



Yaarmag Barracks

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • MARCH 2021

Until recently, Mongolia was a country of fiercely independent nomadic cattle herders who were unaccustomed to living in close proximity to others. But now those nomadic traditions are breaking down and people are living in more crowded and more urbanized situations. Mongolians are having to develop new skills for working with their neighbors to meet the many needs they can't meet individually. This small project, in which a group of 69 families worked together to upgrade their dilapidated "barracks" housing, was an important step towards building new systems of friendship and mutual help.

- Project Yaarmag Barracks Renovation
- Location 5th Khoroo, Khun-Uul District, Ulaanbaatar City, Mongolia
- Size 69 households
- Finished 2006
- Type Upgrading of housing and infrastructure in an old, run-down Soviet-era workers housing community, on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar.

CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

Context of the housing project:

The housing situation in Mongolia: In the 11th century, Mongolia conquered and ruled almost all of Asia and a lot of Europe, under the great warrior king Genghis Khan and his descendants. 900 years later, the Mongols are still a tough, fiercely independent people, though their empire has shrunk back down to only Mongolia, a beautiful country of mountains and vast open spaces, where tribes of nomadic Buddhist herdsman still graze their cattle. But the country is changing fast. With the collapse of the communist system, state-run factories which used to provide housing for their workers have shut down, creating wide-scale unemployment and housing problems. The state can no longer maintain that housing, and the only new housing being developed by the private sector is unaffordable to the poor majority.

It has been no easy matter for Mongolia's society to cope with the sudden and jarring transition from a socialist system, in which the state provided for everyone, to a capitalist system, in which everyone must look out for themselves. With rising unemployment, over-grazing in rural areas and increasingly harsh winters due to climate change, more and more people are moving into the cities in search of a living, and a country of nomads is fast becoming urban. By 2010, nearly half of the country's 2.7 million inhabitants were living in the capitol city of Ulaanbaatar, and of these, more than 60% were living in poverty in the vast, unserviced informal settlements which ring the city, called ger areas. In the provinces and districts around the country, the percentage is even higher, with 80 - 100% of the people living in ger areas.

What is a ger area? Since it cannot provide housing for its fast-growing urban populations, the government has a policy of allowing Mongolian families to occupy up to 700 square meters of land, on which to house themselves. On these plots of land, people first put up a ger (rhymes with "care"), the traditional, round Mongolian tent dwelling, and enclose their plot with a high fence. Many also build wooden houses, but because these tend to be poorly insulated against the fierce Mongolian winters, most families prefer to stay in their cozy, felt-lined gers during the winter and use their houses only during summer. Within these fenced-off compounds, many families also plant vegetable gardens and raise poultry and livestock. The hills around most Mongolian towns and cities are carpeted with these loosely-packed informal ger areas. Although land tenure is not a problem, conditions in these ger settlements are still very primitive. Apart from electricity, there is usually no municipal infrastructure like paved roads or street lights. Toilets consist of simple pit latrines built away from the houses, and the water supply comes by tanker or is purchased from neighborhood tube wells installed by the state or the private sector. Carting water from the tube wells to home is usually done by children, and in winter is a very difficult task. In addition, pollution from wood-fired heating stoves has become a serious environmental problem.

Workers housing in communal barracks: Poor and low-income families also stay in over-crowded and dilapidated barracks and apartment blocks. During socialist period, communal barracks were a common form of housing for factory workers in Ulaanbaatar and in other parts of Mongolia. These barracks are composed of small one-room or two-room apartments that were allotted to workers whose productivity was considered to be worthy of being rewarded with free housing. Facilities in the barracks were very basic, though. Residents cooked in make-shift kitchens and bathed themselves from basins of heated-up water inside their rooms. A few smelly wooden pit latrines near the buildings were shared by all the residents.

