families.
- **Media:** You have the power to move hearts and minds to take action for good. Partner with the government & NGOs to raise awareness on key issues of vulnerable children through your communication channels. Do not sensationalise or belittle their plight, but amplify their voices.
- **Teachers:** Learn about participatory learning methodologies to enhance your skills in the classroom. Create a safe, fair, positive environment for children and listen to their thoughts and opinions.
- **Parents:** Education will transform the lives of your little ones – encourage them to attend kindergarten and school. Be role models to your children through your behaviour and listening ear. Create positive, fair, safe environments for them where they feel comfortable sharing their feelings openly. Build their confidence, teach them how to protect themselves. Their insights are valuable and can help to solve issues. Mothers, breastfeed your babies for the first six months of life to give them the healthiest start.
- **General public:** Have an open mind to children. Volunteer on a 'Home Visitor' programme run by the government and World Vision and transform lives. Report any form of child abuse to your local government child protection team.

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