

**Learning project:
Engaging with informal local
governance institutions (ILGI)**



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Case study 3 : Insights on homeland associations in Mongolia

Ulaanbaatar/Bern, March-May 2015



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SDC/IDS/Helvetas/Swisspeace case studies

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Summary

This work explores the role of homeland associations in governance processes in Mongolia. Homeland associations (in Mongolian: *nutgiin zövlöl*) are formed in the context of migration, wherein people 'originally' from a certain rural locality who have migrated to an urban centre form an association. The aim of the association is to provide assistance of various kinds back to their locality of origin. Unlike political parties, homeland associations are not mass organisations – their membership is constituted only of political, cultural, sporting and business elites. This case study was multi-sited – we selected Uvs *aimag* (province) homeland association and in March 2015 analysed all the different layers of this institution, from the village level to the capital city.

Key findings

Homeland associations play a role in governance processes, though the intensity and influence depends on the particular association, the issue at hand, and political dynamics both internal and external to the association and the locality it represents. Indeed, it was suggested that the interests of the 'homeland' can even bridge political party differences.

Homeland associations and their members play a **number of important roles in governance processes**, ranging from connecting different networks and transmitting information to directly investing in local public services and infrastructure.

Access to resources and influence are both reciprocal. For example, politicians (association members) in the capital city claim a homeland identity to increase their credibility and legitimacy. But rural people can also use this resource to make claims of association members (i.e. accessing employment opportunities).

There is a **strong informal accountability** within the association and a **weak formal accountability**. There is a strong sense of duty and obligation on the part of members, but institutionally no check and balance mechanism. As the association is based on a social network, reciprocal relationships and volunteer based activities are dominant. There is limited transparency on financial matters.

Homeland associations may appear as **models of civil engagement** and collective action to solve common issues. Associations organise themselves, their own funding and have a specific and clear objective. Trust, reliability and reputation are key capitals that the associations possess. Compared to many classical NGOs, homeland associations seem to be relatively constituency oriented.

¹ The learning project is implemented for SDC's DDLGN through a partnership between HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, swisspeace and the Institute of Development Studies. This report was authored by Sarah Byrne (HELVETAS), with contributions from Jens Engeli (HELVETAS), Bumochir Dulam, Byamba Ichinkhorloo and Tuya Shagdar (Anthropology and Archaeology Department, National University of Mongolia).

However, homeland associations lack transparency and promote a **clientelistic or paternalistic kind of development**. Development is not implemented as the equal right of all citizens, but as something that the powerful dispense to their clients. This can lead to inequality. For example, powerful homeland associations with strong links and support from high level politicians may be more successful in solving budgetary issues for their constituencies.

There is significant social and spatial mobility in Mongolia and intense rural-urban interactions. Thus while locality (homeland) is a salient form of collective identity, **multi-local networks are important and influential** for access to and distribution of resources.

Implications and recommendations

The case study findings suggest that the **plurality of actors should be at the heart of reflections around local governance**, given that governance is also produced at the informal margins of the state. Our findings suggest that it is important to undertake a thorough analysis of the following:

- **How local governance ‘actually’ takes place**, including both formal and informal, hidden and visible aspects and the different kinds of actors who engage. These actors may be ‘unusual’ from the point of view of development agencies, but they are likely very ‘usual’ for citizens and possibly local implementing organisations who are experienced in navigating the system.
- How to engage with such actors in a way that acknowledges their **different roles and possibly different positions in different policy arenas**.

To inform reflections, **local context analyses are essential**. However, this focus on specific local contexts does not mean that analysis should only look at them in an isolated way. On the contrary, in the case of homeland associations it is of utmost importance to understand **relationships at different levels**, their specific roles and power dimensions. ‘Local’ or indeed ‘rural’ are not separate slices of governance, but intensely linked in terms of both governance and livelihoods.

While it is important to acknowledge that associations are important stakeholders in many contexts, our findings suggest that SDC should **not directly engage** homeland associations as partners in a programme basis or in a programme management scheme.

We recommend proceeding with **caution**, considering potential risk both to SDC/implementing partners due to dual roles and the porous border between homeland association members and various political and business elites.

However, based on a thorough understanding of the context, issue based entry points may be identified for which **associating homeland associations** may be useful. They may be able to play an important role in policy influence or advocacy initiatives, for example.

Bringing associations on board in a more general information and sharing process could also be a strategy to **increase the potential for them to be a driver** of a particular initiative, and/or **reduce the chances they will be a restrainer**.

Associating with associations at **specific times for specific purposes where interests are shared** (such as in terms of timely LDF disbursement) thus seems an appropriate way to engage.

This calls for **dynamic and differentiated analysis** and could be one way to take into account the fact that a plurality of different actors is involved in producing local governance.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Opening up the scope of actors SDC engages with in governance programmes

This case study research was conducted within the frame of a learning project mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance Network (DDLGN). The objective of the learning project was to analyse the role of a range of actors that play an important role in local governance and public service delivery but that do not constitute the 'usual' kinds of partners for an organisation like SDC. The question of exploring how to work more politically and with a wider range of actors, was raised through the DDLGN in several contexts and the important role of 'unusual' intermediaries was suggested in earlier learning projects. Based on this significant demand from its members, DDLGN initiated a learning project in 2014.

On the basis of a questionnaire and a series of follow-up interviews, the learning project mapped SDC's existing experience with a series of governance actors that Swiss Cooperation Offices (SCOs) think SDC should considering working with more.² The most frequently cited actors that emerged from this research were informal local governance institutions.

Informal local governance institutions (ILGIs) are very different from context to context. Even within a particular context, different kinds of ILGIs can operate in different ways. Furthermore, one may encounter different degrees of informality from a hidden status to formal recognition by the state. Nevertheless, there are a few key characteristics:³

Characteristics of ILGIs:

- a) They are state-like to the extent that they enjoy general local territorial authority and deliver services.
- b) They stand in ambiguous, variable and contested relationships to the formal state apparatus.
- c) Intermediation between 'their' populations and the external world constitutes a significant part of their activities.

