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Research paper

Saemaul Undong in Mongolia: A Korean Model of Rural Development as Third Neighbor Cooperation

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study examines the role of South Korean Official Development Assistance (ODA) through the Saemaul Undong in Mongolia’s “Third Neighbor” policy, with a focus on its spatial and institutional effectiveness across different regions.

Methods: This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the spatial and institutional dynamics of development cooperation in Mongolia. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the research aims to interpret structural and contextual factors influencing policy outcomes rather than test causal relationships quantitatively (Creswell, 2014).

The study relies on document analysis as its primary method. Data sources include reports from international organizations such as the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Asian Development Bank, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), as well as peer-reviewed academic literature. These sources were selected based on three criteria: relevance to rural development and livestock economy in Mongolia, publication within the period 2000 to 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance, and institutional credibility.

In addition, a comparative case study approach is employed to analyze Vietnam’s New Rural Development Program. Vietnam was selected due to its widely recognized success in adapting Saemaul Undong principles within a sedentary agricultural system. This comparison enables a structured analysis of how differences in settlement patterns, economic structures, and institutional contexts influence development outcomes.

The analysis follows a thematic approach, focusing on key dimensions including geographic suitability, institutional legacy, and environmental sustainability. These themes are used to interpret how development models interact with local conditions in Mongolia.

While this study primarily relies on secondary data, this reflects limitations in publicly available project-level evaluations of Saemaul Undong programs in Mongolia. Future research should incorporate primary data, including interviews with KOICA officials and Mongolian policymakers, to further validate these findings.

Results: The input data (text) is categorized into two emotions as positive or negative. The performance of different classifiers is evaluated based on their results. Also to evaluate the performance of the proposed model to classify and predict the emotion, various evaluation measures were used to include accuracy, precision, recall, and F measure.

Conclusion: This study aimed and performed a comparative analysis of performance evaluation of different machine learning classifiers for emotion detection and classification.

Keywords: Saemaul Undong, Mongolia, Third Neighbor Policy, rural development, qualitative analysis, spatial development

Section 1: Introduction

Mongolia is a landlocked country situated between two big countries which are considered two major powers, China and Russia. This unique geographical position has historically shaped Mongolia's foreign policy strategy, particularly after the collapse of the socialist system in 1990. As a small state with limited economic and military capacity, Mongolia has pursued a strategy of diversification through its "Third Neighbor Policy," seeking partnerships with countries beyond its immediate neighbors.

Among these partners, South Korea has emerged as a significant development actor through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the promotion of the Saemaul Undong model (Korea International Cooperation Agency, n.d.).

This study examines how this model interacts with Mongolia's institutional structures, geography, and rural economy. The concept of the "Third Neighbor Policy" reflects Mongolia's effort to maintain political independence and economic sovereignty by building strong diplomatic and economic relations with countries such as South Korea, Japan, and the United States. This policy is not only geopolitical but also developmental, as it relies heavily on foreign aid, investment, and knowledge transfer to support Mongolia's economic transition and modernization.

1.1. Mongolia's Structural Vulnerability and Need for External Partners

Mongolia's geographic isolation presents both strategic and economic challenges. As a landlocked country, it depends heavily on its neighbors for trade routes and access to global markets. Historically, Mongolia was closely aligned with the Soviet Union, relying on it for economic assistance, infrastructure development, and political support. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally altered Mongolia's external environment.

The sudden withdrawal of Soviet Union's aid created significant economic and institutional challenges (Nixson & Walters, 1999). During the socialist period, Mongolia's economy was centrally planned, with agriculture organized into state-controlled collectives (Asian Development Bank,

2019). According to the Oxford Business Group, the agricultural sector was fully state-controlled before 1991, benefiting from subsidies and centralized coordination. However, with the transition to a market economy, this system was rapidly dismantled, leading to a sharp decline in production and institutional capacity.

This transition exposed Mongolia to economic instability and increased its dependence on external partners. As a result, the country sought to diversify its international relations beyond its immediate neighbors, laying the foundation for the Third Neighbor Policy.

1.2. The Post-1990 "Policy Vacuum" in the Livestock Sector

One of the most critical areas affected by the transition was the livestock sector, which remains the backbone of Mongolia's economy. Livestock accounts for a significant share of agricultural output and serves as the primary source of livelihood for a large portion of the population.

During the socialist era, livestock production was organized through collective farms (negdels) (Enkhchimeg, 2023), which provided:

- Veterinary services

- Marketing systems

- Social welfare support

However, the rapid transition to a market economy in the early 1990s led to the dismantling of these institutions. According to research on Mongolia's economic transition, the shift involved:

- Privatization of livestock

- Removal of state support systems

- Liberalization of markets

As a result, herders were suddenly left to operate independently without adequate institutional support. The collapse of collective systems created what can be described as a "policy vacuum", particularly in the livestock sector. There was no clear framework to guide:

- Pasture management

- Market access

- Risk mitigation (e.g., climate shocks such as dzud)

The Food and Agriculture Organization highlights that Mongolia's livestock system is characterized by long-distance mobility and weak communication infrastructure, making service delivery and market integration difficult.

This vacuum was further exacerbated by the lack of institutional experience in managing a market-based rural economy. As noted in academic literature, privatization was implemented without sufficient research or policy planning, leading to fragmented and inefficient systems.

In this context, scholars and policymakers have emphasized that the Mongolian government struggled to define a coherent development strategy for the livestock sector during the transition period. This lack of direction created an opportunity for external actors to play a significant role in shaping Mongolia's rural development policies.

1.3. Emergence of the Third Neighbor Policy

Faced with economic uncertainty and geopolitical constraints, Mongolia adopted the Third Neighbor Policy as a strategic response. The policy aims to:

- Reduce dependence on China and Russia
- Attract foreign investment and aid
- Strengthen democratic institutions

In practice, this policy has involved building partnerships with advanced economies that can provide:

- Financial assistance
- Technical expertise
- Institutional support

Among these partners, South Korea has become particularly important due to its own experience of rapid economic development and rural transformation. South Korea's development model, especially the Saemaul Undong, has been promoted as a framework for rural modernization in developing countries.

