Determining Small Towns' Status Based on Their Basic Public Service Level. The Case of Mongolia

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A B S T R A C T

Small towns are widely recognized as key drivers in rural sustainable development, primarily by offering essential public services to residents in remote areas, thereby playing a pivotal role in promoting rural sustainability. Research endeavors focusing on small towns and rural regions of Mongolia are infrequent, with the majority of existing studies and reports predominantly rendered in the national language. This linguistic barrier significantly impedes the facilitation of international-level research in these areas. The current study is designed to address this gap by conducting a detailed analysis aimed at identifying small towns within local administrative units. This identification is predicated on an evaluation of their essential functions and activities, utilizing national statistical data from 21 provinces across Mongolia. The approach is geared towards understanding the unique characteristics and roles of these towns within the broader context of rural development and governance. The results show that soum centers are the main destination for access to daily necessities, agricultural trades, non-farm employment, basic education, and minor medical treatment for remote rural residents and serve as small towns. The varied functions of small towns are influenced by socioeconomic factors, urban proximity, and infrastructure. The research findings will enhance our knowledge of the functions of small towns within the rural hierarchy in Mongolia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, socio-economic transformations in both developed and developing nations have often diminished the traditional roles of small rural settlements. While examining the differences and interactions between rural and urban areas, there is a tendency to emphasize urban regions, often overlooking the modern functions and potential contributions of rural settlements to rural development (Akkoyunlu, 2015; Xijia et al., 2014). This research will explore the current economic functions of small towns,

as well as their contribution to the surrounding settlements in the case of Mongolia. The delivery of high-quality and accessible local services to rural populations presents a universally inherent challenge, primarily attributable to the issues of geographical remoteness and diminished population density characteristic of rural environments (Milbourne, 2004; Wirth et al., 2016; Yurui et al., 2020). Small towns have been instrumental in regional development, acting as pivotal nodes that facilitate the linkage between rural and urban areas. They provide a range of services, goods, and employment opportunities, and proffer

access to public transportation, catering not only to the needs of their residents but also to those of the surrounding hinterland (Courtney et al., 2007; Lintz and Wirth, 2009; Powe and Shaw, 2004). Prior studies have predominantly focused on developed societies, such as those in the UK, Australia, and North America (Kolodinsky et al., 2013; Powe et al., 2009; Van Leeuwen and Rietveld, 2011), while allocating comparatively less attention to rapidly developing countries. Existing research has typically been centered on a singular purpose, such as livestock (Rao et al., 2015; Sneath, 2006), healthcare (Dorjdagva et al., 2015; Guillon et al., 2022; Otgon et al., 2023), or education (Dorjdagva et al., 2015; Javkhlan and Hyun, 2021; Sukhbaatar and Tarkó, 2022), and mining (Amartuvshin et al., 2021; Lahiri-Dutt and Dondov, 2017). However, the diverse functions of the rural settlements in Mongolia have not yet been investigated. This study aims to explore small towns within rural settlements in Mongolia, with a particular focus on scrutinizing the basic services available for the local community.

Mongolia, characterized by its sparse population, expansive territory, and rich natural and agricultural resources, is presently contemplating the reorganization of its settlement systems and regional planning. Historically rooted in an agriculture-based economy and predominantly rural in both population and settlement patterns, Mongolia has undergone a significant shift towards urbanization. This transition has led to a diminished role of the agricultural sector in its economy, with its contribution to the GDP dwindling to just 12.9% by 2022, while other economic sectors have experienced substantial growth (The National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2022a). By 1970, 44% of Mongolia's population resided in urban areas. However, by 2022, this proportion escalated to 69.1%, with a significant concentration of 68.5% living in the capital city, while the remaining 31.5% were distributed across the centers of the country's 21 provinces (The National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2022b). The Government of Mongolia has placed a significant emphasis on achieving key policy goals, such as the establishment of a coordinated system for urban and rural population settlements to foster balanced territorial development. This includes a commitment to long-term sustainable development through the reform of urban and rural planning, along with the creation of living centers that are healthy, safe, and comfortable for the population (Myagmarsuren et al., 2021).