Our survey of the literature on ILGIs started with Helmke and Levitsky's (2006: 5) influential definition of informal institutions as 'socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. By contrast, formal institutions are rules and procedures that are created, communicated and enforced through channels that are widely accepted as official.'

For the purposes of the learning project, we take this definition of socially shared rules as a starting point and expand it to also include actors and organisations that are rooted in, and base their authority on, these informal socially shared rules. From a policy and practical perspective, such an expanded definition allows us to identify tangible actors with which we may interact, rather than limiting our analysis to more abstract interactions and processes. As noted in the Literature Review (2015: 16),³ we deal with both these forms because the attempt

² Please refer to DDLGN (2014) *Learning Project on engaging with "thus far less targeted" actors in local democracy: Actor Mapping: Synthesis & Analysis*.

³ This list of characteristics and definition is drawn from the learning project's Literature Review on ILGIs (2015: 16-17).

to distinguish *institutions* from *organisations* at all times is an obstacle to useful understanding of the phenomenon that we hope to capture here.’

1.2 Practical research and analytical guidance for informal local governance institutions

In a second step, a series of case studies were conducted in order to deepen the reflection in a more contextualised way. The case studies aimed to a) analyse both the constitution of traditional and informal authority, its legitimation, and how this kind of authority is influenced by and influences on-going processes of democratisation and b) identify interventions SDC could support in order to strengthen the accountability and inclusivity of these institutions and associated governance spaces and processes. Overall, the case studies seek to provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the role of informal local governance institutions with regard to local democratic governance and in particular with regard to citizen participation, social accountability and social inclusion?
- What is the role of these actors in influencing public policies that enables – or hampers – local democracy?

Four countries were selected for case study research, based on a) their interest in knowing more about the way traditional or informal authority influences governance and b) geographical distribution. In all four cases, notions of ‘tradition’ constitute important political capital, though this is mobilised in different ways. The four case studies are:

- Macedonia. December 2014. Focus on religious authorities.
- Tanzania. February 2015. Focus on customary authorities.
- Mongolia. March 2015. Focus on migrant/homeland associations.
- Mali. October 2015. Focus on traditional authorities.

On the basis of this practical research, the learning project developed an analytical framework on informal local governance institutions in order to guide operationally-oriented analysis. A literature review on informal local governance institutions provides complementary conceptual framing.⁴

1.3 A case study on informal local governance institutions in Mongolia

The present report summarises the findings from the ILGI case study in Mongolia – conducted jointly by a team from HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation and the Anthropology and Archaeology Department of the National University of Mongolia. In Mongolia, the chosen focus is homeland associations, organisations that influence and mediate democratic governance processes though in an informal and often hidden way.

Homeland associations (in Mongolian: *nutgiin zövlöl*) are formed in the context of migration, wherein people ‘originally’ from a certain locality but having migrated to Ulaanbaatar or another urban centre form an association to provide assistance of various kinds back to their locality of origin.⁵

⁴ The analytical framework, literature review and other case studies can be accessed at www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN
⁵ Sometimes translated in English as local council. However that translation misses the important aspect of homeland (as opposed to local) implied with *nutag*.

The associations evolved from more longstanding locality-based social networks and obligations of mutual assistance. The information in this report is based on exploratory and empirical research conducted by the learning project team, as well as secondary literature.

This research starts from the assumption that a plurality of different actors is involved in producing governance. Our findings suggest that if international development organisations would like to better understand and influence governance, it is important to take into account the whole range of actors, including those that may be considered ‘unusual’ from the point of view of development partners. In general, and particularly in the case of homeland associations, the roles of informal and formal actors may overlap – e.g. same actor with two faces. It is not always easy to disentangle roles or relationships. Interactions between state and informal actors are an everyday part of democratic governance processes in many contexts. The question therefore is to analyse the specific roles of such actors in a given context and to assess whether they are drivers or restrainers of change in particular public policy areas or more generally in terms of democratic governance.

2 Setting the stage

2.1 Socio-economic and political context

Mongolia’s contemporary history is replete with social, economic and political transformations both gradual and rapid. The economy has seen massive upheaval and collapse in the initial years of the adoption of free market policies, a resource-led economic boom in the early 2000s and today’s more uncertain perspectives. Politically speaking, Mongolia’s transition to democracy was peaceful and the two main parties (Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, now the Mongolian People’s Party, and the Democratic Party) have alternated in government since the parliamentary elections in 1992.

Mongolia is a unitary state with a central government and a three-tier system of subnational government including 21 *aimags* (provinces) that are further divided into *sums* and *baghs*. In the capital city (with powers akin to an *aimag*), the subnational units are called district and *khoroos*. For reference, these tiers are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Subnational tiers of governance

Subnational units in rural areas	Subnational units in the capital city
<i>Aimag</i> (province) (21)	Municipality of Ulaanbaatar (1)
<i>Sum</i>	District
<i>Bagh</i>	<i>Khoroos</i>

While Mongolia has started to transfer greater resources to local levels of government, particularly through the discretionary Local Development Fund (LDF), decision-making remains relatively centralised in the capital city. For example, as a recent analysis of local governance in Mongolia points out: ‘The role of local *hurals* [elected councils] is to gather local views, but decisions can be heavily influenced by the centrally appointed executive who ultimately controls fiscal resources. Furthermore, the central government controls the appointment of heads of agencies at the local level. In some sense the elected bodies end up

with relatively little power in this scheme. All this creates an undesirable gap between power and responsibility.⁶ This centralisation of decision-making power is relevant for homeland associations because it shows that seemingly very local decisions can be influenced at national level. In other words, sometimes these decisions are taken by people representing the locality but residing in Ulaanbaatar and influential at the national level. Their decisions might not fully represent people actually residing in the *sum*.

