

# Team photo-diaries: Making places, people, and power more visible

Ariane Utomo<sup>1</sup>  | Andrew McGregor<sup>2</sup>  | Bunnarath Som<sup>3</sup> |  
 Caitlin Finlayson<sup>1</sup>  | Chariya Korn<sup>3</sup> | Katharine McKinnon<sup>4</sup>  | Lita Mom<sup>3</sup> |  
 Nicholas Harrigan<sup>2</sup>  | Panhaleak Chay<sup>3</sup> | Pao Srean<sup>5</sup>  | Pherom Song<sup>3</sup> |  
 Sao Chen<sup>3</sup> | Sareout Yong<sup>3</sup> | Sinuon Chhun<sup>3</sup> | Sophanara Phan<sup>3</sup> |  
 Sophea Yous<sup>3</sup> | Thong Tran<sup>6,7</sup>  | Van Touch<sup>1</sup>  | Brian R Cook<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>The University of Melbourne, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Macquarie University, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Partners for Rural Development, Cambodia

<sup>4</sup>Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

<sup>5</sup>National University of Battambang, Cambodia

<sup>6</sup>Fenner School of Environment and Society, College of Systems and Society, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia

<sup>7</sup>Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resources, An Giang University, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM), Long Xuyen City, An Giang, Vietnam

## Correspondence

Ariane Utomo, The University of Melbourne, Australia.

Email: [ariane.utomo@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ariane.utomo@unimelb.edu.au)

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## Abstract

The prolonged border closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have inspired novel approaches in field-based research. In this paper, we review methodological and collaborative practice reflections on the use of a team photo-diary activity generated by research associates working with smallholder farmers in Northwest Cambodia. Team photo-diaries were introduced as a training tool to encourage reflexivity among Cambodian early career researchers during a household census data collection. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the photo-diaries inadvertently evolved from a training tool into a methodological tool for data collection and a collaborative tool between Australian and Cambodian-based team members. In seven months, eight research associates captured and collated 92 images, including a brief written note for each image. These were then presented in 10 fortnightly online workshops. The photo-diaries uncovered the unseen in quantitative data collection; they emerged as an orienting device, guiding the census data collection, and as an understanding device, enabling the team to contextualise quantitative data findings and identify emerging analytical themes. As a collaborative tool, a fortnightly online team photo-diary workshop facilitated regular interactions, connecting the lives and field experiences of team members. Using the photo-diary activity, we reflect on the ethics of remote fieldwork and over-reliance on local research associates for knowledge production. We argue that team photo-diary activities can make research locations, research teams, and power imbalances in global north–south research collaborations more visible and considerable. The team photo-diary activity underlines the challenges in navigating the ever-present tensions and possibilities of knowledge (co)-production.

## KEYWORDS

Cambodia, data collection, power relations, research assistants, research collaboration, visual methods

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# 1 | INTRODUCTION

Prolonged border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic saw many field-based social scientists turn to digital and creative methods (Bueddefeld et al., 2021; Eigege et al., 2022; McKinnon et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021; Southerton et al., 2022; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). Aside from necessitating reflections on methodological lessons learned, the pandemic has resurfaced questions concerning how research is shaped by, or might (re)-shape, the long-standing axes of inequalities in knowledge production. These inequalities are often amplified in field-based collaborative research in the global south/majority world, often funded and led by institutions and researchers from the global north/minority world (Connell, 2014; Garrett & Brickell, 2015; Msila, 2022; Ozano & Khatri, 2018; Rosyada, 2022; Sieber & Tolich, 2013). COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of technologies that altered fieldwork, facilitated by videoconferencing and data collection apps that allowed foreign researchers to stay in contact with field researchers. This pre-existing trend, exacerbated by COVID-19, increased reliance on researchers in the global south, not only to lead, manage, and conduct field data collection, but also to analyse, curate, and impart key insights to team members abroad (Brickell et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022).

This paper considers these issues through methodological and collaborative reflections generated from the adoption of a research associates-generated team photo-diary activity (herein referred to as the photo-diary activity). The photo-diary activity was integrated into a household census as part of a larger research project exploring the perceptions and livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Northwest Cambodia. The project follows a classic research financing model with a funding institution in the global north (in this case, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research [ACIAR]) to explore ways of improving agricultural extension in the global south (in this case, Cambodia), through partnerships with global south institutions. Agricultural extension is a long-standing tool of rural development that has historically concentrated on the one-way transfer of agricultural knowledge and expertise from north to south (Cook et al., 2021). Initially, photo-diaries were introduced as a research training tool with the aim of encouraging reflexive practice in field-based quantitative data collection for the team of research associates involved in the project (see Jamieson et al., 2023; Mannay, 2010). Based on the collective reflections of research team members, we show how their engagement with the photo-diary activity evolved to become much more than a training tool. Our arguments centre on how the photo-diary activity *uncovers the unseen* in quantitative data collection. More broadly, its use by the research associates, who were working as census enumerators, forces us to

## Key insights

We reflect on the use of a team photo-diary activity in a research project on smallholder farmers in Northwest Cambodia. Photo-diaries were introduced as a training tool to encourage reflexivity among Cambodian early career researchers. However, they evolved into a methodological and collaborative tool that complemented census data collection. Photo-diaries help make research locations, teams, and power imbalances in global north–south research collaborations more visible. Visual methodologies are critical in enhancing quantitative insights and addressing the inherent challenges and opportunities in co-producing knowledge within such collaborative frameworks.

acknowledge long-standing inequalities in the labour for, authority around, and reward from knowledge production (Garrett & Brickell, 2015; Ozano & Khatri, 2018; Sou, 2022).

