

PROJECT UPDATE

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE NEXT GENERATION
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PROJECT



Practical Skills, Creative Insights

FROM: BRIAN COOK
PHOTO: FEMALE PARTICIPANT ATTENDING A PRD FINANCIAL LITERACY TRAINING

Hello/ជំរាបសួរ (Chom Reap Sour) from the research team of the *Next Generation Agricultural Extension Project: social relations for practice change*. This quarter, our team continued [Activity 6](#), working closely with farmers to support livelihood development. A key focus has been financial literacy training, with early impacts already visible at the household level — explored in this newsletter. We also highlight two recent team publications using creative research methods, including forum theatre and team photo-diaries, and what they reveal about learning, reflection, and change.

Project Overview

This project aims to produce an innovative model of agricultural extension founded on expanding enabling social relations, which will complement and/or replace existing models of extension based on the provision of technology, capital and information.

Duration: January 2021 to December 2026

Target Areas: Cambodia

Budget: AUD\$4.5million

Project Leader: Associate Professor Brian Cook, The University of Melbourne

How Forum Theatre sparked learning and action

FROM: KIRT HAINZER, VAN TOUCH & BRIAN COOK
PHOTOS: LAKHON KOMNIT

Back in [April 2023](#), we reported on 13 [Lakhon Komnit](#) Forum Theatre performances from our sister ACIAR-funded project, [Uptake of agricultural technologies and best practices amongst farmers in Battambang and Pailin provinces](#).

These performances shared project findings directly with farmers, allowing participants to see their own voices and experiences reflected on stage. The play was built around four key themes that emerged from the research:

- Unsafe **pesticide use** and integrated pest management
- **High-interest loans** and the risk of losing farmland
- **Instability in agricultural markets**
- The financial and social costs of **migration**

One year later, our team returned to the villages and interviewed 66 people who had attended the performances. We explored what participants remembered, whether the stories felt realistic, what new insights they gained into livelihood challenges and possible solutions, whether the performances influenced farming or financial decisions, and whether participants shared these lessons with others in their communities.

The findings show that emotional impact and memory alone are not enough to drive change. Instead, **cognitive and reflective learning were key predictors of real action**, often spreading through social networks. By connecting Forum Theatre with theories of transformative learning, the paper highlights how **perspective-taking and critical reflection can support lasting behavioural change**.

Access the full article [here](#). Recordings of the performances, along with a documentary on how the play was developed, are [publicly available](#).



'Yes, I shared it with about 5 or 6 of my neighbours. When we were working on our farms and discussing pests, problems, I remembered the performance and we talked about how the characters fought against whiteflies'.

- One farmer's comment on knowledge diffusion



Building resilience through financial literacy

FROM: SOPHANARA PHAN, PHEROM SONG, PANHALEAK CHAY, SAROEUT YONG, SOPHEA YOUS, CHARIYA KORN, LITA MOM & VAN TOUCH
PHOTOS: PHEROM SONG & LITA MOM

In Northwest Cambodia, smallholder farming households face constant financial pressure that extends well beyond their farms. Savings are rare, expenses often unplanned, and debt is a daily burden. Many families sell valuables, livestock, or even land to keep up with repayments.

To respond to these challenges, 2-day financial literacy workshops under Activity 6 were held in 8 villages, with **154 farmers participating (77% women)**. Training focused on budgeting, distinguishing needs from wants, saving, and managing debt. Role plays and group discussions helped farmers connect everyday financial decisions to household wellbeing.

A key change was the **emergence of saving habits**, with participants beginning to set aside small daily or monthly amounts, often for the first time. **Learning to separate needs from wants** proved especially powerful, helping households cut spending on non-essential items, redirecting money toward savings and basics. Participants also became **more cautious about borrowing**, planning repayments more carefully and avoiding risky loans.

Beyond these practical changes, farmers reported feeling **more in control and less anxious about the future**. Women, in particular, described greater confidence and stronger voices in household decision-making, and many shared these lessons with their children.

While financial literacy alone cannot address the broader economic pressures facing smallholders, it provides practical tools for navigating them. With greater financial control, farmers are better able to plan ahead. As one farmer explained, "If I plan money well, I can plan better for farming."



'Now my husband and I make decisions together. I have a say in how we spend and save.'
-Financial literacy training participant



What photo-diaries revealed about research and power

FROM: ARIANE UTOMO & CAITLIN FINLAYSON
PHOTO-DIARY IMAGES: SOPHEA YOUS, PHEROM SONG & LITA MOM

In January 2023, we reported on how the Next-Gen project used photo-diary sessions during Activity 2 of the household census to support reflexivity within the research team. What began as a training tool quickly proved far more valuable.

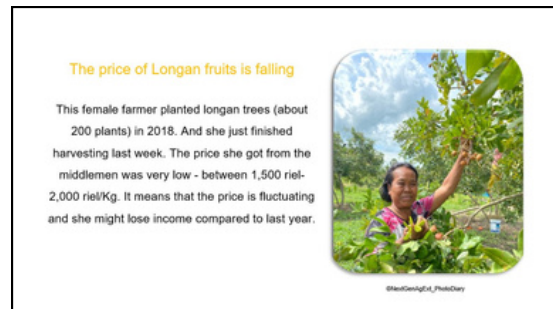
Developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many field-based researchers turned to digital and creative methods, the photo-diary approach reopened important questions about how research reflects and reshapes long-standing inequalities in knowledge production. Our reflections on this work were later published in a journal article, available [here](#).

As a rapid assessment tool, the photo-diaries helped make visible what often remains unseen in quantitative data collection. They enabled researchers to:

- **identify challenges in data collection** and adjust logistics and field approaches;
- **spot emerging themes** that informed later analysis and project activities; and
- **add context and meaning** to quantitative findings, helping explain averages, differences, and outliers.

Beyond these practical benefits, the photo-diaries **created new opportunities, and tensions, for collaborative knowledge production**. The process made the contributions of Cambodian research assistants more visible and valued, highlighting their deep contextual expertise in agriculture, culture, services, and local needs. It also challenged assumptions about who counts as an “expert” in research teams.

Ultimately, the photo-diaries brought into focus the **people, places, and power dynamics** shaping international research collaboration, prompting ongoing reflection on research practice itself.



**‘The photos themselves—coupled with the stories from the RAs—the study site came to life.’
-Australian-based researcher**



Project Partners



មន្ទីរកសិកម្ម រុក្ខាប្រមាញ់ និងនេសាទ ខេត្តប៉ៃលិន
ដើម្បីសង្គមស្រូវ និងការអភិវឌ្ឍស្រូវប្រកបដោយចីរភាព



Resources

Check out the latest articles, blogs and research outputs which are shaping the project:

Participatory action research with research assistants in rural Cambodia

Similar to the photo-diary activity paper, this article also demonstrates the importance of Cambodian research assistants as cultural navigators and argues for the need to embrace their situated knowledge when undertaking research.

[Read more](#)

Applied Theatre and the SDGs

This recent book brings together leading scholars and practitioners engaged in creative and community contexts globally, offering critical insights into the use of theatre within development frameworks.

[Read more](#)

