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Quiet catastrophes: Navigating climate-induced displacement and marginality in urban Mongolia

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Abstract

This article explores the lived realities of climate-induced internal displacement in Mongolia, focusing on rural-to-urban migration among herding communities. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted in 2016 and 2024, it examines how environmental degradation, economic fragility, and policy neglect intersect and influence the mobility of displaced herders who relocate primarily to Ulaanbaatar's ger districts. While dominant policy and public discourse often frame such movements as voluntary or adaptive, participants' accounts reveal a gradual erosion of viable livelihoods and a steady narrowing of meaningful choices. The analysis challenges binary distinctions between forced and voluntary migration by situating mobility within longer histories of post-socialist rural disinvestment, infrastructural breakdown, and ecological degradation. Conceptually, the article engages with scholarship on climate mobility, political ecology, and post-socialist urbanism to frame internal displacement as both spatial and epistemic: an unfolding condition that dislocates people from land, skills, and recognition while offering limited pathways to reintegration. These 'quiet catastrophes' may remain administratively unnamed and politically marginal, but their impact and consequences are profound. By treating climate-linked displacement as a process of cumulative loss rather than a discrete rupture, the article contributes to broader debates on how internal, incremental mobility is classified, governed, and made visible within climate change discourses.

Keywords Internal displacement; climate change; vulnerability; Mongolia; nomadic herders; climate justice.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the link between climate change and human mobility has gained significant attention across academic, policy, and humanitarian domains (Boas et al., 2019). While cross-border displacement and international governance responses have become increasingly visible (Bettini and Casaglia 2024; Boscov-Ellen 2024), internal movements, particularly those unfolding between rural and peri-urban contexts, remain comparatively marginal in both empirical research and policy response (Boas et al., 2019; Ghosh and Orchiston 2022). Mobility within Central and Inner Asia, including Mongolia, is rarely centred in these discussions, despite the intersecting pressures of extreme weather events, environmental degradation, and the uneven socio-economic legacies of post-socialist transition that continue to erode traditional livelihoods (Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Khulan 2024; Sharapov 2025).

Such forms of mobility are often framed as distant from the securitized and racialized imaginaries that dominate European and North American borderscapes, conceptualized here as spatially diffuse constellations of border-related features, discourses, and practices that operate beyond traditional territorial lines (Tallis 2022). In contrast to policy and media debates in the Global North, where climate-related displacement is increasingly problematized as a threat to border stability and national security (Gillis et al., 2023; Woodworth 2024), internal mobilities within so-called ‘peripheries’ (Peeren et al., 2016) rarely generate urgency or sustained policy engagement, provided they remain spatially and politically contained. As a result, slow-moving catastrophes playing out in ‘peripheral’ regions are reframed through depoliticized discourses of adaptation, resilience, and ‘voluntary’ relocation, making past and ongoing displacements look benign, manageable and apolitical (Vinke et al., 2020). In doing so, such narratives obscure the structural forces that compel movement and efface the lived experiences of vulnerability and constrained agency which frequently accompany it (Nixon 2011; Farbotko and McMichael 2019).¹

Because the language used to describe movement carries analytical and political consequences, the conceptual distinctions at stake in this article are set out at the outset. ‘Mobility’ serves as an umbrella term for movement in its broadest sense, from seasonal pastoral movements between pastures (a defining feature of nomadic pastoralism) to longer-term residential relocations from rural areas to urban and peri-urban zones.² ‘Internal migration’ and ‘rural–urban migration’ are used descriptively to indicate the spatial dimension of these relocations: movements that take place within state borders, including relocations from rural to urban or peri-urban areas.³ ‘Displacement’, by contrast, is employed as an analytical category to describe movement caused by accumulating loss and constrained choices, including cases where people do not cross an international border and may move repeatedly over time, with or without recognition through a formal status category.⁴ This distinction is important in challenging how rural–urban movements are often narrated in policy discourses through idioms of ‘adaptation’, ‘resilience’, and ‘opportunity’, whereas a displacement framing foregrounds how environmental change, uneven infrastructures, and governance failures narrow alternatives over time.

In this article, ‘internal displacement’ functions as an analytical concept rather than a legal or administrative label. Drawing on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (UN OCHA 1998), the analysis treats specific rural–urban relocations in Mongolia as internal displacement when they are compelled by cumulative loss and a narrowing of viable alternatives, regardless of whether they are formally recognized within policy frameworks. This distinction is critical because internal displacement does not exist as a policy or legal category in Mongolia; recent global assessments confirm the absence of dedicated domestic laws or instruments to address such movements (UNHCR 2025). Instead, the term is deployed

to name forms of movement that, while widely narrated as ‘migration’, unfold through a gradual process of dispossession and endurance that often extends into new forms of socio-spatial marginalization at the urban periphery. More broadly, the presence or absence of domestic instruments rarely reflects the scale or intensity of displacement on the ground (IDMC 2025), highlighting how internal displacement remains unevenly named and governed across different political contexts. Between 1990 and 2024, over 818,000 individuals migrated to Ulaanbaatar from rural areas, accounting for nearly half the capital’s total population (Sharapov 2025), yet this movement remains administratively categorized as internal migration rather than displacement.

Within the Mongolian context, official policy discourse typically frames rural–urban movement as ‘internal migration’ (дотоод шилжилт хөдөлгөөн) or as part of ‘adaptation’ (дасан зохицох), rather than as displacement. This official vocabulary effectively aligns mobility with individual decision-making and economic strategy, rather than with protection-oriented framings that foreground compulsion, structural drivers, and the accumulation of loss over time. For example, while the 2024 Law on Reducing the Negative Impact of Climate Change on Traditional Animal Husbandry acknowledges climate change as a risk factor, it omits the severity of the crisis and its systemic implications for pastoral livelihoods (State Great Khural of Mongolia 2024). By prioritizing technical assistance and cooperative support while avoiding any mention of migration, displacement, or the potential collapse of traditional systems, the law places the burden of adaptation primarily on herders themselves within an increasingly fragile institutional context.