Another contextual factor that is related to the development and extension of homeland associations is (internal) migration and links to a particular locality. Extensive rural to urban migration has been a factor in Mongolia since the 1950s and has accelerated in the past decade. Today almost half of the Mongolian population lives in Ulaanbaatar. However, this number includes those who travel frequently and possess second homes. In a context of significant social and spatial mobility, this has created intense rural-urban interactions and strong multi-local networks that shape major social institutions. This context of high mobility co-exists in a somewhat surprising way with a strong emphasis on locality as the most salient form of collective identity across generations. Thus, as David Sneath writes, ‘the importance of “roots” in local homelands is a central theme in Mongolian public life’.⁷ This is the case despite, or perhaps because of, the high degree of mobility and migration.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been working in Mongolia since 2002. In 2004, SDC decided to start a medium term cooperation program, opening a cooperation office with the intention of supporting the country in tackling structural challenges of sustainable rangeland management. The strategic goal of the latest Swiss Cooperation Strategy 2013-2016 is to contribute to equitable and sustainable social and economic development in Mongolia. In order to achieve this, the Agriculture and Food Security Domain aims to increase incomes and create better livelihoods for vulnerable rural populations; the Vocational Education and Training Domain seeks to improve the employability of rural men and women; and the State Reform, Local Governance and Civic Participation Domain fosters effective, efficient and fair local governments, satisfied citizens, and a genuinely representative and effective civil society. The strategy is underpinned by mainstreaming gender equality in all SDC interventions.

2.2 Informalities

In many parts of the world democratic governance functions – service delivery, dispute resolution, representation and electoral politics – are influenced or mediated by informal institutions that operate wholly or partly outside the formal structures of the state. In some places, they may even substitute the state by providing services the state does not provide or provides ineffectively.⁸ Informalities also imply that citizens may need connections to access (certain) public services as well as employment in the public sector.⁹ Informality may be closely related with clientelism (personal aspects) and corruption (material aspects), but also with longstanding understandings of leadership, solidarity and moral obligations for mutual assistance within social networks.¹⁰

In post-socialist countries, informality is sometimes cited as a coping mechanism developed to deal with a scarcity of resources under communism, though closer inspection tends to show

⁶ Tsegmed (2014: 8-9).

⁷ Sneath (2010: 253).

⁸ Mohmand (2012).

⁹ Koutkova (2013).

¹⁰ For more on the corruption/obligation distinction as understood in Mongolia, see Zimmerman (2012) or Sneath (2006).

such practices also pre-dating the socialist period. Particularly in post-socialist contexts, informality can also be understood as a phenomenon bridging the gap between a mismatch in the speed of institutional political reforms and the speed of socio-economic transformation. The resultant lack of trust in leaders or public institutions is a further factor. In Mongolia, inadequate state responses to a number of crises (both the collapse in food distribution in the early 90s and later weather-related disasters known as *zuds*) were frequently cited by our interviewees as key moments of homeland association-based interventions.

Informal networks and institutions can play both positive and negative roles concerning trust in democratic institutions. While some informal institutions can coexist with formal institutions and contribute to democratic consolidation, practices such as corruption can also subvert or undercut processes of democratic consolidation.¹¹ Informal structures are also attractive to political elites because they are more flexible than formal ones, since informal structures can change and adapt more rapidly.¹² Informal authorities therefore have a range of functions relevant for governance processes, functions that may enable certain social inclusion but that also marginalise some citizens and communities.

In Mongolia, research indicates that informal networks are considered very important relative to formal associations. On the basis of an analysis of the Asian Barometer surveys from 2003, 2006 and 2009, Dalaibuyan Byambajav suggests that Mongolians have a relatively low rate of formal associational membership.¹³ The category of formal associations in this study includes political parties, labour unions, and professional associations, amongst others. Of course, such types of formal associations are minimally, if at all, present in rural areas. However, in contrast to the relatively weak linkages to formal associations, Byambajav reports that Mongolians have relatively more social ties to different informal networks. These include such networks as family, friends, co-workers and alumni from the same high school or university. Amongst these networks, the survey respondents rated local homeland very highly. The following table shows the top five results as reported by Byambajav. Notable aspects include the significant urban-rural differences some of the categories, including homeland associations.

Table 2: The importance of different social networks in Mongolia¹⁴

Type of network	% of Yes		
	Total	Ulaanbaatar	Provinces
Family	96.5	95.0	97.4
Relatives	68.8	58.7	74.8
Local homeland	71.8	57.7	80.2
Workplace	39.5	44.3	36.6
School/university ties	27.8	25.7	29.0

2.3 Diaspora/migrant organisations and contributions to development

As remittances continue to massively outstrip funds transferred through official development assistance in many countries, the potential contribution of migrant or diaspora organisations is a topic of great interest to policy-makers and international development agencies. A number of studies have been undertaken by development agencies (including SDC) to identify ways in which this contribution can be facilitated. Origin countries’ governments are themselves increasingly adopting policies to attract the resources of their migrants to encourage

¹¹ Marcic (2013).
¹² Gallina (2011).
¹³ Byambajev (2012).
¹⁴ Byambajav (2012: 44).

development. These policies, sometimes referred to as 'diaspora engagement policies', range from strengthening the migrants' sense of national identity and their linkages to the origin country to adapting the business environment to facilitate and secure investments.¹⁵

Research on migration organisation indicates that a wide range of associations are formed by migrants. Migrant/diaspora groups are also increasingly taking advantage of the possibilities provided by internet and social media for strengthening connections amongst themselves and back to their country of 'origin'.¹⁶ Specific locality or 'hometown' based associations are organised in some contexts, for example by migrants coming from different parts of Ghana and India.¹⁷

The examples cited above all refer to international migrations. Within the development sector, homeland/town type organisations within a single country and stemming from mobility within the country seem not to be on the radar. Whether they do not exist, or whether they just have not yet been identified as potential development partners is an open question.¹⁸ Our analysis of Mongolia's homeland associations thus seems to be a somewhat original contribution. While it is important to note that patterns, practices and perceptions of spatial mobility within Mongolian society are relatively unique, our findings may still be of relevance to other contexts. This may be the case in contexts with a high degree of circular migration, for example.

3 Methodology

This case study is based on interactions with some 40 persons, in the form of semi-structured interviews and informal exchanges.¹⁹ Over eight days in March 2015, a five-person research team spoke with a wide variety of association members from different sectors (public administration, business, culture, politics, students) as well as people living in the locality the association claims to represent. Three members of the team were anthropologists affiliated to the National University of Mongolia and two were development professionals working for the Swiss INGO Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation. The research was inductive and exploratory in nature, following a series of guiding questions that had been agreed with the SCO Mongolia/GDP team in advance.

