

In their own words...

Mongolia: D. Jargal rediscovers childhood

D. Jargal, now a 7th-grader, started work in Mongolia's gold mines in 1997 in order to help his family. "Personally I do not like to work", he says. "However, I didn't have a choice. Life was hard then, I had headaches and torn clothes – my family is so poor."

The informal gold mining sector in Mongolia is large and increasing, involving 20 per cent of the rural workforce. At least 10 to 15 per cent of these workers are children. The situation stems from reduced rural income opportunities, decimated livestock herds, and rising unemployment in both rural and urban areas, as well as popular expectations of high income through gold mining activities. Children in this sector work in hard rock, and half of them work with mercury to extract gold. They work underground, in water, and at blasting sites. Many of them have no access to schools or health services.

In 2004, International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour supported a comprehensive pilot project to prevent and eliminate child labour and improve the situation of informal gold miners. One of the priorities of this project, implemented by the Mongolian Employers' Federation (MONEF), was to improve educational opportunities for working children. D. Jargal quickly learned how different life could be.

"When I worked, the food was bad and I often felt sore and sick. I couldn't take breaks to eat or drink properly, I always needed to hurry. Now everything is different, I can rest, my body and mind are fresh and I feel that I am learning every day."

"When I worked, I was very busy all day breaking rocks and panning gold. I don't work anymore, I have a good time studying and playing with friends and classmates. When I wasn't going to school, I didn't have time to play. I worried about whether I would find any gold, and I had headaches due to worrying so much."

As his life has changed, so have his hopes for the future. He says, "When I worked I wished I was a rich person with freedom. I dreamed about that when I worked. But now I dream about being a smart person, who can do something good for my country and the world."