In 2019, a constitutional amendment was enacted, enabling cities and villages to be recognized as administrative and territorial units within the framework of the law (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2019). The legislative framework governing the designation of urban areas is well-established, with a select number of settlements having been accorded 'city status'. This status is defined in accordance with the Law on Legal Status of Cities and Villages, which stipulates that a city must possess a minimum population of 15,000 inhabitants, predominantly engaged in industrial and service sectors, and exhibit a centralized form with a robustly developed urban infrastructure, while a village is a self-administered settlement with 500-15,000 inhabitants, developed in one of the following sectors: agriculture, industry, tourism, recreation, sanatorium, transport, and trade (The State Khural of Mongolia, 1993). Despite this clarity, there remains a significant gap in scholarly research and discussion concerning intermediate units that straddle the characteristics of cities and villages. Contemporary investigations in Mongolia, particularly those focusing on urban-rural interrelations and developmental paradigms, have not adequately explored the role of small towns in the context of rural development, instead offering a generalized overview of rural settlements. Hence, it is both critical and timely to engage in research that elucidates the types and functions of small towns within certain Mongolian settlement networks, as this knowledge is essential for effective local planning. The hypothesis underpinning our research is based on the premise that small towns play a crucial role in rural development. This significance is ascribed to their provision of varied basic services across different classifications of small towns in Mongolia.

2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Small towns: theoretical views and characteristics

Although the phrase "small town" is frequently used, there is presently no established definition of this term in geography or urban studies that can be applied to every nation (Trócsányi et al., 2018). The majority of scholarly works describe the extent of small towns in terms of their inhabitants. For instance, in Germany, towns with a population ranging from 5,000 to 20,000, or those fulfilling central community functions, are categorized as small towns (Kühn, 2015). In the United States, the term "urban clusters" with a population between 25,000 and 50,000 are informally equated to small towns, although this designation is not officially recognized by the census bureau (Bowns, 2013). The characterization of a small town is thus a relative concept, influenced by factors such as the degree of urbanization, developmental level, and economic framework of a country. The criteria for defining town size are predominantly quantitative, with population size being a primary factor. Although a town's population size does not directly determine its regional role, it serves as an indicative measure of its function and importance within the broader urban network and

surrounding areas. The size structure of a small town can vary, but typically it is a community with a relatively low population, often more than 2,000 and less than 20,000 people.

The role of a town as a governmental entity varies across nations, depending on local context and historical factors (Zhang and Li, 2014). The essence of small towns lies more in their functional characteristics than in their population size. Generally, a small town is characterized by its location away from larger urban centers, fostering a strong sense of community and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). These towns often preserve traditional customs, cultural practices, and historical landmarks, contributing to cultural diversity and heritage conservation (UNESCO, 2003). They may be located near agricultural or natural resource areas or may have a history tied to a specific industry or trade and often play a crucial role in the local economy, providing employment opportunities and supporting small businesses. Small towns offer a more peaceful and less congested living environment, contributing to a higher quality of life and overall well-being (Alois and Bruno, 2010). From a functional perspective, small towns have traditionally been viewed as human settlements where residents partake in activities similar to those in urban environments. Nevertheless, recent socio-economic transformations in both developed and developing nations have catalyzed the emergence of new functional activities within these settlements. These activities encompass rural tourism, light industry, spa resorts, commercial ventures, and services. Such diversification has led to the application of multifunctional roles in rural settlements, significantly expanding their traditional scope and utility (Ishii et al., 2014; Servillo et al., 2017).

Additionally, it presents an intriguing research opportunity to investigate the predominant functional activities specific to various types of small towns in Mongolia. Such an exploration would provide valuable insights into how different small towns specialize or diversify in terms of their social functions, potentially revealing unique patterns of development within the Mongolian context.

2.1.1. Administrative and territorial units and town regulation of Mongolia

Mongolia's administrative structure is hierarchically organized, with the country being segmented into aimags (provinces) and the capital city. Further divisions occur with aimags being subdivided into soums (similar to counties) and soums into baghs. In the capital city, the administrative breakdown includes districts, which are further divided into khoroos (sub-districts).