In contrast to the locality-based focus of the case studies we conducted in Macedonia and Tanzania (where we did our research in specific municipalities or wards), in Mongolia our research was multi-sited. We chose one particular homeland association and conducted our interviews at all the different layers of this institution, from *sum* level to Ulaanbaatar. Of course, being a homeland association, this institution is rooted in a particular locality. In this case, we chose the homeland association of Uvs *aimag*. We selected this homeland association on the basis of key informant interviews conducted during the planning phase of our research. Given the very short amount of time that we had available for our research and the somewhat hidden nature of the operations of these associations, we selected Uvs homeland association as one of the relatively better institutionalised associations.

¹⁵ GTZ (2010).

¹⁶ See for example, <http://www.kosovodiaspora.org/> or twitter handles such as #somalidiaspora

¹⁷ GTZ (2010) and Crook and Hosu-Porblev (2008).

¹⁸ There are exceptions: for example, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation works with a homeland association type organisation in the context of a 'Migration and Development' project in Benin.

¹⁹ The list of interviewees will not be published. We have chosen to anonymize our data due to the sensitive nature of some of the information shared. For this reason, we also do not list the different *sums* we visited in Uvs *aimag*.

Our findings thus build on this particular empirical setting. The case study shows that one cannot make generalisations about how informal authorities operate across localities even within a small country. By focusing in on one particular association, our strategy was to try to understand the role of homeland associations in a contextualised and situated way. Having triangulated our findings both with key informants and secondary literature,²⁰ we think our findings are relevant inputs for a more general reflection. That being said, Uvs *aimag* homeland association is definitely one of the more active and influential homeland associations and one cannot assume that all associations are as powerful and organised. Should an opportunity become available, a follow-up study comparing one or two additional associations would be useful.²¹

It is also important to note that our findings on the activities and influence of the Uvs homeland association are affected by our research methodology. Due to time constraints, our main method was semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Therefore, in this report we share what people told us about the association. When you start by asking people 'what does the association do', this already frames the response in a certain way. Some of our respondents may have over or under emphasised the activity and influence of the association, and the association may be perceived to be more powerful than it actually is. While perceptions are extremely important in politics, a more ethnographic research method that would allow the researcher to observe what the association actually does (not just what people say about it), would provide a more precise analysis. Unfortunately an invitation we had to observe a homeland association meeting (not of Uvs *aimag*) had to be declined due to illness.

Due to the limited duration of our 'fieldwork', access to interviewees was enabled through the existing networks of the Mongolian members of the research team. In addition, the Mongolian members of our team were able to attend a large festival organised by the Uvs *aimag* association for the New Year celebrations, which provided a useful opportunity for networking and establishing contacts. Through these initial contacts we were able to access a wide range of potential interviewees within a limited timeframe. In general, we used the 'snowball' method, at the end of each interview asking for recommendations of other people we should speak to. In rural areas of Uvs *aimag*, we had several spontaneous interactions with public officials and 'regular citizens'. This tri-part strategy enabled access to a very wide-range of stakeholders, from high-level politicians and corporate leaders to herders and other residents of rural areas. Interestingly, our very access to our research participants was another layer of informality. This means that organising interviews often boiled down to knowing someone who knows the potential interview partner, getting a phone number and calling based on the personal reference.²²

Another aspect that affects our findings and should be noted here is timing. At the time of our research, Uvs *aimag* homeland association was gearing up for a major event celebrating the 90th anniversary of the *aimag*. This means that the association was particularly active during the time that we spent in Mongolia and was very much focused on both fundraising and public relations.

²⁰ Particularly Sneath (2010) and Byambajav (2012).

²¹ As a follow-up to this report, the Swiss Cooperation Office in Mongolia conducted phone interviews with representatives of four other homeland associations. These interviews confirmed the analysis and recommendations presented in this report.

²² This even came down to the phone number itself. In Mongolia, certain mobile phone numbers are perceived as being prestigious. One of our Mongolian team members has such a phone number and this may have been a factor in some relatively high ranking interviewees taking our calls in the first place.

One final limitation that should be mentioned is that our research did not expand significantly into the topic of corruption. While we consider this to be a relevant issue when analysing governance (and homeland associations in particular), the duration of data collection in Mongolia and the sensitivity of the topic informed our decision to focus on other aspects of the associations.²³

Most interactions were conducted in Mongolian and were translated into English either during the exchange itself or afterwards. We took notes either during or after the interviews, and these were later jointly analysed looking for key themes and patterns.

