

Citizen Groups in Mongolia – possibilities and barriers

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Abstract

Citizen Groups, almost exclusively comprising women, are emerging in *ger* district, an intriguing mix of the nomadic culture and rapid urbanization with significant social challenges. Current knowledge and policy to support citizen-led initiatives is limited in Mongolia. except for those successful examples of micro-financing and micro enterprising in Southern and South East Asian countries. In Mongolia government policies and funding schemes lack mechanisms to financially support groups like CGs. This paper draws on insights from research with three Citizens Groups seeking to build social and economic opportunities for *ger* residents through collaborative partnerships with governments, NGOs and the business. The paper argues that whilst Citizens Groups create bonding and bridging social capital that reduce the social, economic, and environmental vulnerability of *ger* residents their capacity to mobilise linking social capital remains tenuous. Citizens Groups remain institutionally weak, and this paper calls for greater recognition and support of their activities.

Keywords

Mongolia, Citizen Group, Social capital, Social Work, Women

Introduction

Mongolia has been making economic, social and political progress that is supported by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and guided by social policy goals of inclusive growth and poverty alleviation (UN Mongolia, 2020). However, despite these ambitious goals social exclusion and widening inequality remain. The capital, Ulaanbaatar, is a demarcated city with a wealthy center versus its peripheries (Terbish & Rawsthorne, 2016). The social work profession in Mongolia continues to be involved in developing new responses to these social, economic and political challenges (Gray & Coates, 2010).

Nearly 64.7 percent of the Mongolian population (3.3 million) reside in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar (Integrated Statistics Fund [ISF], 2018). Affected by natural disasters and inspired by social, economic and cultural opportunities pulling from the city, hundreds of rural families migrated to the capital city over recent years (Terbish et al., 2020). Zooming more closely to the urban population, 56.7 percent of Ulaanbaatar residents live in suburban areas or peri-urban Ulaanbaatar which local people call “*ger*” areas (ISF, 2018). *Ger* districts [*ger horoolol*] consist usually of square, fenced allotments of land with a small house or *ger*-the white, traditional dwelling covered with felt and a white cloth that is used by Mongolian mobile pastoralists over centuries (World Bank 2015).



Photo 1: Ger area in Ulaanbaatar. Photo was taken from Northern part of the city by the researcher in June 2020.

Despite the fact of environmental and social problems lingering in *ger* areas, these areas are not identical to slums and shanty towns that are common in other major cities in

developing economies but a delicate balance between urbanization and nomadic culture (Choi, 2014). The reasons for discussing *ger* areas are twofold in this article. Firstly, the Citizen Groups (referred to as CGs hereafter) researched here are located and function in a *ger* area as opposed to apartment zones in Ulaanbaatar. Secondly, despite the dominant deficit discourse about *ger* areas, nuanced citizen-led bottom-up initiatives are emerging as a way for community development and democratic participation to improve lives (Anglin, 2011; Ninacs & Sherraden, 1998). However, as is common across the world, the social work profession in Mongolia appears ambivalent about its relationship to community development and emerging civil society acts in *ger* areas (Terbish & Rawsthorne, 2018).

Citizen Groups

Citizens Groups (CGs) in Mongolia draw on and build social capital by fostering participation, empowerment through local decision making and social innovation (Morais-da-Silva et al, 2019). Mongolian CGs have emerged with both local political support and international donor organisations. Acknowledging the significance of CGs in poverty reduction and in improvement of livelihoods, a former President of Mongolia, Tsahia Elbegdorj, issued a decree in 2010 to support CGs in creating savings groups from their operations and to spread the experience of successful CGs throughout Mongolia. In addition, many CGs activities have received small amounts of seed funding from international donor organizations in cooperation with the local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The Mongolian CGs have much in common with self-help social enterprise activities emerging in other Asian countries and Africa (Chen & Ku, 2017; Tian, Hiu-Kwan Chui & Hu, 2018). CGs can be understood as part of the informal sector, through which people get organized to act collectively on a voluntary basis, sharing the same interest of influencing policy or decision makers to improve their livelihoods (Chen & Ku, 2017). Like other social ventures they operate in a hybrid space and operate ‘outside the purely private business and state sectors’, often with both social and economic purposes (Tian, Hiu-Kwan Chui & Hu, 2018, p. 112).