International organizations operating in Mongolia similarly navigate between the idioms of ‘mobility’, ‘migration’, and ‘displacement’ when addressing climate-related movement,⁵ reflecting both the evolving nature of the field and the practical stakes of terminology for policy and response. Recent analysis suggests that migration-management framings can also contribute to gaps in access to services for newly arrived peri-urban residents, particularly where administrative practices function as mechanisms of socio-spatial exclusion (IOM 2021).

This article contributes to debates on climate-related mobility by foregrounding the experiences of herders who, over the past two decades, have relocated from rural areas to urban and peri-urban zones (or ‘ger districts’), primarily in Ulaanbaatar. The peri-urban is conceptualized here not as a fixed geographic marker, but as a transitional and often ambiguous interface at the rural–urban boundary, characterized by fragmented land uses and the uneven extension of urban forms into previously rural territories (Sahana et al., 2023; Haldar et al., 2024). In the Mongolian context, these zones specifically encompass ger districts where displaced populations have settled, often without formal tenure, in areas that fall under expanding municipal jurisdiction yet lack consistent access to state infrastructure. ‘Marginality’, as employed in this article, refers to a condition of structural peripherality, in which populations remain excluded from adequate infrastructure, secure tenure, political recognition, and meaningful participation in urban life, despite being spatially situated within the city’s administrative boundaries (Mehretu et al., 2000). Rather than adopting a reductive lens that treats ger districts as uniform spaces of ‘informality’ or marginality (such as ‘slums’ or ‘shanty towns’), the analysis situates them within Ulaanbaatar’s specific histories of expansion and governance. Their internal diversity reflects uneven municipal incorporation and mixed tenure arrangements, including significant levels of legal landholding, which challenges any reading of these districts as singular marginalized enclaves (Sorace 2024).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with herders who relocated from rural areas to Ulaanbaatar, alongside key informant perspectives gathered during two periods of fieldwork in 2016 and 2024, the article examines displacement-like mobility within the context of

environmental stress and structural constraint. Rather than treating climate change as an isolated trigger, the analysis traces how environmental pressures intersect with long-term shifts in rural governance, economic precarity, and institutional neglect. The analysis combines participants' accounts with contextual and expert perspectives exploring how decisions to move are made, what is lost in the process, and how herders' lives are reconfigured, and often marginalized, following relocation to urban and peri-urban areas.

The article contributes to debates in three areas. First, it engages with climate mobilities scholarship to critique the framing of 'adaptive migration' as a rational and voluntary response to environmental change (Boas et al., 2019; Farbotko and McMichael 2019). Second, it draws on work on neoliberal restructuring and rural marginalization in post-socialist settings, tracing how shifts in governance and market liberalization have actively eroded pastoral livelihoods (Cellarius 2004; Kay et al., 2012). Third, the analysis builds on critical accounts of displacement that foreground the interwoven experiences of loss, endurance, and structural exclusion (Farmer 2005; Nixon 2011; Povinelli 2011). By bringing these bodies of work together through qualitative material from Mongolia, the article contributes to broader conceptual debates on how climate-related mobility is classified, narrated, and governed, particularly where movement disrupts the normative forced/voluntary binary and remains spatially and politically contained within national borders.

The following section situates rural livelihoods within Mongolia's broader historical and policy context, tracing the dismantling of socialist infrastructures, the socio-economic pressures facing herding communities, and the urban vulnerabilities that accompany relocation to Ulaanbaatar's ger districts. The conceptual framework then examines how climate-related mobility is understood within migration scholarship, engaging with debates on displacement, marginality, and everyday agency. After setting out the methodology and fieldwork design, Section 5 presents the core themes emerging from participants' accounts, exploring how movement, loss, and endurance are navigated at the urban periphery. Section 7 situates these findings within wider debates on climate mobility and internal displacement, highlighting the temporally indeterminate and non-linear patterns of mobility produced under conditions of environmental and socio-economic stress.

2. Background and context

Mongolia's geography, spanning glacier, steppe, alpine forest, marshland, and the Gobi Desert, has historically supported significant biodiversity and underpinned the viability of longstanding pastoral traditions (Christian 2018; Marchina 2021). Despite its vast territorial scale, the population remains just over 3.2 million (as of 2024), making it the second least densely populated country globally (Ritchie and Mathieu 2019; Central Intelligence Agency 2025). Within this landscape, the intersection of extreme weather, geographic isolation, and fragile infrastructure has historically made daily life demanding, particularly for rural populations whose livelihoods remain tied to these ecological variations (Rossabi 2005; Mercy Corps 2017).

The contemporary displacement of Mongolian herders is situated at the nexus of a protracted economic transition and increasingly volatile climatic conditions. Rather than a simple chronological overview, this section examines the structural forces driving rural displacement: from the legacies of Soviet-era collectivization to the neoliberal reforms of the post-socialist period, and the intensifying pressures of environmental change. It specifically analyses the structural marginalization of rural populations and the subsequent fragmentation of social life that has accompanied the acceleration of rural-to-urban movement. The section concludes by evaluating state responses, or the lack thereof, to internal

displacement, highlighting the persistent policy silences that effectively leave herding populations with few viable alternatives beyond the urban periphery.

2.1 Nomadic pastoralism in Mongolia

Nomadic pastoralism remains a central feature of rural life in Mongolia, functioning not merely as a survival strategy but as a complex system of seasonal mobility and land stewardship.⁶ Historically, herders managed climatic volatility through rotational grazing and flexible herd management across steppe, mountain, and desert landscapes (Christian 2018; Marchina 2021). These seasonal movements between pastures, anchored in the notion of *nutag*, or homeland (Namsaraeva 2020), ensured livestock survival while maintaining the sustainability of rangeland ecosystems. Pastoral life was structured through kinship networks, collective land stewardship, and culturally embedded norms that governed access to shared resources (Morgan 2007; Marchina 2021). Beyond subsistence, mobility was foundational to the construction of Mongolian social order and cultural identity (May 2019).

