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# GETTING HERDER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES READY FOR SCHOOL: A LIFELONG LEARNING APPROACH





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## Summary

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015–2030 recognize lifelong learning as an essential part of mainstream quality education. In the 1990s, Mongolia introduced non-formal education (NFE) to extend educational access for out-of-school and school dropout children and youth, and illiterate and low-educated adults. Now known as the Lifelong Education (LLE) system, it continues to be narrowly envisioned as a remedial component, rather than a core component, of the education sector. The country is yet to garner the potential of LLE to reach even young children in remote herding communities. Innovative LLE approaches such as fostering family and community-centred learning for school readiness can help overcome Mongolia's urban-centred bias to early childhood education.

# 1. INTRODUCTION: Lifelong learning as a master concept for education policies

Goal 4 of the United Nations SDGs 2015–2030 focuses on quality education, with the overarching objective “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

For the first time in history, lifelong learning has been recognized as an integral and essential part of mainstream education. It has been a landmark move to uphold the contributions of lifelong learning – most commonly understood as NFE; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); and adult literacy – away from being considered a rudimentary adage to formal schooling systems. SDG 4 has put the responsibility on national education sectors to become more accessible and inclusive, while pushing for employment-focused skilling, and information and communications technology as essential elements of the national education agenda.

Lifelong learning is not an entirely new concept or agenda. The previous global agendas for education – including Education for All, the Millennium Development Goals and the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 Framework for Action – set the stage for eventually recognizing non-traditional forms of education and their importance in addressing intergenerational transmissions of poverty, social exclusion, environmental issues and the changing world of work (English and Carlsen, 2019; United Nations SDGs 2019).

## Box 1: SDG 4 focus areas

SDG 4 outlines the following as focus sectoral areas that contribute to achieving the overarching objective of quality education for all:

- 4.1 Free, equitable and quality education
- 4.2 Early childhood care and pre-primary education
- 4.3 Technical, vocational and tertiary education
- 4.4 Relevant skills of youth and adults
- 4.5 Equal access to education
- 4.6 Adult literacy and numeracy
- 4.7 Promote sustainable development
- 4.a Education facilities
- 4.b Scholarships available to developing countries
- 4.c Qualified teachers.

A constructive approach to lifelong learning is to unpack the concept into three closely interrelated dimensions of literacy, namely (1) literacy as a lifelong learning process; (2) literacy as a life-wide process; and (3) literacy as part of sector-wide reforms to foster lifelong learning systems. Using this approach to analyse progress towards SDG 4 indicates an expanded vision of literacy and education is yet to take hold (Hanemann, 2019).

Lifelong learning brings into focus four critical pillars of SDG 4:

- **Life cycle approach:** learning happens across the life cycle
- **Equity:** there is a need for foundational skills for all
- **Inclusion:** learning for decent work for all
- **Quantity:** learning for full integration into social and civic life.

Lifelong learning has posed a challenge for policymakers in Mongolia and elsewhere due to contested understanding of what it entails. With a lack of consensus, it is difficult to put in practice and measure progress at the global, regional or country level. Moreover, the limited conceptualizations fail to harness the potential of lifelong learning in achieving other SDGs, primarily SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 3 (Health and well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth); and also SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and SDG 13 (Climate change mitigation)

(United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019; English and Carlsen, 2019). Lifelong learning expands the potential and purpose of education as an enabler of long-term sustainable development and is one of the priority SDGs. Indeed, dominant discourses of education must be challenged in order to create acceptance of lifelong learning as the “master concept for education policies and as the organizing principle of education” (English and Carlsen, 2019).

Even today, there remains an overarching focus on access, enrolment and completion of primary education, but less on indicators of quality, equity and inclusivity of education; teaching; training; educational outcomes; student retention; and NFE including TVET. In 2017, worldwide there were 262 million children and young people (aged 6–17 years) still out of school, and more than half of them were not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics. Education sectors around the world have failed to keep up with rapid technological changes. Increased efforts are needed to improve learning outcomes across the life cycle, especially for women, girls and marginalized, often invisible, minority groups of children and adolescents (United Nations SDGs, 2019). Indeed, only when national governments adopt an expanded vision of education as a lifelong learning agenda going beyond literacy and mathematical skills will there be transformative effects on the achievement of the SDGs.