Assessing the health of civil society (the informal sector) since the early 1990 in Mongolia, Undarya (2013) noted that it was driven by a vision for positive social change but financially weak, mostly dependent on time-limited project funding from international organizations. Currently CGs in *ger* areas of Ulaanbaatar function in areas of micro infrastructure development or area development (area cleaning, fixing broken public spaces, paving roads, etc), women’s empowerment (various activities that aim to enlighten and empower women in society), elderly counsels and participation of people with disabilities in

society (UDRC, 2020). These CG functional areas are also target areas for social work intervention in Mongolia.

Social capital

Productive social action arises from relationships based on trust, reciprocity and social norms (Coleman, 1988, Woolcock, 2001). These co-operative relations are embedded into and made productive through structured networks, both formal and informal (Macke & Dilly, 2010). Putnam (2000) argues that the higher the level of trusting and co-operative relations within networks the higher the level of social capital. Gender and cultural differences have been under-acknowledged in much social capital scholarship (Claridge, 2004). This study highlights the role of women in building social capital in non-Western settings.

Within the literature, three distinct forms of social capital have been identified as embedded and produced through relational networks: bonding social capital; bridging social capital; and linking social capital (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). Bonding social capital arises within strong, close, ties or relationships such as extended families or neighbors (Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000). It is associated with localized trust and protective against crisis. Bridging social capital arises between heterogeneous groups to expand the resources or skills available to members (Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Both bonded social capital and bridging social capital can be understood as creating horizontal relations of empowerment (Macke & Dilly, 2010). The third form of social capital, linking social capital, arises from networks of relations between citizen groups and *horoo* (the lowest administrative point in Ulaanbaatar municipality), social policy actors (district and national government) and public institutions (including universities and private companies). Linking social capital can be generated between the State and CGs that are independent of the State, with distinct values and cultures to the State and not co-located or subsumed by the State (Macke & Dilly, 2010).

Methods

Research questions

This article explores three specific questions:

- What is the individual, family, and community impact of participating in Citizens' Groups?
- What are Citizens' Group relationships with government and businesses?

- How can the social capital benefits of participation in Citizens' Groups be maximized and made sustainable?

Data Collection Process

The data referred to in this article was collected during 2019 and 2020 through observation, individual interviews, focus group discussions and reflections (McTaggart, 1997; Milofsky, 2006). Participants were identified from snowball recruitment through existing networks with CG leaders (participants details provided below). Researchers invited participants to identify potential areas for CG activities and income generation, particularly through the sale of sown good, were identified as the top priority. CG research participants developed work plans, budgets and received financial support through the research project to purchase textiles, promote their wares and rent premises. The researchers supported the CG members develop their initiative, map their assets, identify and address problems informed by their local knowledge and networks (McTaggart, 1997).

Research Context and Participants

Three CGs active (hereafter CG#1, CG#2, CG#3) in two different *ger* districts (Bayanzurkh and Songinokhairkhan) participated in this study. These districts have the largest population of 343,619 and 321,150 respectively out of the total population of Ulaanbaatar of 1,444,669 (City population, 2020). Due to their peripheral location, large territorial size and extensive *ger* areas, migrants from rural provinces tend to settle easily in these two districts. Local government (horoos) in both districts have experience in supporting citizen action. Each CG participated in at least three focus group discussions during the study. Individual interviews were undertaken with CG leaders (n=6) throughout the study as well as with staff employed within government (n=6).

