Child Protection in Herder Households at Risk of Dzud in Mongolia: Poverty, Vulnerability and the Effects of Social Protection Policy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Dzud is expected to become more frequent and intense with climate change, and the repeated loss of large shares of herder households' livestock threatens children's nutrition, education, and safety. This study aimed to assess the situation of herder households during and after dzud, the challenges facing children and families, and the outcomes of prevention and coping policies and programs, and to identify ways to improve child protection.

Methodology: A document analysis with source triangulation was conducted on 79 documents published in 2007–2026. The social protection system was then assessed against nine criteria developed within the theoretical framework, using deductive content analysis.

Findings: National poverty in Mongolia has stabilized at about 28% since 2016, and no official herder-specific poverty assessment has been made since 2018. The 2023–2024 dzud reduced the national livestock population by 19% and affected 80,215 children through five channels: household income, nutrition, education, protection, and mental health. The social protection system met three of the nine criteria, and the universal Child Money program secured a basic income for herder children. However, no state cash assistance to households was identified during the dzud, disaster risk financing and legal guarantees were lacking, and benefits were not linked to child protection services. UNICEF's humanitarian assistance reached about one third of affected children, and some implementing regulations for the 2024–2026 insurance reforms have not been approved.

Conclusion: The social protection system secures a stable basic income for herder children but does not yet protect them from dzud-related risks, because it responds only after disasters and is not linked to child protection services. The study recommends linking social work services with a Child Money top-up paid as soon as a dzud early warning is issued, soum-level child protection assessments, and flexible arrangements for dormitory meal fees.

Keywords: herder households; dzud; child protection; shock-responsive social protection; social work

INTRODUCTION

The World Bank report "Assessing the adaptability of social protection and enhancing herder resilience against climate shocks in Mongolia" (World Bank, 2025a) emphasizes that herders make up more than 20% of Mongolia's population and over half of its rural population, and that their livelihoods are directly exposed to dzud, a combination of summer drought and extreme winter cold, whose frequency and intensity are expected to increase (World Bank, 2025b). According to Fernández-Giménez et al. (2012), the 2009–2010 dzud killed about 20% of the national herd, or 8.5 million head of livestock. By April 2024, the 2023–2024 dzud had killed 7.2 million head of livestock (FAO, 2024), and the national livestock population fell from 71.1 million in 2022

to 57.6 million at the end of 2024 (National Statistics Office of Mongolia [NSO], 2025). Herder households have thus been hit by two large-scale dzuds in the past 15 years and lost their main source of livelihood. Because the livelihoods of herders, who make up over half of the rural population, depend directly on natural and weather conditions, dzud remains a constant threat to their livelihood security.

Dzud losses are not limited to herders' livestock; they also have long-term negative effects on child development. Groppo and Kraehnert (2016) found that three to four years after the 2009–2010 dzud, the height-for-age of exposed children still lagged behind that of their peers, and that the effect was strongest among children exposed in utero. Their subsequent study showed that exposure to the dzud significantly reduced the probability of completing basic education ten to eleven years later, with the most severe effects among children exposed at preschool age (Groppo & Kraehnert, 2017). UNICEF's "Humanitarian situation report No. 3 (dzud)" of 22 March 2024 reported that during the 2023–2024 dzud, herder households that had lost many animals and whose incomes had fallen sharply had been unable to provide cash for their children's dormitory meals for several months, and that school dormitories provided only 35% of the recommended dietary intake for children (UNICEF, 2024a). These facts show that natural and weather-related disasters undermine rural children's physical development and right to education and increase child protection risks.

Mongolia launched the Child Money program in 2005 as a scheme targeted at poor households (International Labour Organization [ILO], n.d.). After several policy changes, including a temporary restriction to about 91% of children in the first half of 2023, universal coverage of all children aged 0–17 was restored in July 2023 (UNICEF Mongolia, 2023). The World Bank, together with UNICEF and the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Protection, assessed the adaptability of the social protection system. In the report on this assessment, the World Bank concluded that the system reacts after disasters occur and put forward recommendations for preparing the system before disasters (World Bank, 2025a, 2025b). However, empirical research on herder families has focused mainly on the economics of index-based livestock insurance and livestock asset recovery (Bertram-Huemmer & Kraehnert, 2018; Mogge et al., 2025), and studies that systematically assess the effects of social protection policy at the child and family level, particularly from a child protection perspective, are scarce. To address this research gap, this article addresses three questions:

1. What were the trends in herder household poverty and livelihood vulnerability in 2010–2024, and what losses did herder households suffer during and after dzud?

