Perspectives on Poverty and Respect in Mongolia: Terms, taboos, taxonomies and the sustainability of translations

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Abstract: This article examines the complex and nuanced perspectives on poverty and respect in Mongolia, focusing on terms, taboos, and taxonomies surrounding poverty and their implications for a culturally appropriate phrasing. It highlights challenges of translations from a seemingly international development jargon into Mongolian, which often appear inadequate or even counterproductive.

Our research is based on a mixed-method pilot study investigating the connotations of Mongolian terms related to poverty. Through surveys, interviews, discourse analysis, etymological and semantic studies of poverty-related terms, the authors explored social challenges perceived by Mongolians including experiences of discrimination faced by those in 'difficult living conditions'.

Moreover, we investigated the societal tendency to avoid addressing poverty directly in order to find out how it is connected to structural discrimination and the perpetuation of social inequalities. Given that terms may be acceptable in one context but disrespectful and stigmatizing in another, the authors advocate for a culturally sensitive use of terms. Based on the findings of our study, we provide constructive suggestions for a more appropriate terminology that focuses on empowerment and the expansion of opportunities. This analysis contributes to the understanding of complex dynamics between language, poverty, and social inclusion in Mongolia.

Keywords: Poverty-related terms, Avoidance Speech, Social Inequality, Development Jargon, Discourse Analysis, Semantics, Mongolia

Introduction and Study Design

In most countries, poverty-related problems are largely denied, especially in external representations. This is also true for the Federal Republic of Germany, where more than one in five children grows up in poverty.[1] In Mongolia, levels of poverty had appeared since the 1990s that had not existed before. The then new label as a 'developing country' was accompanied by what Escobar (1997: 92) referred to as "discursive homogenization": terms of a seemingly international development paradigm also appeared in Mongolian, some of

which turned out to be inadequate or even counterproductive, partly as a result of superficial translations. Given the significance of translations for development policy practice, we would like to raise awareness of a more critical, culturally sensitive examination of terms, taboos and taxonomies.

When translating, usually a pragmatic search is made for equivalents that seem appropriate. However, not always is taken into account what connotations and effects terms have in the target language. If universal validity is assumed, even terms that are considered accepted and/or politically correct in one context can be inappropriate in another. In Mongolia, the terms *jaduu*[2] for 'poor' and *jaduural* for 'poverty' are present in formalized contexts, e.g. development policy, but hardly occur in practical project work. The first author of this article had observed this discrepancy in various contexts over many years of dealing with the topic. The question why this is the case was the starting point for our pilot study presented here, which we carried out together with students as teaching research in Mongolian Studies at Bonn University.

In order to better understand different perspectives on poverty in Mongolia, we used a mixed-method design for our research: The core of our pilot study is surveys with questionnaires, and we had previously looked at statistics, documents and publications as well as project reports, where we also compared multilingual versions using discourse analysis. Meanwhile, we examined the etymologies and semantic fields of various terms for 'poverty' most commonly found in publications, and we also conducted interviews. Before we present some of the findings from our pilot study, relevant background information should be addressed that shows the nexus to concepts of progress and development in the Mongolian context.

Poverty in the Context of Progress and Development in Mongolia

According to its historiographical narrative, the Mongolian People's Republic was empowered in the 1920s to deviate from Marx's stage model of historical development by leaving out capitalism on the path to socialism. This shortcut on the way through history sometimes involved bizarre translations of new terms. One example is the word 'proletarian' which was initially incomprehensible, which is why the famous call from the Communist Manifesto can be found on the cover of an early Mongolian women's magazine with the following wording: "Have-nots of all countries unite!" (*yaǰar büri-yin ügegüü nar nigedügtün*).[3] At that time the word *ügegüü* (mod. Mg. *ügeegüj*), etymologically derived from the same root as the word *ügüj* 'no' in Modern Mongolian, stood for 'poor', 'empty', or 'destitute'. Unlike the class term 'proletarian', however, it did not have any positive potential for identification.

[2] In this article, the transliteration of Mongolian Cyrillic follows the German scientific transliteration according to Vietze (1988), while the upright Mongolian script (*mongγol bičig*) follows the international standard according to Poppe (1954). Exceptions to this are names of people who are known in a different transcription. Translations, unless otherwise indicated, by authors.