Our approach draws upon and extends the growing interest in photography as a research method in human geography and the social sciences more generally. While photographs have always played a role within geographic research, initially as a means for recording and depicting people and places and later as a means for analysing the viewpoints of those taking the photos, more recently, the taking of photos—photography—has become a method in itself (Hilander, 2024). Through techniques associated with auto-photography (Johnsen et al., 2008), such as photo-elicitation, photo response (Alam et al., 2018), photo-diaries (Shubin et al., 2023), and photo-voice (Maclean & Woodward, 2013), participants are provided with opportunities to take and discuss their own photos. Such photographic methods unsettle standard researcher-researched power dynamics by providing participants with the ability to share their perspectives in a visual form and in their own time, providing a different ‘vantage point’ for engaging with an issue (Alam et al., 2018; Shubin et al., 2023). This is particularly important for disadvantaged or marginalised groups, such as children, homeless, Indigenous or refugee communities, who may be uncomfortable with more traditional methods (Johnsen et al., 2008; Maclean & Woodward, 2013). In this paper, we find inspiration from this work but develop it in two key ways. First, we initially implemented the researcher photo-diary during the collection of *quantitative* data rather than as a component of a qualitative methodology which is more typical in photographic research. Using photo-diaries in this way helped improve data collection processes and provided vital

contextual and narrative insights that aided the interpretation of statistical data, ultimately influencing the design of later research activities and research findings. Second, we do not use the photographic research techniques to highlight the vantage points of the rural communities involved in our research, the typical focus of auto-photography, but to instead address power dynamics that elicit hidden perspectives from *within* the research team itself. Specifically, we used photo-diaries to create openings for the voices and perspectives of the Cambodian field researchers to be heard and respected.

We argue that, as an orienting device, the photo-diary activity works as a rapid assessment tool, allowing researchers to identify problems in data collection and prompting adjustments in logistics and approach. As Figure 1 highlights, access to households and farming plots, compounded by road conditions, were significant and recurring considerations in the data collection process. Further, the photo-diary activity allowed consideration of emerging themes, which were followed up in the analysis and subsequent phases of data collection and project activities. It provided unique, visual, and in-depth insights (Gotschi et al., 2009; Hall, 2009), often overlooked, forgotten, or hidden in standard surveys and censuses. In so doing, the photo-diary activity provided context and meaning that enriched quantitative data, helping to explain the reasons and mechanics behind averages, differences, and outliers. We highlight the significant benefits that could arise if the photo-diary activity were to be adopted as standard practice in quantitative data collection—like surveys and censuses—in social science.

In addition to data collection benefits, we also focus on the tensions and possibilities of the photo-diary activity as a collaborative tool for knowledge co-production. For the researchers in Australia, it compressed time and space, allowing more frequent ‘check-ins’ with data, study sites, and team members.

We reflect on the practice and ethics of remote fieldwork (Hynes, 2024), particularly in contexts where much of the data collection was done by a team of Cambodian early career researchers (see Nguyen et al., 2022; Tang & Gube, 2022; Turner, 2010). We juxtapose the ambiguities between physical and psychological absence as well as emergent possibilities of frequent virtual field visits whilst maintaining care responsibilities at home (Cox et al., 2024) and in the field (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017). The Cambodian early career researchers were enthusiastic participants in what they saw as capacity and team building: preparing the photo-diaries individually and collectively and presenting them in English to the wider research team. While the team learned and benefited from the photo-diary activity, we explored the one-sided use of the phrase *capacity building* in our team reflection, and used it to interrogate the social construction of expertise and the politics of funding in global north–south research collaborations (Gaillard, 1994; Voller et al., 2022).

By promoting humility in claims around expertise in knowledge, the photo-diary activity is a promising tool to move towards more egalitarian and sustainable international collaboration. However, it is also riddled with the potential of making field-based *international collaborative* research more extractive. As opposed to flying in and out for a quick field visit, research elites from the global north can increasingly *Zoom in*, taking most of the academic credit and enjoying the rewards of upward career mobility (see Gupta, 2014; Mwambari, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022).

In what follows, we first introduce the research project and the international team of researchers from Australian and Cambodian institutions (Section 2). We then introduce the photo-diary activity in Section 3. In Section 4, we reflect on the value of the photo-diary activity as a data collection tool in terms of embedding researcher reflexivity into the research process. We

### On the way to the household at [anonymised] village

*The team went to do the census.  
The households interviewed are far  
from the outside village.  
I took a photo on Aug 19, 2022. I  
decided to share this photo because  
the view on the way is beautiful.*



**FIGURE 1** On the way to the census: a photo-diary entry by Chariya Korn.

follow this with a discussion of the photo-diary activity's role as a collaborative tool and the challenges it brought in terms of power, expertise, and knowledge production (Section 5). We conclude (Section 6) by reflecting on how the photo-diary activity brings three parts of the research process into view: research locations, research teams, and power imbalances within international teams of researchers.

## 2 | THE RESEARCH PROJECT: NEXT GENERATION AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

The ways in which international research collaborations are funded, governed, and structured play a consequential role in the ensuing academic and relational outcomes between organisations, and among individual team members of different ranks and roles (Gaillard, 1994; Voller et al., 2022). The Next Generation Agricultural Extension: Social Relations for Practice Change is a 6-year multidisciplinary research project funded by ACIAR. The project commenced at

the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and was still ongoing at the time of writing. The project seeks to identify forms of agricultural extension that could create sustainable livelihoods that meet the needs and aspirations of smallholder farmers, and their households and communities. The project consists of a series of seven sequenced research activities involving mixed methods (Figure 2). Each of the research activities is led by an *activity lead*. All seven activity leads are employed by three different Australian universities (Australian-based researchers). Out of seven, only one activity lead resides in Cambodia and has the double role as an in-country project lead. Multiple Cambodian institutions are involved as collaborators. However, the central node of the in-country research activity for the project is a Cambodian non-government organisation specialising in rural development, located in Battambang.

