

Children on the move: Rural-urban migration and access to education in Mongolia

National University of Mongolia, Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Centre (CHIP) and
Save the Children UK Mongolia, 2005



This study suggests that the target of providing education for all Mongolian children by 2015 is unlikely to be achieved unless the effects of rural to urban migration on children are better addressed. Living conditions and household economic situations are difficult for more than a quarter of families who moved and who were left behind, raising concerns for their children's more general wellbeing.

1. MIGRATION AND CHILDREN

Most studies of migration and of poverty in Mongolia and elsewhere overlook children in the design and analysis. NUM/CHIP/SCUK has placed children at the centre of their analysis, considering their and their families' experiences of rural-urban migration and the effect it has had on their lives. The study examined children and their families in urban areas of high in-migration and rural areas of high out-migration, and analysed the *impact of migration on children's access to a good education both for those moving and for those in areas left behind by migrants.*

The study methodology

A comparative study was carried out in eight sites:

- three soums (both rural areas and *soum* centres) in Dornod, Zavkhan and Dundgovi;
- three *aimag* centres in Selenge and Dornod (both with high in- and out- migration) and Zavkhan (with high out-migration);
- and two cities, Ulaanbaatar and Erdenet¹

This selection ensured a geographical spread across the country. The sites were purposively chosen to reach areas with high in-migration, high out-migration and high in and out migration, also reflecting different economic activities and employment rates.

The study was comparative, not nationally representative. It included:

- a household survey covering 964 migrant and non-migrant families with children aged 3-16.
- qualitative research methods - focus groups and interviews using participatory techniques- with 335 children and 209 adults.

Poverty, education and children

The second generation of children, post transition, is now growing up in Mongolia. Their access to education and their poverty status are inherently linked. Income/consumption poverty can prevent children getting a good education, for example, when families can't afford to pay the costs of education or related costs, such as administrative fees. A lack of education is an important dimension of children's (and adults') poverty. Poor access to education could be due to a lack of (public) provision of services for children or the particular needs of specific children/adults, for example a boy child may be education-poor for cultural not economic reasons. Failure to obtain a good education when you are a child increases your chances of growing up in poverty – and even passing that poverty on to your children. Investing in this generation of children is a critical investment in the future of Mongolia.

¹ *Aimags* are provinces in Mongolia; the major town of each *aimag* is the *aimag* centre. *Soums* are districts within *aimags*.



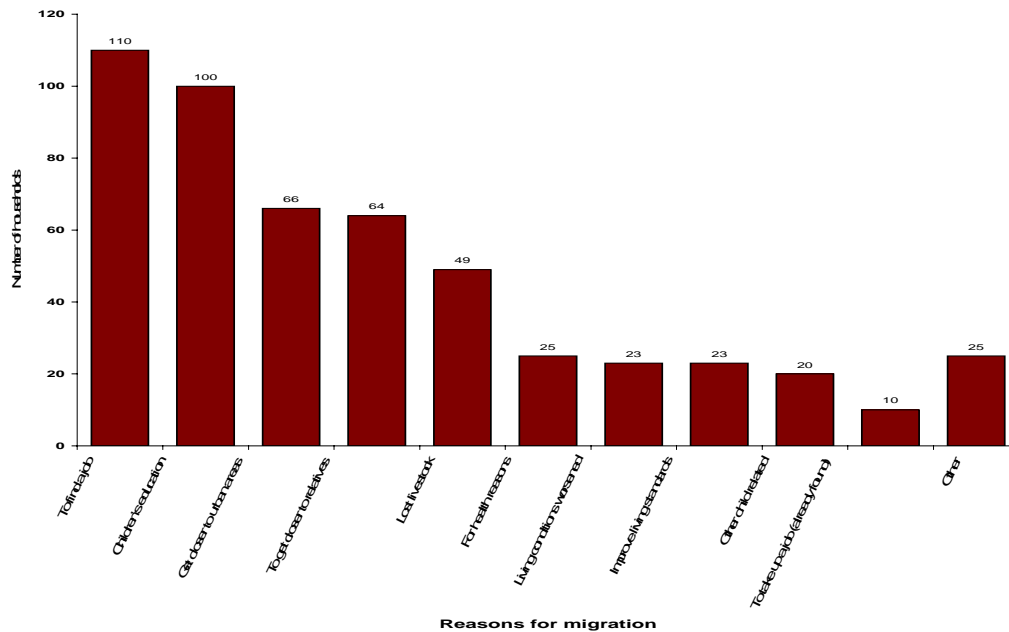


Figure 1: Migrant households' reasons for moving (the 311 migrant households in Ulaanbaatar, Erdenet, Selenge and Kherlen Soum were offered up to three reasons each)