[3] The form *ügegüü* was probably based on the pronunciation (otherwise: *ügeyigüü*); the transcription for the plural suffix (formerly *ner*) has been adapted accordingly here.

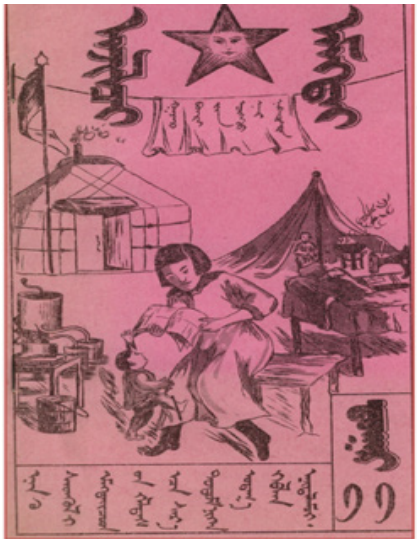


Fig. 1: Cover of the magazine Ažilči emegtei *([diligently] Working Woman) with the appeal below the star.*

When, with the end of socialism, the political sphere previously referred to as the 'Second World' disappeared and the term 'Third World' was replaced by 'developing countries', Mongolia found itself in this category (*chögžiž bajgaa ornuud* / *buuraj chögžiltej ornuud*).[4] The complacent counter-term "developed countries" (*chögžsön ornuud*)[5] suggests final accomplishments. But with regard to sustainability, according to Aram Ziai, these are not "desirable final stages". He also reminds us that problems often do not lie in a "lack of 'development'" but rather "in social power relations" (2010: 28, 26). This is particularly true when it comes to poverty.

Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that apply to all UN member states, the first one reads: "End poverty in all its forms everywhere". The objectives "implement nationally appropriate social protection systems" (1.3) and "create sound policy frameworks ... based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies" (1.A)[6] require nuanced knowledge about poverty in diverse social environments. For Mongolia, even though there are many quantitative studies on poverty lines, poverty rates, etc., one looks in vain for current qualitative analyses of how the society actually deals with the (tabooed) topic.

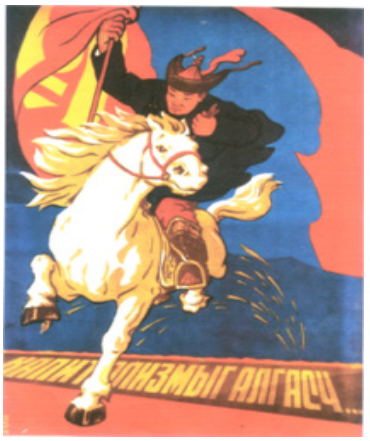
The 1997 Human Development Report Mongolia describes poverty as a "key feature of the formative years of a major portion of Mongolian society" and shows that at that time 50% of all children under 16 were poor (Government of Mongolia & UNDP 1997: 8). The report

[4] The latter term stands for 'underdeveloped'.

[5] Often given the attribute 'high' (*öndör*); in formal contexts appears *chögžingüj ornuud*, also with the meaning 'developed countries'.

[6] Online: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/.

contains children's drawings from an awareness campaign by the Poverty Alleviation Program Office. One of the drawings is entitled *Jaduural bol ardčilsan nijgmijn čödör mön*: "Poverty is the hobble of a democratic society". The child (who is not mentioned by name) represents poverty as a profound danger for the so-called transition and quotes the famous picture by the artist D. Amgalan, which symbolizes the Mongolian journey through history, in which a rider on the way to socialism skipped capitalism:



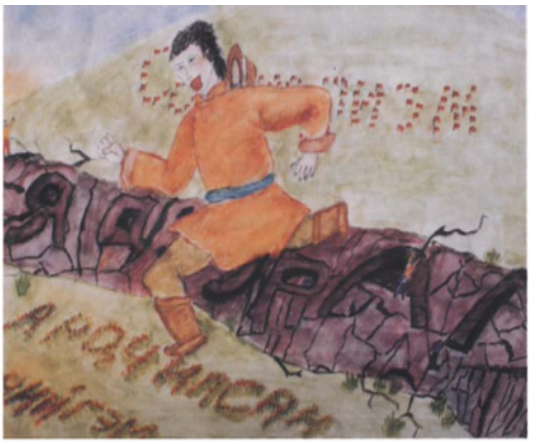


Fig. 2: D. Amgalan *(*1959): Kapitalismyg Algasč *(Bypassing Capitalism).*

Fig. 3: Children's drawing: in the background it reads 'Socialism', in the foreground 'democratic society' and 'poverty/impoverishment' in the abyss *(Government of Mongolia & UNDP 1997: 43).*

