



**ECOSOUM**

# **WHY SMALL LOCAL NGOs ARE A NECESSITY**

**THE EXAMPLE OF ECOSOUM**



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## **ABOUT US: BACKGROUND**

Ecosoum is the fruit of the initiative of a French–Mongolian couple living in Khishig–Undur.

### **NARANTUYA GURSED**

After spending her childhood in Khishig–Undur, Nara went to the capital to study International Relations. After this, she spent nearly three years in Jerusalem, from where she returned to Mongolia with a Master's degree in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. Having also worked for ten years as a tour guide, Nara discovered her country as much as she could and she has been dreaming of contributing to the solutions for the challenges she has always witnessed in rural Mongolia. Her encounter with Pierre then led her to France, where she completed her studies at IRIS Sup' with a Humanitarian Manager Master's degree. After five months of internship at Action Against Hunger's headquarter, she was finally ready to go back to Khishig–Undur in order to found Ecosoum.

### **PIERRE GUERBER**

Pierre started his professional career in an environmental engineering company. Three years later, he left his native France to embark on long journeys around the world. The ecological and socio-economic problems that he observed everywhere, including in Mongolia, led him to want to reorient his activities towards international development and solidarity. Upon his return to France, Pierre joined IRIS Sup's Master's degree in International Programs Management, he wrote his thesis on the Mongolian agro-pastoral system. He then worked in Paris at Doctors of the World's headquarters and participated in the writing of a book about food and agriculture policies for over a year before to finally return to Khishig–Undur with Nara to launch Ecosoum.

## **A WORLD IN CRISIS : WHAT CAN WE DO?**

In a global context of interdependent environmental, economic and social crises, it has become necessary to undertake a transition toward a new society founded on ecological and solidarity values.

Facing this realization, we asked ourselves: how can we take part in this transition movement and how to contribute, at our own level, to solve these world crises?

As many people, we first thought of joining large international NGOs that have been working on these issues for decades – and, as mentioned, we even went back to school for it. But very quickly we started seeing the limits of the “international development” approach.

# LIMITS TO BIG NGOs AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

During our studies and through our respective experiences in large international NGOs, we identified several issues that started to make us question the relevance of the global approach to “development” as carried out by international NGOs and institutions.

## ⇒ LACK OF LEGITIMACY

In our opinion, the first major limit to international development is the very legitimacy of large NGOs to operate in foreign countries. Sure, they usually carry out projects that are widely considered as “good causes” and most of them are truly convinced that their projects are essential to help their “beneficiaries”. But is that enough to justify what can be seen as foreign interference in a sovereign country? Is that enough to impose a universalized vision of what “development” should be in countries that have different histories and cultures, and may want a different kind of “development” for themselves?

## ⇒ DECONNEXION FROM LOCAL ISSUES

Incidentally, this disconnection between the “developers” and their “beneficiaries” represent a major issue. Even though they often carry out field analyses and employ more and more national staff, international NGOs’ projects are still often designed by their foreign top executives who usually do not share and experience the issues they claim to be able to fix. Who better than the local populations can identify their needs and imagine their own solutions to fix their own issues? Even with the best intentions and professional dedication, isn’t there a major risk for outsiders not to fully grasp all aspects of a specific local issue, and thus – through the prism of their own culture – to design projects that may not be the best solutions to these particular issues?

## ⇒ BUREAUCRACY AND LACK OF FLEXIBILITY

The size and structure of most international NGOs, which is often seen as a strength, can also be a weakness. As the donors imposed more and more standards in the 1990’s, large NGOs had to structure and professionalize themselves deeper and deeper. Doing so, they may have gained in reliability and efficiency, but they also became more and more bureaucratic and less and less flexible. This lack of flexibility and adaptability now turns out to be a significant problem on the field, especially when projects have not been designed by locals and need to be somehow modified to match actual needs.

## ⇒ OVER EXPENSIVE

The increase in size and professionalism has also led to more need for funding. International NGOs now require tremendous amounts of money to operate. The huge budgets that are

necessary to run HQs abroad and to pay expatriate staff are lost to tangible actions in target areas. The constant need to find large funding can also lead big NGOs to apply to any available call from donors and to design projects that primarily focus on donors' requirements, instead of favoring the design of projects that only focus on beneficiaries' actual needs.

## ⇒ **CAN BE LINKED TO FOREIGN INTERESTS**

The fact that large NGOs rely so much on international donors also raises the question of their independence. If the very existence of these organizations depends on getting finance from other countries or large multinational corporations, how can we be sure that the local beneficiaries' interests and needs remain the only preoccupation of "developers"? It is fairly easy to imagine how much development projects can be influenced by geopolitical games, international ratio of power, economical interests or political ideologies.