2. Which structural factors shape inequality among herder children, and what challenges did the 2023–2024 dzud create for children and families?

3. What outcomes have the social protection system and the 2024–2026 policy changes aimed at preventing and coping with dzud had for the protection of herder children and families?

The study makes three contributions. First, it assesses the protection of herder children and families at four levels at once: poverty, structural factors, disaster impacts, and policy responses. Second, it develops a framework for assessing the social protection system against nine criteria. Third, it evaluates policy effects at the child and family level and proposes social work practice responses to improve child protection.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on five interrelated concepts, which are briefly described below.

Social protection floors. Recommendation No. 202 of the International Labour Organization states that every country should guarantee, as rights defined by law, basic income security for children, access to essential health care, and basic income security for persons of working age and older persons (ILO, 2012). Drawing on this recommendation, criteria were defined for assessing the coverage of social protection, the adequacy of benefits, and legal guarantees.

Shock-responsive and adaptive social protection. According to Bowen et al. (2020), social protection should support household preparedness before a disaster, scale up coverage and benefit levels during a disaster, and

support recovery after a disaster. O'Brien et al. (2018) distinguished five ways of using existing social protection programs during a disaster: vertical expansion (increasing the benefit amount or duration), horizontal expansion (adding recipients), piggybacking, shadow alignment, and refocusing (Figure 3).

Linking cash transfers and services. Linking cash benefits with child protection, education, and health services increases their effects on children (Roelen et al., 2017). This approach was therefore used to define child- and family-level criteria for assessing the links between benefits and child protection services.

Asset-based poverty traps and multidimensional poverty. According to Carter and Barrett (2006), households whose assets fall below a certain threshold cannot recover on their own and enter a poverty trap. Using seventeen years of observational data on Boran pastoralists in Ethiopia, Lybbert et al. (2004) showed that household cattle holdings tend to converge to two stable levels, about one head and several dozen head, with an unstable threshold between them. In other words, households whose herds fall below this threshold keep losing animals and remain in long-term poverty. The multidimensional poverty method developed by Alkire and Foster (2011) measures whether households are simultaneously deprived in several dimensions of education, health, and living standards. The author argues that, using this approach, herder household livelihoods should be assessed together with child protection risks, such as the risk of gender-based violence.

Ecological systems and social work macro practice. In his ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasized that child well-being is shaped by interactions among systems at the level of the family, the khot ail (a camp of several herder households that herd together), the school, the soum (rural district), and national policy. Netting et al. (2017) defined social work macro practice as strengthening coordination among these systems, influencing policy, and monitoring implementation.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study combined qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) with secondary analysis of official statistics. The deductive content analysis method of Elo and Kyngäs (2008) was used: coding categories were defined in advance from the theoretical framework, and document content was assigned to these categories. The predefined categories comprised the nine assessment criteria for the social protection system and six categories of child- and family-level risk.

Sources

The analysis covered 79 documents published in 2007–2026 (including five undated documents). These included laws and government decisions (9); studies by the NSO or conducted jointly with it (6); reports and assessments by international and non-governmental organizations (34); peer-reviewed articles (13); and news reports used to verify quantitative information (17). The documents were collected through online searches in October–November 2026. The list of documents is available from the corresponding author on request.

Criteria and assessment

The nine criteria developed from the theoretical framework were: (1) basic income for children; (2) health protection for children; (3) social insurance for parents; (4) adequacy of benefits; (5) shock-responsive capacity; (6) actual measures taken during the 2023–2024 dzud; (7) index-based livestock insurance; (8) welfare targeting and financing; and (9) legal guarantees. Each criterion was rated at three levels: (a) *met*—guaranteed by law or policy, with evidence of implementation; (b) *partially met*—covering only some groups, or with implementing regulations not yet approved; and (c) *not met*—not reflected in policy, or with no evidence of implementation.

Source triangulation

Each indicator was cross-checked through data source triangulation (Denzin, 1978) against primary sources (NSO surveys, UNICEF reports, and laws), independent secondary sources (World Bank and ILO), and peer-

reviewed articles. Where sources disagreed, their reference periods, methodologies, and calculation bases were compared and the differences explained.