The community:

This case study describes a project whereby a community of 69 families collectively upgraded the four dilapidated old "barracks" apartment blocks they live in, in Yaarmag, in the southern part of Ulaanbaatar - an area of the city that used to be known as the Workers' District because of all the factories located there. These four barracks were originally built in 1969 to house workers in a state-owned shoe factory. Before the project, they were in a very run-down condition, with problems of garbage disposal, drainage, sanitation and roof leaks. 210 people live in the barracks, including 68 children, 58 employed and 35 unemployed adults, 3 disabled people and 11 pensioners.

The community upgrading project:

In 2004, the World Bank and the local NGO Center for Housing Rights and Development (CHRD) conducted a participatory study of poverty in Khan-Uul District. The Yaarmag barracks were identified as one of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in that district, with poor living conditions and high unemployment after the factories were closed in the early and mid-1990s. Around the same time, CHRD linked with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), which helped bring community leaders from other Asian countries to meet with the poor communities in Khan-Uul District and help them to organize themselves, set up community-based savings groups and begin to discuss how they could work together and use their

community strength to tackle some of the livelihood, housing and environmental problems they faced. This project to upgrade the Yaarmag barracks came out of that lively peer-to-peer learning and community mobilization, and was implemented jointly by the community and CHRD. The upgrading project was funded partly by a UN-ESCAP project, which sought to support and pilot a community-based approach to low-income housing in Mongolia.

The project was conceived to encourage the community to resolve their own housing problems through a community-based approach and was implemented in two phases. In the first phase, a survey was undertaken to identify capacities and needs in the community. In the many community meetings that followed, the residents decided to build a sturdy fence around the community, as a first step in their collective upgrading process. The people did all the planning and all the work themselves, and the 72-meter long wooden fence was finished in October 2005. In the second phase, the residents continued their discussions to identify other needs they could work together to address, and implemented more projects to construct a garbage disposal area, and make improvements to drainage, communal toilets, facades and roofs of the barracks buildings.

Support groups and partners in the project:

- **Center for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)** is a local NGO based in Ulaanbaatar. Since 1998 it has been promoting human rights and social justice in Mongolia through a variety of initiatives.
- **United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP)** is the Secretariat of the United Nations for the Asian and Pacific region. One of the main functions of UN-ESCAP is to promote economic and social development through regional and subregional cooperation and integration. This project in the Yaarmag barracks was supported by a grant from UN-ESCAP, under their "Housing the Poor in Urban Economies" project in Mongolia.
- **Asian Coalition for Housing Rights:** ACHR worked with CHRD and other groups in Mongolia to support the develop and strengthen the processes of community savings and collective housing and community improvements through the exchange of knowledge and experiences, both within Mongolia and with other countries in the Asia region.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

Legal background and legal status:

According to the law, all Mongolian citizens are entitled to 700 square meters of land, for free. Apartment blocks and workers' barracks were all originally owned by the state, but after the socialist period ended, residents of apartments and barracks were allowed to apply to own their units individually. The process of getting that official ownership is not easy though. In the Yaarmag barracks, 51 of the 69 households who live there are now owners of their apartments, and seven households are tenants. It is not clear if the five other households are owners or tenants. The 51 families got their ownership certificates in 2007 and 2008, using their collective power. CHRD assisted with information on various issues such as rights to adequate housing and to information. As a result, community members were able to negotiate with the State Authority of Registration Office and get their ownership certificates.

Government support:

The local government in Ulaanbaatar assisted the project by sending municipal garbage trucks to the community to carry away ten truck-loads of accumulated garbage. When the upgrading project in the Yaarmag barracks was finished, a celebration was organized in the community. Guests included Dr. Kim Hak-Su (Executive Secretary of UN-ESCAP), Ms. San Yunwa (Second secretary of the Department of Multilateral Cooperation, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Ms. Unurtsetseg (Director of Department of Population Development and Social Welfare Policy Coordination), who jointly distributed gifts of small kitchen appliances to residents who participated in the community upgrading project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Project costs and who paid for what?