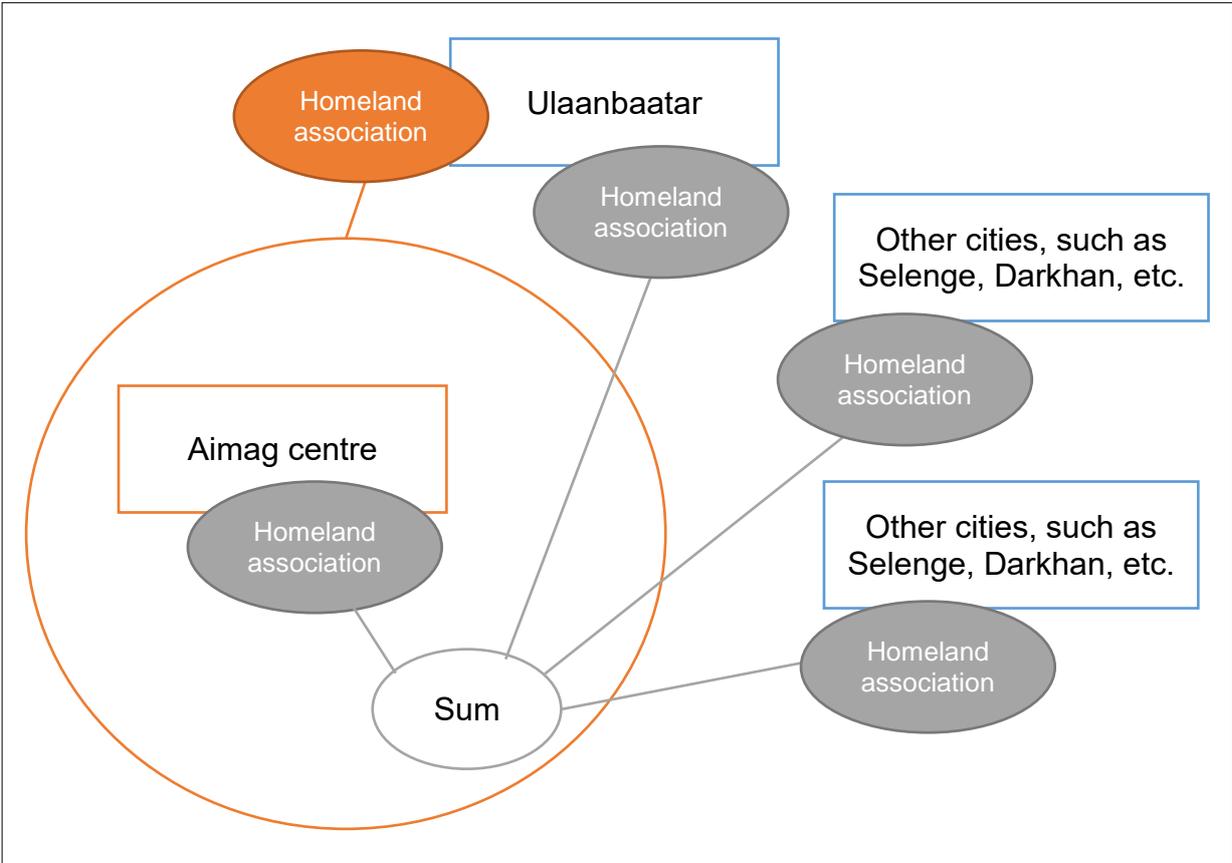
4 Homeland associations: a case study of Uvs aimag

4.1 Structure and organisation

In the Mongolian context, homeland associations started appearing on the scene in the early 1990s. They were founded to facilitate linkages between people living in rural areas and people from the same locality who are presently residing in urban areas. The associations thus function as central nodes in networks linking different people with a similar attachment to a particular locality or homeland.²⁴ Associations are formed wherever groups of people from a particular homeland have settled. This can be in Ulaanbaatar, but also in the smaller cities such as Darkhan, Erdenet or Selenge. Our research suggested that these networks also extend internationally to different countries that Mongolian people have migrated to (i.e. USA). The basic structure is illustrated and explained on the following page:

²³ On the relationship between corruption and obligation in Mongolia, please see Zimmerman (2012) and Sneath (2006).
²⁴ Sneath (2010).

Figure 1: Homeland associations at aimag and UB level



As illustrated in the diagram on above, the basic unit of the homeland association is the *sum*. There are *sum*-linked associations located in the *aimag* centre as well as other cities (as the case may be). There is also an umbrella *aimag* level association that represents the *aimag* as a whole, particularly in Ulaanbaatar (where, as we pointed out earlier, government institutions and power are concentrated). Today, each of the 21 *aimags* has its own homeland association in Ulaanbaatar. The diagram presented here represents just one slice of the dense network of these and similar associations in Mongolia.

Homeland associations operate in a sort of grey zone between formality and informality. Most homeland associations are registered as NGOs – but we encountered both registered and non-registered in our admittedly limited sample. The NGO registration certificate is needed to collect donations through an official bank account. Like with the religious authorities we analysed in Macedonia, even if the institution is itself quite formal, it can operate in informal ways (through hidden and invisible power, in the language of the power cube). In terms of organisation and institutionalisation, one further relevant point is that the Uvs *aimag* association has established an office space in central Ulaanbaatar. This office serves as a physical entry and coordination point for the association.

4.2 Membership

As David Sneath points out, homeland associations are mainly interested in exerting influence and thus, unlike political parties or civic movements, they focus on recruiting *leaders* from a range of different sectors (rather than a more broad-based membership). Membership typically includes politicians, businesspeople, artists, academics, cultural or sport celebrities and

religious authorities.²⁵ Homeland associations are an exclusive space in that it seems that one must be related by birth to a particular locality in order to claim membership in its association. Interestingly, it seems that this relationship can be on either the father or mother's side. The membership restriction serves to regulate access resources, (whether socio-political status, privilege, legitimacy or real material resources). Associations can be highly influential, particularly if prominent politicians or business people are committed to their endeavours. This is an interesting new development: associations were originally led mostly by political, cultural and academic elites, whereas recently leadership is perceived to shift more towards elites who have interconnected political and financial/business interests. Our analysis suggests that the associations are relatively hierarchical and that power distribution within this network is quite clustered around two to three important men.

The degree of success of associations' work and their influence thus depend on their network / members. Interviewees spoke of having been 'pulled in' to the association and of a feeling of obligation or duty towards the homeland. It is important to note that this 'pulling in' also extends to second generation migrants from a particular homeland – i.e. people who were born and have grown up in Ulaanbaatar (or another city) but whose parents originated from another part of the country. For members, access to the homeland association's networks provides benefits, but also comes at a cost. These costs include requests for donations for the association's activities and supporting people from the homeland. This can range from supporting families who travel to Ulaanbaatar for medical treatment to securing employment for recent graduates, etc.

Homeland associations typically have a youth wing – a student association – who are in charge of mobilising students, organising youth-oriented events, and doing much of the 'leg work' associated with the bigger association events, such as distributing invitations and acting as ushers. The youth wing is also used to identify and nurture future leaders in politics and businesses. In the case of Uvs *aimag*, there is also a women's association (though a few women are also members of the 'main' association). The women's association appears to focus on the preservation of traditional costumes and dances. However, our respondents also noted a trend in which women are starting to be approached for association membership as women increasingly access political power positions (due to electoral quotas and other measures).