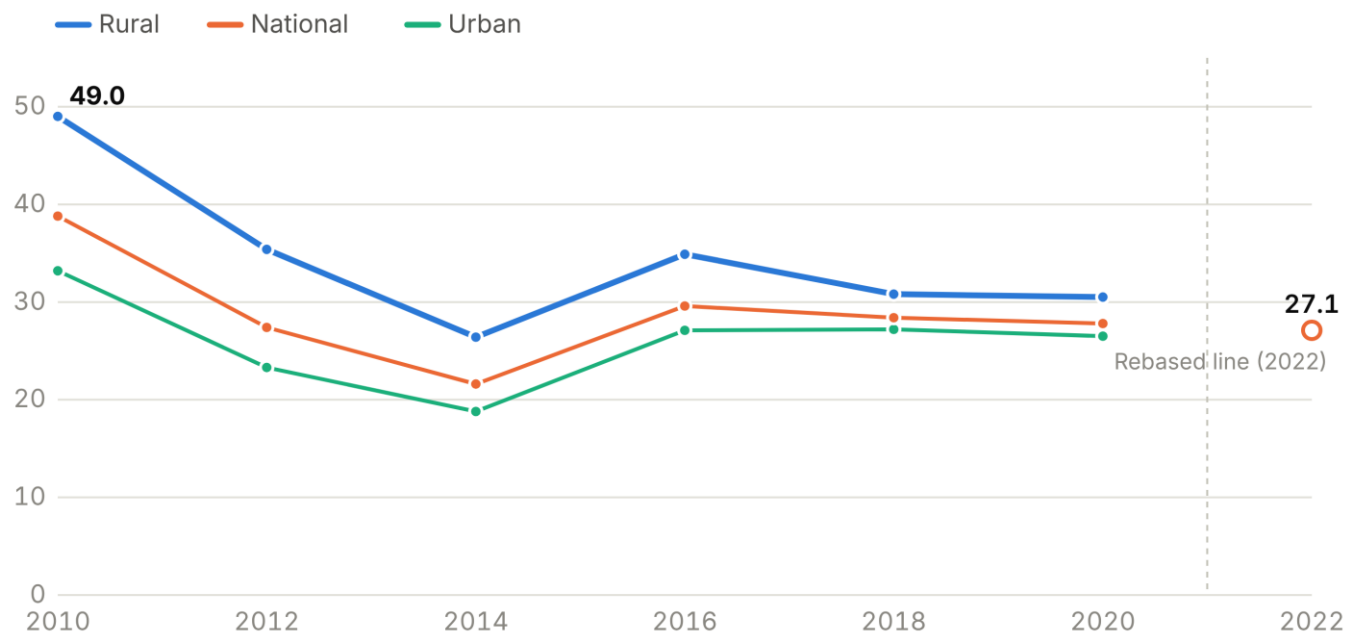
RESULTS

The results are presented in the following order: the situation of herder households and dzud losses, the challenges facing children and families, and the outcomes of prevention and coping policies and programs. Ways to improve are considered in the Discussion and in the Conclusion and Recommendations.

Situation of herder households: losses during and after the dzud

National poverty fell from 38.8% in 2010 to 21.6% in 2014, then rose to 29.6% in 2016, and stood at 28.4% in 2018 and 27.8% in 2020 (World Bank, 2015a, 2017, 2019, 2021; Figure 1). The World Bank described this period as a decade of progress followed by stagnation in poverty reduction (World Bank, 2022). The NSO revised its poverty measurement methodology in 2024; under the new methodology, 27.1% of the population was poor in 2022, but this figure cannot be directly compared with the earlier series (NSO, 2024). A multidimensional poverty index piloted with 2024 data found 26.0% of the population to be multidimensionally poor (NSO & UNDP, 2025).

Figure 1. National, urban, and rural poverty rates, 2010–2022 (% of population)