In this paper, we focus on Activity 2: the household census. This involved the full enumeration of all households across eight purposely selected villages in Northwest Cambodia (see Finlayson et al., 2025). The primary objective of the household census was to



FIGURE 2 Project phases and data collection approach.

provide a comprehensive overview of the study's broader contexts, enabling us to generate detailed profiles of the geographic, socio-economic, demographic, and agricultural characteristics across the diverse commune settings in Northwest Cambodia. The rest of the project—Activities 1 to 7—draw on a suite of quantitative, qualitative, and participatory data collection methods.

In the context of mobility restrictions and risks associated with the global COVID-19 pandemic, the census served as the first phase of our in-country data collection. Coming out of a series of lockdowns, and with many of the Australian-based members and their families falling ill with COVID-19 for the first time in 2022, we limited international and inter-provincial travel.<sup>1</sup> Rather than hiring many enumerators to collect household demographic data simultaneously within a short time frame, we were concerned with the risks to our team and to community members of catching and spreading COVID-19. This led to the decision to work with a relatively small number of local research associates who resided either in or near our study sites.

We recruited and trained eight research associates (RAs) based in Battambang and Pailin to carry out all aspects of data collection for Activity 2, and for the remaining duration of the project. Our selection process prioritised individuals with educational qualifications and previous experience in agriculture and rural development, aligning with the project's principle of fostering ongoing capacity building among early career researchers in Cambodia. When joining the project in May 2022, four of the RAs were recent graduates with master's degrees, and two were still enrolled as master's students at the National University of Battambang. Four of the RAs were women, and four were men, with one man married with children.

Rather than using the term *research assistants*, we intentionally use the term *research associates* to describe their role in our project. Much has been written about the stratified and unequal nature of research collaboration between more securely employed senior researchers, and research assistants on contingent employment (Deane & Stevano, 2016; Gupta, 2014; Hill et al., 2019; Hobson et al., 2005; Ozano & Khatri, 2018; Sieber & Tolich, 2013; Tang & Gube, 2022; Turner, 2010). Sieber and Tolich (2013) use the term *hired hands* to describe the marginalised and vulnerable positions of research assistants, while Hobson et al. (2005) underlined the issue of research assistants as *silenced partners* in knowledge production. Simply replacing the term clearly does not solve these long-standing inequalities in knowledge production and its reward structure. Indeed, the two terms lead to the same abbreviation: RAs, which had been consistently used to describe the specific role and relative rank of the Cambodian early career researchers in our project.

Yet, the Cambodian RAs in our team do much more than provide *research assistance*. Hired as *research project officers* attached to our partner non-government organisation in Battambang, they work under the supervision of an in-country project lead and other researchers and collaborators in Cambodia, and project and activity leads based in Australia. With Activity 2 marking the start of their engagement in the project, the RAs were first trained and asked to conduct a rather 'slow' census and other supporting research activities for the census data collection: a village and GIS mapping exercise, and photo-diaries. The RAs conducted various other data collection activities for subsequent stages of the project. These included conducting a farm plot survey, in-depth interviews, and organising and facilitating participatory mapping and wellbeing and livelihood workshops. In addition to spearheading the field data collection, and partly as an outcome of the photo-diary activity which destabilised global north-south power dynamics, the RAs went on to provide key inputs in the design of the data collection approach, analysis, and subsequent design of the livelihood interventions at the core of the project.

### 3 | THE TEAM PHOTO-DIARIES

The use of photo voice or participatory photography in agricultural research involving farmers is not new (Gotschi et al., 2009). However, rather than asking farmers to take photos, photo-diaries were curated by the Cambodian RAs. In July 2022, the RAs were introduced to the method during a training session for census data collection in Battambang.

Within the realities of post-pandemic field research, the photo-diary activity was intended as a supplementary training and collaborative method to mitigate the inability of Australian-based researchers to visit and stay in the field for extended periods. Therefore, rather than as a tool for data collection, photo-diaries were introduced as a research training instrument to encourage the RAs to foster critical skills in evaluating data collection, methods, and findings, as well as to develop reflexive research practices. Reflexivity is recognised as a crucial element in qualitative research. Broadly understood as "the act of examining one's own assumption, belief and judgement systems, and thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process", social scientists have pushed for its inclusion to improve rigour in quantitative data collection (Jamieson et al., 2023, p. 1). Promoting reflexivity in census data collection aligned with the project philosophy, acknowledging and identifying 'missing' or typically overlooked aspects of agricultural extension.

Between August 2022 and February 2023, the RAs took on the role of census enumerators. Through a

digital questionnaire facilitated by a mobile application (CommCare, see Dayalu et al., 2015),<sup>2</sup> they enumerated 2,507 households, with 10,096 household members and 4,253 farm plots across eight villages in the lowland and upland areas of Battambang and Pailin provinces. In parallel with the census, the RAs were asked to take images pertaining to any aspects of the data collection and research process. The RAs were then provided with the following written instructions:

“The photo-diaries are intended as a way to share and reflect upon our research and data collection experience during Activity 2 of our project. Please submit one picture each week (you can submit more if you want). The picture can be of your field site/ your respondent’s house/your respondents (with consent)/farms/people/ yourself/ your research process/your travel/anything related to the data collection process or related to you as a researcher during this data collection process. Add information in the speaker notes – where was this (picture) taken; when was this taken; why did you take this picture/why did you decide to share this? Tell us about this picture. Write your name and date when you submit this photo to our collective online photo-diaries document”

In total, 92 images were submitted with a brief accompanying written text to a collective online photo-diaries document. Figures 3–4 showcase examples of photo-diaries’ submissions. In one example, an RA took a photo of a respondent’s diverse agricultural practices, while in the other, a reflection was shared

regarding the co-learning that took place among the RAs themselves (see Kammoora et al., 2024).