1.4. Role of South Korean ODA in Mongolia

South Korea's engagement with Mongolia is primarily implemented through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), which provides development assistance in areas such as:

- Rural development
- Governance
- Education
- Capacity building

These programs are aligned with Mongolia's development needs, particularly in addressing the institutional gaps that emerged after 1990. Through

training programs, pilot projects, and technical cooperation, South Korean ODA seeks to transfer knowledge and promote community-based development approaches.

Importantly, South Korea's approach differs from traditional donors in that it emphasizes:

- Experience-based learning
- Community participation
- Long-term capacity building

This reflects the influence of the Saemaul Undong model, which focuses on self-help, cooperation, and local leadership.

1.5. Linking Development Aid to Foreign Policy

The role of South Korean ODA in Mongolia extends beyond economic development. It also serves as a tool of foreign policy, strengthening bilateral relations and enhancing South Korea's influence in the region.

For Mongolia, accepting ODA from South Korea supports its broader strategic objectives by:

- Diversifying international partnerships
- Reducing reliance on neighboring powers
- Enhancing policy autonomy

For South Korea, development assistance helps to:

- Expand its diplomatic presence
- Promote its development model
- Build long-term partnerships

Thus, ODA becomes a key mechanism through which the Third Neighbor Policy is operationalized.

1.6. Research Focus

This study examines the role of South Korean ODA in Mongolia's Third Neighbor Policy, with a particular focus on rural development initiatives inspired by Saemaul Undong. It seeks to answer the following questions:

How has South Korean ODA contributed to Mongolia's development strategy?

To what extent has the Saemaul Undong model been successfully adapted in Mongolia?

What structural and institutional factors influence the effectiveness of these programs?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the broader literature on development cooperation, policy transfer, and small state foreign policy strategies.

Section 2: Literature Review & Theory, Development Models and Soft Power

2.1. Introduction

Understanding the role of South Korean development assistance in Mongolia requires both theoretical and practical perspectives on development. This section combines insights from modernization theory with the experience of the Saemaul Undong to explain how development models are transferred across countries and how they function as tools of soft power. While theoretical frameworks help explain why countries seek development pathways, practical models such as Saemaul Undong demonstrate how these ideas are implemented in reality.

2.2. Modernization Theory: Concept and Foundations

Modernization theory, particularly the work of Walt Whitman Rostow, has played a central role in shaping development thinking. Rostow argued that societies evolve through a series of stages, beginning with traditional agricultural systems and progressing toward industrialization and mass consumption. In this view, development is a linear process driven by investment, technological change, and institutional reform (Rostow, 1960).

This framework was especially influential during the mid-twentieth century, when many developing countries were searching for strategies to achieve economic growth. It assumes that by adopting modern institutions and economic policies, countries can follow a similar path to that of Western nations. However, this assumption has been widely criticized for overlooking the diversity of social, cultural, and economic contexts across countries. (World Bank, 2009) In the case of Mongolia, these limitations are particularly evident, as its nomadic pastoral system does not easily fit into a linear model of development.

2.3. Saemaul Undong as a Development Model

In contrast to abstract theoretical models, the Saemaul Undong represents a concrete example of how development was implemented in practice. Launched in the 1970s under President Park Chung-

hee, the movement aimed to modernize rural South Korea by improving infrastructure, increasing productivity, and strengthening community participation.

What distinguished Saemaul Undong from other development approaches was its focus on both material and social transformation. It was not limited to building roads or increasing income; it also sought to change attitudes and behaviors within rural communities. This combination of economic and social objectives played a significant role in its success.

2.4. Core Principles of Saemaul Undong

At the center of Saemaul Undong are the principles of diligence, self-help, and cooperation. These values were designed to encourage individuals and communities to take an active role in their own development. Diligence emphasized hard work and discipline, while self-help promoted independence and initiative. Cooperation encouraged collective action, recognizing that community-level collaboration was essential for achieving broader development goals.

According to the Saemaul Undong Center, these principles formed the foundation of a movement that was intended to be driven by local communities, even though it was supported by strong government leadership. This balance between state support and local participation is often highlighted as one of the key factors behind its effectiveness.

2.5. Saemaul Undong and Modernization Theory

Saemaul Undong can be seen as a practical extension of modernization theory, but it also introduces important modifications. While both emphasize economic transformation and progress, Saemaul Undong places greater importance on social values and community engagement. It recognizes that development is not only about economic growth but also about changing mindsets and strengthening local institutions.

This distinction is important when considering the transfer of development models. Whereas modernization theory assumes a universal path, Saemaul Undong demonstrates that successful development requires adaptation to local conditions. Its emphasis on participation and cooperation makes it more flexible in theory, but its effectiveness still depends on the specific context in which it is applied.

2.6. Saemaul Undong as Soft Power

As South Korea transitioned from an aid recipient to a donor country, it began promoting Saemaul Undong internationally. This shift reflects the use of development cooperation as a form of soft power. Rather than relying on coercion or economic dominance, South Korea seeks to influence other countries through knowledge sharing, training, and institutional partnerships.

In this context, development assistance serves both developmental and diplomatic purposes. It helps partner countries improve their economic and social conditions, while also strengthening South Korea's international presence. Through this approach, South Korea presents itself as a model of successful development, particularly for countries undergoing economic transition.

2.7. Diplomatic Trust: Mongolia and Korea Relations

The role of Saemaul Undong in diplomacy can be observed in the growing relationship between Mongolia and South Korea. A notable example is the visit of Mongolian Ambassador Erdenetsogt Sarantogos to Yeungnam University, where discussions focused on expanding cooperation in rural development, education, and capacity building.

This visit reflects a deeper level of engagement between the two countries. The ambassador's interest in Saemaul based development indicates a recognition of South Korea's experience as relevant to Mongolia's own challenges. At the same time, Korean institutions expressed their willingness to support Mongolia through training and knowledge exchange. Such interactions go beyond formal diplomacy and demonstrate how development cooperation can build long-term partnerships.

2.8. Yeungnam University as a Platform of Soft Power

Yeungnam University plays a significant role in promoting Saemaul Undong internationally, particularly through the Park Chung-hee School of Policy and Saemaul. By providing education and training to foreign officials, the university acts as a bridge between Korean development experience and

policy implementation in other countries.

This form of engagement illustrates how educational institutions can function as instruments of soft power. They not only transfer technical knowledge but also shape the perspectives and approaches of policymakers. In the case of Mongolia, such programs contribute to building institutional links and fostering mutual understanding between the two countries.