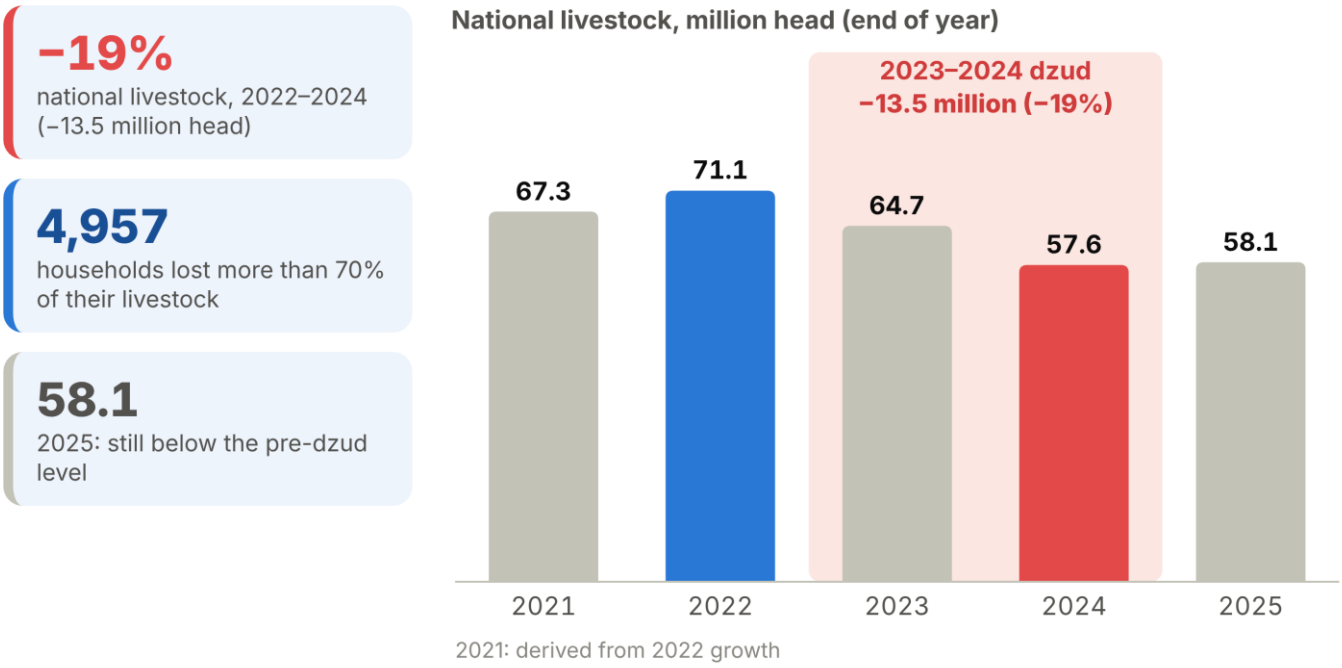


Source: NSO and World Bank data (World Bank, 2015a, 2017, 2019, 2021; NSO, 2024)

No official herder-specific poverty assessment has been conducted since 2018; the joint NSO–World Bank report "Mongolia poverty update 2018" found that one third of herders were poor in that year (NSO & World Bank, 2020). According to Zagdbazar (2026), the average herd of herder households grew 1.7-fold, from 159 to 268 head, between 2007 and 2022. However, the distribution of livestock remains unequal. The Asian Development Bank brief "Strengthening cooperative institutions to support sustainable livestock production in Mongolia" (ADB, 2022) noted that in 2020, herders with fewer than 200 head made up 48% of all herders but owned only 12% of all livestock. According to estimates by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), households with up to 200 head accounted for 54.3% of herder households in 2024 (UNDP Mongolia, 2026). Although the two indicators use different units (herders and herder households), they show that herders with small herds still make up more than half of all herders.

The 2023–2024 dzud hit this vulnerable group hardest. During the dzud, 4,957 herder households lost more than 70% of their livestock (UNICEF, 2024b). The national livestock population fell by 13.5 million head, or 19%, from 71.1 million in 2022 to 57.6 million at the end of 2024; by the end of 2025 it had risen slightly to 58.1 million but had not returned to its pre-dzud level (NSO, 2025; Xinhua, 2026; Figure 2). According to UNDP's "Socio-economic impact assessment of dzud 2023–2024," the monthly net income per member of dzud-affected herder households fell by 77,000 Mongolian tögrög (MNT), or about 12% (UNDP Mongolia, 2024). Livestock assets that had grown in 2007–2022 thus fell sharply in a single dzud, weakening herder households' incomes and, in turn, their capacity to meet children's basic needs.

Figure 2. National livestock population and losses from the 2023–2024 dzud, 2021–2025 (end of each year, million head)



Source: NSO livestock census results (NSO, 2025; Xinhua, 2026); UNICEF (2024b)

Challenges facing children and families

Save the Children's "Child rights situation analysis: Mongolia 2018" (Save the Children Mongolia, 2018) identified four factors that impede the full realization of children's rights: remoteness, regional inequality, extreme climate, and disasters. All four factors were corroborated by independent sources (Table 1).

