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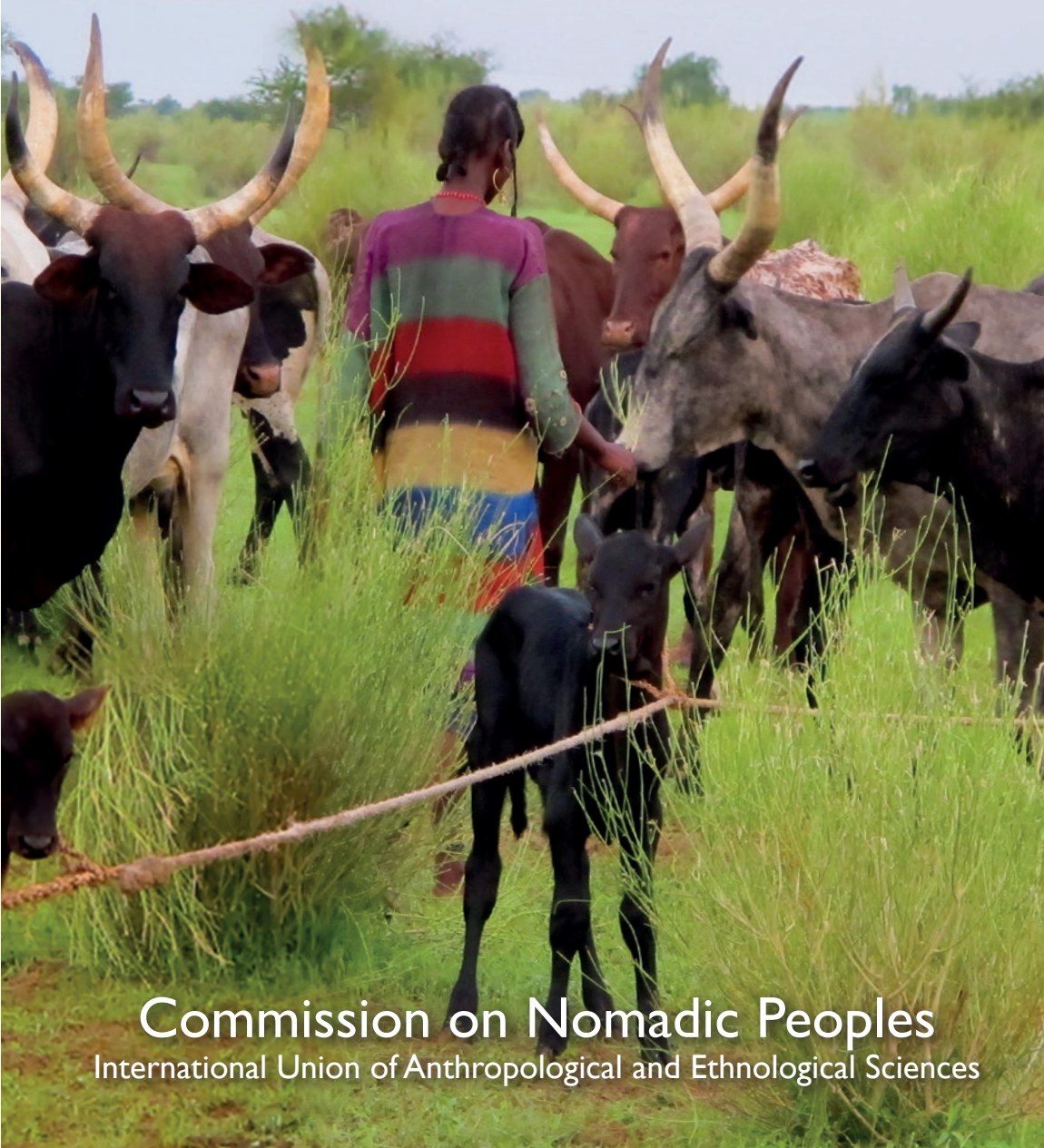

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RESEARCH REPORT: COVID-19 RESILIENCE IN MONGOLIAN PASTORALIST COMMUNITIES