## 2. The lifelong learning agenda in Mongolia: a bottleneck situation

In Mongolia, the National Centre for Lifelong Education under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports (MECSS) assumes responsibility for lifelong learning. To date, lifelong learning has been narrowly conceptualized as NFE. The programmes and trainings cover three areas: adult literacy programmes, equivalency programmes and subsidiary programmes and trainings; for example, English literacy. The National Centre for Lifelong Education oversees policy development, monitoring surveys, the provision of information and consultancies, materials development and human capacity-building at the national level (Yembu, 2009).

The Government first prioritized NFE as it transitioned into a market economy in the 1990s. The NFE enlightenment centres target two groups. The basic target group consists of out-of-school and school dropout children and youth, and illiterate and low-educated adults. The special target group is composed of adults, the unemployed, housewives, migrants who want to improve their education level, parents with very young children, and children and adults with disabilities (Yembu, 2009). Indeed, a key outcome of the policy was the establishment of the Equivalency Programme for dropout children and adolescents. It led to a marked improvement in equitable access and greater inclusion of children and adolescents with disabilities, and from migrant families and vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds.

The centres do not have access to their own facilities, unlike countries such as Japan, and do not receive independent funding from the soum (sub-province) or aimag (province) administration. Instead, they are established on formal school premises and collaborate with school authorities to appoint NFE teachers and monitor centre

activities. This is to maximize the use of available financial and human resources in soums and aimags, which respectively have populations of less than 2,000, and 15,000 on average.

Overall, there has been slow progress in the provision of NFE, now interchangeably referred to as LLE. The NFE enlightenment centres have also been renamed LLE centres. However, the same challenge remains: LLE is still considered remedial rather than educational in its own right. **Hence, LLE centres are characterized by poor investment, and weak capacity and infrastructure.** This is reflected in the allocation of minimal resources to LLE centres, which usually consist of just one or two rooms. There is generally one LLE teacher with a primary teacher qualification catering to the needs of the entire soum population, one LLE teacher per school in an aimag, and one methodologist at the aimag level Department of Education. At soum-level centres, students from Grades 1–9 are taught together regardless of their level of maturity, educational background or learning abilities.

The lack of investment and integration of the centres into the mainstream education sector can be attributed to the biased understanding of this agenda in higher levels of government, as well as poor acceptance and stigmatization of LLE in wider society. This lack of policy priority is further reflected in the isolation of LLE, which does not engage with other relevant departments such as the Higher Education Department in MECSS, or TVET that comes under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare.

Finally, there is a data bottleneck in Mongolia, with little data on hard-to-reach populations such as remote herding communities who are still semi-nomadic. The data challenge is regional; the latest SDG progress report on the the Asia-Pacific region (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019) reveals two thirds of the global SDG indicators cannot be measured for Asia and the Pacific, including SDG 17. A major bottleneck is the region's failure to systematically meet SDG 17, which stipulates a significant increase in availability of high-quality and timely data by 2020. The report **highlights that no SDGs will be achieved if progress continues at the current pace, including SDG 4.**

## 2.1. Leaving no one behind: children in herder families

In the context of nomadism and low population density, an expanded vision and approach to lifelong learning could accelerate progress towards equitable, inclusive, quality education for all across the life cycle. However, there is no cohesive strategy, owing to outdated notions of education that still dominate the policy discourse and public understanding.

In particular, access to education has historically forced herding families to migrate to urban areas and eventually adopt a settled lifestyle. Education, when narrowly envisioned, is a process of cultural production that broadly and often permanently changes social organization and household economies. In Mongolia, education has gradually contributed to 'pastoral dropout', whereby the vast majority of herder families have either voluntarily transitioned into urban, settled families or splitting the household so that children are able to relocate to urban centres to attend school.

Today, children from remote herding families are no longer the norm but the exception, with more than 60 per cent of the population in urban centres. Yet they are most likely to miss preschooling opportunities due to distance – a major disincentive.<sup>1</sup> Herder families have to travel up to 60–70 kilometres to reach the nearest educational centre, with some families living as far as 100–200 kilometres away (Yembu, 2009).