Every two weeks, each RA took turns presenting a photo-diary image to team members across a total of ten 90-minute online workshops (the photo-diary activity). The photo-diary activity was facilitated by the first author (lead of household census data collection) and attended by other activity leads as well as collaborators in Cambodia and Australia. It began with a quick icebreaker<sup>3</sup> then each of the eight presenters was allocated roughly 10 minutes to present their image. Roughly 20 minutes were allocated for Q&A, and then the facilitator wrapped up, summarising themes arising from the presentation and, at times, linking themes to issues or themes raised in previous workshops.

The photo-diaries’ reflections were written in English and the photo-diary activity run in English, creating opportunities for RAs to work on their professed desire to improve their English language skills, however, this was difficult for some. When speakers struggled, they would revert to Khmer and another team member would translate for them. Aside from the in-country lead, a Cambodian national, none of the other activity leads or other Australian-based researchers speak Khmer. The requirement to speak in English with a foreign research team member was intimidating at first. There was no assessment of the photo-diaries in terms of quality, plenty of affirmative comments provided, lots of laughter, and ongoing attempts to break down hierarchical relationships.

In sum, the photo-diary activity is facilitated by a suite of digital technologies and refers to both i) the process of taking and curating images associated with the census data collection by the Cambodian RAs, and ii) the accompanying regular online workshops where these images were presented to and discussed with

I interviewed a farmer in [anonymised] village, Sangkae district, Battambang province.

I took this photo on November 15, 2022. I am interested in this household, her name is [redacted]. She is 21 years old. So I decided to share this household because they have a lot of primary activities in their family. She has a drone for spraying on rice field (Pesticide, diseases,...) , raising catfish (Trey Ondaeng) for home consumption and sell) , cows , and rice production.

- For rice production: She has 11 ha. She got yields between 4T to 5T per 1ha.
- About the drone: Last year she got 1000 ha for the spraying. She got the price 7.75\$/ha.
- About the raising catfish: she bought small catfish (Trey Ondaeng) 200kg but she forgot the cost. And She spent the feeding 907.5\$. When she was harvested, she got 1000kg. She was sold 2\$/kg.

Battambang, 18 Nov 2022

Chariya Korn



FIGURE 3 Multiple careers in agriculture: a photo-diary entry by Chariya Korn.

## Sharing Knowledge!!

Last September 17th, 2022, the Btb team and Samlout team went to visit the Pailin team to learn from the Pailin team how they interview farmers, and learn more about how to draw village maps by using ArcGIS 10.8.

In this photo was the a group activity where Ms Lita explained ArcGIS. She explained how to use ArcGIS, OpenStreetMap, and Google Earth to us before we went to the field.

As a result of this explanation, I could draw [anonymised] village's map for the first time. Even though it is not well but I think better than doing nothing. Thanks, Ms. Lita for your explanation and for your help.

This photo was taken last September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022 in Pailin province.

Reported by Saroeut YONG, 30th September, 2022

ArcGIS Sharing from Lita

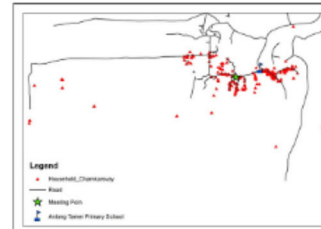


FIGURE 4 Sharing knowledge: a photo-diary entry by Saroeut Yong.

activity leads and collaborators located in Cambodia and Australia. Following the completion of census data collection and the associated photo-diary activity, we circulated a questionnaire to all participants in the online workshops (all co-authors in this paper). All RAs, collaborators, and activity lead involved in the photo-diary activity were invited to co-author the current paper. They were asked to describe what the photo-diary activity involved, reflect on their role, and have broader reflections on lessons learned. Their responses and insights informed this analysis. We present these insights through two sections, the first focuses on the photo-diary activity in terms of knowledge production, and the second focuses on collaboration.

## 4 | PHOTO-DIARIES AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND AS A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING

### 4.1 | Reflexivity in quantitative data collection

The initial aim of incorporating a photo-diary activity in the census enumeration was to encourage more attentive and reflexive research practice in a largely quantitative (and digitised) approach to data collection. Only one out of eight RAs reported that they had previously worked with visual methods. One participant described the tasks associated with having to prepare and present a photo-diary entry as “small homework”. Preparation for the online workshop could take anywhere between three minutes, two hours, to half a day for different RAs. The opportunity to take, select, and curate pictures to share and present to the group required them to be more reflexive and observant while in the field:

“To me, photo-diary activity is important to improve thinking and observation. However, the photo-diary activity required me to take notes, be more observant, and think while I was in the field.” (Battambang-based RA)

Given the vast coverage of the census and the length of time spent in the field (seven months), the photo-diary activity was an effective way to curate a visual fieldnote to complement the digital census enumeration process:

“In my opinion, the purpose of having a photo-diary was because I want to save a good memory of the photo and bad memory as a lesson to remind me next time.” (Battambang-based RA)

However, rather than simply a visual fieldnote for an individual researcher, the photo-diary activity produced collective visual notes for the group. The presentation and discussion during online workshops encouraged reflexivity for both the Cambodian and Australian team members, at both the individual and team levels (see Toraman Turk et al., 2024):

“The purpose of the activity was to provide a safe and supportive space for critical reflection and collaboration. This was important on two levels – firstly to critically reflect on the content of the data collection (what stories stood out, what themes kept coming up) but secondly, and of equal importance, to critically reflect on being a social science researcher (positionality,

access, power, bias etc.) (Australia-based researcher)

As a practical example, the quote below illustrates how a single image can lead to diverse interpretations:

“Because it requires us to think, observe, and what we should do to help farmers. Sometimes we have the same picture, but we have different ideas about the problems and possible ways to help them. For example, as I remember I was presenting one picture of a toilet in the field. I wonder why farmers still use it because it is not safe to use and is too old. Then, I presented the problem how it was hard to find a toilet for female members of the research team, but other members thought differently from me. I understand that we can get different ideas and knowledge from other people through one picture.” (Battambang-based RA)

Observations like this encouraged discussions about positionality in quantitative field-based research and subsequent data analysis. The dynamics of the photo-diary activity enabled discussion of how, for example, a particular census respondent might generate different interpretations and responses depending on who asked the question, when the question was asked, and how it was explained to the respondent (Jamieson et al., 2023).