Presently, Mongolia comprises 21 aimags, 330 soums, 1,639 baghs, 9 districts within the capital city, and 169 khoroos, illustrating a comprehensive and multi-tiered administrative system (The National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2022a). The 2019 amendments to Mongolia's Constitution expanded the administrative and territorial unit system to include cities and villages. Now, Mongolia is divided into aimags (provinces) and the capital city. Aimags are subdivided into soums (counties), state and local-ranking cities, and baghs (small administrative units). Additionally, soums can be divided into villages, while in the capital, districts are further split into khoroos (sub-districts) and villages (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2019) (Fig. 1).
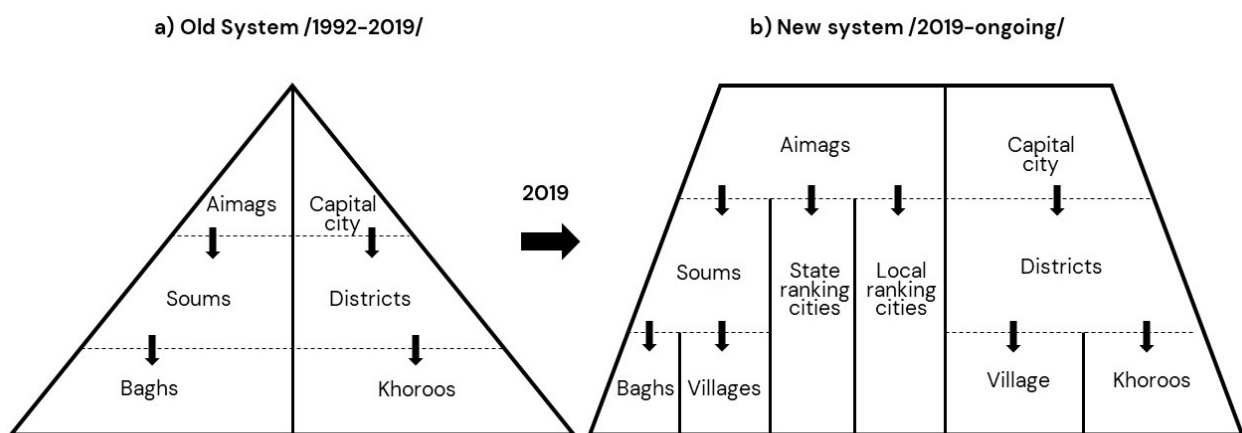
Fig. 1. Comparison of old and new divisions of administrative and territorial Units, Mongolia (Myagmarsuren et al., 2021).

The bagh is a key local governance unit designed to facilitate citizen participation in self-management and service provision as mandated by law. Its responsibilities encompass a range of functions: delivering legal services to local citizens, representing their collective opinions and requests to higher authorities, addressing economic and social issues within its domain (unless overridden by law or higher

authority decisions), engaging team members in national, provincial, and local quality initiatives, managing and regulating communal natural resources like hay, crops, pastures, and water points, and overseeing environmental balance in the area (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2020).

The soum serves as the primary unit for autonomous economic and social decision-making, law compliance, and provision of legally required services. Its roles encompass local development planning, property management, financial oversight, local tax and fee regulation, and local development fund management. Additionally, the soum implements provincial human resources, food, agriculture, and production programs; manages water resources, trade, services, housing, and utilities; and regulates traffic, parking, and tourism. It also oversees the maintenance of public infrastructure, including roads, recreational areas, historical monuments, and educational, health, cultural, and sports facilities. Responsibilities extend to waste management, cemetery operation, fire and flood protection, treatment facilities maintenance, and residential area upkeep. The soum's comprehensive duties are geared towards enhancing local development, infrastructure management, and community welfare (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2020).