Children on the move and those left behind

- Families with children are moving – and at increasing rates. More and more children are growing up as migrants or in areas 'left behind'.
- Migration is likely to continue. Most families who have lived in their current home for more than 5 years (between 60% and 75% depending on the location) are planning to move.
- Some 4.6% of children in households surveyed are left behind in rural centres by one or both parents who have migrated to urban areas. Qualitative work suggests more children than this are affected. Families dividing as a result of migration can have negative impacts on children's well-being.
- Focus groups and interviews suggest that it is common for rural children to be sent to urban areas to school; sometimes families move to join them.

Children's futures as a reason for migration

- **Children's schooling, or giving children a better education, was one of the three most important reasons for nearly one-third (31.2%) of migrant families.** This was particularly the case for those moving to Kherlen *soum* (the urban centre of Dornod *aimag*) from neighbouring *soums*, and to Ulaanbaatar and Erdenet cities.
- A similar number of migrant households (34.3%) moved to find work. Some of these, plus the 15.3% moving after losing livestock, used migration as their coping strategy for dealing with an economic shock. Others considered more general advantages of living in urban areas; 6.2% thought migrating would generally improve their children's futures.

2. MIGRANT CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Migration: improving access to education?

- 91.6% of all school-aged children in households surveyed in Ulaanbaatar, Erdenet, Selenge and Kherlen *soum* were in formal education at the time of the survey. However, school-aged **migrant children in our sample were more than three times more likely to be out of school than long-term resident children.** 11.9% of migrant children – one in eight – are out of school; 3.6% of long-term urban residents do not attend.
- Migrant children are four times more likely to drop out: 8.9% compared with 2.2% of long-term urban residents. Box 1 considers those dropping out.
- The availability of non-formal education requires further study. Designed to support children who have dropped out to re-enter school and/or get a certificate, non-formal education in the areas surveyed appeared to be of varying standards, often underfunded and insufficient.

Furthermore, **significant numbers of those who can attend struggle to do so.** This is the case for both migrants and long-term urban residents, but often more so for migrant families.

When we moved here, it was difficult for my parents to get me a place in school. We looked everywhere. One acquaintance of us helped me to enrol in the school No11. I tried to enter schools No 5 and 13. They refused to accept more children. (interview with child in Erdenet)

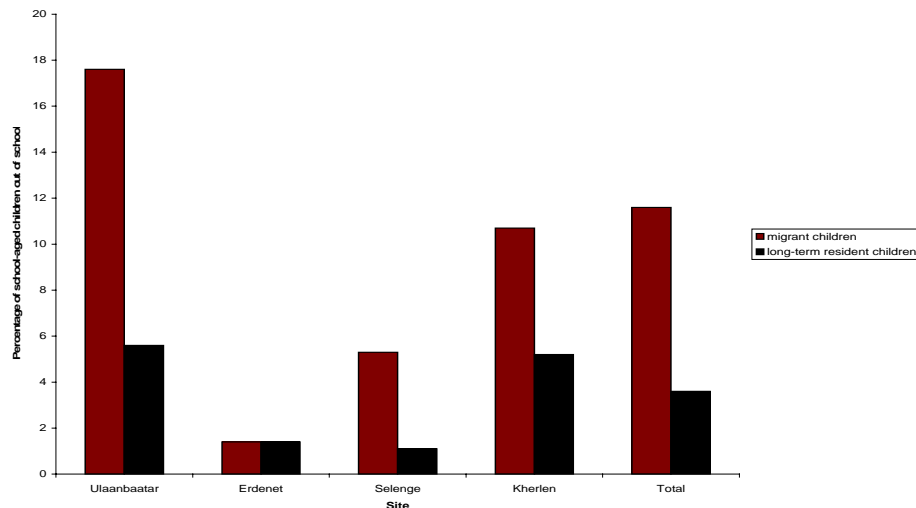


Figure 2: Children out of school by research site, comparing migrants and long-term residents

- Education costs are high (in relation to family income). Many are hidden: schools charge for classroom repair, class funds and textbooks.
- Schools do not receive enough funding to provide vulnerable children and those from households with three or more children in school with the state assistance of Tg16,000 (approximately US\$13). This should be provided in the form of books and materials once a year. Schools have to divide their assistance budget between many children – a problem in all sites. Families often need assistance from relatives/others to keep children in school.
- Schools are often far from where families, particularly migrant families, are living, creating problems of security and transport for children.