Despite numerous nationwide programs, the poverty rate in Mongolia has remained high: throughout the years since the 1990s, around one third of the population has been affected. For 2020, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank estimated the rate at 27.8%,[7] this figure can also be found at the National Statistical Office (*Ündesnij Statistikijn Choroo*) of Mongolia.[8] Although the government had taken measures to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic in 2020, including, most prominently, increasing child benefit, a recent UNDP study based on "big data" with reference to expenditure (i.e. not consumption) determined a poverty rate of 40.3% in urban and 52.6% in rural regions (UNDP 2021: 21).

A comparison of statistical information on poverty in Mongolia shows that the focus of the surveys since 1996 has been on income and purchasing power, while important structural aspects, that provide information about equal opportunities, remained invisible for a long time. The Multidimensional Poverty Index focuses on deficiencies in health, education and living standards beyond income poverty. The latest data for Mongolia is available for 2018, according to which 7.3% of the population was classified as multidimensional poor and a further 15.5% as vulnerable (UNDP 2020: 6-7). Also relevant is the distribution: While Mongolia's Human Development Index was high, namely 0.737 for 2019, only remained at a value of 0.634 in the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (ibid.: 4).

[7] Online: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/12/30/mongolia-s-2020-poverty-rate-estimated-at-27-8-percent; https://www.adb.org/countries/mongolia/poverty.

[8] Online: https://www.1212.mn/mn/statistic/statcate/573066/table-view/DT_NSO_1900_035V1.

Social inequality received little attention in Mongolian Studies beyond ethno-cultural aspects, although the topic is relevant and predestined for historical and contemporary research approaches. In sociology, where inequality is considered "one of the most central key concepts" (Dlabaja; Fernandez; Hofmann 2023: 7), political participation, living and working conditions, educational (in)justice, etc. are examined interdisciplinarily and with a view to globality. Yet the inclusion of perspectives from the so-called Global South has been rare.

Recent Mongolian statistics from the central authority list 'poverty' and 'inequality' (*jaduural, tegš bus bajdal*) in a common heading, whereas in a survey of the sustainable development program inequality appears primarily in combination with gender issues. Extremely interesting is the statement that it would be a special characteristic of Mongolian development plans that a lot would be done to reduce poverty, even though the term is barely used in the documents (NÜB-yn Chögžlijn Chötölbör 2021: 21).

So, what is behind the avoidance of the term in some, sometimes even official, contexts? To explore the observation further, we first looked at the etymology of 'poor' and 'poverty/ impoverishment' in their semantic and lexical fields with common combinations. Both words have the root *jad-,* from which the verb *jadach* is derived. Depending on how it is integrated, it can have different meanings, including 'to vegetate', 'to torment', but also 'to be unable'. The student members of our team, who also developed digitally usable teaching materials, created an interactive diagram. This visualizes etymological and semantic branches: Each word derived from the common root can be clicked to call up common combinations or pair words (*choršoo üg*) as a drop-down list and/or to learn something about meanings in the respective combinations. The interactive diagram is linked to an index for conceptual embeddings in common contexts, each provided with explanations of functional equivalents in German and English.

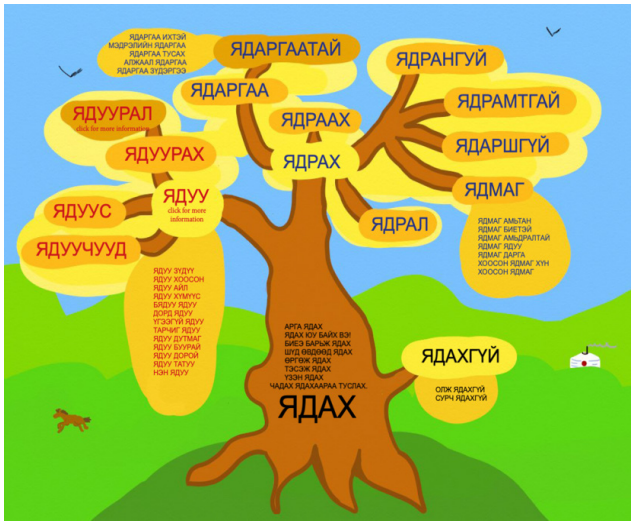


Fig. 4: Interactive diagram on etymology and some semantic fields of relevant terms.