4.3 Functions and roles

Our analysis confirms what was already suggested by the mapping exercise: different kinds of actors can play different roles and exercise different functions at different times. The homeland association itself, as well as its individual members, are an excellent case in point. The actual role played at any one particular time is dependent on a number of factors including personality, power relations, interest etc. Thus analysis methodology (and interaction strategies) for dealing with such actors must be able to capture their multi-faceted and dynamic nature.

Homeland associations were originally established to operate as fundraising, lobbying, networking, cultural preservation and local development organisations. This work is carried out in both hidden and visible ways. The most visible activities of homeland associations (and those that appear prominently on the official website, Facebook page and other social media/PR material) are the organisation of various competitions, festivals and sporting events

²⁵ Sneath (2010).

and recognising of leading figures from the realms of academia, business and culture. The emphasis on the cultural and intellectual domains highlight the importance the associations place on identity and reinforcing a kind of ‘micro-nationalism’.

Concerning festivals, associations organise annual events celebrating the New Year, during which elderly people are honoured. Interviewees were in full-fledged planning (and fundraising) for the 90th jubilee of the *aimag* in summer 2015. Several of the people we attempted to interview in Uvs *aimag*, including *sum* governors, were absent from their post due to fundraising duties – mainly in Ulaanbaatar – related to the associations’ planned 90th jubilee celebration. While these festivals have an important cultural element, they also serve as key moments in which political leaders and aspirants can network and profile themselves.

The range of functions associations carry out has expanded over the years, building on the original objectives. The list of homeland association functions mentioned by our interviewees include the following:

- Lobby for the interests of the homeland (i.e. influence state budget allocation)
- Filling in gaps, a kind of back-up to state budgets (through donations, both cash and in-kind, i.e. computers)
- Connecting and brokering – information, contacts
- Advising the local government on local development priority setting
- Local development work itself (i.e. refurbishment of sports facilities, schools, kindergartens, etc.)
- Horizontal and vertical networking
- Profiling, public relations
- Pulling in powerful people (also recruitment of the younger generation)
- Assistance to migrants settling in urban areas
- Preservation of cultural heritage & fostering pride

It is worth noting that, at least in the case of Uvs *aimag* homeland association, the size of the financial transactions involved is significant. We were told (but were not able to verify independently) that the budget for one event such as the 90th jubilee is 1 million US dollars and includes related infrastructure development.

In terms of the roles associations play, there are a number of different ways they could be characterised. For example, Piper and Von Lieres propose an analytical frame that suggests that actors mediating between citizens and the state may at different times work as ‘diplomat’, ‘educator’ and/or ‘captor’.²⁶ We noted wide range of roles, most of which fit into these broader categories of diplomat, educator and captor. These are summarised in the table below. Note that we refer only to association-related roles, and not other roles a particular person might play in relation to their professional status.

²⁶ Piper and von Lieres (2014).

Table 3: Roles of homeland associations

Role	Description	Examples
Information broker and connector	Main vertical communication channel; pass along messages and priorities; Information provider towards members and citizens of homelands	<p>Due to the hierarchical and well organised structure of the association and related groups (youth and women's sections) most members are extremely well connected.</p> <p>The homeland association passes information - especially investment or culture related information in an advisory function - to <i>sum</i> officials and within the homeland association to different members. In this way, the homeland association assures a strong connection between the different levels (local to national) and among the different governance actors.</p>
Representation	Representing and participating in different events and spaces on behalf of the homeland; supporting members in getting access	Most homeland association representatives / heads are employed in public or private organisations or elected in political key positions. Hence, when they attend meetings or events - for example donor meetings or project planning meetings - the homeland association members may (unofficially) represent their homeland association in addition to their official positions and try to advocate/negotiate advantages for their respective homelands.
Leadership	Elected leaders of a membership-based organisation strongly linked to political leadership	<p>There are election procedures in formal meetings of homeland associations, however these are largely influenced by the local election outcomes.</p> <p>Homeland associations are run by 'leading representatives' – a kind of board whose members are often under direct leadership by political elites.</p>
Guardian and promoter of identity	Maintaining and fostering local identity, culture and pride	<p>Homeland associations serve to promote national and local identity through funding '<i>Naadam</i>' or other national celebrations where Mongolians enjoy and cultivate their national culture and pride.</p> <p>Homeland associations are the main fundraisers/ donors for cultural events because the state budget law and Local Development Fund only allow a very limited contribution to such events.</p>
Unifier	Put homeland interests higher than political and personal interests; bridge differences and join forces	Party affiliation is strong and often perceived as a divider. However, regional interests and specifically linked projects (cultural, development, investment) can in some cases (such as <i>Naadam</i> and <i>Tsagaan sar</i> celebrations) unify these different interests and positions.
Mediator	Negotiate on different levels for interests of homeland (resources etc.); advises on priority setting; mediate between citizens and state	Most homeland association leaders hold important official positions or run big businesses. This fact is often used to get information, influence and negotiate decisions in favour of their homeland. Thus, key homeland association members play an important mediator role that bridges the political epicentre of UB with their homeland as well as between the homeland citizens and state (services).
Providing state-like services / investments	Provide services that the local government is usually providing	To a certain degree, homeland associations 'fill the gap' because state actors and service deliverers are simply unable to respond to all the needs due to very limited resources. In order to satisfy the homeland citizen's needs, homeland associations use their members and linkages to channel private funds and some projects to their homelands and thus respond directly to their 'constituency'. This 'substitute role' provides homeland association (leaders) with a great appreciation and recognition (sometimes personally 'hijacked') but may also prevent intergovernmental fiscal transfers to local level (fungibility of funds).

4.4 Power, politics and accountability

There are a number of relevant issues related to the accountability of homeland associations and their relationship to power and party politics. We briefly highlight three here.

4.4.1 Multi-dimensionality and reciprocity

First of all, it is important to note the multi-dimensionality and reciprocity of both resources and influence where homeland associations are concerned. With respect to resources: the resource itself goes both ways. On the one hand, politicians need to emphasise links to the homeland and a rural identity. This is an important political capital, particularly as most leading politicians live in Ulaanbaatar. So politicians claim a homeland identity as member of a homeland association to increase their credibility and legitimacy. But rural people can also use this resource to make claims of association members (i.e. to access employment opportunities). Both political leaders and average citizens in rural areas thus have something to gain from the emphasis on a homeland identity and they make reciprocal claims (for votes, and for access to public goods). The situation is similar when it comes to influence: *aimag/sum* people can use the association to influence budget distribution, for example in favour of their school or hospital. But association members also advise the local government on the distribution of the local development budget. Our informants suggested that homeland association leaders play a key advisory role in local budget processes.