Box 1: Which migrants are dropping out?

43 migrant children, from 32 different households in the 4 urban research sites, have dropped out of school – this small sample suggests certain trends. Some 12 of the 43 children (27.9%) said their main reason for dropping out was because the urban schools would not accept them. 7 (16.3%) dropped out because there was no school nearby. 7 (16.3%) of migrant children who dropped out did so to look after livestock. A further 5 (11.6%) dropped out because the family could not afford the costs of education. The other 12 children gave other different reasons. The children who dropped out were those who were:

- **living in the capital city.** 70% of the 43 children who have dropped out moved to Ulaanbaatar (40% of all children moved to the capital).
- **from a soum centre or rural area.**
- **from a household that had problems with registration.** Until September 2003, registration in the new place of residence involved paying a fee to the city/aimag authority.

Children who have dropped out appear more likely to be from a poor family:

- **A family struggling to cover basic needs.** 50% of households with children who have dropped out say they can't provide enough for their family's basic daily needs (compared to 31.6% of all migrant households). Children who have dropped out are more likely to come from households that struggle to heat their homes and do not have electricity. 43.8% of households with children who have dropped out (compared with 26% of all migrant households) feel that since migration their economic situation has got slightly or a lot worse.
- **A family receiving less assistance than before.** 35% of households with children who have dropped out (compared with 16% of all households) said their support from relatives had decreased since moving, 32% said their assistance from the state had decreased since moving, compared with 14% of all households who said state assistance had declined.
- **A larger household.** Children who dropped out of school were more likely to come from households with six or more members.
- **A household that lost livestock (an economic shock).** Some 32% of households with a child who dropped out (7.8% of all households) moved after loss of livestock.

Most children dropped out when they were at primary (grades 1-4) rather than secondary school (grades 5-10/11) in equal numbers of girls and boys. 44% (14) of these children are now contributing to family income.

Note: Was the registration fee (and bureaucracy) to blame? It certainly appears that this seriously affected families' abilities to send their children to school. However, the problems faced by migrant families are a complex mixture of poverty, and school- and legislation-related difficulties. Removing the fee was a positive first step but it is unlikely to have relieved all problems facing migrants.

City school teachers say to children who have moved from the countryside 'go back to where you came from, do not disgrace out class' (interview with child, Erdenet)

Better quality education in urban areas?

In most places, migrant children and their families felt the quality of education was better than before moving, particularly the quality of the teaching. However, there are serious concerns about:

- **capacity and resources.** Urban schools in areas of high in-migration are overcrowded – three-shift teaching is a common response to this problem.
- **discrimination** against migrant children in schools occurs as children are often behind in the curriculum when they arrive in urban areas.

Children from different schools and areas have different experiences. Children comparing education in Kherlen Soum *aimag* centre with that of their rural *soums* see big improvements. Children in Ulaanbaatar and Erdenet, who have moved from a range of rural and urban areas, experience more problems after moving. This includes lack of capacity: the numbers of pupils are greater in city schools. Of course, individual teachers, school directors and education officials, as is the case in Selenge *aimag* centre, can have a positive impact on children's experiences and well-being.

Is there a dual system of education emerging? Education in peri-urban areas is of a lower quality than in city centre schools. Also, a number of families in urban centres pay for special classes or schools that charge an annual fee. Whilst recognising the pressures on public provision of education, an increased reliance on households to pay for a better quality education raises concerns for equity of access for all children to a good education.

Migration also has an effect on aspects of child well-being and family life that can affect children's attainment in school. Again, whereas many families see an improvement in their situation, one in four are not benefiting from migration.