Since word formation in Mongolian is agglutinative, the meanings of the words point in similar directions. Here are some examples:

jaduu	destitute, needy, poor, exhausted
jaduurach	to impoverish
jadrach	to grow weary, to become tired, to suffer from poverty
jadargaa	exhaustion, depression, fatigue
jadargaataj	strenuous, tiring, annoying
jadral	tiredness, weakness, debilitation
jadranguj	weary
jadramtgaj	feeble, being easily exhausted, frail
jadmag	incapable, powerless, incapable

These examples indicate why the terms *jaduu* for 'poor' or *jaduural* for 'poverty/ impoverishment' are only used hesitantly or are avoided altogether in certain contexts. In her dissertation, which was dedicated to the topic of respect and its reference systems, Elisa Kohl-Garrity had already drawn attention to the fact that in Mongolia *jaduural* is associated with fatigue and can therefore take away the strength to act (2019: 260).

Pilot Study on Perceptions of Poverty: Responses to the Questionnaires

In order to record and compare associations from as many different people as possible, we developed questionnaires as the core of our pilot study. Firstly, we wanted to find out more about the classification of social challenges as well as attitudes towards difficult living conditions and the existence of poverty. Secondly, the focus was on the actual use of terms and their effect in different contexts. We hereby tested the assumption that the terms *jaduu* and *jaduural* are rarely used in everyday language and are hardly ever used for self-descriptions. Thirdly, our aim was to explore reasons and to contextualize them. We distributed our questionnaires to reach different groups, both on paper and electronically. The return was good, we received 47 questionnaires filled out in the summer and fall of 2022 by people from school age to retirement age.[9]

Most respondents lived in Ulaanbaatar, but four rural provinces were also represented. Regarding the level of education, the information ranged from non-formal education to doctoral degrees. The spectrum of the respondents' occupations was wide-ranging; there were schoolgirls as well as students, unemployed people, self-employed people, stokers, teachers at primary and secondary schools, saleswomen, drivers, trainees, pensioners, electricians, childcare workers, researchers, university employees, doctoral students, chiropractors, person on duty (*žižüür*) and agricultural specialists. They were all asked to give their personal assessments, opinions and justifications in content-related questions.

[9] We thank all respondents for their participation as well as Cend-Ajuušijn Solongo, Mjagmaryn Gančimeg and Pürevžavyn Udval for their assistance in distributing the questionnaires.

First, we asked respondents to provide 3-5 examples of what they considered to be Mongolia's most pressing social issues. The following points were mentioned frequently or several times:

- Unemployment, lack of jobs, even despite having a degree
- Poverty, many people live below the subsistence level
- Disregard for work, unfair pay, late payment of wages, disregard for workers' rights
- Price increases and increased cost of living
- Social inequality
- Environmental pollution and destruction
- Smog, noise, traffic jams, not enough buses
- Discrimination and exclusion
- Too few school and kindergarten places, a lack of quality in education, declining levels of knowledge
- Poor facilities in state hospitals
- Excessive social benefits, expectations of receiving everything ready (*belenčlech setgelgee*)
- Bad state policies, extreme party politicization, bureaucracy
- Corruption and nepotism
- Alcoholism
- Debt / Indebtedness
- Lack of safety, deficiencies in food safety

The spectrum of answers paints an interesting picture. Many of the points would probably also have been mentioned in Germany, but others, such as debt, corruption, smog or a lack of food safety, are less likely to be brought up.

Next, we wanted to know which people our respondents thought had a difficult life. The following points were mentioned several times:

- Unemployed people and families without income
- People who are unable to work or for whose qualifications there is no work
- People who are seriously ill and people who care for seriously ill people
- Poor people who live below the subsistence level and can only eat once a day
- distinct between people who have a really hard time and those who are lazy and don't want to work
- People whose income is absolutely not enough to cover their daily needs
- People who have not learned anything and have to do poorly paid work all their lives
- People without life resources, who do not know their rights, who have limited freedoms
- People who lack the necessities of life and receive social welfare
- People with little education who have learned to expect things ready-made (*belenčilž sursan*)
- Disabled people (*chögžlijn berchšeeltej*)
- People who have no support, whose partner has left them
- People who crave more and get themselves into trouble
- People who drink alcohol instead of providing for their families
- People suffering from domestic violence

- Homeless people
- People who live and work in dangerous environments
- People who are not valued by society
- People who cannot follow their plans due to restrictions

The answers exemplify the associations associated with "having a difficult life" (*checüü am'draltaj*), a phrase that is very often used when talking about social problems.