## 4.2 | The photo-diary activity as a rapid assessment tool

During the online workshops, the team observed how the photo-diary activity brought other methodological benefits. The photo-diaries inadvertently became a rapid assessment tool, providing an expanding and (almost) real-time dataset of annotated visual records of the census data collection process.

First, the photo-diary activity helped to identify methodological issues in the census data collection, including strategies to address those issues. Despite multiple rounds of pre-testing and revisions, there were, as expected, responses that could not be captured in the census questionnaire. While there was an in-country project lead and activity lead who oversaw the data collection, the photo-diary activity offered a regular space for discussion with other activity leads, and other members of the research team:

“Keeping in touch with activity leaders is very important because we can discuss problems we face during data collection.

For example, some farmers’ conditions don’t fit with the questionnaire form, or some important information can be discussed during a Zoom workshop.” (Battambang-based RAs)

For example, through the photo-diary activity, we found that people were reluctant to participate in the census because they thought our RAs were either scammers (*swindlers*) or were working for microcredit companies as debt collectors/loan marketers. These insights prompted us to take necessary measures to ensure that our team was easily recognisable as researchers, for example through having uniforms (shirts, t-shirts, and jackets), printing lanyards, ID cards, and stickers for helmets/motorcycles for them, and providing alternative ways of recording consent apart from collecting written signatures (Figure 5).

Second, the photo-diary activity helped identify outliers, unique, and missing cases that would otherwise be subsumed in the tendency to calculate and present averages and means from the census data. For example, one Battambang/Pailin-based RA, Sao Chen, shared their experience of coming across vacant “migrant” houses, which could partially account for higher non-response rates in particular villages (Figure 6). That is, the visual and narrative insights from the photo-diary activity provided unique perspectives, often hidden in the numbers or missing from our census data. As noted by one of the RAs:

“The photo-diary to me is a very good way of telling the story or overview of RAs, what they thought about, for instance, when they were interested in something, and wanted to express their feelings about something that have not been included in the census questionnaire or could not be noted [in the CommCare App].” (Battambang-based RA)

The ways in which the photo-diary activity identified unusual observations relate to a third point—the photo-diaries contextualised and triangulated results from the census data. The photo-diaries added a visual ‘check’ to the household datasets generated by the census. As a sampling frame for subsequent activities, the census provided unique household IDs for all respondents in our dataset. We could match the household ID with relevant photo-diary entries. In effect, we have a curated and partial visualisation behind the *numbers* collected through a standard census questionnaire:

“The photos themselves—coupled with the stories from the RAs—the study site came to life”. (Australian-based researcher)

## Hesitant to be interviewed because of signature gathering!

Since I started the census, he was the first man who volunteered to be interviewed, but did not dare to sign because he thought I'm a scammer. I had to introduce myself and showed him several photos of my interviews with the villagers. After getting to know me well, he's really welcoming, and a good respondent.

This photo was taken while I was interviewing him in front of his barber shop and his name was (redacted) wearing a black shirt.



FIGURE 5 Hesitant to be interviewed because of signature gathering: a photo-diary entry by Sinuon Chhun.

## MIGRANT HOUSE

These households migrated to Thailand. They can save money to buy land and build their houses, and they are still working in Thailand.

These photos were taken on October 7, 2022.

CHEN Sao, October 14, 2022



FIGURE 6 Migrant house: a photo-diary entry by Sao Chen.

In this way, rather than being only an instrument for research training, the photo-diaries became a data collection activity. The photos and accompanying narratives can be coded and analysed independently. They can also be coded for a mixed methods analysis when used in conjunction with the census data.

Finally, with its function as a Supplementary 'dataset' in our project, the photo-diary activity, in combination with the slow census, provided a space for key themes to emerge and an opportunity for RAs to identify participants for subsequent research activities. One example is the visual record of the changing nature of challenges faced by smallholder farmers over different seasons, which can vary across upland and lowland villages. This called for greater attention to seasonality

when we analysed census variables like subjective wellbeing, household income from different farming commodities, and farming challenges, which were collected across different study sites at different times across the seven months of census data collection. Another example showed how the photo-diaries guided the sampling in subsequent project activities. Equipped with the census-linked photo-diary entries, RAs were able to provide inputs and nominate participants for a purposive sample of farmers with specific criteria for Activity 5. The following quotes from other activity leads highlight how the project's accidental encounter with the photo-diary activity benefited the research design and analysis in their respective activity:

“It provided motivation and insight into the project context for those working outside of Cambodia. As I mentioned before, it brought the project to life and provided an impetus to analyse and read more about the various themes and topics which were coming up.” (Australian-based researcher/lead of Activity 1)

“I think also that it was useful for other team members who were even further from the data/case study to help situate them. It has also been useful to gain insights into qualitative changes in peoples’ lives that were less easily captured in the census data—so there was a richness that came through the photos - involving personalities, successes and failures, that provided memorable framings for interpreting the data. Also, I think the photo diaries will help RAs inform Activity 5 selection of households, so they shift from simply being assistants to more active contributors to research design. So, the diaries help them reflect and engage more deeply with the places and people they were in contact with.” (Australian-based researcher/lead of Activity 5)

In sum, reflections on the methodological contributions of the photo-diary activity support the argument that visual digital methods have the potential to be more than a supplement to conventional quantitative data collection. They have the potential to orient standard surveys and interviews (Jamieson et al., 2023), and in our case, have the added benefit of nurturing collaboration.