The cost of all the various community improvements undertaken in the Yaarmag barracks came to a total of about US\$ 10,000, which was financed partly by a grant of US\$ 5,000 from UN-ESCAP and partly by the community members themselves.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

- 1. Fence around the community:** The construction of a wooden fence around the community (to stop neighbors from throwing garbage in the community and keep out trouble-makers) was the community's first priority and first collective project. It took the people just one month to complete 72.45-meter long fence, which was 2.85 meters tall and had several gates for people and vehicles to enter the community.
- 2. Solid waste management system:** Before the project, garbage from the residents and from neighbors was being tossed all around the community and had become a mess which nobody knew how to remedy. So the residents made cleaning up the garbage and developing a proper waste management system their second priority for the upgrading project. First the existing garbage was gathered up, by a team comprising two men from each of the four barracks, and loaded onto garbage trucks sent by the municipal government. Next, a big team of women and men designed and built a concrete-walled waste collection point, 3.5 x 3.5 meters, where community members would leave their household trash. A system was then worked by which the garbage disposal is managed collectively. Instead of paying their garbage collection fees to the city individually, as they had been doing, the 69 families pay the fees to a community committee, which coordinates with the local government for regular pick up of garbage. For this service, every household in the Yaarmag barracks pays 2,500 Tugriks (US\$ 88 cents) per month.
- 3. Waste water drainage improvements:** There was much discussion about the next priority project, which was the construction of a new septic tank to receive and purify "gray" waste-water from the apartments (kitchen sink and bathing drains). The residents asked a construction specialist, Ms. Altantsetseg, for help designing the septic tank, which she suggested should be two meters square and four meters deep, in order to handle the waste-water from all 69 units. Next, a team of community members (two or three men from each barrack, plus four women) worked together to build the new septic tank. The work took only ten days, with everyone sharing in the digging, and the women bringing water for the cement and cooking meals for the working team. CHRD loaned the community tools like shovels and saws.
- 4. Roofing repairs:** All of the barracks buildings had old leaky roofs, with badly deteriorated asphalt roofing tiles that let in all kinds of rain and dust and smells. One of the barracks took the lead and organized a project to repair their roof first. They decided to replace the asphalt tiles with galvanized iron sheets, which last much longer. The leader of this barracks, Ms. Bayrmaa, coordinated the construction process with the enthusiastic residents, and the work was completed quickly. Inspired by the success of this first roof renovation, the other three barracks followed later with their own roofing repairs.
- 5. Facade repairs:** After decades of harsh Mongolian winters, the exterior finishes of all the barracks buildings were in bad condition, with crumbling plastering and dilapidated doors and windows. As with the other issues, there were many discussions about how to repair and repaint the building facades together. They asked two women construction specialists (Ms. Altantsetseg and Ms. Narantsetseg) for advice on how to remove broken plaster from the walls, how to make cement and filter sand, and how to mix colors. The leaders in each barracks building coordinated the process. It was mainly the men who went to the shops to buy building materials, while the women were in charge of storing the materials and distributing only those materials that were needed for each day's work. Between ten and twenty people worked on the renovations each day. The women cooked lunches and dinners for the workers, and the children helped carry water and clean vegetables for cooking the meals.
- 6. Renovation of shared toilets:** The old outside latrines that people had shared for many years were primitive and very run-down, with drafty enclosures made of old wooden planks. After another round of discussions and consultations with their construction specialists, the people developed designs for replacing them with new toilets and septic tanks. The new toilet enclosures were built of plastered brickwork, with the men doing the construction work and the women mixing cement, carrying water and cooking lunch. When an underground electrical line was discovered during the construction of one block of four toilets, a decision was made to reduce the toilets to just three stalls, to avoid disturbing that electric line. Because there wasn't much space inside the new fence for toilets in other locations, the people decided that three shared toilets was enough.
- 6. Other activities during, and after the project:** After finishing the external renovations, some families were inspired to make repairs to the inside of their apartments, fixing ceilings, repairing doors, replacing wallpaper and repairing broken window frames. Some of these internal renovations were financed by the savings group which the women set up after the project started. In the year after the project, the community held a "Cleanest Barrack" contest, with the winner being given a prize of a renovation the internal corridor. The Yaarmag barracks children - all 68 of them! - were enthusiastic participants throughout the project.