## ⇒ **QUESTIONNABLE ACHIEVEMENTS**

International NGOs work with projects that don't last more than a few years. They usually try to ensure the sustainability of their achievements, but claiming that they don't always succeed seems like a euphemism. Real long-lasting changes require permanent presence on the field, which is simply impossible for foreign organizations. With decades of perspectives, more and more observers have started to question the very achievements and impact of "international development" and many of the projects carried out in its name.

In the light of these important limits, it became obvious to us that the "development" sector needed to adopt a more local approach that would really put populations and small local associations at its core. That is why we decided to found our own NGO, Ecosoum, in the Mongolian countryside.

# **ECOSOUM**

## **A MISSION AND VALUES BASED ON ECOLOGY AND SOLIDARITY**

Ecosoum has set its mission to contribute to the sustainable development of rural Mongolia, by promoting jointly the protection of the environment, social equity and economic development in the soums.

Given the inseparable links that exist between these three spheres, such an objective can be achieved only by working comprehensively on all the related issues, in order to create a virtuous circle able to reduce environmental damages, revitalize the countryside, and slow down the rural exodus.

## **A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO LOCAL AND AUTONOMOUS DEVELOPMENT**

The Mongolian context lends itself particularly well to a holistic approach of local and autonomous sustainable development. Indeed, the low population density and the alveolar

administrative subdivision define communities that are clearly identifiable and barely interdependent.

Each soum (district) comprises a central village of sedentary inhabitants, surrounded in the steppe by nomadic families administratively linked to that village. The interactions between the different soums are therefore very limited because of the isolation of each one.

Thus, rather than specializing on a specific topic at a larger scale, Ecosoum has decided to focus its action – at least initially – on a "model" soum, using a comprehensive approach to simultaneously address its various environmental and socio-economic problems.

The ultimate goal remains – in a second phase – to promote in the rest of the country the duplication of the model developed by the association and the inhabitants, in order to truly reach all rural populations.



## **KHISHIG-UNDUR, AN AVERAGE SOUM REPRESENTATIVE OF MOST OF THE COUNTRY**

Ecosoum chose to start by developing its project in Khishig-Undur, in the Bulgan province, for two main reasons.

First, because its founders are native from there and currently live in the soum-center. Therefore, the association already has ties and contacts in this soum, as well as a real knowledge of the local issues and needs, which will facilitate its development and legitimacy.

Second, because this 3,000 inhabitants soum (of which two-thirds of nomads) doesn't present any particular characteristic – its structure, geo-climatic environment or socio-economic context being quite average. To succeed in turning this regular soum into a model of local and autonomous sustainable development, even though nothing particular predestines it, will prove that such a development is possible anywhere in the country – which is the ultimate goal of the association.

## A LOCAL LONG-TERM ASSOCIATION IN THE HANDS OF THE INHABITANTS

Created and registered in Mongolia, Ecosoum defines itself as a local citizen movement in Khishig-Undur.

In contrast to international solidarity organizations that rely on local partners to develop temporary projects, the association wants to become itself this local structure established in the long term.

As such, the association does not only want to involve some inhabitants of the soum in its projects but to be constituted almost exclusively of the maximum of them.

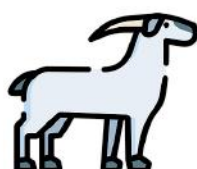
The aim is to build a participatory and inclusive organization, feeding on local skills, and able to create sustainable jobs that can benefit the whole community.

## 5 MAJOR TOPICS

Given the local context and issues, Ecosoum focuses its projects on five main fields of action.



**AGRO-ECOLOGY AND  
FOOD SOVEREIGNTY**



**SUSTAINABILITY OF  
TRADITIONAL BREEDING**



**WASTE MANAGEMENT  
AND VALORIZATION**



**ECO-CONSTRUCTION  
AND RENEWABLE ENERGIES**



**LOCAL AUTONOMY  
AND RESILIENCE**

## OUR WASTE MANAGEMENT PROJECT AND FIRST ACHIEVEMENTS

**ECOSOUM'S OBJECTIVE IS TO SET UP AN EFFICIENT AND SUSTAINABLE WASTE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM, BY PROMOTING WASTE SORTING AND RECYCLING, AIMING AT ZERO ULTIMATE WASTE ON THE SCALE OF THE SOUM.**

At the request of the population and local authorities, improvement of waste management in Khishig-Undur has been the main project on which Ecosoum has focused since the creation of the association. Due to lack of sufficient funding, the construction of the necessary medium- and long-

term infrastructure for optimal and sustainable waste management could not be started in 2019. But many other equally necessary actions were carried out during the year.

