10

Ranking with Shagaa in Mongolia

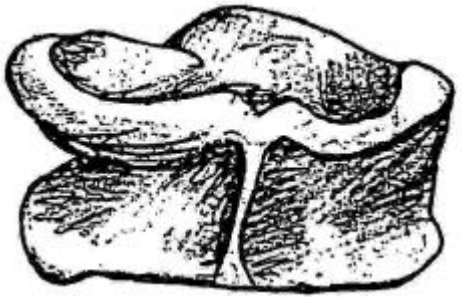
Adrian Cullis

• Introduction

Extensive livestock production forms the mainstay of the Mongolian economy, providing employment for almost 40 per cent of the population. Policy Alternatives for Livestock Development in Mongolia (PALD) is a research and training project involving collaboration between the Research Institute of Animal Husbandry and the Institute of Agricultural Economics in Mongolia, and the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in the UK. A number of studies have been carried out as part of this project (see also Cooper and Mearns et al., this issue of *RRA Notes*), including an investigation, in late 1992, into the potential of rainwater harvesting for fodder production. Seasonal fodder shortage is a key constraint to livestock productivity, and one which will probably be exacerbated by the liberalisation of the Mongolian economy.

The investigation into fodder constraints and the potential for rainwater harvesting involved interviews with herders in three districts, as well as with key informants (administrative staff and co-operative leaders). During the discussions with herders, the team learned about *Shagaa*, which is a bag of sheep and goats' knucklebones (Figure 1). Each facet of the bone represents a different livestock type. One side represents a camel, another a horse, and so on for sheep, goats and cattle. The bones are used like dice or counters in about 20 different games. Most households appeared to have a bag of 30-40 bones.

Figure 1. A Shagaa bone



• Aims of the exercise

The team decided to make use of the *Shagaa* bones for a ranking exercise with herders to rank winter livestock losses over the last 10 years.

• Methodology

The herders were very familiar with the names of the years (based on the Chinese years) and so were able to divide the pile of bones between lines drawn on the floor representing each of the 10 years. When the exercise was complete, the piles were subdivided into livestock types within each year. This exercise was a combination of time trends and proportional piling.

The technique proved useful in illustrating the trends in livestock losses over the years and providing a basis for discussion. As is often the case with participatory techniques, the level of interest was very high, with many people gathering round to offer advice and contribute to the discussion. The exercise was enhanced by the use of the bones, which to the herders already represented animals (the

Source: RRA Notes (1994), Issue 20, pp.87–88, IIED London

pastoral equivalent of ranking with beans or seeds).

The research team felt that the *Shagaa* bones had enormous potential for much wider use in ranking and other participatory techniques with Mongolian herders, especially using the different facets of the bones to represent the livestock types.

- **Adrian Cullis,** Intermediate Technology Development Group, Myson House, Railway Terrace, Rugby CV21 3HT, UK

REFERENCE

This paper is based on: Cullis, A., Jigjidsuren, S. and Bujantogtoh, T. 1993. *Preliminary Assessment of the Potential of Rainwater Harvesting for Fodder Production.* Policy Alternatives for Livestock Development in Mongolia, Research Report No.6. Research Institute of Animal Husbandry and the Institute of Agricultural Economics, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.