

IDRC in Mongolia

IDRC's support for research in Mongolia began in the early 1990s, as the country embarked on a process of democratization, decentralization, and privatization, and transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market system. The Centre's biggest accomplishment has been to assist Mongolia's efforts to connect to the Internet. IDRC partners are also helping to ensure more sustainable management of one of the country's most important renewable resources: its grasslands. As well, environment and health are the focus of a study on the health risks posed by tanneries in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar.

Both IDRC and the Mongolian government see information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a crucial accelerator of the nation's development. Mongolia is one of the world's most sparsely populated countries. More than half the citizens of this vast, rugged land live in remote or rural areas. Roads are poor, which makes communication difficult. IDRC has supported research and policy development related to ICT use for more than 12 years. The Centre's current contribution in this area is a small grant to the Naraa Foundation to establish a scholarship fund for Mongolian ICT university students. This non-governmental organization (NGO) commemorates the memory of digital pioneer and IDRC partner Narantsetseg Baljin (Naraa) who died suddenly in 2004.

The Centre's involvement in the country's ICT development began in 1994, when it provided technical and financial support that led to the creation of Mongolia's first Internet service. Datacom, formerly a state-run software and networking company, installed a low-cost dial-up gateway system that was soon used by government officials, educators, non-profit groups, and fledgling businesses. In 1998, Datacom used IDRC support to test wireless technologies in order to help extend Internet access to Mongolia's 22 provinces. It found satellite-based Internet technology to be well suited to Mongolia's large area, low population, harsh climate, and poor existing infrastructure.

From 2002 to 2005, IDRC support also enabled the Mongolian Information Development Association, an NGO, to conduct research and advise the government on policy issues, such as the establishment of an ICT agency, and the implementation of ICT Vision 2010, Mongolia's blueprint for ICT development.

IDRC-supported researchers have also investigated how Mongolia's thriving Internet technologies can be used to deliver health and education services, particularly to rural and remote areas. Researchers have demonstrated that basic telemedicine can have a significant impact on the medical services delivered to remote areas — even in cases when connectivity is poor. They have also found that distance learning is an

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excellent option for rural doctors. These research results have led the Health University in Mongolia to expand distance-learning programs and introduce telemedicine to more regions of the country.

Today, Mongolia is a regional leader in Internet-based methods of development. Lessons learned in Mongolia have already guided similar IDRC research in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.

IDRC support for research on the management of common resources, especially grasslands, has also led to significant results. The grasslands are currently home to more than 25 million head of livestock and 192 000 herding families. The livestock have been privately owned since 1992, but grasslands remain state property and are shared. The government has devolved responsibility to local governments and herders for the co-management of this fragile state-owned resource, which is becoming seriously degraded as a result of extreme climate change, overgrazing, and the legacy of heavy industrial growth.

Mongolia's Ministry of Nature and the Environment is in its third phase of IDRC-supported research to find new and effective approaches for the local management of grasslands. These include co-management teams — comprising herders, local government, and civil society members — and community herders' groups. Herders are now taking the lead role in reshaping their use and management of the natural resource base. Government representatives are working closely with the herders, learning from and with them. The government has used the research to draft new national environmental laws.

The Government of Mongolia has expressed its appreciation for IDRC's support for research in the country by honouring the Centre and its staff. In 2004, the President of Mongolia, Natsagiin Bagabandi, presented the Centre with Mongolia's prestigious Friendship Medal. IDRC President Maureen O'Neil received the medal.

In 2006, Maria Lee-Hoon Ng and Renald Lafond, two IDRC program officers involved with IDRC's ICT research in Mongolia, were honoured for their significant contributions in developing and strengthening the country's health sector and medical research. They were both awarded the title Professor Honorarium from the Health Sciences University of Mongolia.

Also in 2006, IDRC program officers, Ronald Vernooy and John Graham, received Mongolia's highest environmental award in recognition of their efforts supporting community-based sustainable management of Mongolian natural resources and pastureland. They were made "Honorable Environmental Officers" of Mongolia.

Since 1994, IDRC has allocated more than CA\$3 million to 19 research initiatives in Mongolia, some regional in scope. Three of these projects are active and represent an investment of CA\$750 000.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

[Finding Innovative Ways to Prevent the Degradation of Grasslands](#)

Nomadic livestock producers are the backbone of Mongolia's economy. More than half of Mongolia's population makes a living from herding sheep, goats, cattle, horses or camels. Herders depend on the country's grasslands, but these pastures are becoming degraded.

