



## ARTICLE

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# Organic MONGOLIA

Mongolia has a rich tradition of nomadic pastoralism, constituting a key element of the nation's culture and traditions. With the onset of significant urbanization, and just under half of the country's population now residing in or around Ulaanbaatar, these traditions are slowly changing, exacerbated by the infamous Mongolian dzud which reduces the livestock population and damages the livelihood of nomadic herders.

Climatic conditions further impact on the annual harvest, with this year Mongolia having to import a significant amount of wheat from Russia to meet the shortfall.

## Diet

From a dietary perspective, Mongolia is heavily reliant on produce from the five main livestock groups, goats, sheep, cattle, horses and camels. This results in a diet that is primarily comprised of meat and dairy, with less than 1% of the population eating fruit and vegetables every day of the year. Traditionally, this animal-based diet has been largely "organic" in nature, without the significant dietary alterations that come from mechanized and industrialized agricultural production.

However, the downside of rapid and extensive urbanization is that the traditional self-sufficiency of the Mongolian diet has been eroded and supplemented by a need for the import of processed foods and fruit and vegetables. Over the past five years, Ulaanbaatar has seen a fairly

dramatic rise in the typical fast food outlets that are seen in almost every other country in the world. This trend is only likely to continue, even if Mongolia can still proudly boast that it is one of the few nations not to have a McDonalds.

A growing middle-class and an explosion of restaurants in the last three years to cater for more globalized and international tastes (primarily among young Mongolians) also has an impact on the food chain supply and demand.

## Imports

But what are these imported products, and where do they come from? Parsing the statistics is a separate and time-consuming exercise, but clearly a high proportion of processed foods come from Russia, China and for the more affluent in Ulaanbaatar, South Korea. Other destinations are more niche in nature, including Western Europe, Japan and to some extent, the USA. In terms of fruit and vegetables, China is a significant source of imported produce.

While China is working hard on its year-round pollution problems, this fact should be an automatic source of concern. While Russia has reasonable standards of food production, these are not uniformly applied, especially when it comes to meat products (including chicken), and until 2016 product certification was largely on a voluntary and regional basis.

A major concern with the import of Chinese fruit

and vegetables (and potentially those from other nearby neighbours) is the inherent level of toxicity of the product. Rapid industrialization has resulted in major pollution issues around Beijing and other industrialized regions, which persist almost all year round. Apart from implementation of food standards, it is quite possible that agricultural produce deriving from China may contain above average levels of heavy metal content, such as cadmium, arsenic, copper and zinc, the latter being routinely added to diets of chickens, pigs and other animals worldwide to promote growth, all of which can find its way into the soil.

US agricultural production is now increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few multinational corporations, with genetically modified products on the rise, causing something of a backlash in the alternative media. GMO business is increasingly under pressure, and while it is clearly profit-driven, Mongolia would be well advised to resist any measures to implement that type of agribusiness here.

### **Potential solutions**

The worldwide trend for more organic and “natural” produce is only likely to continue. This is area that Mongolia might profitably capitalize on. New technologies such as hydroponics and aquaponics allow for the production of organic fruit and vegetables (and potentially fish!) in a controlled environment the whole year round. This type of solution, if implemented on a significant scale and given the comparatively small population of Ulaanbaatar, could materially reduce health risks over the longer term and promote a degree of self-

sufficiency for the capital city in that specific food sector.

As far as meat is concerned, the proposed US\$1bn of meat exports to the neighbours in 2015 has, unsurprisingly, not materialised. Of course, Mongolia has a highly organic animal husbandry tradition, but there remain a number of key implementation challenges: (1) universal certification is an issue, and achieving a consistency of product standard that meets both Chinese and Russian standards (with the latter gravitating more towards EU certification standards) is a difficult task; (2) meeting the relevant standards may require a change of mindset to a more industrialized form of agricultural development in order to achieve economies of scale; (3) there are logistical issues in terms of maintaining product quality with a lack of available infrastructure for export; (4) outbreaks of disease are relatively common, which can have a major impact on the approach of end consumers.

All that said, there is massive potential for growth in the sector both to meet rising domestic demand and international consumers.

Mongolia should be looking for solutions to develop enhanced self-sufficiency in terms of the import of fruit and vegetables using the latest technologies to grow product domestically in an organic way, and continue to find sustainable solutions to capitalize on its vast resources of livestock for the benefit for discerning consumers in neighbouring countries.

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