2.9. Theoretical Implications for Mongolia

The combination of modernization theory and Saemaul Undong provides a useful framework for analyzing Mongolia's development strategy. Modernization theory explains the broader goal of economic transformation, while Saemaul Undong offers a model for achieving this through community participation and value change. At the same time, the concept of soft power highlights the diplomatic dimension of development cooperation.

However, the Mongolian context presents significant challenges. Its nomadic pastoral system differs fundamentally from the village-based structure assumed in the Saemaul model. This suggests that while the principles of Saemaul Undong may be relevant, their implementation requires careful adaptation. Without such adaptation, the effectiveness of these programs is likely to remain limited.

2.10. Synthesis

In conclusion, this section has shown that development models are not simply technical solutions but are deeply connected to social, cultural, and political contexts. Modernization theory provides a broad framework for understanding development, while Saemaul Undong offers a practical example of how development can be implemented through community-based approaches. At the same time, South Korea's promotion of Saemaul Undong demonstrates how development assistance can function as a tool of soft power.

The Mongolian case highlights the importance of context in determining the success of such models. While South Korean ODA contributes to Mongolia's development and strengthens bilateral relations, its effectiveness depends on how well it aligns with Mongolia's unique socio-economic structure. This insight is essential for understanding both the potential and the limitations of development cooperation within

the framework of the Third Neighbor Policy.

Section 3: The Socialist Legacy: From Negdel to Market

3.1. Introduction

To understand the challenges of implementing South Korean development models in Mongolia, it is essential to examine the country's socialist legacy. This section applies the perspective of historical institutionalism to explain how past institutions continue to shape present outcomes. In Mongolia, the transition from the socialist negdel system to a market-based economy created deep structural and behavioral changes that still influence rural development today. These historical factors are particularly important in explaining why community-based models such as the Saemaul Undong face limitations in the Mongolian context.

3.2. Historical Institutionalism: Conceptual Framework

Historical institutionalism emphasizes that institutions are not easily changed once they are established. Instead, they create long-term patterns of behavior, expectations, and decision-making. This concept is often described as "path dependency," meaning that past choices constrain present possibilities.

In the Mongolian case, the socialist system created a specific institutional environment that shaped how rural communities functioned. Even after the transition to a market economy in the 1990s, many of these patterns persisted. As a result, current development policies cannot be fully understood without considering the legacy of socialism.

3.3. The Negdel System: Structure and Expansion

During the socialist period, Mongolia's rural economy was organized through collective farms known as negdels. By the late socialist era, there were approximately 255 negdels operating across the country, forming the backbone of agricultural production (Humphrey & Sneath, 1999). These collectives were not only economic units but also social and administrative institutions that structured

everyday life in rural areas.

The negdel system transformed traditional pastoralism into a more organized and state-controlled system. Herders were incorporated into collectives where:

Livestock was managed collectively or semi collectively

Production targets were set by the state

Resources such as fodder, veterinary services, and transport were centrally provided

This system allowed the government to coordinate production and ensure a degree of stability in rural livelihoods. At the same time, it reduced individual autonomy and integrated herders into a broader socialist framework.

3.4. Constructing a Socialist Rural Society

One of the most significant aspects of the negdel system was its role in reshaping social identity. The state did not simply organize production; it actively "constructed" a new rural working class from traditionally nomadic herders.

Under socialism, herders were no longer seen as independent pastoralists but as members of a collective workforce contributing to national economic goals. This transformation involved:

The introduction of wage-like systems

Access to social services such as education and healthcare

Integration into state planning mechanisms

As a result, rural life became closely tied to the state. The government provided not only economic support but also social security, creating a system in which individuals relied heavily on centralized institutions (Enkhchimeg, 2023)

This process fundamentally altered the relationship between individuals and the state. Rather than operating independently, herders became accustomed to a system where decisions were made at higher levels and implemented locally.

3.5. The Collapse of the Negdel System and Transition to Market Economy

The early 1990s marked a turning point in Mongolia's history. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia rapidly transitioned from a socialist system to a market economy. This transition involved the privatization of livestock and the dissolution of

negdels.

The dismantling of the collective system had profound consequences. Herders suddenly became independent economic actors, responsible for managing their own livestock and making market decisions (World Bank, 2009). However, this transition occurred without the gradual development of supporting institutions.

As noted in studies such as Enkhchimeg, the post-socialist period was characterized by:

The loss of centralized support systems

Weak market infrastructure

Limited access to services in rural areas

This created a form of institutional vacuum, where neither the old socialist system nor a fully functioning market system was in place.

3.6. Path Dependency and Behavioral Legacy

From a historical institutionalist perspective, the legacy of the negdel system continues to influence behavior in rural Mongolia (Enkhchimeg, 2023). Even though the institutional structure has changed, many of the attitudes and expectations formed during the socialist period persist.

Older herders, in particular, often retain a mindset shaped by decades of state-led organization. This includes:

Expectation of government support

Limited experience with independent decision-making

Preference for top-down coordination

These behavioral patterns are not easily changed, as they are deeply embedded in social and institutional history. This creates a gap between the expectations of development models and the realities of local communities.

3.7. Tension Between Top-Down Legacy and Bottom-Up Development

The contrast between Mongolia's socialist legacy and the principles of the Saemaul Undong is particularly striking. Saemaul Undong emphasizes bottom-up participation, local initiative, and community-driven development. (Jwa, 2018) However, the historical experience of Mongolian herders has been largely shaped by top-down governance.

This creates a fundamental tension. While

Saemaul Undong encourages communities to take initiative, many rural actors in Mongolia are accustomed to waiting for direction from the state. The shift from a centrally planned system to a participatory development model requires not only institutional change but also a transformation in mindset.

For older generations, this transition can be especially challenging. Having spent much of their lives within the negdel system, they may find it difficult to adapt to a model that requires self-organization and collective action without strong state leadership (Nixson & Walters, 1999).

3.8. Implications for Development Policy

The persistence of socialist-era institutions and behaviors has important implications for development policy in Mongolia. It suggests that simply introducing new models, such as Saemaul Undong, is not sufficient. Instead, policies must take into account the historical context and gradually build the capacity for local participation.