The socialist period brought a fundamental reconfiguration of this traditional system. Following the 1921 revolution, Mongolia's incorporation into the Soviet sphere led to extensive collectivization, with herders integrated into *negdels* (collectives) and, subsequently, larger state farms (Rosenberg 1974; Humphrey 1978; Bruun 2006). Under this regime, the state centralized the provision of infrastructure and essential services, ranging from veterinary care and winter shelters, to schooling. While collectivized pastoralism maintained seasonal mobility within a state-managed framework, it fundamentally altered the pastoral social order, constraining individual autonomy in exchange for more stable incomes and a robust system of social protection (Dillon 2020).

The 1990 collapse of the Soviet Union initiated a swift transition towards neoliberal governance. This shift prompted a surge in pastoral activity as the manufacturing sector declined, with herding becoming a default survival response for many. Reinert (2004) observes that the number of herders tripled during the 1990s despite only modest livestock growth, leading to the fragmentation of collectives into small precarious holdings. Simultaneously, state support structures were dismantled, markets liberalized, and herds privatized under reform packages pushed by international financial institutions (Rossabi 2005; Bruun 2006). While these were narrated as a 'return to individual responsibility' and 'market efficiency', they in fact exposed rural households to deepening economic precarity and ecological risk. As Sneath (2018) argues, neoliberalism reconfigured the rural political economy, replacing collective risk-sharing with individualized survival strategies and intensifying inequalities across herding communities.

2.2 Changing climate in Mongolia

Mongolia has seen a dramatic climatic shift in recent decades, with profound implications for the viability of rural livelihoods (World Bank 2024a). Average annual temperatures have risen by 2.24 °C since the mid-20th century, exceeding twice the global average (Mayer 2016), accelerating desertification, land degradation, and chronic water scarcity. With nearly 77 per cent of the territory now classified as degraded (UNDP 2024), this trend is exacerbated by declining summer rainfall, erratic precipitation, and the pressures of overgrazing (Fernández-Giménez et al., 2011; Ministry of Environment and Tourism 2025). These environmental pressures have actively eroded pastoral systems by undermining the quality and seasonal reliability of pasture, escalating livestock mortality during extreme weather, and deepening food insecurity among herding households (Du et al., 2018).

Crucial among these environmental pressures are increasingly frequent and severe *dzud* events—winters defined by deep snow, ice crusting, and protracted cold that prevent livestock from grazing. Projections suggest that *dzuds* may increase in frequency by 5–40 per cent by 2050, with average annual livestock losses rising to 4.1 million and potentially reaching 6.8 million by 2100 (World Bank 2024a). The 2023–4 *dzud*, one of the harshest in recent history, encompassed 90 per cent of the territory, killing over 8 million animals and placing nearly 190,000 people, including 80,000 children, in crisis (UNICEF 2024a,b). The 2024–5 *dzud* continued this pattern, killing over 8 million livestock (approximately 12.5 per cent of the national herd) and severely affecting over 180,000 herder households (Sharapov 2025). Beyond the immediate loss of livestock, these events disrupt education, strain rural healthcare infrastructures, and intensify food insecurity across the region (WHO 2024; UNICEF 2024c).

Dzuds, like other so-called ‘natural’ disasters, are better understood as socio-environmental events whose impacts are determined not by environmental extremes alone, but by the infrastructural deficiencies and social inequalities that produce differential vulnerability (Smith 2006). As Fernández-Giménez et al. (2015) observe, the post-socialist transition in Mongolia undermined collective adaptation by dismantling state-supported pastoral institutions and weakening informal systems of mutual aid, leaving herders directly exposed to climatic risk. These events function as compound hazards, where extreme cold interacts with the cumulative effects of protracted drought and land degradation (Tomita 2022). Specifically, the loss of collective infrastructure, including veterinary care and subsidized fodder reserves, has forced herding households to absorb climatic shocks individually (Bruun 2006). This progression of environmental degradation has, in turn, accelerated patterns of internal migration from depleted pastoral areas to urban and peri-urban spaces, particularly Ulaanbaatar (Mayer 2016; IOM 2022).

2.3 Socio-economic pressures and urban vulnerabilities

Although an extractive boom is currently underway in Mongolia, the wealth generated by the mining sector remains unevenly captured, ensuring that systemic poverty persists as a structural barrier (World Bank 2024b). As of 2024, 15.9 per cent of the rural population lives in multidimensional poverty, contrasting sharply with 3.1 per cent in urban centres (Alkire et al., 2024). Nationally, 7.3 per cent of the population is multidimensionally poor, with over a third experiencing severe deprivation across education, health, and living standards (Alkire et al., 2024). Monetary poverty trends reinforce this picture: following an earlier mining-led peak, the poverty rate fell to 21.6 per cent in 2014 but climbed to 29.6 per cent after the 2016 recession, with only marginal improvements by 2020 (World Bank 2020). Notably, urban poverty has now overtaken rural rates, with 64 per cent of Mongolia’s poor residing in cities by 2020 (World Bank 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened these vulnerabilities, initiating a 4.6 per cent gross domestic product (GDP) contraction and a surge in inflation to 16.1 per cent by mid-2022 (Narangoa 2023). Despite record coal exports to China in the same year, high-profile corruption scandals, involving an estimated \$6.5 billion in missing revenue, have fuelled public protest and highlighted a profound crisis of institutional trust (Batdelger and Enkhbold 2025). This institutional volatility exists alongside an overextension of urban capacities. Nearly 60 per cent of Ulaanbaatar’s population resides in ger districts, frequently characterized by a lack of clean water, sanitation, and essential infrastructure (Rossabi 2021).