Since 1999, IDRC-supported researchers have been investigating ways of conserving grasslands and protecting livelihoods through community-based co-management of natural resources. A multidisciplinary team coordinated by the Ministry of Nature and Environment has carried out research in three of Mongolia's major ecosystems: dry steppe (Lun site), forest steppe (Khotont site), and Altai mountains steppe (Deluin site). Researchers analyzed how herders manage grasslands year-round and tested various approaches to improving animal productivity, counteracting grassland degradation, and diversifying incomes. They helped establish pasture co-management teams involving herders, local government officials, and members of civil society. Twelve new herders' organizations were formed. IDRC-supported researchers also provided input to the national government that was used to draft the new Rural Development Strategy and the Law of Mongolia on Land.

In this third project phase, researchers aim to extend the co-management approach to more communities. They are conducting more experiments and are training local facilitators and researchers. Research is also taking into account women's participation in natural resource management.

(Project # 102429, Sustainable Management of Common Natural Resources in Mongolia, Phase III; Duration: 2004-2007; IDRC allocation: CA\$391 400; IDRC contact: Ronald Vernooy; Research partner: Hijaba Ykhanbai, Ministry for Nature and Environment of Mongolia, Government Building No. 3, Small Ring Road 44, Ulaabaatar 11, Mongolia; Email: ykhanbai@magicnet.mn)

Naraa Foundation ICT4D Scholarship

Mongolian digital pioneer, Narantsetseg Baljin (Naraa) was instrumental in many IDRC-supported ICT endeavours; from the original Datacom Internet service set up in 1994 to later research providing evidence for policy development. Her sudden death in 2004 moved family, friends, and colleagues to establish the Naraa Foundation in her memory. The main goal of this NGO is to continue Ms. Baljin's ICT for Development (ICT4D) training and research work and promote her commitment to public service as an example for younger generations.

This small IDRC grant will help to establish a scholarship fund to support bachelor and masters students who are completing their degree in ICTs and whose thesis-related research contributes to community development.

(Project # 103832, The Naraa Foundation ICT4D Scholarship; Duration: 2006-2007; IDRC allocation: CA\$20 000; IDRC contact: Maria Lee-Hoon Ng; Research partner: B. Baatarukh, Naraa Foundation, PO Box 24, Ulaanbaatar 210646, Mongolia; Tel.: 976-11-328469; Email: baatarsukh@gmail.com; Website: <http://www.naraafoundation.org.mn>)

Assessing the Health Risk Posed by Leather Tanneries

The tanning of animal skins is an important industry in Mongolia. Each year, Mongolian tanneries — many of them small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — process 8 million sheepskins, bovine hides, goatskins, and yak hides. However, leather tanneries produce wastewater containing chromium and other chemical pollutants that can harm the environment and human health.

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An IDRC-supported pilot study undertaken in Ulaabaatar city, an industrial centre with 34 leather tanneries, indicated chromium pollution was a problem. Based on this study, researchers from the Health Sciences University of Mongolia are using IDRC support to find ways to protect human health and the environment. They are gathering scientific evidence on the environmental distribution of chromium and the associated human exposure. The research team is also exploring other health risks among the study population, as well as examining safety standards and their enforcement. Various stakeholders are participating in the study, including employers, workers, decision-makers, and community representatives.

(Project # 103053, Risk Assessment from Leather Tanneries in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Duration: 2006-2008; IDRC allocation: \$350 000; IDRC contact: Ana Amelia Boischio; Research partner: Lkhasuren Oyuntogos, Health Sciences University of Mongolia, Building 3, Choidogiin Street, Sukhabaatar District, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 00976; Tel.: 976-11-3291; Email: lotgs2002@yahoo.com)

For more information, please contact IDRC's Regional Office for Southeast and East Asia: Address:

22 Cross Street #02-55 South Bridge Court, Singapore, 048421
Tel.: 65-6438-7877
Fax: 65-6438-4844
Email: asro@idrc.org.sg
Website: www.idrc.org.sg/

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International Development Research Centre

PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9

Street address: 250 Albert Street, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1P 6M1

Tel.: 613-236-6163

Fax: 613-238-7230

Email: info@idrc.ca