The CG participants were in the main women but were quite diverse in terms of age, education, employment, marital status, and family income. The descriptive socio-economic characteristics of CG members who participated in this research are illustrated in the Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of the CG members

Variables	Attributes	No.
Gender	Female	15
	Male	1
Age	Average age of the group	43.5
Income	Average family income	MNT 669, 375 (\$235.38 USD) ¹
	Minimum family income	0
	Maximum family income	MNT 1,500,000 (\$527.24 USD)
Education	Lower secondary education	2
	Upper secondary education	7
	College education	3
	Higher education	4
Marital Status	Married	14
	Single/Female headed	3
	Average family size	5 persons
Employment	At home/care work (child/adult)	6
	Unemployed	7
	Pensioner	1
	Welfare Recipient	1
	Self-Employed	15

¹ 1USD is equivalent to 2,845MNT as of 31 December 2019 (TDB of Mongolia, 2019)

Findings

In this section we report findings in relation to each of the guiding research questions. Our findings highlighted the social capital benefits of participating in Citizens Groups for disadvantaged people living in *ger* districts. Participation in Citizens Groups had a positive impact on individual bonding and bridging social capital. However, despite deliberate effort to foster linking social capital with governments and businesses these linkages remain weak. Further research is required to identify the policy settings to best support self-help social enterprises in Mongolia.

What is the individual, family, and community impact of participating in Citizens' Groups?

Our research found that there were positive impacts at the individual and family level from participating in the Citizens' Groups social enterprise activities. Social capital theory suggests that relationships are resources for reciprocity and for social actions (Coleman, 1988, Woolcock, 2001). In our case, CGs leaders recruited members based on their own social connections and a desire to expand their types of products. Through word-of-mouth, CG#1 members knew their shared interest in sewing products and started meeting from time to time. The CG#1 leader in Songinokhairkhan district conducted informal interviews with tentative members and recruited some resourceful people based on a mutual trust. Experience and involvement in the CGs were varying among members but the majority had no prior experience of working as a team but were active in attempting to improve opportunities for their families.

After joining the CG, members individually acknowledged numerous benefits of working as a group. Individuals reported feeling empowered through increased friendship and trust as well as feeling less isolated and vulnerable due to emotional connectedness with others. Participating in the CG also extended personal and business networks and improved access to financial and material resources. Members of the CGs included vulnerable sections of the population such as pensioners, women without employment due to childcare responsibilities and people with disability who are at risk of being isolated from the mainstream. For some, daily routines even started to change with a full-day employment at the workplace which led to improved sense of belonging among the CG members to the group as well as to the community. One of the CG#2 members noted:

Before joining this CG, I had no partnership. All I did was surfing through internet alone and try to capture more ideas for sewing. But now, I have my colleagues whom I can discuss, consult and learn from. All other members agreed on the point that working as a CG helps them to learn from each other, especially when there is a lack of opportunity to attend a special training on sewing (Bolor, female, 40, CG#2 Songinokhairkhan).

Furthermore, broadening their relationships and sharing their networks were beneficial for the groups, extending their networks horizontally and vertically with other similar groups. For those without previous sewing or business experience participating in the CGs allowed them to learn from other experiences. For example, the CG#3 'From Stitches to Success' included an unemployed man who was capable of making European and Mongolian traditional boots, and a woman with disability who focuses on sewing traditional costumes, tops, dresses and clothing for the children. Through participating in the CGs individuals extended horizontal network included increasing the number of shops and businesspeople they were in contact with, increasing the size of potential customer base or market for their products and increasing the number of supporters who are interested in knowing more about how CG function. Working as part of a Citizens' Group social enterprise also reduced individual vulnerability to corrupt dealings as well as sharing work to meet delivery deadlines.