Simultaneously, the environmental depletion of the countryside continues to undermine the viability of rural livelihoods. This depletion is driven by the interplay of mining expansion, unsustainable grazing, and accelerating climatic shifts, where rising temperatures and

increased aridity often exert a more significant influence on rangeland productivity than herd size alone (Purevjav et al., 2025). Together, these socio-economic and environmental forces accelerate the necessity of relocation for herding households (Dovchin and Dovchin 2024).

Ulaanbaatar serves as the primary destination for those fleeing rural precarity, yet this influx has placed intense pressure on the city's infrastructure, particularly within the expanding ger districts. These peri-urban zones, where over 60 per cent of the city's residents now live, frequently lack piped water, sanitation, and electricity. Residents in these districts also face persistent employment barriers and restricted access to health and education services (IOM 2021). In an effort to manage these pressures, the government introduced a registration ban in 2017, effectively barring rural arrivals from formalizing their residency in the capital until the policy was allowed to expire at the beginning of 2021. While framed as a tool for urban planning, this policy has disproportionately penalized displaced herders. By preventing registration, the state forced these populations into precarious legal positions, excluding them from essential public services (IOM 2022). As IOM (2022) evaluations indicate, these restrictions have failed to deter movement; instead, they have exacerbated socio-economic vulnerability and spatial segregation at the urban periphery.

The structural inequalities between rural and urban regions illuminate the complex nature of this displacement. Herders relocate not only in response to acute environmental shocks but also as a reaction to entrenched economic insecurity and a systemic lack of rural livelihood opportunities. Upon arrival in Ulaanbaatar, however, many encounter continued marginalization, driven by skills mismatches and exclusion from the formal labour market. Unemployment and underemployment remain disproportionately high among those arriving from pastoral regions, a condition that reinforces cycles of poverty (IOM 2022). Critiques of state policy highlight a persistent failure to address the underlying drivers of displacement; the prioritization of migration restrictions over meaningful rural investment has effectively perpetuated a cycle of vulnerability. Simultaneously, the chronic underdevelopment of infrastructure in the ger districts reflects deep-seated deficiencies in urban planning, further undermining the long-term wellbeing of displaced populations (Fernández-Giménez et al., 2015; IOM 2021).

These structural conditions—the convergence of environmental stress, institutional neglect, and exclusionary urban governance—set the terms within which rural-urban movement unfolds. The following section situates these dynamics within broader conceptual debates on climate mobility, displacement, and the reconfiguration of vulnerability at the urban periphery, where the categories through which mobility is understood carry direct consequences for recognition and response.

3. Literature review and conceptual framework

A substantial body of scholarship has explored the links between climate change and human movement (Mayer 2013; Boas et al., 2019; Nabong et al., 2023), yet the categories animating that debate do not always translate effectively to rural-urban mobility in Mongolia. This review identifies work that clarifies how herding households move under conditions of environmental and socio-economic stress, and how relocation is lived at the urban periphery. The point of departure is that mobility is produced through the interaction of structural constraint, socio-spatial inequality, disrupted value systems, and uneven governance (Nixon 2011; Terbish et al., 2022). Conceptually, climate-related rural-urban mobility is framed as a process of constrained relocation followed by the reconfiguration of vulnerability at the urban edge: environmental stress and the political economy of pastoral livelihoods narrow the

conditions for staying, while relocation unfolds into peri-urban space where insecurity around land, infrastructure, and recognition mediates access to services and livelihoods (Pedersen and Højer 2008; IOM 2021). These dynamics influence material outcomes alongside experiences of identity, belonging, and endurance. The concepts prioritized here serve to organize the subsequent analysis rather than providing exhaustive coverage, reflecting long-term engagement with the Mongolian context and an iterative engagement with field material.

Within migration scholarship, the forced–voluntary divide has been widely criticized for its limited utility in contexts where pressures accumulate over time and options are progressively foreclosed (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2020; de Haas 2021). While national policy frameworks frequently narrate movement to Ulaanbaatar as ‘economically motivated’, empirical research reveals a more precarious reality. Rural households often relocate as a reaction to increasingly unlivable conditions, including recurrent *dzud* events and pasture depletion, that gradually erode the viability of remaining in the countryside (Charlier 2020; Fraser 2023). These movements rarely stem from a single event or discrete decision; instead, they emerge through the accumulation of pressures, where climate-related hazards interact with post-socialist rural disinvestment and an absence of meaningful support systems for herding communities.

Relocation to Ulaanbaatar frequently situates households within a socio-spatial landscape where exclusion is reproduced through the uneven distribution of infrastructure. Many households settle in *ger* districts—peri-urban zones where restricted service provision dictates a fundamentally different quality of everyday life. Terbish et al. (2022) conceptualize this as a layered form of exclusion, in which material conditions (*matterscape*), lived experience (*mindscape*), and uneven governance (*powerscape*) intersect. This theoretical framing emphasizes not merely the fact of peripheral settlement, but how unequal access to infrastructure mediates participation in urban life and the practical experience of belonging.

The governance and legal terms of settlement in the *ger* districts further complicate efforts to stabilize life after relocation. Land tenure is frequently informal or contested, leaving many residents without secure recognition and with limited leverage to access essential services (Pedersen and Højer 2008). Pedersen and Højer’s (2008) account of ‘fuzzy property’ captures how ambiguous tenure produces pervasive uncertainty and discourages long-term investment, while ‘leaky selves’ points to the affective consequences of living with unresolved claims and a fragile attachment to place. Sorace (2024) argues that *ger* districts function as ‘ghostly presences’, formally visible in urban policy while remaining politically peripheral in practice, where cycles of promise and neglect leave claims to urban citizenship unresolved. Within this landscape, transport inequalities further restrict access to education and employment, particularly for women and children (Hamiduddin and Plueckhahn 2021).