## 5 | PHOTO-DIARY ACTIVITY AS A COLLABORATIVE TOOL

### 5.1 | ‘Capacity building’ and the politics of expertise

One recurring phrase in the photo-diary activity was ‘capacity building’. Although every team member, regardless of where they were based, expressed how they had learnt from the activity, the phrase ‘building capacity’ or ‘capacity building’ was uniquely used when talking about the RAs by both the RAs and other team members. Capacity building is a trope of development projects and donor-funded research in the global south (Craig, 2007; Jakimow, 2008). Beyond its use to describe community-level empowerment programmes, we note how its use has been mainstreamed among the Cambodian RAs themselves, used to describe how their ‘capacity’ has been strengthened.

The initial objective of the photo-diaries was to build the researchers’ reflexive research capacity amidst quantitative data collection, but we note that in the post-activity reflection, English and communication skills were listed among the primary benefits. Much of this was not because of the photo-taking but was because the RAs were asked to present the annotated image to the team. This required preparation and collaboration, helping to correct and edit ideas and English expression. As indicated by four different RAs, there is a close intersection between English proficiency, *capacity building*, and team building:

“It is very useful to me, providing me an opportunity to practice my English language, and I found myself that I can listen, speak and write better than before. I also got a lot of knowledge and good experience from other RAs and farmers’ stories, for example, challenges farmers faced and their solutions, farmers adaptation to new agricultural technologies, life lesson sharing from farmers...etc. Last but not least, I feel that this activity brings a good working environment to me, such as building good relationships, having fun, and developing my understanding and ideas.” (Battambang-based RA)

“For collaboration, we helped each other make a photo diary, edited phrases of writing, and gave good advice to each other.” (Battambang-based RA)

“We work in a team such as helping me to check my spelling, check sentences, and explain to me how to present the photo-diary. So, I gain more knowledge and friendship from photo-diary methods.” (Battambang-based RA)

“In my opinion, the key lessons that the team learnt from participating in this activity: 1) Good relationship with team members, especially with experts team 2) Got good suggestions and advice 3) improving their English skills 4) improving building capacity 5) become young researchers” (Battambang-based RA)

That English proficiency was mentioned repeatedly underscored the linguistic dominance of English in the project and, more broadly, in international research collaborations (McKinnon et al., 2022; Turner, 2010). This dominance is known but often avoided within collaborative research and publication practices (Ozano & Khatri, 2018). The language spoken in our study sites

is Khmer. Ultimately, the team members with the greatest disadvantage were those who could not speak, write, or understand Khmer. Apart from the Cambodian in-country lead, all the Australian-based researchers relied on translation and third-hand interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data, with little attempt to build proficiency in Khmer. In the context of project annual reports to the funder, the term ‘capacity building’ is used one-sidedly to refer to building proficiency in English for the RAs.

Related to the one-sided use of capacity building is the concomitant use of the term ‘experts’ to refer to the senior researchers in the project. In partnerships between the global north and south institutions, expertise is often symbolised by whiteness and ‘westernness’ (Sou, 2022), and in exchanges between Australian and Cambodian members of the larger team, it was often the Australians whose ‘expertise’ was referenced. An example is the quote below where one of the RAs referred to the Australian-based researchers as *experts*:

“Because it [the photo-diary] provided a good opportunity, so that we could talk or share with the team. And also, experts can summarise the activities that they were interested in, and make an update in the project newsletter for updating of activities that we have done or currently in progress.” (Battambang-based RA)

However, the photo-diary activity was instrumental in shifting perceptions of expertise. One of the lead researchers reflected on how they saw the Cambodian RAs as being the *experts* during the online workshops:

“It helps to break down knowledge hierarchies amongst academics. The RAs were the experts in the room, and we were learning from them.” (Australian-based researcher)

Clearly, the RAs and the Australian-based researchers had different types of expertise, both of which were vital to the project. However, there was an expectation that the Australian expertise was more important than the Cambodian. The photo-diary activity provided opportunities to challenge these assumptions through reflection and in discussions emphasising the value of RA ideas and perspectives.

The centrality of English in capacity building is a proxy of wider inequalities in global north–south knowledge production. Here, we draw on what Garrett and Brickell (2015) define as participatory politics of partnership. Reflecting on their video workshops on domestic violence in Cambodia, the authors conceptualised participatory politics of partnership “as the multi-layered

power relations between community groups, gatekeepers and researchers whose respective agency is mediated by the political economy the research emerges from, and takes place within (Garrett & Brickell, 2015, p. 230). In a Cambodian setting, that political economy of the research environment is inflected by persistent norms of “hierarchy, deference, patronage and an acceptance of the social order” (Hughes, 2003 in Garrett & Brickell, 2015, p.231), making it a challenging environment in which to disrupt the baked-in power imbalances of research. The quote below is illustrative of the tensions around research expertise and partnership within the photo-diary activity. On the one hand, since the presentation of the results to funders and external stakeholders must also be done in English, the photo-diary activity provided a supportive space for learning for the Cambodian RAs:

“Beyond bringing the project to life for those of us outside of Cambodia, it fostered a connection between the more senior and junior members of the team and built trust in the Cambodian team’s abilities. The method developed confidence and capacity in the RAs, which I would argue led them to deliver presentations at the mid-Term Review in front of external stakeholders and the project’s donor agency.” (Australian-based researcher)

At the same time, because the presentations were required to be given in English for the representative of the Australian funders, it also served to sustain and potentially amplify the imbalanced power relations in global north–south collaborations.