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The COVID-19 pandemic showcased the inherent resilience of Mongolian pastoralists. As Coronavirus spread across the steppe and globe and borders closed, herders relied on traditional livelihood approaches, family networks and the natural isolation that mobile livestock-raising provides. Ready access to information, clear advice from the government and school closure minimised COVID-19 impact in the Mongolian countryside. Starting in February 2020 conscientious efforts were made to stay safe, wear masks and avoid travel. In fact, the new dynamics had positive benefits as herders that identified as families were reunited in customary pastoral arrangements. Children were able to help in the spring birthing season and be reintroduced to herding rhythms and skills. Neighbours supported each other and a ban on alcohol sales improved health perceptions. Customary herder self-reliance was recognised and valued as no COVID-19 cases were recorded in our survey of 57 herders in four Aimags (provinces). As one herder stated, 'we have our meat and milk, what else do we need?'[1] Mongolian herders' coping strategies and natural resilience were able to adapt to COVID-19 restrictions.

Much attention has been given to COVID-19 impact on diverse populations and potential exposure and spreading factors. Identifying pastoral risk vectors has been more elusive and less noted in relevant literature. Reports identify pastoral migration as having potential to spread COVID-19 (Rahmanian and Naghizadeh 2020). Mobility and a discourse of herders being difficult to reach may affect pandemic engagement and response (SSHAP 2020). Simula et al. (2020) identify several themes, including marginalisation, remoteness, conflict

1 Herder, male, aged 56.

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and market volatility, that affect pastoralists' ability to adapt to pandemic uncertainty. Other research in pastoral countries (Erkhembayar et al. 2020; Brand et al. 2020) fail to mention pastoralists in COVID-19 assessments. Reports of COVID-19 response in low and middle-income countries are uncommon and needed both to understand COVID-19 response and to prepare for future pandemics (Erkhembayar et al. 2020). International assessment has been constrained by travel bans, quarantines (to five weeks in Mongolia) and border closures. However, in some places such as Mongolia, in-country researchers have been able to visit rural areas to conduct fieldwork.

The Mongolian government was quick to respond to the pandemic, closing the border with China on 31 January 2020 and schools shortly thereafter (Davi 2020). Important to note in the country of three million people is the continued importance of pastoralism, as herders comprise 32 per cent of the population (NSO 2020). The 2019 Global Health Security Index rated Mongolia positively at 46th, perhaps a legacy of the socialist health system, but 90th in response effectiveness (GHSI 2020). The country struggles with infectious diseases (tuberculosis, Hepatitis C, sexually transmitted infections) and funding favours hospital-based over primary care (Davi 2020). Yet government restrictions in February on travel, health ministry messaging, cancelled public events, mask-wearing and distancing being stressed in towns all highlight the rapid pandemic reaction. Social conditions were especially challenging, as restrictions meant the abrupt cancellation of Tsaagan Sar, Mongolia's traditional New Year celebration. Measures were effective – as of 20 November 2020 the country had 578 cases and no reported deaths (Johns Hopkins University 2020). To understand this success, it is important to appreciate the significant role played by Mongolia's pastoral community.

Aware of the attention and disorder COVID-19 has caused, we used a window of opportunity in November 2020 to examine how the pandemic is perceived by herders and how it may have disrupted pastoral livelihoods in rural Mongolia. In-country researchers investigated how herders in Mongolia perceived and engaged with COVID-19 in their social milieu and rural environment. As part of the UK's 'Research and Public Policy Partnership Scheme' funding programme, our research captured herder insights and perspectives in the initial phase of the Coronavirus from the end of winter 2019–20 to the start of winter 2020–21. The seasonal evolution, from winter camp through spring birthing and summer migration to the return of the cold was framed by new COVID-19 dynamics. When pastoralists began to move to their winter camps and home regions we interviewed 57 herders in Khenti, Bulgan, Selenge and Tov Aimags (provinces) in north-central Mongolia. Questions focused on how the pandemic impacted herding, government action, perceptions of risk, changes to daily life and personal or spiritual challenges. Through this research

herders voiced their experience and observations of herding in the 'Year of Covid'. Pastoralists were interested in expressing their views and sharing insights from the steppe.