- The home environment is important for children's homework: migrants, for example, are less likely to be connected to electricity.
- For as many as a quarter of migrant households, the family's economic situation has got worse. 36.2% of families surveyed feel their economic situation has improved a little or substantially since moving; 37.7% feel it has stayed the same and 26% think it has got worse. Migrant families are struggling to find employment in new areas and are more likely to work in the informal sector (often low paid, insecure and long hours). 31.6% of migrant families feel they do not have enough for their basic daily needs; a further 49.4% believe they have only enough for their basic needs, and no more. Long-term residents have similar problems but the situation is worse for migrants. Working

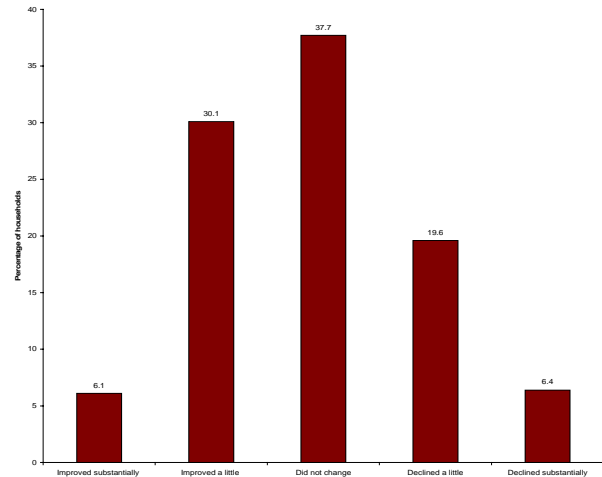


Fig 3: Household economic situation after migration, compared with before moving

long hours or being unemployed can have implications for the time parents spend with children, and/or can strain family relations.

- For children, life can be harder after migration: poor children in migrant settlements have many responsibilities, such as fetching water and firewood and income earning activities such as carrying goods and petty trade in the markets.
- The cost of living of migrant families, especially education cost has increased since migration

3. EDUCATION AND LIFE CHANCES FOR THOSE LEFT BEHIND

Would life have been better had they stayed in rural areas? What is the situation for those children in areas left behind by so many out-migrants?

Falling numbers and declining services in out-migration areas

- Rural schools are experiencing falling numbers due to out-migration, and there is also a declining population growth rate.
- Children in rural schools face problems of:
 - Their school environment, particularly a lack of heating – a problem in a country where temperatures reach minus 40 in winter
 - Availability of equipment and materials
 - Declining teaching standards. Teachers report a lack of training and increased pressure for good results. Many teachers are teaching a variety of subjects, rather than the one they were trained in.

These problems in turn push children and their families to seek alternatives in urban centres.

- Schools are operating under threat of closure – children would then be required to attend nearby *soums'* schools. This situation is likely to increase with falling numbers and falling school budgets.

Children's perceptions of education improvements:

School environment in area of high in-migration

- *The school building is very nice*
- *School dormitory is comfortable*
- *Not enough space in school classrooms*
- *Three children sit at one desk*
- *Good specialized classes*
- *The school has sports hall*
- *Environment close to information flow*

School environment in area of high out-migration

- *It is very cold, heating systems break down in winter*
- *The school does not have sports hall*
- *The sports hall is very cold*
- *The school has no books, no teaching materials*
- *There is no computer in the countryside*
- *It is impossible to go to the library*

Access to education in rural areas

- More children are out of school in rural areas than in urban areas.
- The **cost** of education was an important reason why children drop out of school. Some drop out to contribute to the household economy. Involvement in livestock herding is still a key reason for boys' non-attendance.
- The other major reason given for children dropping out was **health** problems. Poor health is often poverty related, due to both poor environmental conditions at home and poor health service provision. This requires further study.
- Children also dropped out due to a lack of interest in studying – in part a reflection of education quality and, perhaps, of a lack of relevance to rural life. As in urban areas, material **assistance from the state to poor families was inadequate**.
- **Non-formal education is particularly inadequate**. This appeared to be of mixed quality, was only held in summer in rural areas, and was underfunded. Teachers were operating under pressure to get children into these classes, and teach during school vacations.

Living conditions for families

Education decline is part of a general picture of economic decline in these areas and of hardships facing children such as:

- Lack of electricity (for homework)
- Parents' unemployment and the stress this places on families. 44% of rural, non-migrant families say their economic situation has worsened over the past five years. In the three *soums* and one remote *aimag* centre surveyed, 37% of families did not feel they had enough for their basic daily needs (a higher percentage than for migrant families and for long-term urban residents).
- Children being involved in work – both paid and domestic – to contribute to household livelihoods.
- Reported health service decline in rural areas.

Migration and poverty

Are the poorest children moving?