Family members of CG members started noticing positive changes in their lives as their breadwinner was going to work every day. Initially some families reacted poorly as their income was low but eventually family members accepted the fact that partnering together as part of the CG brought social and emotional wealth if not financial gain in the initial stage. A spouse of a CG#1 member, for instance, built wooden racks in his home, supporting the CG members to use the extra space at his home for sewing. A female member of the CG who was unemployed before joining the CG proudly said

When I leave my home, I proudly tell my children that mommy is going to work today. I loved going to my work to produce items with my team" (Degi, female, 36, CG#2, Songinokhairkhan).

If these positive impacts are to continue and to expand to include others the sustainability of the initiatives is vital. The development and mobilizing of linking social

capital – with government, with International NGOs, with suppliers, retailers and other producers – is explored in the following sections.

What are Citizens' Group relationships with government and businesses?

This study found two very different scenarios in terms of the administrative supports from the district level government. Whilst district administration of Songinokhairkhan had no specific authority and funds to support CGs, the Bayanzurkh's governor's office had a division to foster citizen participation, which was able to disburse some funding to support CGs' initiatives. This finding highlights the ad hoc nature of government engagement with CGs currently in Mongolia. In some cases, partnership with local authorities at *horoo* and district levels were more supportive whilst in other situations relationship with authorities was not positive or even undermined CG's small achievements. The district administration of Bayanzurkh has a rich experience in collaborating with the CGs. As an initial support, the administration allowed the CG members to rent a basement of their office and then granted them access to a small wooden kiosk ("Made in Bayanzurkh") located at the bus terminal to sell their products. This support and acknowledgement allowed the group to gain support from the District Governor's Office for their activities.



Photo 2: Inside and outside look of the kiosk for the CG entrepreneurial activities. Photo was taken by the researchers in May 2020.

At the time of this study some 130 CGs were operating in Bayanzurkh according to a District Specialist interviewed. Most of the CGs focused on small-scale infrastructure developments such as footpaths, fencing and play areas. The District Specialist hoped that in the future more CGs would engage in social enterprises to independently raise financial resources to protect members against unemployment. One example she mentioned was the

production and sale of Christmas gift bags and Covid-19 masks with an initial investment from the District Administration. She said:

In the future, we would like to support CGs in two ways. Firstly, we are to invest in them by ordering some products necessary for our District and, secondly, we would love to support such CGs in referring to sewing trainings so that they are more capacitated for a complex sewn products. (District Specialist, Bayanzurkh)

Unfortunately, not all CGs experienced such positive relations and productive partnerships with local authorities. In one example, a *horoo* and CG collaborated for mutual benefit in managing the disposal of solid wastes from the *ger*, with the *horoo* paying the CG for its work. Such reciprocity was beneficial to boost *horoo* performance and was also advantageous for CGs, particularly as they did not need official organizational status (legal registration, stamp and letterhead). However, this was a short-lived partnership that ended without explanation leaving the CG feeling exploited.

The CG research participants identified the need for more administrative and social work support from the *horoo* in relation to their legal status and raising awareness about CGs. The ability to form partnerships and build sustainability of CGs was hindered by the weak state of civil society in Mongolia (Undarya, 2013). Research participants reported a lack of knowledge about CGs and their activities among district authorities. Some believed they needed to formalize their status to NGO to be recognized by various partners. However, completing the application for a new NGO, establishing a board of directors, and understanding local tax rules was viewed as burdensome to CG members. At present there are no specific guidelines to support CGs. When asked about the support they received, few CG members were aware of *horoo* social workers nor their role in supporting residents. One member had approached the *horoo* social worker seeking assistance in recruiting other unemployed people to co-operate in a shoe making enterprise but failed to receive support. Despite these disappointments the CGs were determined to keep informing their *horoos* of their activities, products, and successes. CGs hoped this would raise awareness of their activities and their humble contribution to local development.