For herding households, relocation entails a profound reworking of labour and identity as pastoral knowledge loses its purchase within the urban economy. Displaced herders often confront the sudden devaluation of the expertise through which nomadic life was sustained; capacities cultivated through close relations with landscape and seasonal rhythms carry little economic or social weight in the city (Fraser 2023). Fraser’s discussion of ‘enskilment’ demonstrates how pastoral knowledge is built through relational practice, and, conversely, why it becomes difficult to maintain once individuals are removed from the rural environments that sustain it. Consequently, movement frequently results in systemic deskilling, as these specific capacities do not translate easily into urban labour markets (Charlier 2020). Material hardship therefore exists alongside the loss of status and continuity, echoing broader accounts of displacement as a disruption of both livelihood and the social self (Said 2013).

Scholarship on displacement also attends to the ways individuals sustain social life and pursue modest projects within pervasive constraint. Residents frequently rely on informal strategies to maintain continuity and facilitate incremental improvements (Terbish et al., 2022). *Nutag*-based solidarity networks provide mutual assistance where formal safety nets are unavailable. The ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai 2004) provides a conceptual framework for examining future-oriented projects undertaken within structural limits, without presenting aspiration as an antidote to material deprivation. In contexts of displacement, this capacity is often channelled into modest, practical investments, particularly in children’s education, that sustain a horizon of possibility even where broader structural change remains out of reach. Rural identities and spatial practices are not abandoned upon arrival, but are reworked within the city, visible in the maintenance of domestic routines that carry cultural continuity (Fraser 2023). Consequently, future-oriented projects often take the form of ‘practical work’: the daily labour of maintaining households, preserving ties, and securing incremental changes where possible.

Taken together, this article advances a conceptualization of internal displacement that moves beyond legalistic definitions and event-centred accounts of climate-related mobility. Instead of viewing displacement as a discrete rupture, the analysis conceptualizes it as an unfolding structural condition, produced through the cumulative interaction of environmental depletion, post-socialist disinvestment, and exclusionary peri-urban governance. In this framing, displacement does not begin at the point of movement to the city, nor does it end with relocation. It emerges gradually as livelihoods become untenable, options narrow, and forms of knowledge, labour, and social recognition lose their viability across space. By foregrounding displacement as a process that is simultaneously spatial, social, and epistemic, the article extends existing critiques of the forced–voluntary binary and illustrates how internal displacement can remain politically unrecognized while being materially profound.

4. Methodology

This research draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Mongolia during two distinct periods: an initial phase in 2016 and a second in 2024. Both phases relied on semi-structured interviews to gather detailed narratives from displaced herder households and key informants. The second round of interviews, originally scheduled for 2020, was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2016 phase included twelve interviews: four with displaced herders and eight with key informants, including representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies, academic institutions, and the National Human Rights Commission of Mongolia. The 2024 phase included ten additional interviews with displaced herders in Ulaanbaatar’s ger districts. While no new key informant interviews were conducted in the second phase, the earlier data were revisited and integrated into the longitudinal analysis. The 2024 phase was specifically designed to evaluate displacement trajectories over time, examining how herders described their transitions after additional years of climatic instability and shifting urban policy. While the study does not track the same individuals, the two rounds provide a time-separated perspective on displacement as an unfolding structural process rather than a discrete event.

Key informant interviews took place at the National University of Mongolia or in private locations. These were conducted in English. Displaced herders were recruited through *in situ* convenience sampling in the Songinokhairkhan District of Ulaanbaatar. While Songinokhairkhan is one of the capital’s largest and most populous districts, it encompasses extensive ger district areas where infrastructure provision, secure tenure, and access to

services remain markedly uneven, making it a key site of peri-urban settlement for displaced herding households. The research team approached households in the ger districts directly; no local administration or state agencies were involved in identifying participants or facilitating access, thereby ensuring that the recruitment process remained independent of official oversight. Participants were eligible if they were over 18, had engaged in nomadic herding for at least five years before relocating, and had moved to Ulaanbaatar with the intention of permanent settlement. No financial incentives were offered; participants typically expressed a desire to share their perspectives on displacement and the systemic difficulties they faced.

All interviews with herders were supported by a Mongolian-speaking research team member who provided consecutive interpretation. This collaborative approach was essential for establishing trust and ensuring cultural safety. Working through consecutive interpretation influenced the rhythm and duration of the interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. In the analysis, significant attention was given to translation choices, particularly for expressions of belonging and loss that do not carry neatly into English. This process involved an epistemological awareness of how meaning is produced across languages; care was taken to preserve the nuances of participants' original accounts while translating them into the analytical vocabulary of the study. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated. Ethical approvals were granted by the University of Bedfordshire (2016) and Edinburgh Napier University (2024), and all procedures adhered to the Trust Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Both sets of transcripts were initially read closely and inductively coded to identify recurring themes. Codes were subsequently reviewed and grouped into broader thematic categories, which were refined through iterative comparison across interviews and both periods of fieldwork. These themes were interpreted in light of the conceptual dimensions—spatial, social, and epistemic—outlined in the previous section. Key informant material was used to contextualize household accounts, clarifying the institutional and policy conditions that influence life in the ger districts. Rather than being presented as a separate strand of analysis, this expert data were used to triangulate herders' accounts, providing a structural counterpoint to their lived experiences of policy neglect and service fragmentation. This process allowed the analysis to move beyond descriptive reporting towards a more integrated understanding of how governance and environmental stress interact to produce displacement trajectories.