The following question was whether, according to the respondents, there are poor people in Mongolia and, if so, for what reasons. Only two people answered "no" to the question, one of whom wrote this explanation:

No:
- There are only people with poor spirits / nature (*jaduu seltgeltej*)

Yes, because of:
- Individual and social reasons
- Extreme political partisanship, excessive enrichment at the top of the state
- Wrong state policy, it doesn't work for the citizens, otherwise there would be no poor
- Insufficient education for children
- Inadequate wages and salaries, sparse (*taaruu*) living options
- Unemployment, there is a lack of jobs
- Alcoholism
- Laziness
- 30% are poor, another 10% are close because of the poverty trap (*jaduurlyn zanga*)
- Debt

These justifications again point to political and individual levels. *Jaduu setgeltej* are people who lack will, energy and perseverance, who are mentally sluggish, who complain and give up easily when faced with difficulties instead of looking for opportunities and fighting for their lives. This can be used to characterize every person, whether with or without material wealth.

Respondents were then asked to indicate whether they used the word *jaduu* and, if so, in which environment and under what circumstances. The following points were mentioned several times:

Yes, namely:
- When speaking generally about the topic / only in research contexts
- In cases of homelessness / alcoholism
- When someone has a lame / poor mentality (*jadmag setgelgeetej*)
- When there is little knowledge / spirit
- If someone doesn't want to work / has no initiative / is lazy

No, because:
- Doesn't want to exclude / degrade
- Then someone would be spiritually poor, that's unethical

These answers point to some negative associations with the word, which were confirmed quite

clearly in the subsequent answers.

Next, respondents were asked to indicate at what times or in what environment they avoid using the word *jaduu*. These answers were common:

- Always and everywhere
- In public and abroad
- If affected people are present (would be unpleasant)
- When you see people struggling for a living
- When talking about specific individuals
- If someone has lost the ability to work

Here again reasons for the discomfort with the word emerge, several times with reference to respect for specific people, and once with a view to external representations.

This was followed by the question of which words are used instead of *jaduu*. Here are the most frequently mentioned ones:

- *bolomžgüj*	without possibilities/resources/options/chances/prospects
- *am'dralyn bolomž muutaj*	bad life opportunities/chances/prospects
- *bolomž bololcoo taaruu*	modest/sparse possibilities/opportunities/prospects
- *am'dralyn tüvšin dooguur*	low standard of living
- *ar gerijn bajdal dooguur*	unfair/shabby/poor home/family circumstances
- *Ar gerijn asuudaltaj*	having domestic/family problems
- *checüü, berch, chünd*	difficult/precarious, laborious/complicated, difficult/leaden
- *teneg*	stupid/ mindless/ foolish/ ignorant
- *zalchuu*	lazy/sluggish/uninspired/work-shy
- *belenčlech setgelgeetej*	inactive (waiting to receive everything readily prepared)

Remarkable is the frequent use of derivatives of the term *bolomž*, which is associated with possibilities, options, opportunities, resources and prospects even beyond monetary aspects.[10] Such answers refer primarily to supra-individual factors, as well as references to domestic circumstances and family background. In contrast, the last three points mentioned are blatantly derogatory and represent attribution practices that are not only found in Mongolia. The inherent framing effect suggests causal interpretations from which stigmatization, shame and blame as well as taboos on the topic of poverty result. When it comes to *belenčlech setgelgee(tej)* or *belenčilž sursan*, i.e. inactivity, it is interesting to observe, that this attitude, although not limited to poor people, is solely attributed to them.

When answering the question of whether there is poverty in Mongolia, respondents should also provide reasons. Here is an overview of the common answers:

Yes, there is poverty in Mongolia. Reasons:
- state policy
- falling real wages, delayed and reduced wage payments, low pensions
- lack of industry, consequently forced imports, economic crisis, price increases, lockdowns

[10] For details on this see Stolpe 2008 (Chapter 5.2.3.).