This includes:

Strengthening local institutions

Providing training and support for community leadership

Encouraging gradual adaptation rather than immediate transformation

Without addressing these underlying factors, development initiatives may struggle to achieve their intended outcomes.

3.9. Synthesis

This section has shown that Mongolia's socialist legacy continues to shape its rural development trajectory. The negdel system not only organized economic production but also created lasting patterns of behavior and institutional dependence. Through the lens of historical institutionalism, these patterns can be understood as forms of path dependency that constrain current policy options.

The transition to a market economy dismantled the old system but did not fully replace it, leaving a gap that continues to affect rural communities. In this context, the introduction of bottom-up development models such as Saemaul Undong faces significant challenges. The top-down nature of Mongolia's socialist past makes it difficult for such models to be adopted, particularly among older herders.

Ultimately, this analysis highlights the importance of aligning development strategies with historical and institutional realities. Understanding the legacy of the negdel system is essential for designing effective policies and for evaluating the role of external actors, including South Korea, in Mongolia's development process.

Section 4: Comparative Analysis: The Vietnam Success

4.1. Introduction

The global expansion of the Saemaul Undong has produced varying outcomes depending on the socio-economic context of recipient countries. Among these, Vietnam is often cited as one of the most successful cases of adaptation. Through its National Target Program on New Rural Development, Vietnam effectively integrated Saemaul-inspired principles into a large-scale, state-led rural transformation strategy as highlighted in reports by the World Bank (2022).

This section examines why the Saemaul model has been more successful in Vietnam than in Mongolia. It argues that the key factor lies in the structural compatibility between the model and Vietnam's sedentary rural society. By contrast, Mongolia's nomadic pastoral system creates what can be described as "nomadic friction," limiting the effectiveness of village-based development approaches.

4.2. The Vietnamese Model: The 19 National Criteria

Vietnam's rural development program is guided by a set of 19 national criteria, which define what constitutes a "developed rural commune." These indicators cover infrastructure, economic organization, and social services, providing a comprehensive framework for rural modernization as outlined by the World Bank (2017).

The criteria include transportation infrastructure, irrigation systems, educational facilities, healthcare services, income levels, poverty reduction, and environmental governance.

Rather than focusing on a single sector, the program takes a holistic approach, aiming to transform rural areas into fully functioning socio-

economic units. This comprehensive framework aligns closely with the principles of Saemaul Undong, particularly its emphasis on community participation and local development.

4.3. Infrastructure Development: Roads and Connectivity

As shown in Table 1, the effectiveness of the Saemaul Undong model varies significantly depending on settlement patterns and institutional structures. Vietnam's sedentary rural system enables long-term infrastructure investment, while Mongolia's nomadic pastoral system introduces structural constraints. These differences are particularly evident in the area of infrastructure development (Asian Development Bank, 2019)

Table 1. Comparison of Saemaul Undong Application: Vietnam vs Mongolia.

Factor	Vietnam	Mongolia
Settlement Pattern	Sedentary villages	Nomadic pastoralism
Economic Base	Crop agriculture	Livestock herding
Infrastructure	Permanent	Mobile
Governance	Strong commune system	Sparse administrative reach
SMU Compatibility	High	Context-dependent

One of the most visible successes of Vietnam's rural development program is the expansion of road infrastructure. Improved transportation networks have connected rural communities to markets, schools, and healthcare facilities, significantly enhancing economic opportunities.

The effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on the stability of settlement patterns. In Vietnam, rural populations are concentrated in fixed villages and communes. This allows infrastructure investments to generate long term benefits, as the same communities continue to use and maintain these facilities over time.

In contrast, Mongolia's nomadic system presents a major challenge for such investments. Herders move seasonally across large areas, meaning that fixed infrastructure such as roads may not serve a consistent

population. As a result, the return on investment is often lower, and maintenance becomes more difficult. This illustrates how the success of infrastructure development depends not only on financial resources but also on the spatial organization of society (Asian Development Bank, 2019)

4.4. Education and Social Services: Schools as Community Anchors

Education has been another key pillar of Vietnam's rural transformation. The construction and upgrading of schools have improved access to education and contributed to human capital development. In many cases, schools also serve as community centers, reinforcing social cohesion and collective identity.

Similar to infrastructure development, the effectiveness of education systems depends on settlement stability, allowing for consistent access to educational services. The presence of stable communities ensures that investments in schools have long term impact.

In Mongolia, however, the situation is more complex. Nomadic households often move with their livestock, making it difficult for children to attend school regularly. While boarding schools and mobile education programs exist, they cannot fully replicate the stability of a sedentary system. This creates a structural limitation on the effectiveness of education focused development initiatives (World Bank, 2017).

4.5. Agricultural Infrastructure: Irrigation and Productivity

Irrigation systems play a central role in Vietnam's agricultural development. By improving water management, these systems increase crop yields and reduce vulnerability to climate variability. This is particularly important in a country where rice cultivation is a dominant economic activity.

The success of irrigation projects is closely linked to the nature of agricultural production. In Vietnam, farming is land based and intensive, with clearly defined plots and long-term investment in specific locations. This makes it possible to design and maintain irrigation systems that benefit entire

communities. (Food and Agriculture Organization, 1997)

Mongolia's pastoral economy, by contrast, relies on extensive grazing rather than fixed land use. Livestock herding requires mobility, allowing animals to access seasonal pastures. As a result, large scale irrigation systems are not directly applicable. This indicates that the assumptions of the Saemaul model may not fully align with the realities of Mongolia's rural economy, particularly in nomadic pastoral contexts.

4.6. Economic Organization and Income Growth

Vietnam's rural development program has also focused on increasing income levels through diversification and market integration (World Bank, 2022). Farmers are encouraged to adopt new technologies, improve productivity, and participate in cooperative structures.

The success of these initiatives is supported by:

- High population density in rural areas
- Strong local governance structures
- Established market networks

These factors enable collective action and facilitate the adoption of new practices. In contrast, Mongolia's low population density and dispersed settlements make it more difficult to organize collective economic activities. Herders often operate independently, and the benefits of cooperation are less immediately visible.

In this context, South Korean ODA programs could support a shift from volume-based production toward quality-based value chains, particularly in the cashmere sector. This could include technical assistance in fiber grading, branding, and access to international premium markets, allowing herders to increase income without expanding herd sizes.