The most striking feature was that no herder had got COVID-19 nor did any know of someone who had suffered from the disease. There was widespread satisfaction with the government response for rural residents and rapid awareness of the pandemic's seriousness. The prompt and effective communication and messaging showed government concern and attention that conveyed that pastoralists were part of the national effort to combat the spread of the disease. This outreach campaign started with TV news and quickly spread over Facebook and through in-person discussion amongst families and when in *soum* (town) centres. Herders identified three key events that stressed the seriousness of COVID-19 in their lives. The first was closing the border with China with its rural implications of stopping middlemen that came to camps to buy cashmere. The second was the closing of all schools, nurseries and kindergartens, at first temporarily, then through the summer. This reconfigured family life, bringing families together at camps (rather than children living in towns for school), a change viewed as positive by family members and representing a return to traditional ways of life. The third event was the dramatic cancellation of Tsaagan Sar, Mongolia's Lunar New Year celebration, the most important holiday of the year. As gatherings and public events were stopped, the herders' rapid adjustment exhibited their commitment to the new restrictions on customary life.

'What more do we need?'[2]

Herders stressed their natural resilience in lifestyle and ability to adapt to changing events. Adaptation, though usually to climate and environmental conditions, is a tenet of steppe pastoralism. A common comment was that, in fact, COVID-19 restrictions had limited impact as they 'managed work without panic or serious challenge to their lives'.[3] Overall responses were consistent across the field sites as herders expressed satisfaction with government action, noted that messaging about the pandemic was clear and that herders embraced the new challenges required to confront the pandemic. During the time of perceived greatest risk and uncertainty at the start of pandemic, pastoralists diligently adopted and adhered to the restrictions imposed. Similar to urban Mongolians, face masks were worn when in town, versions of social distancing were followed and public events were cancelled. This dedicated

2 Herder, male, aged 55.

3 Herder, female, aged 42.

approach was practiced in February, March and April. By May, as no local cases occurred and work intensified (birthing, combing cashmere, milking) herders relaxed, particularly in camp settings. By November few wore masks except in shops.

Trust between the government and rural residents was strong. The perceived organised and concerted effort by officials was led by the Health Ministry. This included visits to pastoral families to raise awareness, information in pamphlets and town centres, text messages sent every three days and creation of 'isolation rooms' in local health clinics for potential COVID-19 patients. Importantly, outreach efforts were followed by monthly child support payments of 100,000 tugrugs (~$35) for each child under 18. This provided a basic income to most herder households to assist with expenses during uncertain spring and summer conditions.

'Prioritise the nation's safety and citizents health'[4]

Strong traditional social networks and support of the government in time of crisis characterised the herders' spontaneous response. This was stressed throughout, with impacts being inconveniences to be tolerated rather than points of contention. As a group, pastoralists presented themselves as part of cohesive society working towards a common goal. This collective response helped overcome individual challenges which focused primarily on money issues. Several respondents stated that, without access to the Chinese market for cashmere, the sales price had decreased to ~ 60,000 tugrugs per kilo (~$20), affecting the ability to pay bank loans. The government had two responses; before the election campaign herders (a dependable voting group) were promised a guaranteed price of 105,000 tugrugs per kilogram (~$37). With time this did not materialise. Instead, an additional payment of 20,000 tugrugs was made to herders for each kilo sold. This was adequate support for herder lives to maintain a sense of normality.

The other main concern was education for children. There was support for closing schools, yet virtual teaching was considered inadequate and directed to city students rather than rural children. The notion of classes broadcast over TV at different times for different grades appeared to offer some equivalence but in general parents questioned its efficacy. In some *gers* (tent home) an internet connection was available but course material was similar. One man stated that 'online classes were useless'.[5] There appeared to be a 'digital divide' between

4 Herder, female, aged 52.

5 Herder, male, aged 48.

families over internet access and the ability to recharge devices, primarily through solar panels. Another parent reported that, when school recommenced, the students had forgotten the teacher's name.