Our research identified several positive partnerships between local authorities and CGs, sometimes successful beyond expectation. There were clear benefits flowing to the broader community from partnerships between CGs and local authorities. One *horoo* social worker pointed to the many productive partnerships, highlighting

[we have] partnership with Buddhist temples in horoo, Safety Groups by Residents, Cleaning Group, AA group, neighborhood watch. Neighborhood watch and safety watch is quite well-known now in our horoo. Recognition is provided from the police office budget, so people are likely to take a shift and participate in this watch acts. Buddhist temples also provide huge support in my work as we celebrate some big events and national holidays together. (Horoo Social Worker, Songinokhairkhan)

In another example, a CG was commissioned to liaise between a construction company and *ger* residents to reach a consensus on the *ger* area re-development process. (*Ger* area re-development is a central housing policy of the City Administration and local authorities with plans to develop a range of housing stock options for *ger* residents such as high-rise apartments, mid-to low-rise apartments or semi-detached houses (City Mayor's Office, 2014)). One CG member proudly said that the CG managed not only to create a partnership with the private construction company but also to have sound relations with the elected people's representatives from their *horoo* and district. Whilst creating linking social capital such as this was seen as positive by some research participants for others it was seen as 'dirty' as it involves politics and bureaucratic hierarchy. Poor previous experiences of political interference resulted in a reluctance to form partnerships with local authorities. One participant spoke of their disappointment when they were unsuccessful in obtaining a grant through the Local Development Fund, despite the merit of their tender.

*Political influence and turnover of government staff at horoo level are big challenges. At horoo level, there are too much administrative workload. In this situation horoo staff can't dedicate enough time to its people but more focused on attending meetings and implementing what was told by the district. (***, Songinokhairkhan)*

Knowing the challenges that may encounter at *horoo* and district administrative level, some members of CGs managed to create links with private companies. In Songinokhairkhan District, for instance, one CG#2 member managed to negotiate with a MOBICOM (the biggest cell phone/internet operator in Mongolia) to use a small space for selling crafts. They plan to target CU (a Korean chain shop) and a NOMIN Holdings (one of the influential trading companies in Mongolia) to sell their products. Additionally, other group members also attempted to sell their products during Covid-19 lockdown by sending some surplus

products to rural provinces for sale, using their connections. Linking social capital with businesses, particularly retail outlets, was also essential to increasing sales and hence sustainability. CG#1 was able to negotiate with E-MART (one of the giant chain stores in Mongolia) the stocking and sale of children's clothing they had produced. Through this negotiation and other similar ones, the CGs extended their networks which was helpful in getting more information about market demand. The CG research participants also actively worked to build linking social capital with international NGOs. These efforts resulted in financial support from World Vision - a development-oriented relief organization - enabling the purchase of three sewing machines for members of the CG and the development of a proposal for an additional two.

How can the social capital benefits of participation in Citizens' Groups be maximized and made sustainable?

Research in other settings suggest that sustainability of social enterprises requires the pursuit of an appropriate local policy agenda that reflects community demands (Bertotti *et al*, 2011, p. 180). The Bayanzurkh administration is the only one among the nine districts of Ulaanbaatar that has an official department to support citizen engagement and community initiatives. As a result, there are many CGs flourishing in the Bayanzurkh district most of which receive financial support from the administration for their activities.

In our research, one CG developed a savings strategy with a view to building their sustainability. Members of CG#3 decided to accumulate some savings from their sales to be used after the research project. However, due to COVID 19, it was challenging for the group to continue their saving after November 2020. Each member of the group agreed to contribute Tg10,000 (equivalent to USD 3.5) to the group savings on monthly basis instead of Tg50,000 as their sales declined. By creating savings, group members also developed financial management skills such as recording keeping and expenditure and income logs. Currently, members of the CGs are keeping their savings with an intention to lend the lump sum to one another based on a mutual trust. They hope to increase their overall savings by applying a small amount of interest on the whole. It is likely that the CGs will need more advanced financial knowledge in facilitating their savings fruitfully based on their growth predictions.