The aimag or province autonomously manages economic and social decisions, oversees district activities, and ensures legal compliance. Its duties include formulating and applying medium-term development strategies, overseeing provincial property, managing the budget, and setting tax rates. The province allocates and oversees local development funds, implements human resource policies, and manages agricultural and production programs. It regulates trade and services, coordinates district transportation, standardizes addresses and monument regulations, and develops tourism policies. Additionally, it manages waste and oversees utilities like communication, electricity, and water systems, including flood control. The province also focuses on vocational training. These responsibilities enable balanced territorial development, integrating economic growth with social and infrastructural well-being (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2020).

According to the Amendments to the Constitution (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2019), the following laws on the legal status of cities and villages are prescribed: *the city has at least 15,000 residents, the majority of whom work in the industry and service sector, and is a centralized settlement with a well-developed urban infrastructure*. The city has a national or provincial rank depending on the number of residents, the level of development of the infrastructure, and the role it plays in the economic and social development of the country and the respective administrative and territorial units. Cities with more than 50,000 (if necessary, up to 50,000) residents can be ranked according to the role they play in the economic and social development of the country, urbanization, and the level of development of city-forming infrastructure (The State Khural of Mongolia, 1993). The new administrative and territorial division has been discussed in several research papers, including the identification of four state-ranked strategic central cities (Darkhan, Khovd, Choibalsan, and Dalanzadgad) (Myagmarsuren et al., 2021), and the delineation of 329 soums, 1630 baghs, 168 khoroos, and 16 villages (Tseyenkhand et al., 2022) based on the updated amendments (The State Khural of Mongolia, 2020). However, the criteria for small towns have yet to be addressed in these discussions.

2.1.2. Geographical location difference of small towns in Mongolia

A total of 247 settlements are eligible to receive the designation of 'small town' status. These settlements, inhabited by permanent residents primarily engaged in agricultural, pastoral, and mining activities, currently hold the status of soum centers and aimag centers. There is a requisite need to upgrade these settlements to the status of small towns, and they constitute the focus of this study.

In the context of a 'soum center', the presence of governmental organizations and services is limited. These include facilities providing essential services such as primary education, law enforcement (police stations, intersoum courts), accommodation (dormitories, private housing, apartments), healthcare, and cultural amenities. However, other economic sectors in these areas remain relatively underdeveloped. These centers cater not only to the inhabitants of the soum center but also to those residing in remote areas of designated bagh settlements. This arrangement typifies the fundamental functions of a small town. Conversely, 'aimag centers' exhibit a more advanced level of governmental organizations and services. These centers offer a broader array of basic services, encompassing primary education, transportation links to the capital or other destinations, judicial facilities (courts), police offices, a spectrum of health facilities, and more sophisticated services. The economic sectors in these areas are more developed in comparison to those in soum centers. Similar to soum centers, aimag centers provide services not only to their own residents but also to those from designated soums and baghs.

Therefore, if we look at the general characteristics of these 247 settlements, small towns in Mongolia can be divided into the following two categories in terms of geographical location, administrative jurisdiction, and legal status (Fig. 2a, 2b).

Figure 2a. Small towns are located in the aimag center: geographical location: in the aimag

center; administrative unit: aimag status; territory: semi-nomadic lifestyle, covers the built area of the residential, industrial, trade, cultural, and sports facilities, and basic services specific to a small town; governance: governed by administration of the aimag.

Figure 2b. Small towns are located in the soum center: geographical location: in the soum center; administrative unit: soum status; territory: semi-nomadic lifestyle, covers the built area of the residential, industrial, trade, cultural and sports facilities, and basic services areas in the small town; governance: governed by the administration of the soum.
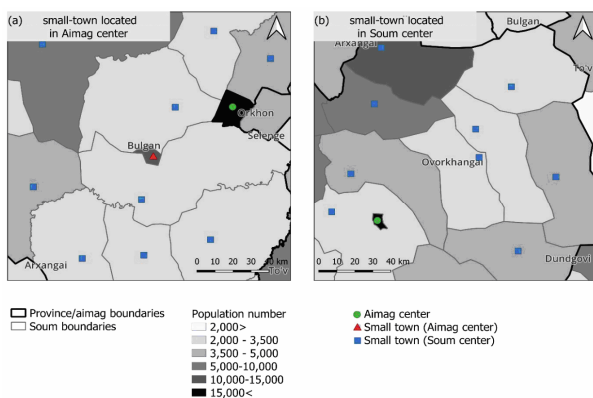