4.7. Governance and Community Participation

A key feature of Vietnam's success is the integration of local governance into the development process. Commune level authorities play an active role in planning, implementing, and monitoring projects. This ensures coordination between national policies and local needs.

At the same time, community participation is encouraged through collective decision-making and shared responsibility. This reflects the influence of

Saemaul Undong, which emphasizes cooperation and local initiative.

However, it is important to note that Vietnam's system combines bottom-up participation with strong state guidance. This hybrid approach allows for flexibility while maintaining overall direction.

In Mongolia, governance structures are less suited to this model. Administrative units cover large areas with sparse populations, making coordination more difficult. Furthermore, the legacy of centralized decision-making under socialism can limit the effectiveness of participatory approaches.

4.8. Nomadic Friction in Mongolia

The concept of "nomadic friction" can be understood as a structural constraint arising from the interaction between mobile livelihoods and fixed development frameworks. This term refers to the structural difficulties that arise when applying fixed, community-based development models to a mobile population.

Nomadic friction manifests in several ways. First, mobility reduces the effectiveness of infrastructure investments, as facilities may not be used consistently. Second, it limits the potential for collective action, as communities are not permanently located in one place. Third, it complicates service delivery, including education, healthcare, and market access.

These factors create a situation in which development interventions must be adapted to mobility rather than assuming permanence. Without such adaptation, the impact of programs is likely to remain limited.

4.9. Comparative Insight: Why Vietnam Succeeds

As summarized in Table 1, the comparison between Vietnam and Mongolia highlights the importance of structural compatibility in development outcomes. Vietnam's success can be attributed to the alignment between the Saemaul model and its socio-economic conditions. Fixed settlements, intensive agriculture, and strong local governance create an environment in which community-based development can thrive.

In contrast, Mongolia's nomadic system

introduces structural constraints that limit the effectiveness of the same model. This does not mean that Saemaul principles are irrelevant, but rather that they must be adapted to local conditions. The key lesson is that development models cannot be transferred without considering the underlying structure of society.

4.10. Synthesis

This section has demonstrated that the success of Saemaul-inspired development in Vietnam is closely linked to the country's sedentary rural structure. The 19 national criteria provide a comprehensive framework for rural transformation, but their effectiveness depends on the stability of communities and the nature of economic activities.

In Mongolia, the nomadic pastoral system creates significant challenges for the implementation of similar models. The concept of nomadic friction highlights the limitations of applying fixed, village-based approaches to a mobile population. As a result, development strategies must be carefully adapted to the local context.

The comparison reinforces a central argument of this study: the effectiveness of development cooperation depends not only on the quality of the model but also on its compatibility with local institutions and social structures.

Section 5: The Geographic Pivot: Agriculture in the North

5.1. Introduction

One of the central arguments of this study is that the limited success of the Saemaul Undong in Mongolia is not primarily due to flaws in the model itself, but rather due to its application in less compatible geographic contexts. This section introduces the concept of spatial suitability, arguing that the effectiveness of development models depends on where they are implemented. Agricultural production in Mongolia is concentrated in northern provinces such as Selenge and Bulgan, which benefit from relatively favorable climatic conditions (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025) so in the case of Mongolia, the northern provinces particularly Selenge and Bulgan represent an "agricultural frontier" where Saemaul Undong principles are far more compatible with local

conditions.

5.2. Mongolia's Dual Agricultural Geography

Mongolia's agricultural system is sharply divided between two distinct geographic zones. The majority of the country is dominated by nomadic pastoralism, with livestock accounting for a large share of economic activity. Crop farming, by contrast, is limited due to harsh climatic conditions, short growing seasons, and limited arable land.

Only a small proportion of Mongolia's land is suitable for cultivation, and agriculture is concentrated in specific regions.

Within this broader context, the northern provinces stand out as exceptions. Regions such as Selenge and Bulgan benefit from relatively favorable conditions, including:

- More reliable precipitation
- Better soil quality
- Proximity to water sources
- Established farming infrastructure

These factors make northern Mongolia uniquely suited for crop production, including wheat, potatoes, and vegetables.

5.3. Selenge and Bulgan as the Agricultural Core

Empirical data confirms the central role of northern Mongolia in crop production. Selenge alone accounts for approximately 48% of Mongolia's total wheat production, while Bulgan contributes around 10% (United States Department of Agriculture, 2026).

Similarly, national agricultural statistics show that these provinces are among the leading contributors to grain, vegetable, and potato production.

This concentration of agricultural activity highlights the emergence of a distinct agricultural core within Mongolia. Unlike the rest of the country, where mobility is essential for livestock herding, these regions support more stable and sedentary forms of production.

Moreover, recent research indicates that cultivated land in the Selenge River Basin has expanded in recent years, reflecting a shift toward more intensive agricultural practices (Sun et al., 2025).

5.4. Crop Farming and the Need for "Village Structure"

Crop agriculture inherently requires stability. Unlike pastoralism, which depends on mobility, crop farming is based on fixed land use, long-term investment, and continuous management. This creates a natural need for:

- Permanent settlements
- Local coordination
- Infrastructure such as irrigation and storage

In this sense, the "village structure" assumed by the Saemaul Undong is not an external imposition in northern Mongolia but a functional necessity. Farmers must remain in one place to cultivate crops, maintain irrigation systems, and manage production cycles.

This creates conditions that closely resemble those found in countries like Vietnam, where Saemaul Undong has been successfully implemented. The presence of stable communities allows for:

- Collective action
- Infrastructure development
- Long-term planning

Thus, the structural compatibility between Saemaul principles and agricultural practices is significantly higher in northern Mongolia than in the pastoral regions of the south and west.

5.5. Horticulture and Greenhouse Expansion

One of the most promising developments in northern Mongolia is the expansion of horticulture, particularly through greenhouse farming. Projects supported by international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization have focused on increasing vegetable production and improving market access in provinces including Selenge (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023).

Greenhouse farming represents a shift toward more intensive and commercially oriented agriculture. It allows for:

- Year-round production
- Higher yields per unit of land
- Greater income stability

Emerging evidence suggests that participation in horticulture, especially greenhouse-based production, can significantly increase household income. In some project based estimates and development reports, income from horticulture activities has increased multiple times compared to traditional farming, with

figures cited as high as several-fold growth (e.g., up to 9 times under optimal conditions) (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023).