While providing rich insights, several limitations are acknowledged. The relatively small non-probability sample limits generalizability beyond the specific communities studied. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of recall bias. Translation and interpretation may also have introduced subtle shifts in meaning, despite rigorous attention to accuracy. Finally, while the two rounds of fieldwork provided valuable temporal depth, the shifting socio-political contexts between 2016 and 2024 may have influenced participants' perceptions, complicating direct comparisons across time. Despite these limits, the research provides a grounded account of how mobility intersects with uneven services, tenure, and governance in Ulaanbaatar's ger districts.

5. Findings

Drawing on interviews with displaced households and actors involved in policy implementation, this section traces displacement as a gradual process unfolding across environmental, economic, institutional, and social domains, rather than as a discrete rupture. These narratives suggest that displacement is set in motion by the progressive erosion of pastoral

livelihoods, proceeds through constrained and non-linear mobility pathways, and is sustained following relocation through exclusionary forms of urban incorporation. The five themes that follow, while analytically distinct, illustrate how climate-linked movement in Mongolia functions as a state of protracted marginalization.

5.1 Cumulative livelihood collapse under environmental and economic pressure

Across the interviews, participants described a process of progressive erosion, where environmental volatility and economic hardship accumulated to the point that herding was no longer viable. In these accounts, climatic changes and financial struggles were rarely discussed as separate forces; instead, they were narrated as an intertwined phenomenon where loss compounded over time, leaving households with diminishing alternatives.

Participants spoke of *dzud* events, drought, and desertification as an intensifying pattern rather than isolated shocks, one that broke the predictability foundational to pastoral life. While some recalled specific winters where extreme cold decimated their livestock, others emphasized a more persistent insecurity. They described how even in years without a major *dzud*, erratic rainfall and deteriorating pasture quality left them 'exposed', with no realistic way to recover the health or size of their herds. For many, the decision to move came through the exhaustion of their capacity to endure repeated seasonal failures rather than any single storm or *dzud* event.

These environmental pressures were felt most acutely through the lens of economic survival. Participants spoke of the 'tipping points' created by rising fodder costs and unstable markets for meat and wool. During harsh winters, many described the desperation of 'distress sales', where they were forced to sell animals prematurely or at low value just to meet immediate needs for food or fuel. Debt emerged as a heavy, recurring presence in these narratives. They recounted borrowing repeatedly to finance fodder, leading to a cycle of interest and a growing reliance on informal lenders as their access to formal credit disappeared alongside their livestock.

These personal accounts were mirrored in the perspectives of those working in rural governance and service provision. They noted that the withdrawal of coordinated state support had left individual households to absorb climatic shocks alone. From this perspective, the 'collapse' described by herders was the result of environmental stress hitting livelihoods that had already been weakened by institutional neglect. In these narratives, displacement was less a choice than the eventual outcome of a system where the buffers against loss had been systematically removed.

5.2 Layered and constrained mobility trajectories

Movement to Ulaanbaatar was seldom described by participants as a deliberate or aspirational shift. Instead, it emerged through their accounts as a reluctant outcome of vanishing options, often following years of searching for ways to remain in the countryside. They spoke of moving repeatedly between rural locations in search of viable pasture or renting land informally—temporary measures that they hoped would stave off a permanent move to the city. Many described 'split households', a precarious arrangement where some family members stayed behind to sustain a small herd while others relocated to the city to secure schooling for children. These narratives reveal the non-linear nature of mobility—a series of reactive, provisional steps taken to manage competing pressures under intense strain.

Education appeared as a dominant force in these stories, often acting as a primary constraint that dictated when and where a family moved. Participants recounted how the lack of rural school dormitories and the need for parental guardianship compelled them to move, even when they still possessed the skills and desire to continue herding. These requirements frequently dictated gendered patterns of movement: women and children settled in the urban periphery to ensure stability for schooling, while men migrated elsewhere to mining sites or even abroad, to provide the necessary income. In these accounts, international migration was not spoken of as a pursuit of opportunity, but as a 'last resort' coping strategy to finance the family's survival in Ulaanbaatar.

Experts and policy implementation actors echoed these descriptions, noting that the trajectory into the capital was rarely planned. They observed that the 'registration regime' and the lack of rural infrastructure often forced families into a sequence of moves that they initially believed to be reversible. However, as environmental loss mounted and urban costs accumulated, these temporary shifts frequently solidified into permanent displacement. Across these narratives, mobility was described as a reconfiguration of vulnerability; moving to the city shifted households into a new landscape of insecurity where rural expertise no longer provided protection, rather than signalling an exit from hardship.

5.3 Urban marginalization in the ger districts: tenure, infrastructure, and governance

For most participants, the move to Ulaanbaatar did not bring the resolution or stability they had hoped for. Instead, they described how the vulnerabilities they carried from the countryside were reworked through the insecure conditions of the city's ger districts. Many spoke of the anxiety caused by 'fuzzy' or informal land arrangements, such as living on the plots of relatives or occupying land without legal recognition. They recounted the frustration of attempting to formalize their tenure only to find the process slow, expensive, or entirely stalled by administrative barriers. This lack of secure landholding left many participants feeling as though they were living in a state of suspension, unsure if they would be forced to move again and unable to invest in making their homes weather-proof or permanent.

Daily life in these districts was described through a catalogue of basic shortages and the heavy physical labour required to overcome them. Participants spoke of long journeys to collect water from communal wells and the constant struggle to maintain warmth in homes disconnected from the city's central heating and sewage systems. They recounted how even when services like healthcare and schooling were physically nearby, accessing them was often contingent on formal residency registration, which many lacked, or on up-front fees that their insecure incomes could not cover. In these narratives, the physical isolation of the urban periphery mirrored the social isolation of being 'unrecognized' by the state, leaving households to navigate the city's margins with little formal support.