4.4.2 Informal accountability

When it comes to accountability, we observed that there is a strong informal accountability within the association (and between it and the homeland) and a weak formal accountability. There is a strong sense of duty and obligation on the part of members, but institutionally no check and balance mechanism. As the association is based on a social network, reciprocal relationships and volunteer based activities are dominant. Especially fund raising activities are obligatory for homeland association leaders but are voluntary for other members. Fees/donations are also somewhat opportunistically driven. There is limited financial accountability or transparency from homeland associations.

If there is any task or project to be implemented in a *sum* or *aimag*, the homeland association collects donations from leading representatives (who may be influential politicians or government officials) who will further collect promises or in-kind or cash donations from other business people or members. Mainly one company covers one task, for example building a small park in the *sum* including transportation, building on site, etc. This activity is managed and controlled by that company not by the homeland association. The company later on reports the total cost of the project and delivers it to the *sum* government on behalf of the homeland association. Alternatively, the homeland association hands over the park to the *sum* government in a ceremony. In this way, a privately funded and built entity is handed over to a public body. This makes the accountability relationship very complex – who is accountable for what, in the end?

4.4.3 Beyond party politics?

The third issue we would like to address here is party politics. Our informants suggested that political differences seem to be overcome when working for the interests of Uvs. As one interviewee joked: the 'Uvs party' always wins (no matter which political party wins the election). However, party differences also are evident in a competition between the homeland association and another member-based local association, the Uvs Lake Wrestlers' Training

Association (*Uvs nuur gal*). While members belonging to the MPP party currently lead the homeland association (since MPP won a majority at Uvs *aimag* level in the last parliamentary elections), the DP party has strengthened its power through the Uvs Lake Wrestler's Association. Thus while there is a degree of consensus around defending Uvs' interests in Ulaanbaatar, at the local level there is still political competition and competition over profiling and association with prestigious figures and events.

4.5 Civic engagement, but at what cost?

From a certain perspective, homeland associations may appear as models of civil engagement and collective action to solve common issues. Rather than formal NGOs who may spend a lot of time in the capital city looking for donor funds, associations organise themselves, their own funding and have a specific and clear objective. Homeland associations are getting people involved and contributing themselves to local development initiatives (and sometimes also humanitarian issues). They work in the realm of social responsibility, solidarity and mutual assistance – both depending on and reinforcing these traditions. Trust, reliability and reputation are key capitals that the associations possess. Compared to many classical NGOs, homeland associations seem to be relatively constituency oriented. Furthermore, at least in the case of Uvs *aimag* association, they are a very effective kind of civil society organisation. For example, in getting a budget approved for repairing public infrastructure such as a sports facility, school or day care.

However, on the other hand, homeland associations lack transparency and promote a clientelistic or paternalistic kind of development. Development is not implemented as the equal right of all citizens, but as something that the powerful dispense to their clients. This can lead to inequality. For example, powerful homeland associations with strong links and support from high level politicians may be more successful in solving budgetary issues for their constituencies. The deep roots of homeland associations within the public administration undermine principles of a professional (non-discriminatory) public administration. So while homeland associations get people engaged in development initiatives (particularly those with political and financial resources), they serve to reinforce differentiated and unequal access to public resources and services.

4.6 Development partners' direct engagement with homeland associations

Though the scope of our study was limited, we found little evidence of development partners engaging directly with homeland associations (as such). One interesting example is the investor forums organised in the context of the 'rural agribusiness support program' (RASP) implemented by Mercy Corps (and funded by the US Department of Agriculture). In the context of RASP, Mercy Corps had supported the development of a series of *sum*-level local development plans. To implement the projects envisaged in these local development plans, RASP assisted the *sums* to organise Investor Fora. According to Mercy Corps' Annual Report for 2012, nine Investor Fora were organised by *Sum* Citizens Representative *Hurals*, Governors' Offices and UB-based homeland associations. In this approach, the association was considered a key organising and convening partner, alongside the elected representatives. The report suggests that on average, 57% of the funds pledged were finally received by the *sums* for the designated projects.²⁷

²⁷ See Mercy Corps (2013).

A second example, which may be considered an outcome of this case study, is that SDC is starting to assess the influence and power homeland associations may have. One example relates to the Energy Efficiency Project co-financed by SDC and GIZ. This project aims to promote the use of the Local Development Fund (LDF) for improving energy efficiency in public buildings (schools, kindergartens, health clinics) in order to prevent heat loss during winter (and reduce air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, electricity bills etc.). The project is being piloted in two Western *aimags*. Following cuts to the LDF announced in January 2015, the donors had to re-negotiate with local governments regarding their co-financing to the pilot construction sites. At the time of writing this report, SDC was considering the potential of mobilising the influence of the homeland associations to ensure that these pilot *aimags* and *sums* receive their LDF disbursements from the Ministry of Finance on time (as the construction season is short, from June – September), and that the local governments will stick to their commitments agreed with the project. We plan to follow up with the SCO on this first practical experience of strategic interaction with homeland associations to identify learnings that may be relevant for the DDLGN more generally.

5 Implications for DDLGN

5.1 The state is not the only producer of governance at local level

In transitions between different systems of governance, particularly in cases of temporary state absences (such as right after the collapse of the Soviet Union), institutions are often not consolidated. The institutional model of governance (i.e. one that focuses only on formal institutions and their relationships) therefore has its limits because it does not account for the great deal of informality and other informal but often legitimate actors performing specific governance roles. The case study findings suggest that the plurality of actors should be at the heart of reflections around local governance, given that governance is also produced at the informal margins of the state. Our findings suggest that it is important to undertake a thorough analysis of the following:

- The system and mechanisms through which local governance ‘actually’ takes place, both formal and informal, hidden and visible and the different kinds of actors who engage therein. Note that these actors may be ‘unusual’ from the point of view of development agencies, but they are likely very ‘usual’ for citizens and possibly local implementing organisations who are experienced in navigating the system
- How to engage with unusual actors in a differentiated and dynamic way that acknowledges their different roles and possibly different positions in different policy arenas.

