Briefing Note – 8 March 2016

MONGOLIA
Extreme winter conditions

Need for international assistance	Not required	Low	Moderate	Significant	Major
			X		

Expected impact	Very low	Low	Moderate	Significant	Major
				X	

Crisis overview

Sixteen of 21 provinces in Mongolia, mainly in the northeast, have been affected by a *dzud,* a phenomenon characterised by harsh winter conditions that result in extremely high numbers of livestock deaths. Around 400,000 people in the northern and western part of the country are at risk of losing livestock and livelihoods in the coming weeks. As of the beginning of March, over 200,000 livestock, out of an estimated 52 million, have died. The situation is expected to worsen, as the heaviest snowfalls are expected to coincide with the beginning of the spring birthing season.

Key findings

Anticipated scope and scale	The situation is expected to worsen due to snowfalls expected in March. The spring birthing season will cause further livestock deaths. Most devastation during the *dzud* is observed in March, April and May.
Priorities for humanitarian intervention	• **Food and livelihoods:** cash, food, and animal feed are key needs • **Shelter:** especially fuel, warm clothes, and animal shelter • **Health:** psychological support for herder families • **Access:** road access for ambulances, food, fuel and medicine deliveries
Humanitarian constraints	Roads are hardly passable due to snow and ice. Extreme winter temperatures, around -25°C during the day, and -40°C at night, require special winter equipment.

Limitations

There is no recent data on affected provinces, the latest information dates from 20 January. No detailed information on inaccessible roads and areas. No information on how many people are in need; the only figure available is the number of people at risk.

Crisis impact

What is a *dzud*?

The *dzud* is a phenomenon that occurs cyclically in Mongolia. It is characterised by a summer drought, which results in low hay production, followed by harsh winter conditions: storms accompanied by strong winds, up to 350cm snowfalls, and colder than average temperatures (lower than -40°C at night). Consequently livestock are unable to access enough food. A *dzud* causes an extremely high toll of livestock deaths and the collapse of livelihoods in herder communities. (OCHA 04/02/2016; World Bank 31/01/2010; Reuters 01/09/2015).

Mongolia has been experiencing very low temperatures and heavy snowfall since November 2015. The situation was exacerbated by last year's drought, which led to poor vegetation growth, overgrazing, and less hay for livestock (IFRC 15/01/2016, 29/02/2016; GIEWS 22/02/2016). Sixteen provinces so far have been affected by the *dzud*, mostly in the northeast; 80% of pasture has already degraded (Financial Times 01/03/2016; IFRC 15/01/2016; GIEWS 22/02/2016). An estimated 400,000 people (80,000 herder families) in the northern and western parts of the country are at risk of losing their livestock and livelihoods in the coming weeks. This would lead to them working for a minimum salary herding other people's animals or moving to extremely poor slums in the outskirts of the capital Ulaanbaatar. Nearly 200,000 livestock, out of an estimated 52 million, have already died as a result of the *dzud* (Reuters 03/03/2016, 26/02/2016; Save the Children 02/02/2016; IFRC 02/03/2016). Several million livestock are expected to face starvation in the spring season (IFRC 02/03/2016). Key humanitarian needs are cash, food, warm clothes and fuel (IFRC 29/02/2016).

The weather and grazing conditions are already worse compared to the previous *dzud*, which occurred in 2009–2010 (Reuters 03/03/2016). As February and March generally experience the heaviest snowfalls, the situation is expected to worsen (IFRC 15/01/2016).

Food and livelihoods: Farmers concerned about the impact of the *dzud* have been selling high quantities of meat, leading to an oversupply in the market and insufficient income for farmers to sustain themselves. In December, prices of beef and mutton were about 30% below last year's (IFRC 29/02/2016; GIEWS 22/02/2016). Households need nutrients and feed to ensure the survival of animals (OCHA 04/02/2016).

Cash: Many farmers lack cash, and they are indebted due to loans (IFRC 29/02/2016; GIEWS 22/02/2016).

Shelter: Herder families need wood, fuel and coal to ensure adequate heating and cooking. Warm clothes are also needed, especially in school dormitories where children stay during the school year (OCHA 04/02/2016).

Health: Snow has made roads inaccessible, disrupting ambulance services in the affected areas. Lack of essential medicines is also reported. Psychological distress among herders can result in domestic violence and depression (IFRC 29/02/2016; OCHA 04/02/2016). Herders who migrated to the outskirts of big cities, especially Darkhan and Ulaanbaatar, are burning rubbish collected in the streets for fuel, which leads to respiratory illnesses (British Red Cross 05/02/2016).

The presence of dead livestock represents an environmental threat due to a possible contamination and diseases. It also deteriorates human mental welfare (OCHA 04/02/2016).

Nutrition: Acute forms of malnutrition are not an immediate concern. Compromises on food consumption as a negative coping mechanisms may lead to acute malnutrition later in the spring (Save the Children 02/02/2016).

WASH: Adoption of negative coping mechanisms will likely lead to reduced purchasing of hygiene items among herders. No major issues with access to clean water have been reported yet, as herders normally melt snow or ice. A lack of fuel could worsen the situation as melting would become impossible (Save the Children 02/02/2016).