Fig. 2. Geographical position of small *towns (source of data: National Statistics Office (NSO), QGIS Geographic Information System, Open Source Geospatial Foundation Project).*

Figures 2a and 2b illustrate the disparities between the two categories of small towns, particularly in relation to aspects such as geographical positioning, administrative jurisdiction, the extent of basic services provided, and their legal statuses. Despite these differences, a shared characteristic of these towns is the composition of their workforce, with 70-80% of total employment concentrated in sectors such as industry, transportation, cultural activities, commerce, construction, public administration, and various service industries. In the context of Mongolia, these small towns have been developed strategically to serve as centers for basic services, commercial activities, and transportation nodes, catering not only to their populations but also to the needs of the surrounding designated areas.

2.2. Method

Upon preliminary examination and in accordance with statutory provisions, a cohort of 247 settlements was identified for potential upgrade to small-town status. Subsequently, we formulated a set of parameters to evaluate the suitability of these settlements for such designation, considering factors such as geographical location, demographic composition, economic dynamics, social service, and infrastructural capabilities. We choose 14 indicators in five thematic groups: population-employment, location-administration, health treatment, culture-education, and services, which are suitable for the types of small towns (Najarsadeghi and Dorostkar, 2022; Reza Rezvani et al., 2009; Tseyenkhand et al., 2022) (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation of criteria.

No.	Criteria	Indicators
1	Population and employment	The small town has a population of 2,000-15,000 inhabitants (1) The majority of the population lives in the small towns permanently and is employed in industry and service (2)
2	Location, local governance and administration	Located in a rural soum of the aimag (3) Small towns have their local governments or councils that manage and govern local affairs, including infrastructure, public services, and policies relevant to the town's development (4) Intersoum Courts and Courts (5)
3	Health treatment and related centers	Hospital (6) Pharmacies (7)
4	Trade-services	Grocery store (8) Petrol station (9) Telecommunication office, internet (10)
5	Education, culture	Preschool (11) School (12) Library (13) Cultural center (14)

Source of data: The National Statistics Office of Mongolia (2022).

The initial 14 indicators were evaluated in the selected 247 settlements (Supplementary material), utilizing symbols to denote the presence (1) or absence (0) of each indicator. Following the evaluation, a total of 247 settlements were identified for small-town status designation. This chapter delves into examining the types of small towns based on their basic public services. For this study, we have selected two distinct

types of small towns from rural settlements, as outlined in the preceding section according to geography location.

Intersoum Court (IC): every soum and aimag is equipped with either a police station or a designated police officer. Therefore, we chose to include as one of our indicators the role of Intersoum courts in soum centers. These courts operate as first-instance courts, dealing with misdemeanors, relatively minor criminal offenses, and civil disputes involving sums less than 10 million MNT (2963.18 USD). The term "intersoum" indicates that these courts have jurisdiction over several soums, thus serving a broader region comprising multiple settlements.

Hospital: in rural Mongolia, each aimag and soum capital has their own hospital, with the distinction lying in the scope and type of services offered. These hospitals are further classified into four distinct categories: Regional Diagnostic and Treatment Center (RDTC), Aimag General Hospital (AGH), Rural General Hospital (RGH), and Soum Health Center (SHC). Further, these Soum Health Centers are categorized into three ranks (A, B, C), depending on their specialized care capabilities. For our research, we focused on 'A' rank Soum Health Centers as advanced hospitals, characterized by their provision of at least four basic specialty care services to the population of adjacent soums and their own designated settlements (Ministry of Health of Mongolia, 2019).

Data pertinent to this study was acquired from digital databases managed by the National Statistics Office, Open Street Map (OSM), and National Statistics Information Center, The Judicial Council of Mongolia. The temporal scope for data selection was confined to the period between 2019 and 2022. The data, specifically concerning the selected settlements, underwent analysis through the application of Multiple Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA).