5.2 Local context matters

To inform reflections, local context analyses are essential: when dealing with local democratic governance, the research suggests that in terms of intermediary actors every homeland association is different. Given that still little research has been done into the role of homeland associations in the Mongolian context, an analysis of realities in each *aimag* is a prerequisite for identifying the formal and informal intermediary drivers or restrainers on specific governance issues.

However, this focus on specific local contexts does not mean that analysis should only look at them in an isolated way. On the contrary, in the case of homeland associations it is of utmost importance to understand relationships at different levels, their specific roles and power dimensions. Most governance actors are parts of 'bigger' institutions, such as political parties or national associations, which operate at other scales. They both influence and are influenced by the actions and authority of these institutions. For example, a particular homeland association leader may be influential in a local context, but also in a national political party or major business. In other words, by zooming in on specific *aimags* or *sums*, we should not lose sight of their inter-connectedness to other levels and spaces of governance.

Insights about the dynamics of a particular homeland association should eventually be linked to the wider context, in particular to complementary studies and analysis on all levels and other homelands (for comparison). Overlaps with party political and business interests would be important here. Such analysis would allow interventions in the field of decentralisation and local governance (as well as other domains) to better understand the implications and linkages of homeland associations within the political system and towards local democracy. This finding implies:

- Using analytical tools, in particular power analysis and political economy analysis (at least a lean version) to reveal the relevant informal and formal power structures and actors in specific homeland associations/*aimags*, but not to claim that knowledge gained is necessarily generalisable
- Linking that analysis to the other levels of governance and power
- Relying on in-country research institutes and think tanks to retain knowledge while systematically building on tacit knowledge within implementing organisations.

DDLGN should continue its reflections about approaches and integration of existing methodologies – adapted and broken down to the local context – in order to account for political realities at the local level and make them accessible for implementing partners. This is one of the objectives of the second half of the learning project.

5.3 On engaging with homeland associations

Our analysis suggests that SDC should not try to directly engage homeland associations on a programme basis or in a programme management scheme. We recommend proceeding with caution, considering potential risk both to SDC/implementing partners due to dual roles and the porous border between homeland association members and various political and business elites.

However, based on a thorough understanding of the context, issue based entry points may be identified for which *associating* homeland associations may be useful. They may be able to play an important role in policy influence or advocacy initiatives, for example. Bringing associations on board in a more general information and sharing process could also be a strategy to increase the potential for them to be a driver of a particular initiative, and/or reduce the chances they will be a restrainer.

This implication is in line with recommendations from recent work by ODI, which suggests that instead of picking partners according to 'cookie cutter categories' that may not reveal much about real incentives at play, rather focus on what process is needed to create change at different levels. And, on the basis of the defined process and 'game changing characteristics'

required, select organisations or individuals to be involved.²⁸ Associating with associations at specific times for specific purposes where interests are shared (such as in terms of timely LDF disbursement as cited above) thus seems an appropriate way to engage.

We suggest that such associating engagement may be reasonable and feasible, if:

- Donors and implementers are more aware of the roles of homeland associations and their leaders in the specific *aimag* as well as wider contexts. A reflection on how this is best done is needed.
- Some communication channels have been established and relationships are fostered with key members of homeland associations (visit, inform, invite)
- The intermediary roles of a homeland association or its leaders correspond to the project reality (role as mobiliser, legitimiser, information broker etc...) and directly impact democratic governance or public service delivery
- Power structures are analysed and understood (including risk analysis of involving and being associated with homeland association and the implications of this for the legitimacy of both the association, SDC and implementing partners)

Therefore involvement should be well thought through and be compatible with both SDC rules and principles and those of the concerned homeland association. A very careful approach is suggested without a direct link to such associations (consider them as stakeholders but not direct partners). The studied Uvs homeland association has very strong links to the political and power elites on all levels that would need to be approached with caution. Additionally, SDC should be aware of its own positioning and thus outside perception by different partners and actors.

5.4 Shared local visions and development opportunities as entry points

We suggest that shared local visions and development opportunities may be entry points that connect and thus unify interests. These include, for example, local public infrastructure or environmental issues (mining), local development and general decentralisation efforts to serve and respond to citizens' needs. Different actors, from *sum* governors and citizen's representative *hural* members to homeland association members, can both complement and compete with each other when it comes to addressing these issues. For a donor like SDC, it is important to recognise the responsibility of formal governance actors and processes, and the same time taking into account the informal roles played by actors such as homeland associations. In practice, it is not a question of either/or but of finding pragmatic ways to work together, building on the strengths of both kinds of governance actors. In the case of Uvs homeland association, we have noted several instances of such cooperation and more will likely emerge as the scope of analysis is extended. Thus this case study should not be seen as the end product of the learning project, but rather as an evidence-based contribution to reflections within the DDLGN (and the Swiss Cooperation Office in Mongolia) in the future.

²⁸ Tembo and Chapman. 2014.

6 Annexes

- Acronyms
- Map
- Bibliography
- List of categories of respondents

6.1 Acronyms

DDLGN: SDC's Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance Network

DP: Democratic Party

(I)NGO: (International) Non-Governmental Organisation

LDF: Local Development Fund

MNT: Mongolian Tugrik

MPP: Mongolian People's Party

SDC: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

6.2 Map



Uvs is located in the far north-west of Mongolia, its capital is the city of Ulaangom.

6.3 Bibliography

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6.4 List of categories of respondents

Note: in many cases there is an overlap in category between homeland association members and their 'official' function

- Homeland association leaders and members
- Businessmen based in Ulaanbaatar and Ulaangom
- NGO representatives (national and local NGOs)
- Representatives of public administration at national, *aimag* and *sum* levels
- Political leaders at national, *aimag* and *sum* levels
- Academics
- Swiss embassy staff and implementing partners in Uvs
- Residents of Uvs *aimag* (non-association members)