## **AWARENESS-RAISING OF THE POPULATION AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS**

From the beginning of the project, our first activities were focused on raising the awareness of the population and staff of local institutions (administration, school, kindergarten and hospital). This work has been ongoing throughout the year through multiple formal meetings and many informal discussions.

Various information and awareness-raising materials have been created to support this sharing of knowledge. In particular, we have printed flyers and posters encouraging waste sorting, which we have displayed and distributed in public spaces and many small shops. We have also created a dedicated page on the Ecosoum's website ([www.ecosoum.org/hog](http://www.ecosoum.org/hog)), where we explain in detail why good waste management is essential to reduce risks to health and the environment, how to simply sort waste, and where to dispose it. The site includes a brief video summarizing all this information, in order to reach the widest possible audience within the soum. This video was screened to students in their classrooms along with a documentary film (*Trashed*) on the subject, translated by us into Mongolian.



## **ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

Our awareness-raising and advocacy work with the soum authorities - to encourage them to take more action towards better waste management - has gradually evolved into true collaboration as

mutual trust was built up. Ecosoum is now considered by the local authorities as the soum's key actor for waste management.

Our association is now at the forefront in defining the action strategies of the soum's administration and is being delegated more and more prerogatives to implement effective waste management in the village. A first official contract was signed at the end of the year for the purchase of a glass crusher and for the establishment of a waste sorting system within the soum's institutions.



## **WASTE COLLECTION AND CLEANING OF IMPACTED AREAS**

Eventually, Ecosoum wants to clean and restore all areas impacted by waste, including by greatly reducing the soum's current open dumpsite. In line with our strategy of action, waste collection campaigns will grow in the coming years, but we have already started this work last summer. Thanks to the mobilization of many members of the association, especially youngsters, we have also managed to make the 2019 edition of Khishig-Undur's Naadam the cleanest in the soum's recent history.







## WASTE SORTING

Once we have sufficient funding, we plan to develop a real waste sorting and disposal center on the outskirts of the village, both convenient for users, and environmentally friendly. In the meantime, we have set up a small temporary sorting corner in our garage, so that the first inhabitants who started sorting their waste are not discouraged by the lack of collection facilities. Several households are already disposing their recyclable waste in the dedicated area.



## WASTE RECYCLING

In order to start recycling plastic waste, we have built – with the help of two foreign engineer students – two machines to crush the plastic and then melt it in a mold. In this way, after several tests, we were able to recycle approximately one hundred single-use plastic bowls (used during Naadam) to manufacture a solid stool. This first prototype will be followed by other items as the population will bring us more and more plastic waste.