- Unemployment
- Corruption, money laundering
- Illness – often high debts due to treatment costs
- Laziness, mental poverty, expectation of social welfare
- Alcoholism
- Family planning (many children)
- Quality of education not sufficient

No, there is no poverty in Mongolia because:

- Poverty is artificially invented
- People who can work don't

Neither yes nor no:

- There is unemployment

Next, we asked our respondents to give 3-5 examples of when people are treated with arrogance, discriminated against or excluded in relation to their living conditions (*am'dralyn bolomžoos n' chamaarč*). The most common answers are shown in this diagram developed by the student members of our tea

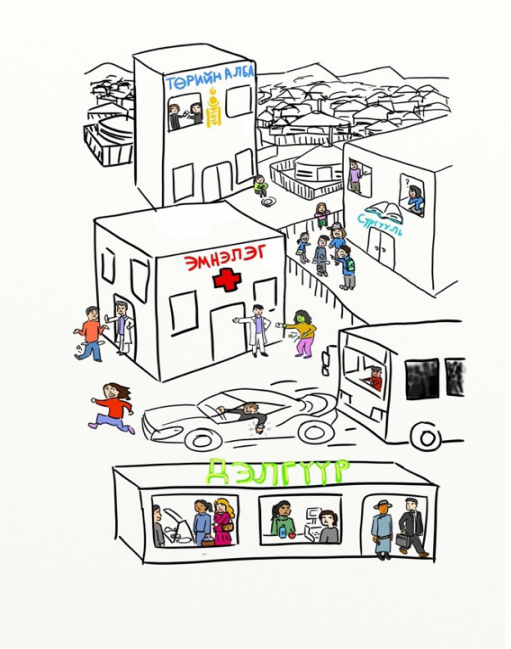


Fig. 6: Depiction of frequently mentioned environments of discrimination and exclusion.

Many respondents wrote that people in shops, but primarily in state institutions (specifically: in offices, schools, hospitals), are treated condescendingly, discriminated against and excluded. Such answers provide insights into the extent of structural discrimination in Mongolia's public sector. Respondents repeatedly stated that children affected by poverty are discriminated against at school when funds are publicly collected, for example to renovate classrooms. Also

frequently mentioned was bullying by financially well-off classmates and limited educational opportunities because of the tuition fees at universities. In the healthcare system, which is generally accessible, corruption acts as a factor for deficient treatment of poor people on the one hand, and fear of additional costs on the other.[11] Many answers show that discrimination based on appearance and/or the lack of status symbols is widespread in public spaces.[12]

Below, the respondents' opinions on why the word *jaduu* is rarely used directly in spoken language are presented. Only one person disagreed with this assessment. Here is an overview of the answers:

- this word does not describe specific people
- it is discriminatory and exclusionary and should not be used in official documents
- such words put people in difficult life circumstances in an awkward position
- this is a sensitive topic, there are many reasons for poverty, direct use hurts people
- It seems inappropriate to me to say this directly because it marginalizes the person as weak
- it's probably taboo, it would annoy people
- you don't want to see social exclusion and the new social stratification emerge
- poor expresses that someone has and is able to do absolutely nothing
- Nowadays people strive to respect human rights and avoid discrimination
- that probably depends on personal ethics
- that is exclusionary and discriminatory, and one should not label the family in question that way
- it has a negative meaning, the word seems uncultured/primitive to me
- probably because it is said that good things symbolically follow from good words (*Amny belgees ašdyn belge*)
- vulnerable groups are not socially integrated
- because the sick, the disabled and orphans are affected
- probably the people affected don't like to hear that, it makes someone miserable
- it would be arrogant/presumptuous and demeaning to the person in question
- it's a worrying topic and would make people sad
- one should not show arrogance
- so as not to ostentatiously accuse people of bad things
- people are ashamed, it's certainly difficult for them to accept it

These answers show an insightful range of the negative connotations associated with the term *jaduu*. This was confirmed in conversations and interviews.

When asked to state concisely what was associated with the direct use of *jaduu*, our respondents gave the following answers:

- offending (*doromžilson*)
- disrespectful (*ül chündetgesen*)
- haughty (*deerelchsen*)
- discriminatory, exclusionary (*jalgavarlan gaduurchsan*)

[11] See also the very insightful study by Dorjdagva et al. (2016).

[12] For more on this topic see Choijav (2021).