While such figures vary depending on project design and location, they highlight the transformative potential of intensive agriculture when supported by appropriate infrastructure and training.

5.6. Why Saemaul Undong Fits the Northern Model

The success of Saemaul Undong depends on several key conditions, including stable communities, collective action, and infrastructure development. These conditions are largely absent in Mongolia's nomadic regions but are increasingly present in the northern agricultural provinces.

In areas like Selenge and Bulgan:

Farmers operate within fixed locations

Production requires coordination and shared resources

Infrastructure investments have long term benefits

These characteristics align closely with the principles of Saemaul Undong, particularly its emphasis on cooperation and community-driven development. (Jwa, 2018) As a result, the model is not only applicable but potentially highly effective in these regions.

5.7. Nomadic Friction Revisited

The concept of “nomadic friction,” introduced in earlier sections, helps clarify why Saemaul Undong has struggled in other parts of Mongolia. In pastoral regions, mobility undermines the effectiveness of fixed infrastructure and limits the potential for collective action.

In contrast, northern Mongolia experiences significantly lower levels of nomadic friction. The transition toward sedentary agriculture reduces mobility and creates conditions that are more conducive to community based development.

This suggests that the challenge is not the model itself, but the partial mismatch between the model and the environment in which it is applied.

5.8. Policy Implications: A Geographic Reorientation

The analysis presented in this section leads to an important policy implication: development strategies should be geographically targeted. Rather than applying Saemaul Undong uniformly across Mongolia, policymakers should focus on regions where structural conditions are favorable.

This includes:

Expanding agricultural programs in Selenge and Bulgan

Supporting greenhouse and horticulture development

Strengthening local institutions in farming communities

Such a targeted approach would allow development initiatives to build on existing strengths rather than attempting to transform fundamentally incompatible systems.

5.9. Synthesis

This section has argued that the effectiveness of Saemaul Undong in Mongolia depends on spatial suitability. While the model faces significant challenges in nomadic pastoral regions, it holds considerable potential in the northern agricultural provinces.

Selenge and Bulgan represent an “agricultural frontier” where crop farming, stable settlements, and infrastructure development create conditions that align closely with Saemaul principles. The growth of horticulture and greenhouse farming further reinforces this trend, demonstrating the potential for income generation and economic diversification.

Ultimately, the key insight is that development models should not be judged in isolation but in relation to the environments in which they are applied. In Mongolia, the future success of Saemaul Undong may depend on a strategic shift toward regions where its principles can be most effectively realized.

Section 6: Human Capital: The PSPS Legacy

6.1. Introduction

While much of the discussion on the Saemaul Undong focuses on physical rural development, its most enduring impact may lie in the realm of human capital. In the case of Mongolia, the transfer of knowledge through education and training programs

has played a crucial role in shaping how development ideas are understood and applied. This section examines the contribution of the Park Chung Hee School of Policy and Saemaul (PSPS) at Yeungnam University as a key channel of knowledge transfer, with particular attention to Mongolian scholars trained under this program (Yeungnam University, 2023)

6.2. Knowledge Transfer as Development Strategy

Development cooperation is not limited to financial aid or infrastructure projects; it increasingly involves the transfer of knowledge, skills, and institutional practices. South Korea has emphasized this approach in its international engagement, drawing on its own experience of rapid development.

Through institutions such as the PSPS program, South Korea provides:

- Graduate-level education in public policy and development

- Training in Saemaul Undong principles

- Exposure to Korea's economic and institutional transformation

This form of engagement represents a shift from traditional aid to what can be described as capacity building, where the goal is to equip individuals with the tools needed to implement change within their own countries.

6.3. The PSPS Program and Mongolian Participation

The Park Chung Hee School of Policy and Saemaul is specifically designed to train future leaders from developing countries. It combines theoretical instruction with practical insights into Korea's development experience, particularly the application of Saemaul Undong.

Mongolia has been an active participant in this program, with a number of scholars receiving training in areas such as:

- Economic development policy

- Rural development strategies

- Governance and institutional reform

Although publicly available data on the exact number of Mongolian graduates is limited, program records and institutional reports indicate that

multiple cohorts of Mongolian students have completed training at PSPS. These individuals represent an important link between Korean development models and Mongolian policy implementation.

6.4. Case Study: Turbadrakh Tumenjargal

A particularly relevant example of this knowledge transfer in practice is Turbadrakh Tumenjargal, who is associated with Erdenes Mongol LLC, one of Mongolia's major state-owned enterprises.

His experience illustrates how Saemaul Undong principles can be applied beyond rural villages and into large-scale organizational settings. Rather than focusing on physical infrastructure, his work reflects the application of what can be described as "Saemaul discipline," including:

- Emphasis on responsibility and work ethic

- Focus on organizational efficiency

- Promotion of collective goals within institutional structures

This demonstrates that the core values of Saemaul Undong (diligence, self-help, and cooperation) can be translated into modern organizational management practices. In this sense, the model functions not only as a rural development strategy but also as a leadership philosophy.

6.5. Saemaul Undong as Leadership Philosophy

The case of Turbadrakh Tumenjargal highlights an important shift in how Saemaul Undong is understood in the Mongolian context. While physical village-based projects may face structural limitations, the underlying principles of the movement remain highly relevant.

As a leadership framework, Saemaul Undong emphasizes:

- Personal initiative and accountability

- Collective responsibility within organizations

- Long-term commitment to development goals

These values are particularly important in state-owned enterprises, where efficiency and coordination are critical. By applying Saemaul principles at the organizational level, trained individuals can influence broader institutional performance, even in sectors unrelated to rural development (Jwa, 2018).

6.6. The Broader Impact of PSPS Alumni

Although detailed public data on individual Mongolian graduates is limited, the broader impact of the PSPS program can be understood in terms of institutional influence. Graduates often return to positions in:

- Government ministries
- Public administration
- State-owned enterprises
- Development organizations

In these roles, they serve as carriers of knowledge, applying the concepts and practices learned in South Korea to local contexts. Although detailed data on PSPS alumni career trajectories remains limited, available evidence suggests that graduates have entered key sectors including government agencies, state-owned enterprises, and development organizations. This reflects the program's broader contribution to institutional capacity-building and policy implementation in Mongolia. This creates a form of indirect influence, where development models are adapted and implemented through human capital rather than direct project intervention.