In sum, research team members interpreted the photo-diary activity in ways that both reinforced and challenged the standard power relations and positionalities that inform international research collaborations between the global north and south. RAs were keen to position themselves as benefiting through capacity building in terms of English language skills and access to experts, conforming to standard norms. To some extent, the Australian-based researchers reinforced these tropes by not running the photo-diary activity in Khmer, and by not identifying capacity building as being a benefit that they received. This is despite recognising many benefits and insights gleaned from the photo-diary activity, including the improved capacity they built to understand the context and plan for future activities. However, there was some awareness among the Australian-based researchers that the RAs were experts rather than the foreign research team. This was a realisation that grew as the online workshops enabled in-depth discussions about trends that could easily have been missed if the Australian-based researchers had simply analysed the census data. Through the

photo-diary activity, the knowledge, skills, and personalities of the RAs came through and positioned them as colleagues rather than assistants when discussing research findings and designing research activities.

## 5.2 | Remote fieldwork and collaboration

In a methodological reflection on remote court ethnographies in an immigration tribunal in the UK, Hynes (2024) notes four dimensions of the challenges of being ‘absent’ in the field. The “absence of fully embodied watching” (Hynes, 2024, p. 3) narrows the time and sensory experience of fieldwork. The second is the “absence of physical co-presence” (Hynes, 2024, p. 3), leading to the loss of informal interactions and chance encounters with study participants, which limits the scope and depth of research. The third is “psychological absences” (Hynes, 2024, p. 4), which refers to the distractions of having to conduct research remotely. For example, when field research was stretched across digital and physical space, the ethnographer could experience distractions by having multiple computer screens and applications open. Lastly, there is the absence of the (visible) researcher, which Hynes argues makes obtaining consent more or less difficult. In Hynes’ remote ethnography, the role of the researcher, where all involved parties—the researcher and participants—had virtual co-presence, was like being a *fly on the wall*.

Through the census, being physically removed meant that Australian-based researchers’ knowledge and understanding were at risk of being lost in context and translation. While our research setting differed from Hynes’, we observed comparable challenges on inter-related aspects of remote fieldwork and collaboration. Though trained in different disciplines in the social sciences, all Australian-based team members consider fieldwork as integral. For many team members, travelling to and from a distant study site requires a long absence from ‘home’. The ability to do so is highly dependent on family and caregiving responsibilities, which vary across—and within the life course of—individual researchers (Cox et al., 2024). For the Australian-based researchers, the photo-diary activity was a way to bring them ‘closer’ and more frequently to the field:

“[The photo-diary] was also a visual and therefore powerful means to connect those of us sitting outside of Cambodia to what was happening on the ground in our study site, and to see it through the eyes of our local team members. I did not have to prepare for the activity, as I was an observer.” (Australian-based researcher)

While ‘staying home’ may be more environmentally and personally sustainable, it came with challenges. As noted by Hynes, for Australian-based researchers, the blurred boundaries between home, campus, and the field can easily turn *convenience* into frequent periods of multitasking. The psychological and physical absence from the field requires the ability to switch on and off across tasks and geographies quickly. In addition, as much as it allows multiple rounds of quick virtual field visits, the ‘simple’ logistics of organising online workshops increased expectations for team members to (frequently) be present despite such absence.

For Australian-based researchers, the absent observer role raises ethical dilemmas around the invisible researcher (Hynes, 2024). Would the data be the same if team members lingered or took a more active part in the census enumeration process? Would the respondents be less or more willing to offer voluntary information? What would be the optics if foreign and more senior researchers were made visible alongside local early career researchers? With questions like these, it was hard to decide whether the photo-diary activity made the collaboration more or less *extractive*.

The photo-diary activity’s reliance on the curatorial decisions of the Cambodian team highlights broader tensions in field research. As a dataset, the photo-diaries include a collection of curated imageries and narratives. Methods-wise, there is a degree of path dependency in the image curation and research theme generation process. Which photo is taken and eventually submitted to the collective album was informed by what was considered interesting and important during the QA session in the preceding workshop. Collaboration-wise, the photo-diary activity gives agency and power to Cambodian RAs to curate and impart insights. While this is common in other methods involving research assistants or data collected by a third party, the photo-diary activity makes inclusion more visually explicit. As reflected in the earlier quote, the shift in power was matched with a shift in the relative workload. Again, this is not unique to the photo-diary activity but is indicative of wider tensions in global north–south research collaborations. The photo-diary activity makes such realities more apparent and encourages reflections on empowering early career researchers and fully trusting their ability to carry out the research. Still, with Australian members taking a more passive observer role, some felt guilty for not being able to be physically present and working alongside the Cambodian researchers in the field. While in-country workshops and short field visits addressed some of the guilt, there remains discomfort with handing over responsibility and lack of in-person engagement.

What was clear, however, was that the photo-diary activity provided an alternative means to foster collaborative practices. The regular online workshops meant that physical co-presence was replaced by virtual co-

presence. It meant that the whole team could have much more frequent interaction and reciprocal check-ins than what had been the case in the past. Digital technologies have compressed time and space, enabling team members from different time zones and countries to come together more often. To a certain extent, having almost ‘instantaneous’ access facilitated care practices among team members, linking the lives of foreign researchers and Cambodian RAs beyond the confines of the ‘field’ (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017). Some Australian-based researchers met with the Cambodian team prior to making their first trip to Battambang. The photo-diary activity then became a platform for introduction among the team. That is, apart from getting visual insights into the study site and participants, it gave the opportunity for the Cambodian researchers to share more intimate more-than-census insights. For example, there were entries from a researcher who went back to their parent’s hometown during a cultural festival and of harvesting fruits in a farm plot owned by their parents. While not presenting images, Australian-based researchers reciprocated by inviting team members to the background space—whether working from home or their office space, allowing for more intimate insights into their private surroundings. During a training session for a subsequent Activity, one Australian researcher had prepared videos taken from his home, providing a reciprocal look into Australian households and home gardening challenges. There has been very little opportunity for early career researchers from the global south to peak into the everyday lives of their foreign research counterparts. Despite the benefits of the collaborative aspects of the photo-diary activity, the online workshops and the pictures alone could not replace the experience of ideas coming together in-person. This became evident through multiple offline meetings and field visits in Cambodia during the different phases of the project.