- pompous / condescending (*ichersen*)

It was also emphasized that the pair word *jaduu züdüü* (derived from *jadrach, züdrech* - to exhaust, toil, to become dead tired) is associated with a permanent, unchangeable state and thus negates potentiality.

Discussion: Avoidance, Disrespect and Constructive Suggestions

Our pilot study confirmed our first observation that the terms *jaduu* for 'poor' and *jaduural* for 'poverty' are not used in the presence of people affected. Instead, in order to emphasize that this is a (hopefully) temporary status, i.e. with the potential to be overcome, the verb *jadrach* (to become tired/exhausted, to wear out, to suffer) is used exclusively in the past tense in relation to people: *jadarsan chün* (literally: someone who was exhausted). These terms are free of stigma and blame. Also typical is the description intended as polite in this sense in combination with 'a little/bit', i.e. *žaachan jadarsan chün* or *žaachan checüü am'draltaj chün* (literally: someone whose life is a bit difficult). Avoiding the terms *jaduu* or *jaduural* is about respecting those affected and not denying them the potential for change.

We even found a statement in a Mongolian version of an UN Development Programme (NÜB-yn Chögžlijn Chötölbör 2021: 21) that hinted at the odd fact that a lot would be done for poverty reduction even though the term is hardly used in the documents. However, this discrepancy, which was even denoted as a special characteristic of Mongolian development plans, was not challenged nor followed up on. Instead, we find our second observation confirmed, namely that – even in the same document – nonreflective translations from development jargon are used. Further down in the Mongolian Sustainable Development Programme, the "No poverty"-goal was translated as either *jaduurlyg ustgach* (eliminate poverty) or *jaduurlyg arilgach* (eliminate / clean up / eradicate poverty) (NÜB-yn Chögžlijn Chötölbör 2021).

What do such findings mean for practical work? In development policy, it is common to design 'anti-poverty' projects. Aram Ziai (2006: 138ff) criticized the fact that the World Bank, in its development report "Attacking Poverty", declared "ownership" and "partnership" in particular to be new principles with the aim of "empowerment" without questioning consequences of its market ideology. We can add that the declared principles remain empty promises as long as perspectives of target groups (as subjects, not objects) are ignored. Language imperialism is still not sufficiently reflected in development policy.

Poverty reduction projects (*jaduurlyg buuruulach tösöl*) have been running in Mongolia since the 1990s. People who work there told us in conversations that it was always extremely uncomfortable to introduce themselves with such project names to those affected. It does not only send negative signals, but also frames the target group in ways, which are, for the reasons explained, perceived as disrespectful and condescending. When asked which terms and categories would be more appropriate in such contexts, we learned that it was above all important to think about the problem from the other side, i.e. from the perspective of potential. The following specific suggestions for more appropriate terminology were made:

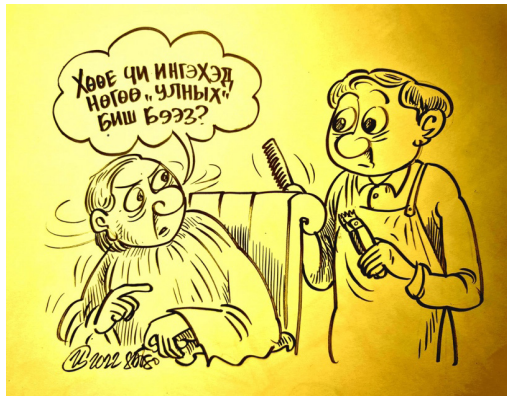
- *bolomžoo deešlüülech* to improve possibilities / to increase chances

- am'žirgaa demžich	to promote livelihoods
- am'žirgaany/amidralyn tuvšinijg sajžruulach	to improve standard of living / standard of living

These constructive suggestions, unlike the wordings mentioned above, do not contain any vocabulary of combat or destruction. In addition, they do not label anyone, but represent taxonomies and resource-oriented approaches in which politics is also responsible for creating conditions for a humane existence.

We began our article by saying that poverty is often denied. Questionable media representations of poor people reproduce stereotypical attributions, and, as a result, arrogance and snobbery are shockingly approved. Due to segregation, there are fewer and fewer contacts with other social classes and milieus. When it comes to battling discrimination, certain forms receive much more attention than the omnipresent classism, which excludes people because of their (presumed) social origin and/or social position.

