

Interview: Urangoo

Problems Faced in Mongolia

1) What current issues affect the average person's life in Mongolia?

Mongolia's extremely fast changing economy is having a huge effect on our daily life. For example since Mongolia started importing gasoline and electricity from Russia the price of bread has increased nearly every month! If the Russians or Chinese raise the prices of gasoline or electricity then the cost of literally everything in Mongolia goes up. It has caused massive problems for the majority of people whose income cannot support the constant price inflations.

This economic crisis affects all areas of life, especially the social, health and education sectors. We are very worried about this.

2) How has the Mongolian government supported people in the past and present?

In the past the government has been very corrupt leading to an increased separation between the rich and the poor. There was little to no support given by the government to help the people and as a result many had no choice but to exist in appalling and squalid living conditions. Money brought into the country through mining was rarely seen by the average Mongolian person and instead the mining boom only caused further polarity between those in positions of power and those who were not.

Recently however, since the Liberal Party was elected two years ago, things have started to turn around for the better. The government is trying to be honest and fair with the people and they are beginning to make improvements to the country which will benefit the lives of the average person.

The money generated through mining is now in part being used to develop the infrastructure of the country, by building new roads and bus stops for example. They are also improving some of the schools and kindergartens. There is still a long way to go but we can now see some evidence of change.

3) How many people live in poverty in Mongolia?

I would say that approximately 1 in 3 people are living in poverty at the moment. This number has increased rapidly in recent times due to the transition in 1990 from a centrally planned economy to a market based economy.

Poverty in rural areas has also increased significantly as a result of a series of exceptionally harsh and destructive winters and ongoing climate change. The death of livestock and changing country terrain has lead to many herders leaving their traditional nomadic way of life to find work in the city.

4) Do they find work?

Sadly often not! In fact it is often the case that they are greeted by a life with even more challenges, unable to find work in an urban environment and powerless to provide for their families off the land with the skills they have developed over generations.

It can be very challenging for people moving away from the countryside into the city, and there is often a strong sense of lost identity which often results in alcoholism, depression, violence and in some cases suicide.

5) What are the main problems faced by children living in poverty in Mongolia?

Living in poverty creates huge stress amongst parents and as mentioned can lead to alcohol abuse and domestic violence. This often results in children fleeing their family home, opting to live out on the streets.

Many parents also get divorced due to the increased pressures and arguments that result from poverty, and it is not uncommon for parents to abandon their children once the family unit has separated. This again means that children are left with no choice but to face the harsh uncertainty and danger of street living.

6) Do children from low income families face any problems going to school?

Yes, it is very difficult for many families to send their children to school. Although education is free in Mongolia, it is extremely hard for people to find enough money to buy stationary and uniforms. Recently a new law was introduced that said all people must buy their uniforms from the same government supplier. This caused a lot of anger amongst Mongolian people as the prices were extremely high and many could not afford it.

It is also the case that in many poor families the children don't go to school at all but instead work in order to earn additional income to support their family. Their families would find it difficult to live, otherwise.

7) How many children in Mongolia have left school to go out to work?

I'd say approximately one-in-five children living in Mongolia are earning some form of income, most of which have dropped out of school to do so.

8) Where do they work?

Many of the children that live on the streets work at the Black Market, selling things like sticker books, chewing gum and cigarettes. They also approach people with their goods in the streets and in cars and restaurants, however usually the waiters will tell them to leave straight away. Some children who have nothing to sell will sit on the pavement begging or sometimes singing to passers by.

For children living in rural areas it is the agricultural and livestock sectors, mainly in the form of herding, that employ the majority of children. Sadly many children are also involved in mining which is one of the worst forms of child labor there is. Working at these informal gold or coal quarries can be extremely tiring and physically draining, with very damaging consequences on their young, developing bodies.

9) You talk about street children, how many currently live on the streets of Mongolia?

I would say about 400 children sleep on the streets all year round. Many of who would have migrated with their family to the city due to poverty and lack of means for subsistence in rural areas. It is often the case though, that a high percentage of these families can't cope with city living and are met with a very different reality to what they were expecting. The children of these migrant families rarely have access to social services, including education and healthcare and often end up living on the streets exposed to abuse and exploitation.

10) What are the main problems faced by children living on the streets?

Sexual and economic exploitation, malnutrition, harsh weather conditions, exposure to drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, human trafficking, violence, lack of education and the introduction into criminal behavior.

Life on the streets of the coldest capital city in the world is very tough for our children and not only poses many physical threats but can also cause extreme psychological trauma and deep-seated problems in later life.

11) Where do the children living on the streets sleep?

In winter when temperatures at nighttime reach -40 or below, many of the children will take shelter down the city's manholes which lead to the capital's underground heating system. Down these manholes the children can keep warm and protected from the bitter weather conditions outside. Life underground poses its own set of problems, however, and is terribly dangerous for our children, with many suffering from burns from the smoldering hot pipes.

12) What can people around the world do to support children living in poverty in Mongolia?

The CNCF Sponsorship Programme means that anyone can help a child living in poverty in Mongolia. Having been a sponsorship child myself, I know the huge support and life changing impact the programme has on children and families who are struggling and in desperate need of financial, emotional and physical help.