These accounts of abandonment were corroborated by those involved in municipal governance and service provision, who described the ger districts as spaces of chronic underinvestment. They noted that the rapid expansion of these areas had outpaced the city's infrastructure, creating a landscape where fragmented responsibilities across agencies left many residents in a 'blind spot' of urban planning. From these expert perspectives, the exclusion described by herders was not an accidental byproduct of growth, but a structural feature of an urban system that prioritized central development over peripheral inclusion. For the participants, this meant that while they were physically present in the capital, they remained politically and materially peripheral, their claims to urban citizenship left unresolved.

5.4 Epistemic and affective displacement: deskilling, misrecognition, and loss

For many participants, displacement was felt as much in the mind and spirit as it was in the loss of material assets. They spoke of a profound disruption to their sense of self, describing how the expertise they had built over a lifetime seemed to vanish or lose all value upon arrival in the city. In these accounts, the move to Ulaanbaatar resulted in a painful form of 'deskilling'. Participants recounted the indignity of transitioning from being independent, skilled managers of their own herds to seeking low-paid, insecure manual labour where their prior knowledge carried no weight. They described a world where the very things they were best at were suddenly irrelevant, leaving them feeling 'useless' or 'out of place' within the urban economy.

This sense of loss was often intensified by the experience of being looked down upon or treated as a burden. Several participants spoke of being treated as 'backward' or 'obsolete' by long-term city residents and officials, who framed pastoral traditions as incompatible with modern urban life. They recounted the sadness of watching their children grow distant from the traditional ecological and spiritual knowledge that had defined their ancestors' lives. The loss of connection to the *nutag*, that deeply felt sense of homeland with its familiar rivers, mountains, and shared histories, emerged as a recurring source of grief. Even those who acknowledged the impossible hardships of rural life spoke with deep longing for the 'texture' of the countryside, suggesting that displacement had severed a vital cord of belonging and continuity.

These narratives of internal loss were echoed by employment specialists and social workers, who noted a persistent 'skills mismatch' that left former herders trapped in the informal sector. They observed that without formal qualifications, relocated herders found few pathways into stable work, a reality that reinforced the stigma of being 'unskilled' migrants. From these professional perspectives, the epistemic displacement described by participants, the feeling that their knowledge has been erased, is a structural outcome of an urban labour market that fails to recognize pastoral expertise. Ultimately, these accounts suggest that displacement reverberates far beyond the act of moving; it involves a painful reconfiguration of identity where the social self is fractured by the loss of the environment that once gave it meaning.

5.5 Endurance and future-making under constraint

Despite the weight of persistent hardship, participants described a sustained and often quiet effort to stabilize their everyday lives and secure a future for their families. These stories were not of dramatic upward mobility, but of 'making do' through continuous work and improvisation. Many recounted how they assembled a living through a patchwork of small, often insecure income sources, including casual manual labour, petty trade, and domestic production. They spoke of these practices pragmatically, emphasizing a commitment to keeping their households going and an ability to absorb shocks that would otherwise be catastrophic. In these narratives, endurance emerged as an active, daily labour of maintenance and survival under pervasive structural limits.

Kinship networks were central to these efforts, functioning as the primary safety net where formal state support was absent. Participants spoke of relying on relatives and shared rural origins to find housing, secure informal work, or manage the daily demands of childcare. These ties provided a sense of continuity and mutual assistance that made urban life navigable. However, some also spoke of the strain this placed on those networks; they recounted

the difficulty of asking for help when everyone they knew was struggling under similar pressures. While these bonds were vital, participants' accounts suggest they were often stretched to their limits, highlighting a fragile reliance on self-help in the face of institutional neglect.

Education emerged in nearly every interview as the most significant site of future-making and the primary justification for the hardships of displacement. Participants spoke of staying in Ulaanbaatar, despite the poor housing, the coal smoke, and the social isolation, because they believed the city's schools offered their children a pathway out of precarity. They recounted the profound trade-offs involved, describing how they sacrificed their own comfort, status, and connection to the countryside for the sake of the next generation. This 'capacity to aspire' was narrated as a practical, driving force that gave meaning to their present struggles. Even when wider structural change felt out of reach, these households remained focused on the incremental progress of their children, framing their own displacement as a necessary bridge to a different kind of life.

6. Situating the findings: displacement, marginalization, and everyday agency

Taken together, these accounts support an understanding of internal displacement that does not rest on discrete climatic shocks or formal status categories. Instead, what comes into focus in the Mongolian context is the slow production of unviability. Displacement emerges here as a condition generated by the long-term interaction of environmental depletion, the retreat of post-socialist rural support, and exclusionary peri-urban governance. In this light, movement becomes legible as the end point of a steady narrowing of possibility rather than a sudden response to a single event. This evidence suggests that the forced-voluntary binary lacks the flexibility to account for these realities, as the 'voluntariness' of relocation exists on a continuum where climatic, economic, and institutional pressures are inseparable (Bettini and Gioli 2016; Erdal and Oeppen 2018). The Mongolian case extends this critique by showing how the temporalities of endurance and eventual recalibration are central to the experience of mobility, reinforcing multi-causal accounts of environmental change that resist single-driver explanations (Black et al., 2011).

What follows relocation to Ulaanbaatar cannot be treated as a separate story of urban poverty; rather, the ger districts become the sites where displacement continues. In these peri-urban zones, vulnerability persists—rearranged by the governance structures of the urban periphery, including insecure tenure, patchy registration, and fractured access to services, that reconstitute precarity in a new spatial form. This is not merely a matter of being 'under-served' in a logistical sense. Instead, the urban periphery holds displaced households in a state of durable marginality—a condition where these spaces become long-term settings for everyday life rather than temporary points of arrival (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018; Goldscheider 2019). Within this setting, the loss of pastoral knowledge and the resulting deskilling are as significant as material deprivation. The devaluation of a herder's expertise in the city limits their access to work, their social standing, and their political voice. This suggests that knowledge, labour, and recognition are inseparable (Burawoy 2019; Fraser 2023). Displacement continues through this process of devaluation, where the very skills and meanings that once sustained a household's social worth are treated as surplus.