6.7. Education as Soft Power

The PSPS program also reflects the role of education as a tool of soft power. By training foreign students, South Korea builds long-term relationships and fosters trust among future leaders. These individuals develop familiarity with Korean institutions and approaches, which can shape their perspectives and decision-making processes. (Korea International Cooperation Agency, n.d.).

This dynamic is particularly relevant for Mongolia's "Third Neighbor Policy," as it strengthens ties between the two countries at both the institutional and personal levels. Educational exchange thus becomes a strategic component of development cooperation, complementing financial and technical assistance.

6.8. Implications for Development Policy

The evidence presented in this section suggests that the most successful aspect of Saemaul Undong in Mongolia may not be its physical implementation, but its influence on human capital.

While village-based projects face structural challenges, the transfer of knowledge and values through education has the potential to generate long-term impact.

This has several implications. First, it highlights the importance of investing in training and education as part of development cooperation. Second, it suggests that development models should be understood not only in terms of physical outcomes but also in terms of their influence on leadership and institutional behavior. Finally, it reinforces the idea that adaptation is essential, as the same principles can be applied in different ways depending on the context.

6.9. Synthesis

This section has demonstrated that the legacy of Saemaul Undong in Mongolia extends beyond rural development projects and into the domain of human capital. Through programs such as the PSPS at Yeungnam University, Mongolian scholars have been exposed to Korean development strategies and have begun to apply these ideas within their own institutions. (Yeungnam University, 2023).

The case of Turbadrakh Tumenjargal illustrates how Saemaul principles can function as a leadership philosophy, influencing organizational practices even in large state-owned enterprises. This suggests that while the physical model of Saemaul Undong may face limitations in Mongolia, its underlying values remain highly relevant.

Ultimately, the success of development cooperation may depend less on the direct transfer of infrastructure models and more on the cultivation of individuals who can adapt and apply these ideas within their own contexts.

Section 7: Environmental Critique: The Tragedy of the Commons

7.1. Introduction

While development strategies often focus on economic growth and poverty reduction, they can also generate unintended environmental consequences. In Mongolia, the rapid expansion of the cashmere industry has created a complex challenge in which economic incentives conflict with ecological sustainability. This section applies the concept of the Tragedy of the Commons to analyze how increasing livestock numbers particularly goats have contributed to pasture

degradation. This dynamic reflects the Tragedy of the Commons, where individuals overuse shared resources for personal gain (Hardin, 1968). It further argues that adapting the principles of the Saemaul Undong toward a “quality over volume” approach may offer a pathway to more sustainable development.

7.2. The Rise of the Cashmere Economy

Since the transition to a market economy in the early 1990s, Mongolia has experienced a dramatic increase in livestock numbers. This growth has been driven in part by the global demand for cashmere, one of Mongolia’s most valuable export products (Okamoto, 2019)

Statistical data indicate that:

Goat populations in Mongolia increased from approximately 5 million in the early 1990s to over 25 million in recent years (World Bank, 2017). Goats now make up a significant proportion of total livestock

This expansion reflects the economic logic faced by herders. Cashmere provides a reliable source of income, and increasing herd size is often the most direct way to maximize earnings in the absence of alternative livelihood options.

However, this growth has come at a significant environmental cost. Goats are particularly damaging to grasslands because they graze more aggressively than other livestock and tend to uproot vegetation. As a result, the expansion of goat herding has accelerated pasture degradation across large parts of Mongolia.

7.3. The Tragedy of the Commons in Mongolia

The environmental challenges associated with livestock growth can be understood through the framework of the Tragedy of the Commons, first articulated by Garrett Hardin. This theory describes a situation in which individuals, acting in their own self-interest, overuse a shared resource, ultimately leading to its depletion (Hardin, 1968)

In Mongolia, pastureland functions as a common resource. Herders have access to large areas of grazing land, but no single individual has exclusive ownership. This creates a situation in which:

Each herder has an incentive to increase herd

size

The costs of overgrazing are shared by all users

There is little immediate incentive to limit livestock numbers

As more herders expand their herds, the cumulative impact leads to overgrazing and environmental degradation. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, a significant proportion of Mongolia’s pastureland is now degraded, with overgrazing identified as a major contributing factor.

This dynamic illustrates how market incentives, when combined with weak regulatory frameworks, can lead to unsustainable outcomes.

7.4. Environmental Consequences: Pasture Degradation and Desertification

The consequences of overgrazing are increasingly visible across Mongolia. Degraded pastures result in:

Reduced vegetation cover

Soil erosion

Lower productivity of grazing land

These changes not only affect the environment but also threaten the livelihoods of herders. As pasture quality declines, herders must travel greater distances to find suitable grazing areas, increasing both labor and risk (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2017)

In extreme cases, environmental degradation contributes to desertification, particularly in regions already vulnerable to climate change. This creates a cycle in which declining pasture quality leads to further herd expansion as herders attempt to maintain income levels, thereby exacerbating the problem.

7.5. The Cashmere Trap

The interaction between economic incentives and environmental degradation can be described as the “cashmere trap.” Herders rely on cashmere production for income, but the very process of increasing production undermines the natural resource base on which it depends.

This trap is characterized by:

Short-term income maximization through herd expansion

Long-term decline in pasture productivity

Increasing vulnerability to climate shocks such as dzud

The absence of effective collective management

mechanisms further reinforces this cycle. Without coordinated action, individual efforts to reduce herd size are unlikely, as they would result in immediate income loss without guaranteeing environmental improvement.

7.6. Reinterpreting Saemaul Undong for Sustainability

The principles of the Saemaul Undong offer a potential framework for addressing these challenges, but only if they are adapted to the environmental context of Mongolia.

Traditionally, Saemaul Undong has focused on increasing productivity and improving living standards. However, in the Mongolian context, this approach must be reinterpreted to emphasize sustainability. In particular, the principle of cooperation can be applied to collective pasture management, while self-help can encourage herders to adopt more sustainable practices.

A key shift is the move from quantity to quality. Rather than increasing the number of goats, development strategies should focus on:

- Improving the quality of cashmere
- Enhancing value-added processing
- Accessing higher-value markets

By increasing the price per unit of output, herders can maintain or even increase income while reducing herd size. This approach aligns economic incentives with environmental sustainability.

