



Case Story

GOVERNMENT-PRIVATE SECTOR-CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERSHIP IN IMPROVING THE SCHOOL TEA BREAK PROGRAM IN RURAL MONGOLIA

1. Background

Mongolia approved a new Procurement Law in 2000 that is predominantly applied to large energy and infrastructure projects managed by the national government. Local governments procure a large quantity of smaller goods and services. These include: school tea breaks, uniforms, repairs, equipment and construction works. In general, local governments do not practice competitive and open processes in procurement of these goods and services. Contracts are often awarded to friends and relatives, which often result in poor quality products and inefficient use of money.

The Government of Mongolia started implementation of a School Tea Break program in 2006, initially for children in Grades 1 to 4. It was expanded to include 5th graders beginning the 2007-2008 academic year. Under the program, each child should get a daily tea break worth MNT 400. Since 2006, the Government has spent MNT 12.3 billion (US\$9 million) on the program, benefitting 253,604 children. The program makes a notable contribution to increasing primary and secondary school enrolment and supports attainment of children's educational and health goals.

The annual budget for School Tea Break for an average province is MNT 800 million (US\$550,000). The program has obvious benefits to children. However, actual implementation of the program by schools has several weaknesses, acknowledged by parents and civil society organizations. These include: poor quality of food supplied; lack of participation by parents and children in program delivery; lack of competition in the procurement and lack of transparency in budget implementation.

Mercy Corps, a nongovernment organization, provides technical assistance to three provinces to help address weaknesses in how schools implement the School Tea Break Program. The long-term objective of Mercy Corps in this program is to promote dialogue and partnership among



government-business-civil society sector.

Short-term objectives include:

- Improving program quality, increasing efficiency and beneficial outcomes for children;
- Involving parents and civil society organizations (CSOs) in monitoring delivery of this program in schools; and,
- Conducting transparent and competitive procurement of products supplied for school tea break, opening new opportunities to local businesses.

2. Innovative Actions

This initiative is innovative in terms of the approach and activities undertaken. First, CSOs assessed the problem and increased public awareness. Parents, teachers, and school doctors started to monitor daily implementation of the program and CSOs then brought relevant government agencies, ultimately responsible for improving policies and practices, into the dialogue. Businesses were informed about the new opportunity to expand their market and were trained to participate in a competitive bidding process. The initiative helped all parties (government, CSOs, and businesses) strengthen the roles they play in local development.

The specific steps taken by Mercy Corps are as follows:

Step 1. Mercy Corps provided training for CSOs on ways to involve parents in monitoring the School Tea Break program. CSOs in the three provinces were awarded small grants to finance project activities.

Step 2. CSOs monitored actual implementation of the School Tea Break program at schools. They conducted satisfaction surveys among parents, children, and teachers and operated Hot Lines to receive feedback and complaints. The CSOs involved Professional Standards Agencies to examine the caloric content of food and they also held interviews with school accountants to find out how much money is allocated and actually spent on school tea breaks.



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Step 3. CSOs held open discussions involving parents, teachers, school tea break suppliers, and government agencies about the problems. Television programs raised public awareness about project activities. School directors, study managers, and teachers were trained in methods for conducting open budget events, and how to monitor School Tea Break quality.

Step 4. Preparations were made for conducting open, competitive procurement of School Tea Break supplies. This involved the formation of new Bid Committees with participation from civil society. With Mercy Corps assistance, businesses were trained in how to participate in these bids, how to improve their technological processes, standards and requirements to supply School Tea Breaks.

Step 5. Open, competitive procurement was conducted for School Tea Break products. Product exhibitions were held with participation of small businesses producing food.

3. Program Status

With support from Mercy Corps, CSOs in the three provinces initiated open and competitive procurement of School Tea Break products at 17 schools. The participation of parents, children, and teachers in monitoring the School Tea Break program has increased tremendously: in 10 schools, each class now displays a weekly menu and information on the budget and suppliers. School doctors are now involved daily in monitoring food safety and hygiene issues. Parents have the confidence to work more effectively with school authorities.

According to Mandal Urtnasan, Mercy Corps Mongolia, "Competitive and open procurement of School Tea Break products was held for the first time in three *aimags* and set an example for effective outsourcing of government goods and services." Prior to this project only 5 companies had contracts to supply School Tea Breaks. This year 30 small businesses participated in the tender and 27 were selected by the Bid Committees to supply Tea Breaks. This has demonstrated productive partnership between civil society, government and business agencies is possible. CSOs have gained skills and experience through this and the Ministry of Education is now interested in using these project experiences to improve the School Tea Break program nationwide.



4. Outcomes and Learnings

It is necessary to involve all stakeholders--government, businesses and civil society organizations--right from the start of the project and to ensure total transparency in planned activities and intended outcomes. Although there were tensions at the beginning, these were resolved in the process due to the confidence and commitment that CSOs had in their pursuit of making changes for the well-being of children and to improve their partnership with businesses and government.

Mercy Corps has a very important role to play in supporting all players to work toward common goals and to build the capacities of government, businesses, and CSOs according to their specific needs. It is useful to identify a strong entry point to start the process (in this case, School Tea Breaks) and to then use positive learning in other fields.

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