This methodological approach is instrumental in evaluating a range of alternatives against diverse decision-making criteria, ultimately facilitating the identification of the most favorable option from the set of available choices.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To investigate the variety and significance of small towns within the context of rural development, a comprehensive evaluation was conducted on a select number of small towns using a range of indicators. These indicators encompassed aspects such as population size and employment rates, geographical positioning and governance structures, healthcare services, commercial activities, and cultural and educational attributes. We categorized the five types of basic services of selected 247 settlements in three types of small towns:

Type 1 - small towns, exemplifying the highest level of service availability, are characterized by the presence of all 14 indicators. This includes key infrastructural elements such as hospitals (AGH, RGH, SHC-A), Intersoum Courts (IC) or Courts, educational and cultural facilities, and essential trade services;

Type 2 - small towns, though largely equipped with essential services, exhibit minor gaps in public service provision, with one or two indicators missing. However, a notable commonality among these towns is the presence of a hospital (SHC-A), signifying a strong commitment to healthcare services;

Type 3 - small towns are marked by a more pronounced scarcity of public services which are lacking more than two indicators, having hospitals that offer less than four basic specialty care services to the population of adjacent soum centers and their own designated settlements.

The summary of all present types and small towns in Mongolia is indicated in Table 2 and Figures 3-4. The selected settlements are classified according to the types of small towns in Appendix 1, with the largest number of Type 3 small towns in Mongolia, which is 78% of the total small towns, followed by Type 2 (19%), and Type 1 (3%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of small town (population size of small towns, hospitals, and Courts)/Key infrastructural elements.

Category	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Total
AGH	2	-	-	2
RGH	4	-	-	4
SHC-A	2	47	-	49
IC/Courts	8	-	-	-
Number of small towns	8	47	192	247
Percent	3	19	78	100
Average residents	10564	5183	3223	-

Source: The National Statistics Office of Mongolia (NSO), The Judicial Council of Mongolia, Order of the Ministry of Health (2019).

Regarding the population distribution within these categories of small towns, Type 1, encompassing eight settlements, boasts the largest average population, counting 10,564 inhabitants. This is succeeded by Type 2, some 47 settlements, with an average population of 5,183 inhabitants, and a number of 192 Type 3 settlements, with an average of 3,223 inhabitants, as detailed in Table 2.