Assessing poverty retrospectively is very difficult. We know that many children and their families are poor when they arrive. Official figures in Ulaanbaatar, for example, state that 80% of in-coming migrants are poor after moving. Our survey indicates that 36.2% think their economic situation has improved since moving. But the poorest and most marginalised seem to be being left behind, particularly in *soum* centres.

Therefore, for some in rural areas it appears that migration can perpetuate poverty. Out-migration, economic decline and education service decline are interrelated in these areas. 44% of families feel their economic situation has got worse over recent years. The future for those children and families left behind, particularly the poorest, looks bleak.

Are migrant children benefiting?

For significant numbers (one in four) life gets more difficult after migration. Of those who can move, the better off, with relatives in urban areas and more resources, tend to do better from migration. But those who were not so well off struggle more after migration.

It may be a matter of time. The non-migrants in the sample are often likely to have been migrants themselves more than five years ago – fewer longer-term residents than migrant households now feel life is difficult. Even if over time life gets better in urban areas, the short-term costs for children's well-being could still be critical, particularly as families moving have younger children. Childhood is a one-off window of opportunity and development.

For those who came from rural areas in decline, their life and livelihoods now seem to be better than if they had stayed, and they arguably have a greater chance of further improvement. But for some, moving to urban areas is creating or perpetuating poverty cycles. This will have long-term implications because access to education is suffering. Children in these families will grow up without a good education and are likely to be less economically productive.

My father [and I]..bring wood from far away, maybe 30km...In winter fetching wood is especially hard because it's so cold....Cutting wood is hard too. We have to cut the whole bundle for about 500² or 600 MNT, but we have to take whatever money people give us. (boy aged 11 who does not attend school, Khalkhgol soum)

I give the money to my mother and she buys meat and milk – mother only has a pension to buy food with (boy who does not attend school, Khalkhgol soum)

² 500 MNT was equivalent to £0.24 or \$0.45.

4. WHY IS THIS ALL HAPPENING?

Education: a system under pressure

The research highlighted a range of problems, many of which are not new. However, recognition of the scale of population movement and its effects on children should give renewed urgency to tackling the issues.

- **Measures to promote equity by encouraging marginalised children's attendance at school have not been prioritised.** Schemes that are designed to increase marginalised children's access to school, such as the Tg16,000 grants and non-formal education, do not appear to be sufficient and are underfunded. The pressure on schools to keep their pupil numbers high (see point below on per capita funding), means that the numbers of children dropping out are often under-recorded. This makes planning for non-formal education provision difficult. The particular needs of migrants entering urban schools, such as extra lessons to enable them to catch up, do not seem to be being addressed.
- **Teacher training and incentives.** Unfortunately, the incentive schemes discussed by some teachers that encourage them to achieve good grades from their students seem to be leading to increased discrimination of poor and migrant children who need time and support to adjust. Teachers are under pressure to encourage children to join non-formal education classes: this is often seen as additional work and can lead to a negative attitude towards these classes. And rural schools and areas need to be attractive to teachers for them to want to work there. Some areas, such as Khalkhgol *soum*, are trying a number of ways to encourage teachers to return to the *soum* after their training.
- **The size of the education budget is not enough to support the provision of good quality education across the country.** The education sector was allocated around 20% of government expenditure and 8.9% of GDP in 2001.³ But the real value of such allocations is vital – as is the effective spending of the resources. The reports from rural schools in particular suggest that resources are not enough to provide for basic fixed costs such as heating. The present actual budget is not enough to rebuild an education system that suffered badly in the 1990s and is now under pressure in many areas from population migration.
- **The system of funds following children as they migrate causes problems for rural schools.** Part of the budget to schools is given as 'variable costs' to cover teachers' salaries, books and maintenance – the more children a school has, the more money it gets. This is a particular problem for rural schools suffering declining numbers, a reported lack of good teachers and buildings in poor repair.

In addition, the research identified cases of rural schools not releasing paperwork needed for children to move, which means they have problems getting into urban schools.

- **External assistance to the education sector could respond better to the problems.** A number of donors and other players support the provision of education in Mongolia – particularly the Asian Development Bank and the Japanese agency JICA. The focus of donors has been more on Ulaanbaatar and city schools than on aimag and soum schools. Much support has focused on investment in infrastructure and some sector development: donor progress has been slow in supporting nationally drawn-up, comprehensive policies and in operating through government systems.