Table 1. Structural factors shaping inequality among herder children

Factor	Corroborating evidence	Source
Remoteness	Herders' children, along with migrant, poor, and disabled children, have particularly limited access to preschool education	Government of Mongolia & UNICEF (2014)
Regional inequality	In 2018, rural poverty (30.8%) exceeded urban poverty (27.2%); child labor reached 45.4% in Khovd (national average 16.3%)	NSO & World Bank (2020); ILO & NSO (2024)
Extreme climate	Between 1940 and 2015, mean annual temperature rose by 2.24°C and precipitation fell by 7%	Ministry of Environment and Tourism (2018)

Disaster (dzud)	The 2009–2010 dzud had long-term negative effects on children's growth and education	Groppo & Kraehnert (2016, 2017)

The ILO's "Mongolia policy brief: Child labour" (ILO, 2016) noted that because children in herder households take part in herding from an early age, the boundary between age-appropriate help with family work and child labor is unclear. According to the results of the ILO and NSO's "Child labour survey results 2021–2022," 16.3% of children aged 5–17 were engaged in child labor, and 96.2% of them worked in production for their household's own use (ILO & NSO, 2024). In 2019, requirements to wear helmets and protective clothing and to bar children under 7 from riding in horse races came into force (Gunsmaa et al., 2025), and Government Resolution No. 57 of 2019, "On certain measures regarding horse racing," banned races from 1 November to 1 May. Yet animal-riding injuries among children did not decline after these requirements took effect: Gunsmaa et al. (2025) recorded 2,539 such injuries among children aged 3–14 in 2015–2018 and 3,770 in 2019–2022. Moreover, in January 2025 the Government revoked Resolution No. 57, lifting the cold-season ban and setting a minimum age of 12 for jockeys in spring races (Global Voices, 2025).

The "Gender analysis in pastoral livestock herding in Mongolia" by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC, 2015) noted that in herder households, men make most livestock production decisions, while women mainly perform unrecognized domestic work. This raises the issue of rural women's rights under Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979).

In their study "Mongolian pastoralist parents' experiences in managing their primary school children's living arrangements," Sukhbaatar et al. (2024) showed that when children start school, parents choose among a school dormitory, a relative's home, or a split household in which the mother moves with the children to the soum center. This indicates that children's educational needs change the way of life of herder families. In the author's view, living in two places increases family expenses and creates new pressures on family relationships, the division of labor, and the allocation of assets.

The 2023–2024 dzud was the most severe in 50 years, affecting more than 188,300 people, including 80,215 children (UNICEF, 2024a, 2024b). The dzud affected children through five channels, and the system response was weak in each of them (Table 2).

Table 2. Channels through which the dzud affected children and the system response

Channel	**Evidence**	**System response**
Household income	4,957 herder households lost more than 70% of their livestock; monthly income per household member fell by MNT 77,000 (UNICEF, 2024b; UNDP Mongolia, 2024)	Herders' loan repayments were deferred; no state cash assistance was identified
Nutrition	School dormitories provided only 35% of the recommended dietary intake, and 22,300 dormitory children needed nutrition, hygiene, and psychosocial support (UNICEF, 2024a)	The dormitory meal standard was raised by MNT 2,000 for all children; fees for dzud-affected households were not waived (Ikon.mn, 2024)
Education	The risk of interrupted schooling increased (UNDP Mongolia, 2024)	No specific measures to support learning after the dzud were identified
Protection	Gender-based violence risks were documented during the preceding 2022–2023 dzud (World Vision Mongolia, 2023); the risk of child neglect rose as parents prioritized other emergency concerns and children were left unsupervised while parents tended livestock (People in Need, 2024)	Soum child protection teams mostly act only on reported cases; risk assessments were conducted within projects

Mental health	As of June 2024, the dzud was still affecting the mental health, well-being, nutrition, and education needs of over 24,000 children (UNICEF, 2024b, 2024c)	Limited to humanitarian assistance

World Vision's "Gender-based violence rapid assessment during dzud 2023," conducted during the preceding 2022–2023 winter, covered 382 households in 14 soums of seven aimags (provinces), and 15.9% of herders reported having experienced some form of violence during that dzud (World Vision Mongolia, 2023). However, this is a sample-based figure from the previous dzud, and there is no time-series indicator measuring the national prevalence of violence. Accorting to UNICEF (2025), approximately two-thirds of children in Mongolia experience multidimensional deprivation, which more prevalent in rural and remote areas. These children more likely to suffer from malnutrition, lack of access to basic health service, and poor educational outcomes. Rural children are also at higher risk for maternal and child mortality. As the UNICEF annual report 2025 cited, as of 2024, 675 cases of violence registered including 643 women, and 463 children aged 0-17. However, the lack of sex-disaggregated data for children limits analysis of gender-specific risks and response needs. While legal frameworks for child protection improved, implementationi is uneven especially in rural areas, continue to suffer from a lack of trained social workers and child protection personnel (UNICEF, 2025, p.5).