Protection: Psychological distress among herders raises the risk for domestic violence for women and children (IFRC 29/02/2016).

Impact on critical infrastructure

Harsh winter conditions and snowfalls are limiting access by road to remote areas (IFRC 15/01/2016). Currently 80% of Mongolia is covered by snow. Herders living up to 50km from towns are not able to reach urban settlements to buy food, clothes or coal due to impassable roads as well as lack of cash (IFRC 19/01/2016; Reuters 03/03/2016).

Vulnerable groups affected

Herders' children are often separated from their parents in order to access education. In extreme winter conditions, they are particularly worried about their families and can experience acute feelings of isolation (Save the Children 02/02/2016).

Old schools and dormitories are reporting heating problems and children who board must wear outdoor clothes in classes and at night. The heating problems are a consequence of budget cuts – Mongolia has been facing a national economic slowdown linked to the Chinese economic decline (Save the Children 02/02/2016).

Humanitarian and operational constraints

Humanitarian workers need special personal equipment for cold weather. Bad road conditions because of snow and ice are reported across Mongolia (OCHA 04/02/2016).

Aggravating factors

Important upcoming events

The spring birthing season, which is starting in March as the *dzud* continues, is expected to dramatically increase livestock losses (Save the Children 02/02/2016).

Outbreak of sheep-pox

An outbreak of sheep-pox has been aggravating the situation. Herders have been breaking government quarantine rules, desperately moving their livestock to new pastures (IFRC 29/02/2016).

Key characteristics of host population and area

Demographic profile: total population: 28,174,724 (World Bank 2014). 72% is urban (CIA World Factbook 2015).

Gender and age distribution (CIA World Factbook 2015):
0-14 years: 27% (male 401,000/female 394,000)
15-24 years: 18% (male 267,000/female 262,000)
25-54 years: 45% (male 653,000/female 695,000)
55-64 years: 6% (male 86,000/female 102,000)
65 years and over: 4% (male 50,000/female 73,000)

Health: Infant mortality rate: 22.44 per 1,000 live births (CIA World Factbook 2015). Under-five mortality: 35.8/1,000 (World Bank 2015). Maternal mortality: 44 per 100,000 live births (CIA World Factbook 2015).

WASH: 91.6% of the population has access to improved water sources (World Bank 2015): 66.4% of the urban population, 59.2% of the rural population. 45.8% of the population has access to improved sanitation facilities: 66.4% of the urban population, 42.6% of the rural population (CIA World Factbook 2015).

Lighting and cooking: 70% of the population use solid fuels for cooking: 60.9% of the urban population, 95% of the rural population. 34% of the population uses wood for cooking, and 23% dung (Cleancookstoves 2016).

Literacy: 98.4% (CIA World Factbook 2015).

Response capacity

Local and national response capacity

The government has limited resources and capacities to meet the essential survival needs of herders. At the end of February, the government filed a '*dzud* appeal' requesting foreign assistance for the first time since 2010 (The Diplomat 29/02/2016). The current winter has not been declared a natural disaster yet (Reuters 03/03/2016). Before the beginning of winter, the government cut wheat and meat exports to shore up domestic supplies and ensure feed for livestock (The Diplomat 29/02/2016).

The national body responsible for disaster response is called the National Emergency Agency of Mongolia (NEMA). It is actively cooperating with IFRC and the Mongolian Red Cross. NEMA holds limited stocks of hay from the state reserve. As of now, it focuses on maintaining the functioning of the infrastructure, the delivery of hay and fodder to the most affected areas, and evacuation of severely affected herders (IFRC 15/01/2016).

International response capacity

The Asian Development Bank granted 3 million dollars to help shore up livestock shelters. IFRC and national Red Cross societies also pledged financial aid (The Diplomat 29/02/2016; IFRC 29/02/2016).

Population coping mechanisms

Herders are trying to sell animals while they are still alive, but the oversupply of livestock has resulted in low market prices. Herders who have lost the majority of their livestock are migrating to the outskirts of big cities, mainly Ulaanbaatar and Darkhan. They usually live in extreme poverty in slums (Emergency Live 04/03/2016).

Information gaps and needs

- The numbers of people in need or people affected are not available. The only published figure is the number of people at risk.

- Information on the accessibility of roads is very general. No concrete areas or roads are said to be inaccessible.

- It is possible that more than 16 provinces have been affected, given the most recent information comes from 20 January.

Lessons learned

- Herders who lose their livestock usually move to towns and search for casual labour. They live in the 'ger district', which is a slum area of traditional Mongolian tents known as *gers* or *yurts* (British Red Cross 05/02/2016).

- The last *dzud* occurred in 2010, and killed over 7 million livestock (over 16% of all livestock). The 2000 *dzud* wiped out a third of the national livestock and pushed tens of thousands of families to the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar and Darkhan (UN 15/02/2016; Financial Times 01/03/2016).

- The *dzud* has devastating social and economic consequences, mainly loss of livelihoods, for rural communities. The effects are usually most apparent during March, April and May (Reuters 03/03/2016; UN 15/02/2016).