In addition, the Public Sector Management and Finance Law and the Law on Education are still sometimes not well understood by key officials within schools and local administrative bodies, who are given increased responsibility in budget-setting under them. The role and effectiveness of the *aimag* in channelling state funding to schools was not covered explicitly in the research but should also be considered.

Broader poverty eradication policy

The reasons for problems facing migrant children and children left behind in areas of high out-migration do not just stem from the education sector. The figure on page 6 tracks the range of different policy areas that impact on children's access to education in Mongolia. Some of these include:

- The history of economic reform through the transition has had a far-reaching impact on family livelihoods: many families have not benefited from the shift. Pro-poor policy until the Economic Growth Support and Poverty Reduction Strategy in Mongolia had taken a project-based approach to poverty reduction. Developing sector policies with an explicit goal of poverty reduction and equity was not a priority.
- Mainstream policy has focused (and still focuses) on economic growth that is private-sector-led. This growth is important for sustained poverty reduction but is not *sufficient*. Growth needs to be planned to have a positive impact on poor families' livelihoods, such as those migrant families dependent on the urban informal sector or those unemployed in remote rural areas.
- Some areas of this vast country, divided into 365 administrative *soums* each with its own infrastructure, service delivery and other needs, suffered badly during transition and continue to be under-resourced.

³ GOM, 2003, Economic Growth Support & Poverty Reduction Strategy, Ulaanbaatar. 2005 budget commits 16.5% of expenditure.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Achieving equitable service delivery in a country with high population movement and vast land areas

Review budget allocation methods and monitoring of resource flows for education. Public expenditure tracking exercises are underway; they need to consider the effects of migration and assess budget allocation methods in terms of their effects on rural and urban areas. The movement of children to different schools and the actual flow of resources to schools and different groups of children should be better monitored.

Reconsider the models of rural education.

- We recognise that the closure of a number of rural *soum* schools and closure of *soums* themselves, may be an inevitable eventual result of economic change and migration.
- Even without these closures, but particularly with, the school dormitory system that was in widespread operation pre-transition must be more adequately funded to provide a high standard of care for children, to allow rural families to send their children to *soum* or *aimag* schools.
- More economic and other incentives for attracting good teachers to rural areas should be explored.
- Alternative measures for reaching rural children across such vast distances should be (re)explored, such as using radio and post.

Meet the demand for capacity in areas of high in-migration. This problem is identified repeatedly in policies; more action is needed. Urban schools running with three shifts a day must be a temporary solution to the problems rather than a permanent one.

Fully implement programmes to enable the poorest and most marginalised to get an education:

- Generally, the education system must maintain its focus on access for all, public service provision, and better service delivery in areas particularly affected by out- and in-migration.
- Non-formal education needs to be better resourced and not seen as an additional burden on teachers.
- The assistance with school materials needs to be reviewed to ensure it is appropriate, and, where necessary, it should be increased so that it reaches the numbers of children who need it and provides for a larger proportion of the costs.

- Extra support to migrant children should be offered to help them catch up with the curriculum in urban areas. Incentives for teachers should encourage them to help migrant children rather than discriminate against them.

In the medium term, greater proportions of donor budgets should be allocated to supporting viable and equitable basic service delivery across the country. Donors in Mongolia need to be better at co-ordinating their aid, using it to support national policies and working through government systems.

