



BRIEFING NOTE

FOR INFORMATION

SUBJECT: The Rivers Movements in Mongolia

The term River Movements is used to classify various grassroots movements that have emerged in Mongolia, engaging in actions against mining operations and their negative effects.¹ The movements arose in response to growing neoliberal reforms being undertaken by the Mongolian government in the early 1990's, and the subsequent lack of regulation surrounding the mining industry as the country's economy transitioned from a Marxist-oriented one. To improve economic conditions in the country, the Mongolian government allowed mining interests to operate with relative impunity in terms of development and regulation. While the move has allowed for an impressive growth in the Mongolian economy, it has also led to a large amount of environmental degradation, pollution, and questionable business practices. With a lack of government and NGO engagement in rural mining areas, local communities began to form groups with the goal of protecting the environment, primarily grasslands and waterways, which are vital to traditional herding livelihoods. This brief will provide a general overview on the development of these movements, highlighting the ways in which the groups succeeded and failed in accomplishing their goals.

The Ongi River Movement, formed in 2001, was the first instance of formal mobilization concerned with mining effects, primarily interested in the protection of the 435km long Ongi River in Central Mongolia. The Ongi River flows through eight rural districts in three provinces and is the only river that flows south of the Gobi Desert. Lake Ulaan, the mouth of the river, dried up in the late 1990s due to the gold mining operations near the upper section of the river. This led to the emergence of the movement to try and curb any further negative effects to the waterway. NGOs were not typically engaged in rural areas of Mongolia, and the emergence of the Ongi River Movement gave international NGOs a local group that they could support and build upon. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung organization, a German political foundation that had worked in Mongolia since the early 1990s, began to support the Ongi River Movement in 2002, supplying the group with environmental activist workshops and training. Over time the Ongi River Movement spread into other areas not along the river, adopting the same practices to combat the negative effects of the mining industry, and eventually culminating in the creation of the Homeland and Water Protection Coalition (HWPC) in 2006.

The creation of the HWPC was primarily aided by the Asia-Foundation, a U.S. based NGO, which provided financial and technical support to the coalition. Ruptures began to arise within the HWPC as different groups disagreed on the direction of coalition. Some members of the grassroots movements advocated for more radical mining reforms, such as a blanket ban on

¹ Dalaibutan Byambajav. "The River Movements' Struggle in Mongolia." *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 92-97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.877387>

mining in river basins, while others argued for a more balanced approach that created a system of responsible mining.

There was also disagreement between the HWPC and the Asia-Foundation on how to approach the issue of mining. The Asia-Foundation sought to collect reliable empirical data through river monitoring, build knowledge based on the collected data, and then make informed decisions based on the data and act accordingly.² The reality of the situation, weak community interaction and an expanding gold market, meant that this method was ineffective at quickly securing real results for communities. Instead, the HWPC opted to undertake more direct action against the Mongolian government and mining companies, such as strikes and more radical tactics, to promote awareness for the issue.

Eventually the HWPC was dissolved due to the rifts in direction, however it laid the framework for a trans-local movement to develop in the Mongolian context. From the HWPC there emerged various other environmental activist groups, such as the United Movement of Mongolia Rivers and Lacks (UMMRL), which gained broader public and private support and became influential in leading to mining reform for the country.³ For instance, in 2009, a day before the Mongolian government was given the authority to finalize an investment agreement on the Oyu Tolgoi mining project, parliament passed a law prohibiting mining operations at the headwaters of rivers, the protected zones of water bodies, and forested areas.⁴ Furthermore, the law suspended mining in those area, as well as obliged companies to rehabilitate the mining sites within 2 years under the monitoring of local government and citizens. Logistical issues hampered the effectiveness of the law in application, however it set the precedent for increased regulation of the industry by government bodies.

The Mongolian River Movements had very real effects on the mining industry in Mongolia, leading to increased regulation, social support, and a decrease in the issuance of exploration and mining licenses. The case illustrated the effectiveness of grassroots organizations in contributing to legislative change, as well as the interaction between local, national, and transnational actors that can form and contribute both negatively and positively to the goals of the interested parties.

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² Ibid., 95.

³ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁴ The Oyu Tolgoi project, located in the South Gobi region of Mongolia, was the world's largest undeveloped copper-gold project, and was expected to account for over 30% of the country's GDP when authorized. Ibid., 96-97.