Recently, however, an example of classism in Mongolia caused a stir: in September 2022, Ms. D. Sarangerel, then Minister of Labor and Social Security, was removed from office after protests. She had not only referred to the poorest (*nen jaduu*) families as *ulny ajl*,[13] which was understood as 'underclass/dregs', but also claimed that they could be brought out of poverty (*jaduurlaas gargach*) by training one member of each family as a hairdresser.



© Samandaryn Cogtbajar: The hairdresser is asked if he is not one of those "dregs" (*ulnych*).

These utterances sparked outrage, which ultimately forced her resignation. The minister had first tried to excuse herself by saying that her words were just a translation of common international terminology. – This is a telling example of how elites, who like to pretend to be cosmopolitan, blame supposedly international terms (no matter how stigmatizing) even when using their own language. Many comments on social media denounced the arrogance of those in political power and doubted whether they were even remotely prepared to acknowledge the realities of life. There were also concerns that framing people as *ulnychan* could become an insult to children in the future. It also indicates, with reference of the Mongolian understanding of the semantic field of the root *jad-* (as elaborated above) that labeling people as being permanently down deprives them of potential. – Such reactions, as well as many of

[13] Literally: 'bottom'-/'sole'-families.

the answers in our questionnaires, show that despite a widespread lack of solidarity in parts of the Mongolian society, the social conscience is still very much alive.

Joseph Stiglitz in his book "The Price of Inequality" (2012), using the example of the USA, demonstrated how threatening the future of socially divided societies looks. This is also relevant for Mongolia, because it addresses connections between economic and political power and central questions of the common good. After all, structural discrimination prevents a true meritocracy. It is not for nothing that recent research on social inequality focuses on "access to social resources" (Pfaff & Rabenstein 2018: 6). Supposed performance principles are still used to legitimize social inequality, even though the pandemic has shown whose (usually underpaid) services a society can least do without in an emergency: These are "unrecognized service providers" (Mayer-Ahuja & Nachtwey 2021) who are largely denied recognition and appreciation. Stiglitz had also stated that there was a "weak connection at best" between income and social benefits (Stiglitz 2012: 119). What ultimately counts is the "opportunity structure of a society" (Mayer-Ahuja & Nachtwey 2021: 28). This goes beyond social stratification, as Gündsambuu (2002) examined for Mongolia two decades ago. With a view to the unequal distribution of opportunities, Nicole Burzan (2007: 141ff) focused with the concept of "social situations" on factors such as education, living environment, privileges or discrimination as influential for "advantageous or disadvantageous living conditions" (ibid.: 142). Pierre Bourdieu had already addressed this when, in his enormously influential study, he placed the categories of social, cultural and symbolic capital alongside economic aspects (Bourdieu 1982).

In recent years, courageous authors have used their own experiences to describe in literary forms what it means to grow up poor in wealthy countries, e.g. Sherman Alexie in the USA (2007, 2017), Didier Eribon (2009) and Édouard Louis in France (2014, 2021), in Germany Deniz Ohde (2020), Christian Baron (2020), Iris Sayram (2022), Olivier David (2022) or in Denmark Glenn Bech (2022). Their books, some of which were award-winning, oftentimes triggered shocked reactions. In contemporary Mongolian literature, discourses on poverty and social exclusion can so far be found primarily in musical genres (especially rap). Having said this, we should mention a book that has so far only been published in English: Mongolian-born Handaa Enkh-Amgalan,[14] a graduate of New York University, recently published her memoirs (2021), in which she describes her experiences with primarily illness-related prejudice and exclusion, including growing up in socio-spatially segregated Ulaanbaatar in the 2000s.

In accordance with the situated knowledge concept (Haraway 1988), we included comparisons while preparing our pilot study in order to find out in what ways the framing of 'poverty' influences perspectives on it. As with many relevant contemporary issues, cross-national comparisons are very enlightening. On the one hand, they shed light on important differences and, on the other hand, show that prejudices, stigmatization, taboos, shame and blame as well as a lack of problem awareness among so-called elites are present everywhere. Maria Barankow and Christian Baron rightly state: "The demand for diversity in the education system, in politics, in the world of work is often about ethnic or cultural origin, about gender.

[14] This is the spelling of the name on the book cover. Her full name is Ench-Amgalangijn Rencenchand.

Social origin is usually forgotten; it is a blind spot" (2022: 9). Ultimately, whether in Mongolia or elsewhere, ignoring social issues turns out to be a threat to democracy.

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