Whilst some factors were limiting (ineffective schooling, travel restrictions), there were many positive outcomes of COVID-19 restrictions. There was a widespread belief that the changes encouraged more traditional lives and practices amongst herders. Families resided together in the countryside, giving children an opportunity to participate in customary rhythms and tasks. Learning pastoral skills was thought important to assist in family chores. The notion of families living together in one *ger* as was customary, rather than being split between two residences for schooling, appealed to residents. Many commented on how the community supported each other, sharing information, buying and transporting food and helping elders. An unexpected outcome was the banning of alcohol sales to promote citizen health. This was done to encourage healthier lifestyles, with people commenting that it contributed to a more family-oriented atmosphere and reduced public drunkenness. Herders also believed that drinking milk, plentiful in summer, helped protect them from the virus.

Good understanding of COVID-19 as it related to themselves and perceived health support mitigated social stressors. Respondents did not identify additional personal pressures or anxieties resulting from the pandemic. Social and cultural practices continued though without group events such as Naadam, the grand nomadic festival in July. As a group, herders conformed to the new conditions and looked out for one another. In summer, months into the restrictions, rural residents reduced adherence to guidelines, feeling little relevance as there were no cases in their areas. Herders were able to migrate with animals, though not to travel to the capital. No COVID-19 disputes or conflicts were reported; to most life continued as before.

The whole country knew the first Coronavirus case was a French mining engineer who flew in from Moscow with no sign of infection. He then travelled by train to the mine and only four days later exhibited symptoms. At first, reaction was hostile but this was quickly replaced with sympathy. Most herders supported the border closure but remained tolerant of foreigners, saying 'it could happen to anyone', 'Chinese are people, they also suffer', outsiders are OK 'if they are tested' and 'if they go through quarantine'.[6]

In Mongolia, the herders' resilience and adaptability to uncertainty mapped on well to effective pandemic response. Like a climate extreme, livestock disease, insect invasion or political turmoil, the pandemic was an event beyond people's control. The key themes were an ability to continue with their livelihoods, a process made easier by great distance between and isolation of

6 Herders, male, aged 48 and 59.

households in daily life. Government financial benefits for children and price support for cashmere meant there was adequate household income to meet basic needs. Less quantifiable was the shared national sacrifice to protect society from the pandemic. The low national infection rate (578 and 0 deaths as of 20 November 2020) and absence of cases in field sites greatly reduced COVID-19 risk vectors and made sacrifices benign rather than a matter of life and death.

In contrast to current COVID-19 literature from pastoral regions in Iran, the Horn of Africa, East and Southern Africa (Rahmanian and Naghizadeh 2020, Griffith et al. 2020; Yousef 2020, SSHAP 2020), Mongolian pastoralists have not emerged as transmission vectors; nor have pastoral toponomies such as water points and markets materialised as potential COVID-19 hotpoints (Griffiths et al. 2020). The repeated implication that mobile peoples, through migration and exchange, are a high-risk group that would spread the disease to towns and regions was not the case in Mongolia. Nor were Yousef's (2020) and Simula et al.'s (2020) assessments of vulnerability and marginalisation of pastoralists evident in the Mongolian context. One reason given by herders was the country's experience controlling outbreaks, most recently a fatal bubonic plague spread by marmots in 2020 (Global News 2020). A herder commented that 'I understand COVID-19 is some sort of plague'.[7]

Whilst the pandemic has been well-handled and herders have not identified infections, this could change in the coming winter. Poor summer rains in some regions have reduced vegetation levels and led to outmigration. This autumn pastoralists have migrated 600–800 kilometres eastward from western Mongolia in search of fodder. Winter cold in herding areas (-30°C) leads to congregation in limited indoor spaces that may be a factor in future cases. The country experienced an increase in COVID-19 cases in December 2020, leading to a national lockdown. To date herders have been little-affected and there have been no deaths. Whilst Simula et al. (2020) argue for a restructuring of pastoral relations as a result of the pandemic, in Mongolia customary herder behaviour and resilience patterns convey the effectiveness of current strategies and practices. Mongolia's pastoral pandemic response advocates for the strength and viability of herding lifestyles in an era of great disease risk.

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7 Herder, male, aged 56.

the 'COVID-19 in African and Asian Drylands Working Group', a National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research Network/ CONVERGE facility working group, Natural Hazards Center - University of Colorado Boulder, US (https://converge.colorado.edu/v1/uploads/images/covid_19_african_and_asian_drylands-1595261210318.pdf)

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