The variance in population sizes among the three types of small towns can be attributed to several factors, including their geographical location, their status, and the availability of social services. Both Type 1 and Type 2 small towns are predominantly located near the main road systems within rural settlements and are dispersed across their respective territories (Fig. 3).
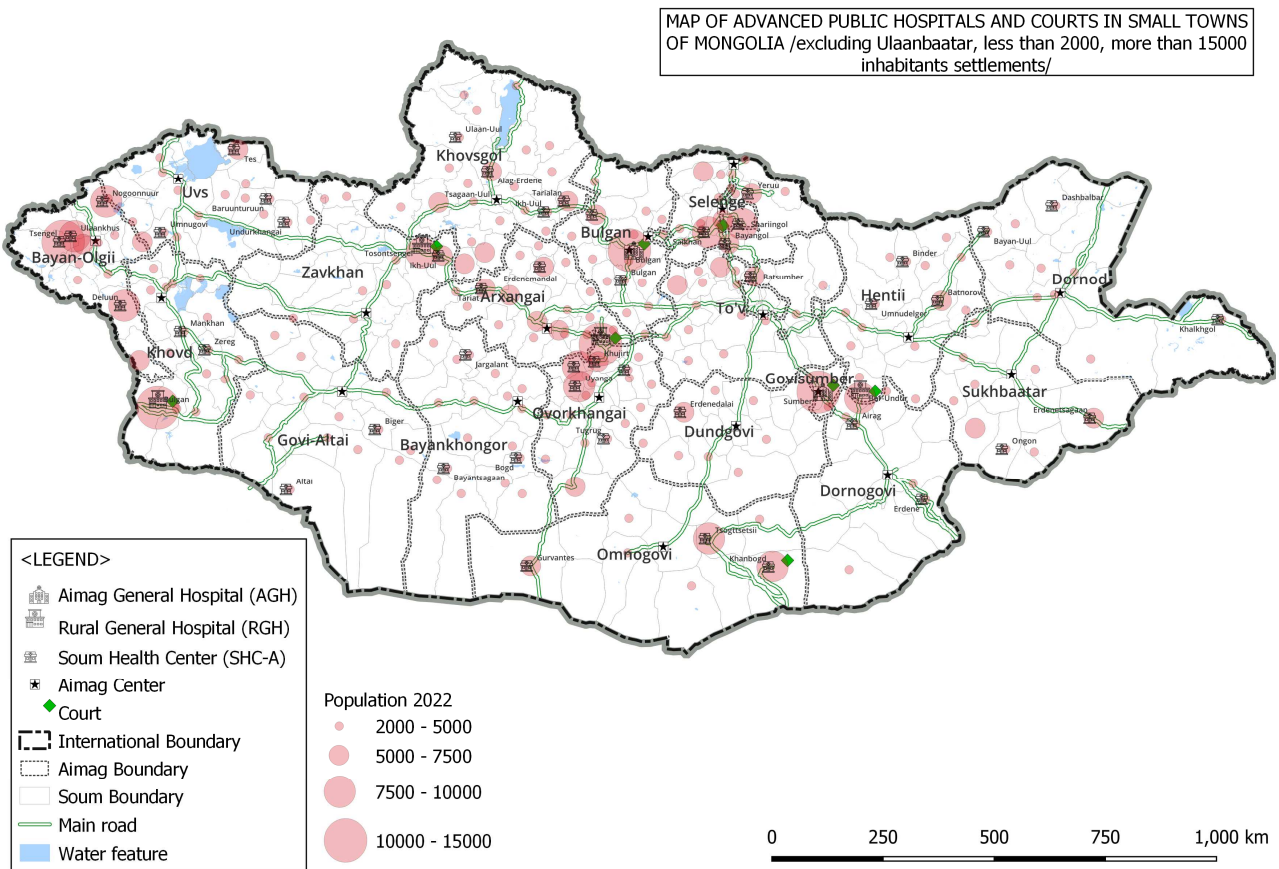

Fig. 3. Map of Advanced Public Hospitals and Courts in Small Towns in Mongolia (excluding Ulaanbaatar, and less than 2000, more than 15000 inhabitants' settlements) *(source of data: The National Statistics Office of Mongolia (NSO), The Judicial Council of Mongolia, Ministry of Health, 2019).*

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to investigate the types of settlements in Mongolia eligible for small town status and the predominant types of small towns within these areas. We then compared these small towns based on their categories and types of basic services. Our findings reveal that small town settlements in Mongolia exhibit varying administrative functions influenced by factors such as geographical location, infrastructure, and social services.

The study found 247 settlements with current aimag and soum centers status in need to be granted small-town status of three types: (Type 1) small towns are distinguished by their comprehensive service provision, featuring all 14 evaluated indicators and found in aimag centers and soum centers. This category includes vital infrastructure such as hospitals (AGH, RGH, SHC-A), Intersoum Courts (IC) or Courts, as well as facilities for education and culture, alongside indispensable trade services, representing the pinnacle of service availability.

Type 2 small towns, while predominantly furnished with crucial services, manifest slight deficiencies in public service delivery, missing one or two indicators. A consistent feature across these towns is the inclusion of a hospital (SHC-A), indicating a dedicated focus on healthcare services.

Type 3 small towns exhibit a notable deficiency in public services, lacking in more than two indicators. The hospitals in these towns provide fewer than four basic specialty care services, serving both the population of the designated area and soum center, thus highlighting a significant gap in service provision. As a result, the new administrative and territorial division shown in Figure 4 can be established with 247 small towns and 85 soums. However, it should be noted that they differ in their administrative function levels. This is because of the basic service range that can be offered to designated settlements.