Outcomes of prevention and coping policies and programs

The document analysis showed that the social protection system reaching herder children met three of the nine criteria, partially met three, and did not meet three (Table 3). The criteria that were met relate to measures common to all children and to the technical capacity of the system, whereas those not met relate to actual measures during disasters, financing, and legal guarantees.

Table 3. Assessment of the social protection system against the nine criteria

Criterion	**Key evidence**	**Rating**
1. Basic income for children	Child Money for all children aged 0–17, MNT 100,000 per child per month (UNICEF Mongolia, 2023)	Met
2. Health protection for children	The state pays children's health insurance contributions; health insurance coverage of herders was only 25.1% in 2020, although mandatory (ILO, 2023)	Met
3. Social insurance for parents	Voluntary insurance coverage was 16.4% in 2020 and about 18% in 2025; the procedure for retroactive contribution payment has not been approved (ILO, 2023; Ikon.mn, 2026a)	Partially met
4. Adequacy of benefits	The benefit for one child equals 23.9% of the monthly poverty line per adult equivalent (MNT 418,090; NSO, 2024)	Partially met
5. Shock-responsive capacity	In 2020, Child Money was raised from MNT 20,000 to MNT 100,000 and paid to 1.2 million children (UNICEF Mongolia, 2021)	Met
6. Actual measures during the 2023–2024 dzud	Loan deferrals and fodder distribution; no state cash assistance identified (Gogo.mn, 2024; IFRC, 2025)	Not met
7. Index-based livestock insurance	Coverage was 14.4% in 2024; the 2025 amendment lowered the first threshold to 5% (UNDP Mongolia, 2026; Ikon.mn, 2026b)	Partially met
8. Welfare targeting and financing	Only 56% of welfare spending reaches the poorest 40% (World Bank, 2015b); no national disaster risk financing strategy has yet been adopted (World Bank, 2025b)	Not met

9. Legal guarantees	Disaster-period support is not included in the Law on Social Welfare (World Bank, 2025b)	Not met

The coverage of the dzud response was limited. In 2024, UNICEF delivered humanitarian assistance to 27,840 children in 17 of the 21 aimags, about one third of the affected children (UNICEF, 2025). Because no state social protection measures targeting herder children were identified during the dzud, international organizations largely took on this role; nevertheless, as of June 2024 the dzud was still affecting the mental health, well-being, nutrition, and education needs of over 24,000 children (UNICEF, 2024c). This shows that international assistance cannot fully make up for gaps in the state system.

Policy effects can be summarized at three levels. First, the universal Child Money program reached herder children without targeting errors; despite its low adequacy, this is the most stable effect. Second, during the 2023–2024 dzud, government measures focused on livestock, and humanitarian organizations took on the role of providing cash to support household consumption and children's needs (Gogo.mn, 2024; IFRC, 2025). Third, the 2024–2026 policy changes (the Law on Herders, the 2024 contribution subsidy, and the 2025 insurance amendment) improved the legal environment, but because some implementing regulations have not been approved, their effects on coverage have not yet been measured (Ikon.mn, 2026a, 2026b). Table 4 summarizes the 2024–2026 policy changes and their effects.

Table 4. Policy changes in 2024–2026 and their effects

Policy change	**Content**	**Effect (as of 2026)**
Amendment to the Law on Index-Based Livestock Insurance (2025)	Lowered the first threshold from 6% to 5%; allowed a one-time advance compensation payment	Thresholds set for 2026–2028; effects on coverage not measured (Ikon.mn, 2026b)
Law on Herders (2024)	One-time retroactive payment of pension insurance contributions	The procedure for retroactive payment had not been approved as of March 2026 (Ikon.mn, 2026a)
Pension insurance contribution subsidy for voluntarily insured herders (from 2024)	The state budget pays 50% of the pension insurance contribution for up to five years (General Law on Social Insurance, 2023)	Herder coverage about 18% in 2025 (Ikon.mn, 2026a)
"New Cooperative" movement (Government Resolution No. 166, 2024)	Loans at 6% interest through cooperatives	No component targeting children and families; no outcome evaluation found
Revised Law on Child Protection (2024)	Child and family social workers to be employed in soums and khoroos (urban subdistricts)	No specific regulation on their dzud-period functions or links with benefits has been adopted

DISCUSSION

The results are discussed in four areas from the perspective of improving child protection.