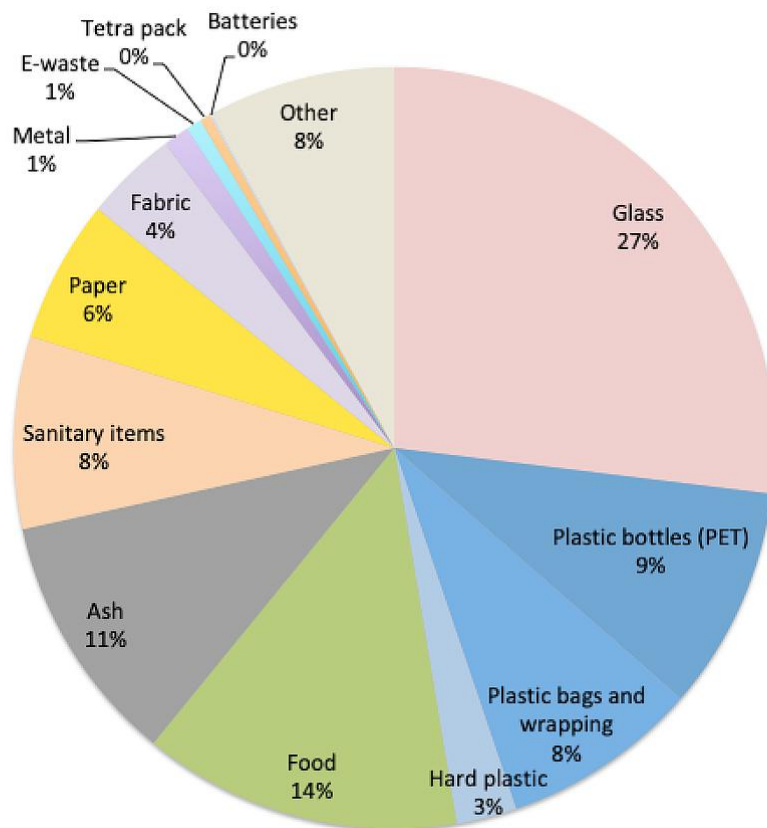
## **REPLACEMENT OF SINGLE-USE ITEMS BY REUSABLE ONES**

Since reducing the production of waste is actually much better than just recycling it, Ecosoum also strives to promote a transition from single-use disposable items to reusable ones. The first step taken by the association was to replace the single-use plastic shoe-covers – which were used in the hospital and kindergarten to avoid dirtying buildings – with reusable ones made out of fabric. The next step will be to replace single-use baby diapers with more eco-friendly washable models.



## HOUSEHOLD WASTE COMPOSITION STUDY

In order to fill the huge lack of data regarding the composition of household waste not only in Khishig-Undur but throughout all rural Mongolia, we conducted a summer survey of 36 families (10% of households in the village). We showed that the sedentary households in Khishig-Undur produce an average of 3.7 kg of waste per week, almost half (by weight) of it being glass (27%) or plastic (20%). A second study, carried out in winter, will help confirming these results and highlight any differences between summer and winter waste (particularly with regard to the volume of ash produced in the heating stoves).



# ADVANTAGES AND DIFFICULTIES OF SMALL LOCAL NGOs

## ~~LACK OF LEGITIMICY~~

### ⇒ **LEGITIMICY FROM BEING LOCAL INHABITANTS**

In a true democracy, the power belongs to the people, and “development” should not be an exception. No one can claim stronger legitimacy to solve local issues than the people who experience them, which is why local NGOs made up of local citizens have to be in charge of their own “development”.

## ~~DECONNEXION FROM LOCAL ISSUES~~

### ⇒ **UNDERSTANDING / SHARING OF LOCAL ISSUES**

If constituted of local inhabitants, small NGOs have a first hand experience of the main issues people face in their operation area. They also are the most suited to identify the best solutions for themselves, in light of their own culture and priorities that may escape an outsider.

## ~~BUREAUCRACY AND LACK OF FLEXIBILITY~~

### ⇒ **FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY**

Small local NGOs are extremely flexible. Their small size, the fact that their members all live on site and the fact that they can very quickly perceive the smallest changes in situations and/or priorities allow them to easily adapt to any new reality.

## ~~OVER-EXPENSIVE~~

### ⇒ **VERY LIMITED COSTS**

No abroad HQ costs, no need for salaries to match Western standards of living, no expenses linked to expatriation. Small local NGOs require much less money to operate than international NGOs. Which incidentally means that much more projects can be carried out with the same amount of funding.

## ~~CAN BE LINKED TO FOREIGN INTERESTS~~

### ⇒ **INDEPENDANCE / LOCAL INTERESTS**

With local people tackling their own problems using less money, the risk to see outsider’s interest compromise the projects and their achievements are largely reduced.

## ~~QUESTIONNABLE ACHIEVEMENTS~~

### ⇒ **SUSTAINABLE ACHIEVEMENTS / REAL NEEDS**

Permanently present on the field of action, local NGOs are not bound by deadlines and project endings. They can always follow up on their actions and adapt to evolving needs to ensure the relevance and sustainability of their achievements.

Nevertheless, being a small NGO doesn't come without difficulties. Among them:

- ⇒ **DIFFICULTY TO ACCESS FUNDINGS**
- ⇒ **DIFFICULTY TO ACCESS NATIONAL DECISION MAKERS**
- ⇒ **LACK OF EXPERTISE**
- ⇒ **LACK OF ACCEPTANCE AND RECOGNITION BY INTERNATIONAL ACTORS**

## **CONCLUSION**

It appears that an effective way to overcome these main challenges would be to structure and empower a federative network of small local NGOs. Regrouped, we could form strong consortiums that could more easily access funding and national decision makers. Within such a network, we could share our knowledge and support each other with our respective expertise.

In such a renewed "development" sector, international organizations could still have an important role to play. They could support local NGOs with their expertise where it is really lacking and transfer to them a significant portion of the donors' funding they still channel today. In practical terms, they could probably adapt easily to this new reality. But this transition would require a fundamental change in the way most of them still consider small local NGOs: from seeing us as local implementers for the projects they designed, they would have to really look at us at least as equal partners, or, even better, as sovereign civil movements they can help and support upon request.