Therefore, access to basic education has placed particular demands on herding families with children or **unfavourable terms of inclusion** in formal education. At each point of transition, from school readiness to university attendance, children from herder families are at risk of exclusion or dropping out of the system (UNICEF, 2014). In fact, boys are more likely to be excluded as they are expected to carry on traditional livestock rearing.

<sup>1</sup> Social Indicator Sample Survey 2018 data.

# 3. School Readiness: A Family And Community-Centred Approach To Lifelong Learning

For Mongolia, **school readiness can be a powerful component of lifelong learning** for herder families, and a family and community-centred enabler for establishing the four pillars of SDG 4: life cycle approach, equity, and inclusion and quality in educational outcomes.

This framework takes attention away from the educational institutions and brings it back to the natural habitat of the child: their family and community. A school readiness framework requires the adoption of policies and standards for early learning, expanding learning opportunities beyond formal education to prioritize those who are excluded. Supportive parenting and stimulating home environments have been shown to be among the strongest predictors of equity and school performance during primary school and beyond. Further, there are lifelong outcomes as these also instil positive social and behavioural competencies for adulthood (UNICEF, 2012).

For a scattered population, the broad approach to school readiness adopted by Nordic and Central European countries may prove to be useful. In this approach, school readiness has three dimensions: child, family and community. Therefore, **family readiness** is another central concept, i.e. preparing the family from childbirth

to eventually send the child to school (UNICEF, 2012). A focus on family is critical given that studies show a child's adjustment to schooling is less complex than the familial decisions undertaken to send a child to school. With household splitting, the preparation creates far-reaching and often permanent disruption to family structures in Mongolia. Instead, an education system that prioritizes school readiness would proactively seek to involve the child's family and community environment.

Indeed, a lifelong learning approach not only fulfils the principles of equity, inclusion and quality but recognizes and respects opportunities for non-settled lifestyles around the world to thrive. In Mongolia, there is already gradual but growing awareness of the importance of school readiness for herder populations. Prior to 2015, there were a few outreach initiatives by soum NFE teachers which were less successful for nomadic herder families and eventually required seasonal planning (Yembu, 2009). In 2015, UNICEF began its successful home-based early childhood development programme in the two districts of Ulaanbaatar and Khuvsgul to promote parent-child teaching through the use of interactive distance learning kits. More recently, a home-based school readiness programme for rural children piloted by Save the Children has been well received. However, despite MECSS commitment, there are financial constraints to scaling up the community-based school readiness programme, which relies on home schooling in the first six months prior to joining pre-primary education.

## 3.1. Recommendations

### Family and community:

- Family and community are the primary delivery platforms for school readiness programmes. Most studies on school readiness adopt a simplistic or idealistic model of families. **There is a need for more research** on the interaction between the school readiness process and family dynamics; psychological adjustment of individual family members; intergenerational transmissions of social-emotional behaviours such as relationship building and connection; cognitive abilities; and a child's relationships with other siblings – all of which influence and shape their learning process (Cowan et al., 2005, cited in UNICEF, 2012).

**Schools and NFS:**

- An expansive and yet cohesive strategy for lifelong learning must be prioritized for Mongolia to progress steadily towards SDG 4. Greater financial and human resource investments in lifelong learning centres followed by capacity-building and social acceptance is essential. TVET should also come under the purview of an expansive, cohesive lifelong learning strategy. These are two important platforms for identifying and reaching the most vulnerable children and adolescents.

**Health care and social services:**

- Health care and social services can play an important role in supporting and training herder parents, families and communities in 'getting ready for school'. Parenting practices must promote positive learning and development in children, which begins with antenatal and postnatal care, early stimulation behaviours for newborns and infants, and early childhood care (WHO, 1999). In fact, pregnancy and the first 1,000 days of life are critical for a child's optimal brain development – a period of vulnerability with lifelong impacts. This also highlights the importance of good nutrition, clean air and safe drinking water both during pregnancy and in the early years.

**Social security and justice systems:**

- Social and labour policies have a direct impact on new parents and early childhood care, which includes school readiness. Social security benefits for remote, semi-nomadic herder families, and putting in place incentives for joining the formal sector, can play an important role in equity and inclusion in lifelong learning.