A universal benefit is a robust foundation, but its adequacy is limited. The Child Money program fulfills the basic income security for children set out in ILO Recommendation No. 202 (ILO, 2012). However, for a four-member herder household with two children, the combined MNT 200,000 benefit is less than half of the monthly poverty line for a single adult equivalent (MNT 418,090), and the household's dzud-related income loss (4 × MNT 77,000 = MNT 308,000) is 1.5 times larger than the benefit (calculated from NSO, 2024, and UNDP Mongolia, 2024). Because the benefit does not increase during a dzud, it does not offset income losses. If

livestock assets fall below the threshold, households risk falling into a poverty trap (Carter & Barrett, 2006; Lybbert et al., 2004). Child-focused benefits therefore complement, but cannot replace, measures that protect family income and livestock assets.

The system can scale up but was not used during the dzud. Shock-responsive social protection theory describes five ways of using existing programs during a disaster (O'Brien et al., 2018). The Child Money top-up during COVID-19 (UNICEF Mongolia, 2021) was an example of vertical expansion and showed that a registry of all children and payment channels are in place. During the 2023–2024 dzud, however, none of the five options was fully implemented (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Five options for shock-responsive social protection and their application to the protection of herder children



Source: Developed by the author based on the typology of O'Brien et al. (2018)

Evidence on anticipatory cash transfers before a dzud is mixed. Gros et al. (2022) found that households that received anticipatory assistance in 2018 had lower mortality in some types of livestock, but no difference in their ability to meet basic needs. In their study "Anticipatory cash transfers in the context of weather disasters," Mogge et al. (2025) found in a randomized controlled trial, in which 421 randomly selected households received anticipatory cash transfers, no significant effect in the full sample, but the herd size and home consumption of livestock of households with smaller herds increased about seven months later. International experience shows that, among pastoralists in northern Kenya, regular cash transfers improved child nutrition, whereas index-based livestock insurance reduced distress sales of livestock at low prices (Jensen et al., 2017). These findings point to the need to target anticipatory assistance at households with small herds and to combine it with insurance. Assistance and support can also be aligned with the tradition of Mongolian herders sharing resources within the khot ail. Fernández-Giménez et al. (2015) emphasized that herder groups practicing community-based rangeland management have greater capacity to adapt to dzud. In contrast, Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2013) found that in pastoral areas of Ethiopia, local mutual-support networks redistributed social protection program transfers among households. This indicates that the planning of assistance should take herders' traditional mutual support into account.

Benefits are not linked to child protection services. The 2024 revision of the Law on Child Protection established the basis for employing a child and family social worker in every soum, but the documents analyzed contained no provision for using the Child Money registry to identify disaster-affected children and refer them to child protection services. Roelen et al. (2017) emphasized that links between benefits and services do not arise spontaneously without deliberately established registration, monitoring, and referral mechanisms. An example of such a mechanism is Brazil's Bolsa Família program, which uses a unified registry to identify households that

have not met program conditions, such as children's school attendance, and connects them with local social assistance services (Lindert et al., 2007).

Implications for social work practice. Although dzud is a macro-level event, it reaches children through its effects on micro- and meso-level settings such as the family, school dormitories, and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The soum child and family social worker is therefore a key actor connecting these levels and needs to combine dzud risk assessment, case management, referral, and policy advocacy (Netting et al., 2017). This work requires knowledge of herder livelihoods, dzud risk, legislation, and social protection programs; skills in multilevel assessment, case management, working in remote settings, and policy influence; and strengths-based, culturally sensitive attitudes that put the best interests of the child first (Council on Social Work Education, 2022; International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Workers, 2020). A matrix linking these competencies to job objectives is available from the corresponding author on request.