During the renovation work, one person on the CHRD staff, A. Khongorzul, organized a "Let's live in a clean environment" contest for the children, in which the land was divided up into sections, and the children got up every morning extra early and went out to clean up their part of the compound. Besides keeping the whole community clean, this activity was a way for the children to make friends and learn teamwork. As a reward, the CHRD team gave the children fruits and biscuits.

The list of future collective projects continues to grow in the Yaarmag barracks community: building a small storehouse to keep fire wood and coals during the winter, planting vegetable gardens, installing less-polluting heating stoves, making a playground and basketball court for the children and putting up outside benches for older people to sit in and watch life go by.

COMMUNITY AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

All the work was planned and managed by the community members themselves, with technical assistance and facilitation support from CHRD staff. Community members all participated in the project - including youth and elderly members - from conducting the survey to identifying the issues to planning the projects to doing the construction. To oversee the project, they formed a monitoring committee, which had good participation of young people in the community.

The weather was a bit of a challenge for the project. Because of the fierce, snowy winters in Mongolia, when construction work becomes impossible, all the work had to be completed in the six months between late spring and early autumn. And because that is the earning season for those with construction and other informal outdoor jobs, it was sometimes difficult to get community members to help with the upgrading work.

Learning to work together: Mongolia's culture is historically a nomadic culture. Unlike most other Asian cultures, people here are fiercely independent and unaccustomed to living in close proximity to each other. In the past, great distances separated families of herdsman from each other. But now that those nomadic traditions are breaking down, people are being forced to live close to each other in cities - in ger areas and in buildings like these barracks. In this new, more crowded and more urbanized situation, Mongolians are being obliged to develop new skills for getting along and working with their neighbors to meet many need they can't meet individually. Although the Yaarmag barracks were built in the late 1960s, people were still finding it challenging to work together to maintain their communal facilities and keep their shared community spaces clean. People just threw their garbage anywhere, whether it was in the streets or inside the compound of their barracks. Disposing of garbage properly was another thing that independent, nomadic tradition didn't train people for. In that way, this project in the Yaarmag barracks was a small but important step towards building a sense in Mongolia that working together can be a way to improve the quality of everyone's life, and to build stronger relationships of mutual support in the process.

After the project was completed, the President of Mongolia at that time, Mr. Enkhbayr Nambar, visited the Yaarmag barracks, on a visit to Khan-Uul District. The project was recognized as a national "best practice," and has been featured on numerous TV programs. The saving groups from this barracks later inspired the setting up of savings groups in Uvurkhangai, Arhangai, Govi-Altai, Dharkan and other provinces.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

This case study was written by Mandkhaitsetsen Urantulkuur at CHRD, in March 2021.

For more information about the Yaarmag barracks project, please contact CHRD:

Center for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)

Contact person: Ms. Mandkhaitsetsen ("Manda") Urantulkuur (Program Manager, Community Development Program)

Address: Room 1103, 11th floor, Peace Tower, Peace Avenue 54, Ulaanbaatar City, 14250, Mongolia

- Phone: +976 11 325721 / +976 11 319037
- e-mail (1): mandatsen@gmail.com
- e-mail (2): chrd@mongolnet.mn
- Website: www.chrd.org.mn

PHOTOS



For many centuries, this is what life for most Mongolians looked like: a few families, a ger or two, a lot of cattle and wide open spaces. Self sufficiency and independence were the order of the day.



This old tapestry depicts the life of the nomadic cattle-herding people of Mongolia, who had to keep moving to find grazing land for their cattle.



But after the collapse of the socialist system, and after many factors are making the old nomadic culture unviable, people move into cities.



An aerial view of one of the informal "ger areas" in Ulaanbaatar, during the winter. Each family claims its 7,000 square meters of land, puts up a fence around it and lives independently, but in close proximity to many others.