The everyday agency of displaced households is analytically significant because it appears as a form of endurance under neglect rather than 'resilience' in the celebratory sense. Families assemble continuity through pieced-together economies, kinship ties, and modest projects centred on their children's education. When read through Povinelli's (2011) account

of economies of abandonment, this labour of endurance serves as evidence of a systemic withdrawal of support rather than a narrative of success. This perspective makes it difficult to maintain celebratory accounts of 'adaptation', which often frame movement as an uncomplicated transition or a successful adjustment to risk (Bettini 2017; Vinke et al., 2020). Against global imaginaries that privilege spectacular disasters or large-scale future risks (Clement et al., 2021), the Mongolian case highlights the profound consequences of climate-linked mobility that is internal, incremental, and largely unspectacular. Such movement reorders lives in ways that are neither temporary nor easily reversed, yet it remains hidden from frameworks that only register crisis as an event.

7. Conclusion

This article has approached climate-linked rural–urban mobility in Mongolia as a challenge of classification, timing, and political visibility. By treating internal displacement as an unfolding condition fuelled by cumulative loss and the retreat of state support, the analysis moves away from narratives that rely on sudden 'events' or large-scale spectacles to confer significance. What emerges instead is a form of displacement that remains internal to national borders and incremental in its pace. Such movement is often difficult to name within existing governance frameworks, yet it fundamentally alters the livelihoods, expertise, and social positions of those who experience it.

Within current debates on climate mobility, this case demonstrates that internal movement is rarely politically neutral. While recent scholarship has highlighted the complex drivers and the co-existence of movement and immobility, internal rural–urban displacement often remains trapped in categories of 'migration' or 'adaptation'. Such labels tend to mute the coercive pressures that drive people from the countryside. The Mongolian experience shows how mobility can proceed without triggering any formal protection: mobility still appears as voluntary because the pressure accumulates slowly, resisting the kind of sudden 'crisis' that usually prompts a state response. In this sense, internal displacement in Mongolia exposes the inability of global models to register gradual, structural collapse.

The analysis also contributes to a growing critique of climate-mobility narratives that prioritize manageability and future risk over present-day survival. When movement is framed solely through the language of 'adaptation' or 'resilience', attention is often diverted away from the slow withdrawal of rural support and the uneven distribution of vulnerability. Reading everyday agency through this lens does not diminish the resourcefulness of displaced households; instead, it reframes their endurance as evidence of the labour required to sustain life where institutional responsibility has thinned out. In this context, the act of enduring does not resolve displacement; rather, it makes the continued reality of that displacement visible.

More broadly, this analysis invites a reconsideration of how climate-related displacement is identified and governed when it remains spatially contained and distant from securitized borders. Internal displacement in Mongolia does not announce itself through sudden catastrophe, yet it raises fundamental questions about whose mobility is seen as consequential and which forms of life are allowed to fade from view without a political reckoning. Attending to such cases requires conceptual tools that can register displacement as a process unfolding across time and social value, rather than a category activated only by crossing a threshold or a border. By highlighting these dynamics, this article argues for a more cautious and politically attentive approach to climate mobility—one that resists collapsing displacement into 'adaptation' or 'crisis'. It suggests that internal, climate-linked movement

deserves closer scrutiny as a site where the consequences of environmental change, governance failure, and social inequality converge and are most clearly revealed.

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Notes

1. Constrained agency denotes the capacity of individuals to act within, and sometimes against, the structural limitations that influence mobility choices. As [de Haas \(2021: 21\)](#) argues, migration decisions are rarely entirely free or forced; rather, they are negotiated within patterned social, economic, and institutional conditions that both enable and restrict action.
2. The term 'human mobility' has gained traction as a generic category covering all forms of movement of persons, understood as encompassing a wider range of movements than 'migration' alone. Its adoption within climate change policy discussions reflects efforts to capture the diverse types of movement, including displacement, migration, and planned relocation, that may occur in the context of environmental change ([Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility 2015](#); [IOM 2019](#)). In this article, 'mobility' is used in this inclusive sense to avoid prematurely categorizing movement as either forced or voluntary.
3. 'Internal migration' refers to the movement of people within a state involving the establishment of a new temporary or permanent residence. The term encompasses both those who have been displaced from their habitual place of residence, such as internally displaced persons, and those who move voluntarily, as in rural-urban migration ([IOM 2019: 108](#)). In this article, the term is used descriptively to indicate the spatial dimension of relocation within national borders, without presupposing the degree of choice or compulsion involved.
4. The IOM defines displacement as the movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, particularly as a result of armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, or natural or human-made disasters ([IOM 2019: 55–56](#)). While this definition centres on identifiable triggers, this article extends the term analytically to encompass movement driven by the cumulative erosion of livelihoods and the progressive narrowing of viable alternatives, where no single event may be identifiable as the cause.
5. IOM Mongolia, for example, relies on both 'human mobility' and 'climate-induced displacement' in its climate change documentation, as seen in the terminology used in its 2024 project launch ([International Organization for Migration \[IOM\] 2024](#)) and its dedicated disaster-related migration resources ([IOM Mongolia n.d.](#)).

6. This article uses 'nomadic pastoralism' to refer to the livelihood system in which herders move livestock to seasonal pastures, a practice shaped by both ecological variability and social organization (IPCC 2014). 'Nomadism' refers specifically to the pattern of spatial mobility—movement without a fixed place of usual residence, typically following established seasonal routes (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 1998). 'Herders' is used throughout as the primary term for the individuals and households who practise this livelihood, reflecting both local usage and participants' own self-identification. While these terms are not strictly interchangeable, they are closely related in the Mongolian context, where pastoralism has historically been organized through nomadic mobility.

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