Limitations. The first limitation of this study is that it relies exclusively on secondary data sources and does not incorporate primary data regarding the lived experiences of herder household members, the social workers who work with them, or other relevant officials. Therefore, future study should employ a mixed methods approach-utilizing both primary and secondary data – to provide a clearer picture of the situation. Second, some secondary data used in this policy analysis were drawn from information about the research and do not encompass all the data reflected in the full report. For instance, for the World Bank assessment, the recommendations summarized in the press release were used, so the full set of recommendations in the report was not covered. Thirdly, the sources on herders' social insurance coverage differ in their calculation bases (16.4%, 18%, and 36%), so the official ILO figure was used (ILO, 2023; Ikon.mn, 2026a; Montsame, 2024). Third, texts of some documents in the reference were not reviewed fully due to lack of access. Finally, the current analysis paper informs only policy content and reported implementation but does not directly measure the actual experiences of herder families. Thus, there is a need to examine the lived experiences as descrived by the herders themselves and to broaden the scope of current policy analysis in the future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poverty reduction in Mongolia at the national level has stalled since 2016, yet official data on herder household poverty have not been updated, which hinders the reflection in policy decisions of the challenges that natural and weather conditions pose for herder children and families. The 2023–2024 dzud reduced the livestock population by 19% and affected the situation of 80,215 children through five channels. The social protection system has secured children's basic income and health protection, but it has not provided disaster-period cash assistance, financing, legal guarantees, or links with services, so the reach of policy effects at the child and family level remains limited.

Within the scope of these conclusions, the following five recommendations for improving child protection are made, organized by the stages before, during, and after a dzud:

1. *Before a dzud:* Add child protection questions to the dzud assessments of soum Livelihood Support Councils, and adopt a procedure for referring at-risk children to child protection teams.

2. *Before a dzud:* Adopt the implementing regulations for the herders' social insurance contribution subsidy and retroactive payments.

3. *During a dzud:* Include in the revised Law on Social Welfare a provision for paying a Child Money top-up, without waiting for a separate decision, to children in soums identified as high-risk by the dzud risk map.

4. *During and after a dzud:* Establish a mechanism for flexible handling of school dormitory meal fees for children from dzud-affected households: temporarily waive fees from January to May or defer them with later repayment, and set aside the necessary reserves in local budgets in advance.

5. *At all stages:* Budget the services of soum child and family social workers for remote herder households differentially according to the distance to each household.

Since the implementation for some of the policies covered in this study has not yet concluded, the research should be revisited in the future. In doing so, it is recommended to utilize both primary and secondary data to gain a more detailed understanding of the multifaced circumstances affecting children of herders families in Mongolia.

Future mixed-methods research using primary data on herder households is needed to measure children's multidimensional poverty and their nutrition, education, and protection outcomes before and after a dzud.

Declarations

Funding. This study received no specific funding.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval. The study relied on publicly available documents and involved no human participants; therefore, ethics committee approval was not required.

Consent. Not applicable.

Data availability. All documents analyzed are publicly available; the full list is available from the corresponding author on request.

Author contribution. There are two authors inlcluding the first and the corresponding authors. Following the CRediT contributor roles, the authors were responsible for: conceptualization (defining the research problem, the three research questions, and the child-protection focus); methodology (designing the document analysis and developing the nine assessment criteria from the theoretical framework); investigation and data curation (identifying, collecting, and selecting the 79 documents and compiling the quantitative indicators); formal analysis and validation (coding the documents, rating each criterion, and cross-checking every figure across independent sources); visualization (specifying the content of the figures and tables); writing – original draft (preparing drafts of the text, tables, and synthesis of results from the author's own materials, research questions, and written notes, and restructuring the manuscript); writing – review and editing (determining the structure, arguments, and terminology, and reviewing, correcting, and approving every section of the Mongolian and English versions through several rounds of written comments); and project administration (selecting the journal, verifying its requirements, and preparing the submission). The authors approved the final manuscript and is accountable for all aspects of the work.

Use of artificial intelligence. An AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic) was used during the preparation of this article under the author's direction and continuous review. It was used for: (a) searching for sources and verifying bibliographic metadata (authors, titles, years, and DOIs) against publisher, Crossref, and registry records; (b) translating the Mongolian manuscript into English and editing the language of both versions; (c) producing the three figures from data compiled from the cited public sources; (d) formatting the manuscript, in-text citations, and reference list according to the journal's author guidelines; and (e) technical checks of citation–reference consistency and of text overlap with the author's earlier drafts and with the abstracts of cited articles. The AI tool did not generate or alter data, did not determine the study's conclusions, and is not an author. The author reviewed and revised all AI-assisted output, verified every number, citation, and conclusion against the original sources, and takes full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the article.

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