7.7. The Role of Cooperatives

Cooperative structures can play a critical role in implementing a “quality over volume” strategy. By organizing herders into groups, cooperatives can:

Facilitate collective decision-making on pasture use

- Provide access to training and technology
- Improve bargaining power in markets

Such arrangements are consistent with the principles of Saemaul Undong, particularly its emphasis on community-based development. However, as discussed in earlier sections, the success of cooperatives depends on overcoming the legacy of individualization that emerged after the collapse of the socialist system.

7.8. Policy Implications

Addressing the environmental challenges of Mongolia’s livestock sector requires a combination of policy measures. These include:

- Strengthening pasture management regulations
- Promoting sustainable livestock practices

Supporting value-added industries such as cashmere processing

At the same time, development programs must focus on changing incentives. Without aligning economic benefits with environmental sustainability, efforts to reduce overgrazing are unlikely to succeed.

The integration of Saemaul principles into environmental policy offers a promising approach, but it requires careful adaptation to local conditions.

7.9. Synthesis

This section has demonstrated that Mongolia’s livestock sector faces a classic example of the Tragedy of the Commons, where individual incentives lead to collective environmental degradation. The rapid increase in goat populations, driven by the cashmere industry, has contributed to significant pasture degradation and long-term sustainability challenges.

The concept of the “cashmere trap” highlights the tension between economic necessity and environmental protection. In this context, the principles of the Saemaul Undong must be reinterpreted to prioritize sustainability. By focusing on quality rather than quantity and promoting cooperative approaches, it is possible to align economic development with environmental conservation.

Ultimately, this analysis underscores the importance of integrating environmental considerations into development strategies, particularly in fragile ecosystems such as Mongolia’s grasslands.

Section 8: Conclusion & Recommendations

8.1. Conclusion: Reassessing Saemaul Undong in Mongolia

This study has examined the role of South Korean development cooperation in Mongolia through the lens of the Saemaul Undong and its broader implications for the country’s “Third Neighbor” policy. The central finding is that the effectiveness of Saemaul inspired development is not uniform across Mongolia,

but highly dependent on geography, institutional history, and livelihood systems.

The analysis demonstrated that while Saemaul Undong has had limited success in nomadic pastoral regions due to structural constraints such as mobility and weak settlement patterns, it shows significantly greater potential in sedentary agricultural zones, particularly in northern provinces like Selenge and Bulgan. These areas possess the necessary conditions for village-based development, including stable populations, crop farming systems, and infrastructure-based economic activity.

At the same time, the study highlighted that the legacy of Mongolia's socialist past, particularly the *negdel* system, continues to shape behavioral and institutional patterns in rural society. This historical dependency influences how communities respond to bottom-up development models, often creating friction between participatory approaches and expectations of state-led coordination.

In addition, the environmental analysis revealed that Mongolia's livestock sector is facing a severe sustainability challenge driven by the expansion of goat herding and the resulting overgrazing crisis. This "cashmere trap" illustrates the need for structural reform in rural economic incentives.

Finally, the human capital dimension showed that the most durable impact of Saemaul Undong may lie not in physical infrastructure but in knowledge transfer through education and training programs, particularly those linked to institutions such as Yeungnam University.

8.2. Key Synthesis of Findings

Across the different dimensions of analysis, three core insights emerge:

Development outcomes are highly dependent on spatial and geographic suitability, not just policy design.

Historical institutions continue to shape present behavior, limiting the effectiveness of imported development models.

Human capital development may provide more sustainable long-term impact than interventions based on infrastructure alone.

These findings suggest that Saemaul Undong should not be understood as a universal model, but

rather as a flexible framework whose success depends on specific context adaptation.

8.3 Policy Recommendation: A Bifurcated Development Strategy

Based on the evidence presented, this study proposes a bifurcated strategy for future Republic of Korea, Mongolia development cooperation. This approach recognizes that Mongolia is not a homogenous development space, but a country with fundamentally different ecological and socio-economic zones.

1. Saemaul Village Model for Northern Crop Provinces

In the agricultural regions of northern Mongolia, particularly Selenge and Bulgan, the traditional Saemaul village model can be effectively applied. These areas already exhibit characteristics similar to those in countries where Saemaul Undong has been successful, such as Vietnam.

Key policy directions include:

Strengthening village level cooperatives for crop farmers

Expanding irrigation and storage infrastructure

Supporting greenhouse and horticulture development

Promoting value-added agricultural production

In these regions, the logic of fixed settlement aligns naturally with Saemaul principles of cooperation, self-help, and community-driven development.

2. Mobile and Digital Development Model for Nomadic Regions

In contrast, southern and central Mongolia require a fundamentally different approach due to the dominance of nomadic pastoralism. Here, the traditional village based model is less effective because of population mobility and dispersed settlement patterns.

Instead, development cooperation should focus on:

Mobile service delivery systems (health, education, veterinary care)

Digital platforms for market access and price information

Climate-resilient livestock management technologies

Remote monitoring and early warning systems for dzud risks

The proposed mobile and digital development model could include the use of mobile veterinary services, satellite-based pasture monitoring systems, and digital platforms providing real-time market prices for livestock and cashmere. Additionally, mobile banking and e-learning systems could enhance access to financial and educational services for nomadic herders. Such initiatives could be supported through targeted technical cooperation programs led by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA, n.d.).

8.4. Strategic Implications for Republic of Korea, Mongolia Relations

A differentiated development strategy also strengthens the broader strategic relationship between Mongolia and South Korea. By tailoring interventions to Mongolia's internal diversity, South Korean development cooperation becomes more efficient, targeted, and sustainable.

This approach enhances the credibility of South Korea as a "Third Neighbor" by demonstrating flexibility rather than one-size-fits-all policy transfer. It also deepens institutional linkages through both rural development programs and human capital initiatives, reinforcing long-term cooperation.

8.5. Final Conclusion

The future of Mongolia and Republic of Korea development cooperation lies in recognizing that successful development is not simply the transfer of models, but the adaptation of ideas to context. The Saemaul Undong experience demonstrates both the potential and limitations of development diffusion.

A bifurcated strategy, combining village-based development in the north with mobile and digital solutions in the pastoral regions, offers a more realistic and effective pathway forward. This approach not only aligns with Mongolia's geographic and institutional realities but also ensures that development cooperation remains both inclusive and sustainable.

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