

Fighting Malnutrition in Rural Mongolia

Mongolia

Kenyon College

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Blog address: <http://macongolia.wordpress.com/2014/05/>

Section I:

**Project Goals.** Our primary goal was to present the 14th school, in Khongor, Mongolia, with a greenhouse that will produce nutritious vegetables, combating the pattern of malnutrition caused by traditional high sodium, fat and protein diets. In addition, we wanted to raise awareness using workshops for the students of the 14<sup>th</sup> School about healthy eating habits, non-communicable diseases, and environmental pollution and its effect on health.

**Funding.** No fundraising was needed to supplement our funding from the Davis Projects for Peace. After construction was completed on the main objective, the greenhouse, surplus funds were used to upgrade the main study room for the students, which had fallen into disrepair over the years of heavy use. Additionally, we used our funds to build a gate around the greenhouse in order to protect it from the stray animals that wandered in.

**Details.** We arrived in Mongolia late May and right away started with the planning and building of the greenhouse. Various community members—including teachers, volunteers and other town members—came to help, give ideas, or provide encouragement during the initial building process. As the greenhouse was finishing, we planted cucumber, tomato, and pepper seedlings in the 6x10 meter space. Construction was completed in three days. The opening ceremony was held right before the students were let out of their schools for the summer, on June 3rd.

After a week and a half, we visited Khongor for the first workshop. More than 30 students attended the workshop, which focused on eating healthy and taking care of our bodies. The school's faculty suggested that the workshop have English elements since many students want to learn English. In addition, three doctors from the nearby city, Darkhan, spoke in depth about the diseases and conditions that Mongolian diets make you more susceptible to, and about how to avoid them. These diseases included diabetes, heart disease and lung and stomach cancers.

After two weeks, we held our next workshop, focusing on beautifying and taking care of our environment/school, and the harmful effects of air and water pollution, which drew about 20 students. In addition, we asked the students to pick up trash around the school as a part of the workshop to emphasize that littering is a problem with a simple fix. We also announced a contest for the students, and asked them to submit essays or posters recalling what they had learned in the two workshops.

Three weeks after the second workshop, we made our last visit to the school. During this time, we gave our closing remarks to the students and gave them a tour of the greenhouse explaining that what we did this summer was for them and their peers, and that they should expect these vegetables in their meals very soon.

Due to the currency rates having a drastic difference for when we proposed the project to completing it, we ended up with extra funds. We asked the school if there was anything that they needed urgently. The school suggested that we make the study room in the dorms more comfortable. The study room is often inhabited by boarding students between the ages of 6 and 16. Built in the 1970s, the room has had little renovation since then. The room was about 12 meters long and it still had older windows that let in cold air during the freezing Mongolian winter. Thus, we decided to purchase and set up new carpet, tables, chairs, and curtains for the room. The school painted the room from their own funds.

The fact that our project took place in the summer was good in terms of the greenhouse and plants, but a critical obstacle was scheduling workshops with the students in the town. Many of the students visited herding relatives in the countryside, traveled on family vacations, or attended summer camps. This made it difficult to invite students to our workshops, especially with the Naadam festival, a national holiday. In addition, staff changes at the school were challenging. For instance, the school principal was about to be reassigned in the fall. Thus, the uncertainty of his position and the future of the greenhouse created anxiety, but these issues were resolved with others stepping in to take care of them.

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Although our first language is Mongolian, we had lived in the U.S. for at least a decade each. Therefore, our Mongolian language abilities were not up to par to explain to the students the technicalities about the diseases and their prevention. But thanks to our contacts in Mongolia, we were able to invite doctors from a nearby town and go in depth with the students on the diseases. In addition, adding the English element to our workshops smoothed the workshops for us and made it an additional learning environment for the attendees.

We hope that everybody in the school will benefit from the presence of the greenhouse and the vegetation in it. Our targets were the children who lived nomadically, and lived at the school dorms 9 months out of the year. By the 2014 summer's account from the school, our greenhouse will positively affect over 100 of such students.

The long-term impact of our project is that the students will grow up healthy and strong, and knowledgeable about the diseases and habits that are so prevalent in current Mongolian society. We strongly believe that the presence of a greenhouse at every rural and urban school would be a beneficial addition to the school, the students and the country.

Section II:

**Defining and Contributing to Peace.** For our project, our guiding definition of peace was the equalization of access to a healthy life. In Mongolia, the geography and available diet is one that is exclusively based on location, social class, and a growing inequality of income. The students we targeted were those most isolated from nutrition and awareness about the non-communicable diseases that they are high risk for. The greenhouse now set up and operating in Khongor will function and produce for the next 7 years, and perhaps more. For at least 5 years, this greenhouse will supplement the diet and budget of the 14th School in Khongor, which then houses and feeds 100-150 students annually, many of them from nomadic families.

Our hope for the 14th School is that the awareness about diet and non-communicable diseases is shared with families, friends and beyond. We were pleased to have garnered the attention of the local community television station, which broadened our audience base as well.

**Quotes.** "Our project in Mongolia was just a small grain compared to the entirety of international development in Mongolia, and even smaller in the global setting. Yet, we are as determined as ever that the goal of international development and peace, goals that the Davis Foundation is based on, are right and true. Before I left for Mongolia, I met with a professional who had worked in international health development for the better part of two decades. Her advice was that working in development is like walking along a beach filled with starfish that have become stranded on the shore. The person who works in development must work from the very beginning of the shore, throwing the starfish back into the sea one at a time. The greenhouse project this summer affirmed this belief for me. There are many things to consider in development, and the challenges are many, but it is the most important work that we can do." – Zolzaya Erdenbileg

"This project will stand strong and support the student body living in the dorms to supplement their meals and provide a more nutritious alternative to the more traditional meals. I only hope that the success of the greenhouse will not only stay in Khongor but grow to other parts of rural Mongolian schools and plates of other students that may also be malnourished. I have been humbled by the excitement of the students, dedication of the teachers, and the support of the community members during this short project, that will surely stand and continue to grow for years to come. This project has emphasized my desire to enter the field of International Development, and I hope that I will continue to successfully carry out many more projects like these in other parts of the world."

– Tselmegetsetseg Tsetsendelger

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