In the future, all three CGs are hoping to buy more sewing machines to increase their production as well as branch into new product lines. Shoe making, for example, could be extended to a horse saddle making. Cotton item production could be expanded to fashion

accessories and home décor making. The CGs also aspire to exhibit their products at public fairs for popular holidays including Lunar New Year, in partnership with the local administration. However, risks associated with the uncertain legal status of CGs and lack of direct administrative support still hinder further progress. Without dealing with these risks, CGs are financially dependent and like other small entrepreneurial initiatives are in need of leadership to further promote their activities (Lunenburg et al, 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

Little is currently known about the scaling up citizen-led initiatives such as CGs in Mongolia, except for those successful examples of micro-financing and micro enterprising in Southern and South East Asian countries (Defourny & Kim, 2011; Lunenburg et al., 2020). In Mongolia government policies and funding schemes lack the mechanisms to financially support groups like CGs. However, the small successes of CGs in this study illustrate the many benefits of active support for CGs in reducing the social, economic, and environmental vulnerability of *ger* residents.

Our research suggests working as a group shows positive impacts on individuals, families and the community more broadly. At the individual level this includes improved self-esteem, new friendships, productive use of their skills and increased income. It was evident that partnership among individuals reduced their vulnerability to unemployment and food insecurity and increased their access to resources. At the family level, CG members were satisfied by their modest financial contribution to their family income which helped to reduce the financial vulnerability of families and provided some emotional ease and comfort for the entire family. In the broader communities, the activities of CGs have profiled local development and initiative. One district administration show-cased the activities of CGs as part of their partnership with residents, enacting their social policy commitments.

Based on bonding and bridging social capital, CG members in Mongolia used their horizontal relationships with friends, neighbors and trusted former colleagues to establish CGs initially. Social relations are strongly rooted in collectivist cultural practices with varying support systems from water well-using groups [*neg usniihan*] and valley groups [*neg jalgynhan*] to neighborhoods [*neg nutgiinhan*] where the whole is paramount (Mearns 1995; Stol and Adiya 2010). Rooted from the pastoralist herding encampments, community for Mongolians had a territorial meaning, where land and geographical space of belonging meant

more than material property (Myadar, 2011). In this study, bridging social capital is evident when citizen groups in different locations or activities share knowledge or resources.

Citizen engagement dynamics in the *ger* areas in Ulaanbaatar via CGs is probably not a unique story but it has peculiarities in a way it represents civil society and re-emerging community action in a lives of former pastoralist herders. What is important here is newly emerging social capital among different people from provinces whose initiative then flourished further through social capital, both with and without government assistance. In a moment of increased migration from rural to urban settings the functions of CGs may have a particular significance for those who seek job after migrating from rural areas as a step towards more sustainable income generation.

It is becoming increasingly important for social work in Mongolia to engage with social change and development-oriented practices rather than an individual and psycho-social orientation (Gray and Coates, 2010; Shek, 2017). This could include supporting grassroots CG activities which reflect the latent assets and intangible resources among *ger* residents, particularly among women. Special attention should be paid to the vulnerable sections of the community including people with disabilities, unemployed residents and those who have just migrated from the rural areas to the city. Social work also has an important role in informing community members about administrative and legal arrangements. Nearly 150 legal provisions are presently available in Mongolia to support grassroots engagement and citizen participation at all levels (MOJHA, 2017). The lack of awareness about CG activities at the administrative level, missing legal entitlements and absence of CG collateral to access government support are challenging. Without legal support and facilitation, CGs are provided with opportunities to access limited public resources as a group but not yet access to real 'power' (Bertotti *et al*, 2011, p. 180). It is clear that currently CGs are limited by their unequal power with local administration and governments (Macke & Dilly, 2010).

The experiences of the Community Groups in the *ger* districts of Mongolia are modest examples of action towards achieving the UN sustainability goals. Unfortunately, such grassroots action is not always recognized or supported by governments. Women's role in the leadership of these activities is also under-recognized. Our research suggests considerable benefits will flow from the untapped capacities of CGs in Ulaanbaatar.

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