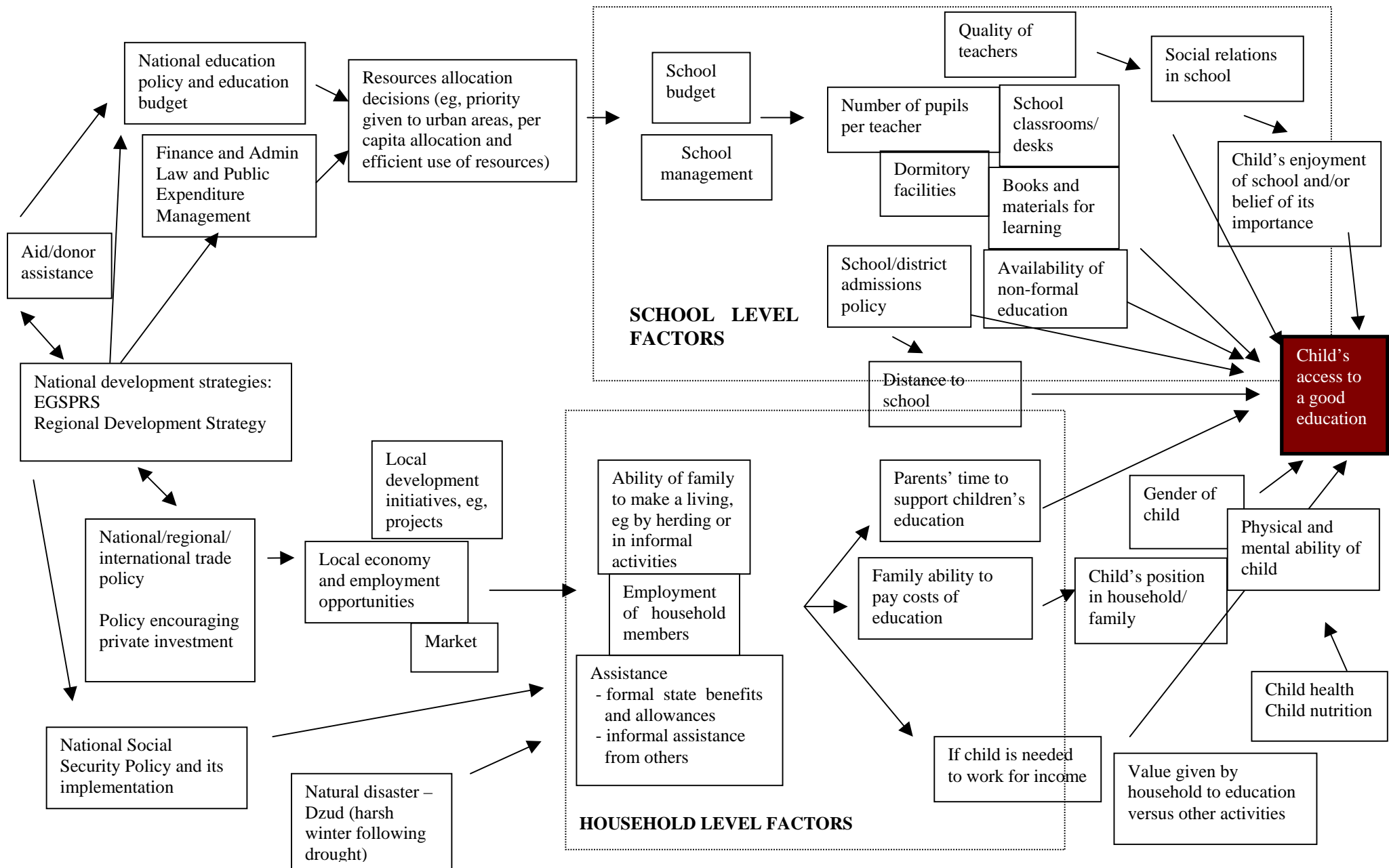
Better pro-poor policy that is designed to maximise impact on poor children and their families

Regional development that balances economic and social policy – the recent regional development policy needs a greater focus on social as well as economic policy across the country if it is to slow down the rate of migration. Almost one-third of migrant families moved to improve their children's schooling: good public schools in *soum* and *aimag* centres are likely to attract pupils and their families to an area.

Consider the impact of reforms on poor children and families. If inequalities between rich and poor areas and people are to be reduced and avoided in future, the impact of policy choices on the poor and marginalised must be considered. Poverty and Social Impact Analysis, supported by the World Bank and IMF, and other national analyses and debates on economic and social policy reform, should consider their impact on marginalised groups.

Plan for the future generation: economic and social policy that benefits children. The situation of children must be linked to more mainstream policy frameworks such as the EGSPRS and regional development and trade policies. Children are not just a 'special group' requiring special projects run by specialised agencies. They are almost 50% of the population in Mongolia and most policies will have an impact on them.

This is a summary of NUM/CHIP/SCUK, 2005, *Children on the move: rural-urban migration and access to education*. For the full report, go to www.childhoodpoverty.org or www.savethechildren.mn. NUM/CHIP/SCUK reserve the right to amend data cited in this summary. The final report and briefings are available in English and Mongolian. For more details, contact Tungalag Chuluun (Programme Director, SCUK Mongolia), Jenni Marshall (SCUK/CHIP) or Bold Ts, Tumennast G, Batbaatar M, Tamir Ch and Oyunsetseg D (Department of Sociology, National University of Mongolia).



The framework for analysis: important factors influencing whether or not a child has access to a good education in Mongolia (from findings of NUM/CHIP/SCUK research, 2002-04)