In the "ger areas" that ring Mongolia's cities, people often build a wooden house for summer and a cozy felt-lined ger for winter.



These photos show the Yaarmag barracks buildings, in the winter, before the upgrading project began. Services like water supply and toilets were primitive, and the buildings were in bad repair, with crumbling walls, leaky roofs and lack of proper drainage.



Inside the compound of the four Yaarmag barracks buildings, many families built small sheds for storing things that don't fit in their small one-room apartments.

The areas around and within the barracks buildings had become covered with garbage, which people just threw anywhere.



This is a photo of the dilapidated internal hallway in one of the Yaarmag barracks, with apartments opening off both sides.

All life's functions take place inside the small one-room apartments: sleeping, cooking, bathing, socializing and raising the next generation.



▲ In this photo, a group of community leaders from Thailand, Japan, Nepal and the Philippines visit the community savings groups in Khan-Uul District, on an ACHR peer-to-peer exchange.



▲ The women and men of the Yaarmag barracks in one of the early meetings, to begin planning the collective renovation of their community.



▲ The first priority for the Yaarmag barracks residents was to clean up all the garbage in and around the community (above left), and then make a proper garbage dumping area (above right), where residents can dump their household garbage, for pick up by the municipal garbage trucks.



▲ The next priority for upgrading was rebuilding the outdoor toilets, which were very primitive and in bad shape (above left) with brand new toilets and septic tanks, with plastered brickwork enclosures (above right).



Another set of drafty, smelly and dilapidated shared toilets (above left), was replaced by this new block of three toilets (above right), with proper septic tanks and ventilation and stalls especially marked for men, women and children.



The fierce, snowy Mongolian winters take a big toll on buildings, and the outside of the Yaarmag barracks had crumbling plaster and broken window and door frames (above left). The photo on the right shows the work going on to repair the facades, before repainting.



Two photos which show the finished work on the facades, with re-plastered walls, repaired foundations, repaired windows and door frames and a new coat of pale yellow for the walls and a cheerful cornflower blue for the window frames.



These photos show the work going on to remove the old, leaky asphalt roofing shingles (above left), which were replaced with insulated and water-tight interlocking galvanized iron sheets (above right).

ХАМТ ОЛНЫГ ХӨГЖҮҮЛЭХ САН

Орлого		Зарлага		ХОХС-аас		гөргөсөн		ЗЭЭЛ, ТӨЛӨЛТ	
ЭТГА	ХЭМНЭЭ	ЭТГА	ХЭМНЭЭ	ЗЭЭЛ	БҮЛЭГ	ЗЭЭЛ	ЗЭЭЛИЙН	ЭРГЭН	ТӨЛӨЛТ
Бүтээгдээгүй барилгын үйлдвэр	30000	Боловсролын үйлдвэр	26000	ЗЭЭЛ	ЗЭЭЛ	ЗЭЭЛ	ЗЭЭЛИЙН	ЭРГЭН	ТӨЛӨЛТ
АКВА	2919540	ХОХС-д хийгдсэн үйлдвэр	10400	Сур	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН
Батцэцэг	30000	Хөдөлмөр хийгчдийн үйлдвэр	100000	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	
Гандах нар	27990	Бусад үйлдвэр	41800	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	
Сур	41800	Мандах нар	6000	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	
Мандах нар	6000	Мандах нар	3000000	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	
ОА	7910	Мандах нар	6400	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	
Ивээл	122000	Мандах нар	8000	Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	
ДҮН	3469040	Мандах нар		Мандах нар	ОА	Мандах нар	Ивээл	ДҮН	



During the upgrading project, the children in the community pitched in with a daily program of cleaning up the common areas around the Yaarmag barracks.

It was mostly the women in the community who kept track of all the expenditure and building materials, so every bag of cement and every nail was accounted for.



When the project was finished, a big celebration was organized, with dignitaries from the local government and the director of the UN-ESCAP project in Mongolia. The project may be small, but it has been an important one for Mongolia, and has been well covered on TV and in other media and has been made a "best practice" in the country.