In essence, this study illuminates the dynamic tapestry of Mongolia's small towns, each playing a unique role in the socio-economic fabric of the nation. By understanding and categorizing these settlements,

we pave the way for informed policy decisions and targeted interventions to enhance the quality of life for all Mongolian residents.
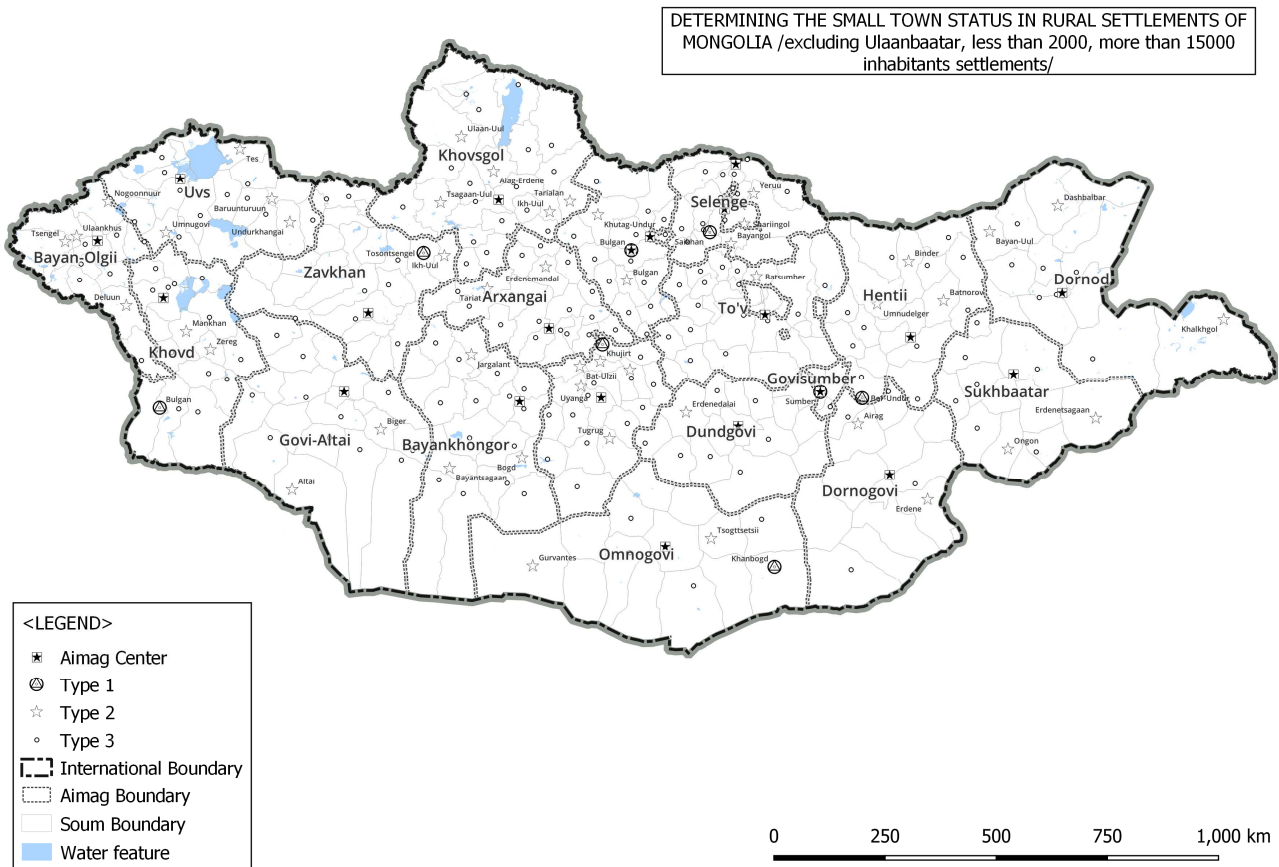

Fig. 4. Determining the small towns status in rural settlements of Mongolia /excluding Ulaanbaatar, less than 2000, more than 15000 inhabitants' settlements *(source: General Department of Geography, Geodesy and Mapping and Table 2).*

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