**Digital and non-digital communications:**

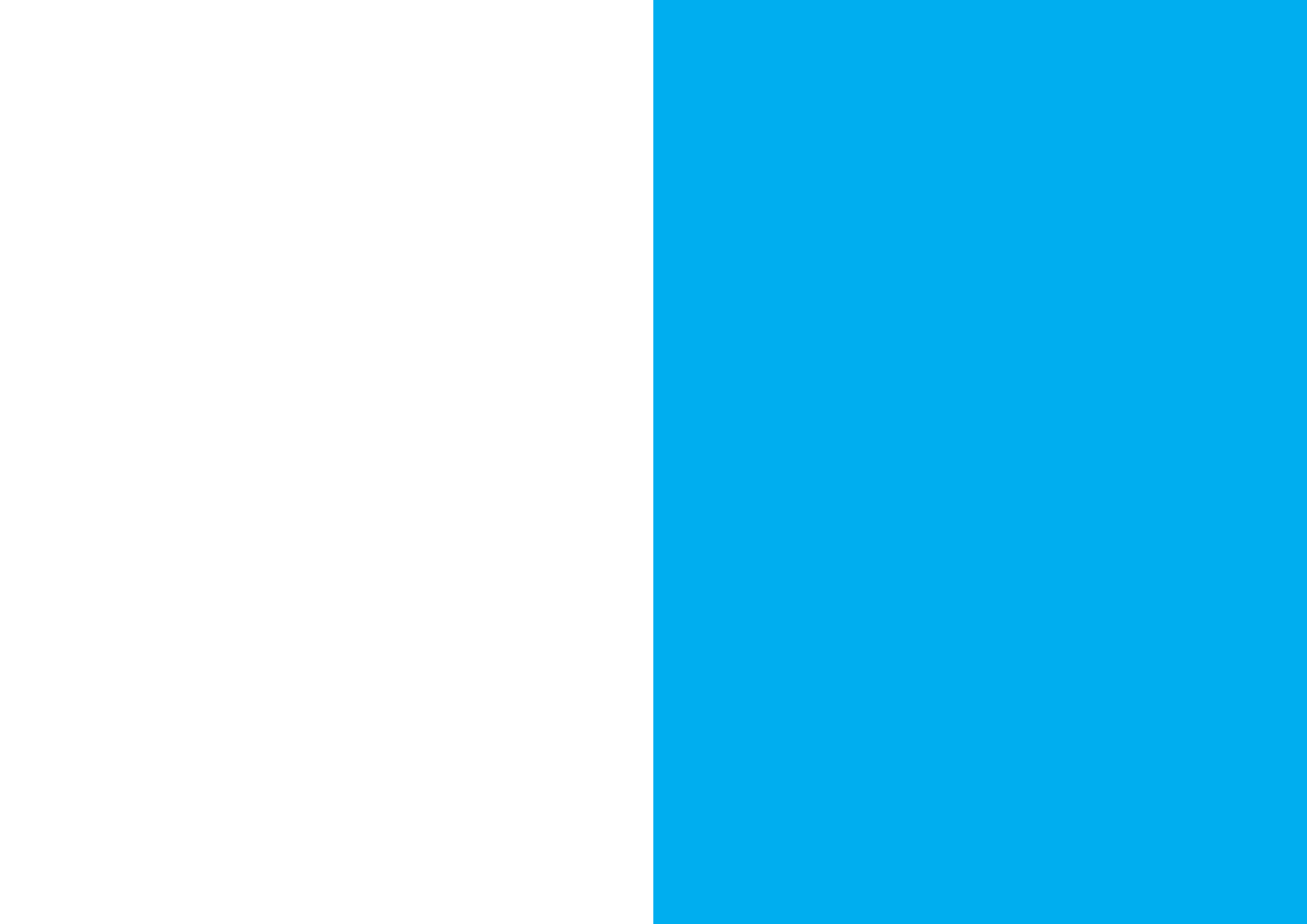
- Younger, especially urban, Mongolians still experience physical and geographic isolation in their places of origin. The Internet represents a powerful platform for connecting with peers in other parts of the country and across the world. Digital technology presents new opportunities for connecting with hard-to-reach populations such as herder families. Given the challenges of mobile connectivity in this vast country, the digital space needs to be better explored and exploited as an important outreach platform for invisible populations.

This policy brief is based on UNICEF Mongolia's 2019 Situational Analysis on Integrated Development for Adolescents, in collaboration with Development Pathways.

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