## 6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

We conclude by arguing that the photo-diary activity benefited the project by making three unseen aspects of research more visible. First, as a tool for orientation and understanding, it brought census respondents and places into view. The Australian team benefited from being exposed to narratives and photos that helped to contextualise the quantitative data being generated. The photo diary activity helped to identify emerging themes that influenced the design of data collection in subsequent research activities. Most of the Australian team was unfamiliar with the location, making the online workshops their first visual and narrative exposure to village lives. Similarly, Cambodian RAs benefited from exchanging stories and having the

opportunity to debrief about challenges and events. Collective team understanding of agricultural issues pertaining to project goals benefited from the exercise.

Second, the photo-diary activity made the RAs more visible within the research process. In the context of COVID-19, many of the Australian-based team members met the RAs for the first time in these online, informal, and convivial environments. More than just meeting, however, Australian researchers gained insight into the challenges that RAs faced within the data collection and how they overcame these challenges through the embedding of reflexive research practice, enabling questions that deepened understanding. As the RAs became familiar with the process and more confident in sharing their opinions and ideas, they shifted from being anonymous data collectors to becoming colleagues and collaborators who influence how research is done and how it is understood and interpreted. Recognition of RA skills, strengths, insights and reflections saw their ideas influenced the design and practice of subsequent activities.

This relates to our third observation that the photo-diary activity makes power inequalities between teams of researchers working across global north–south divides more apparent (Garrett & Brickell, 2015; Sou, 2022). It forced all team members to reconsider their idea of expertise. It became apparent that there was not an expert team of external researchers working with a less educated or skilled team of Cambodian researchers. Instead, contextual understandings of place, agriculture, culture, norms, values, services, and needs, as well as the problems of research design and practice, were all derived from RA expertise. As was often reiterated in the online workshops, the RAs were the experts from which the Australian team sought to learn from—this was the case not only because they were the ones gathering the data but because their thoughts and reflections on the experiences and observations gained during data collection were also valued. However, because the RAs have different sorts of skills and expertise, they have limited ability or opportunity to contribute to and profit from publications or subsequent grant applications—the currency of academia. The photo-diary activity made these global inequalities in knowledge production more visible to the team, inducing a measure of humility amongst the Australian team but not enough to really challenge global north–south norms such as the use of the English language and development tropes such as capacity building (McKinnon et al., 2022; Turner, 2010). Our experience raises the unsettling possibility that research teams working across global north–south divides may be unwittingly reproducing some of the power dynamics they may be criticising and attempting to deconstruct. The quest of breaking down rank inequalities among researchers for a more egalitarian collaboration remains elusive.

In summary, this almost accidental COVID-induced research method added much to our research. We employed a version of it later in the project when the Cambodian team were able to share their experiences and reflections when conducting qualitative interviews, fieldwalks, and auto-photography methods, creating powerful emotional moments as the team collectively, rather than individually, grappled with some of the confronting and difficult narratives that researchers were exposed to. Perhaps the most significant learning from the researcher photo-diary exercise was the immense importance of providing opportunities for research associates to share their ideas, observations, and reflections, particularly in international research teams, but also in any research group. Too often 'research assistant' perspectives are given insufficient weight or are not acknowledged (Msila, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; Ozano & Khatri, 2018; Rosyada, 2022; Tang & Gube, 2022), particularly during the collection of quantitative data. The researcher photo-diary discussions enable their 'vantage points' (Alam et al., 2018) be heard and become influential in structured ways that dilute the power dynamics between senior and junior researchers, just as more conventional forms of auto-photography address power relations between researchers and the researched (Johnsen et al., 2008; Shubin et al., 2023). We recommend the team photo-diary method for the three reasons discussed above. The team photo-diaries brought the places and participants within the research, the practices and perspectives of the research associates, and the ongoing and unsettling power dynamics within international team research (including, most significantly, the ability of the more privileged senior researchers to travel), into view and consideration. This all, we believe, led to improvements in how we conducted, applied, and interpreted our research methods, and how we engaged with one another across significant divides in geography, opportunity, and power.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Ariane Utomo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2314-9513>  
Andrew McGregor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6476-346X>

346X

Caitlin Finlayson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2287-8821>

Katharine McKinnon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2991-0182>

Nicholas Harrigan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5092-1180>

Pao Srean  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2330-9660>

Thong Tran  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9779-713X>

Van Touch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2391-4898>

Brian R Cook  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5618-1395>

## ENDNOTES

- While Australia pursued a strict elimination strategy with prolonged lockdowns and border closures, Cambodia focused on pragmatic containment through rapid vaccination and selective restrictions, despite schools being closed for nearly 250 days between 2020 and 2021 (UNICEF Cambodia, (2022). New research confirms Cambodian children experienced extensive learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/press-releases/new-research-confirms-cambodian-children-experienced-extensive-learning-loss-during>). Cambodia opened its borders to all vaccinated international travellers in November 2021 (Srean et al. (2023). Descriptive assessment of COVID-19 responses and lessons learnt in Cambodia, January 2020 to June 2022. *BMJ Global Health*, 8(5), e011885. [10.1136/bmjgh-2023-011885](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2023-011885)). Australia reopened its borders more cautiously, with a phased approach starting in November 2021 for returning citizens and residents, and a full reopening in July 2022 (Commonwealth of Australia. (2024). COVID-19 response inquiry summary: Lessons for the next crisis. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/covid-response-inquiry-summary.pdf>)
- CommCare is an open-source mobile technology platform developed by Dimagi Inc. Each RA was provided with a tablet to conduct an in-person enumeration with an index respondent from each household using a digital census questionnaire.
- Example prompt: Rate how you feel today on a scale of 1–10 in the chat and tell us why if you'd like.

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