

**TRANSFORMATIVE ENTERPRISE
RESEARCH GROUP-*TERG***

**TERG Working Paper Series
No 4/24**

*Seeds of Change: An
Autoethnographic Journey in
Fostering Food Security
through Entrepreneurial
Activity in Cambodia*

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Paper 4/24

TRANSFORMATIVE ENTERPRISE RESEARCH GROUP-TERG

University of the West of Scotland, Paisley,

Scotland

May 2024

TERG Working Paper Series

ISSN 2977-1889 (Online)

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to promote the revival of autoethnographic examinations of entrepreneurial support and how it can be used to enhance food security. While experts have continued to neglect food security in developing economies in favour of themes that are more relevant to mature economies, this paper provides an exceptional opportunity to explore the influence of entrepreneurship on food security in Cambodia, particularly focusing on the period from 2011 to 2015.

The paper relies on a qualitative study and selectively draws on a case study from the Agriculture Development Denmark Asia (ADDA) project in Siem Reap undertaken by the lead researcher, which illustrates some useful cues for improving sustainable entrepreneurial ventures in a developing economy. The paper discusses and evaluates three important points: the interplay of risk, necessity-driven entrepreneurship, and the potential of targeted interventions at both micro and macro levels. The paper then reflects on the authors' direct involvement in the project, during the development of offerings for Micro Business Development Facilitators, which provides unique insight into the realities of entrepreneurial education in this context.

While the findings are still in the developmental stage, they are welcomed for their boldness and the potential to engage further studies on the impact of context and culture on entrepreneurship for food security. This is particularly relevant due to its connection to entrepreneurship and the importance of avoiding 'toxic charity' traps in development initiatives.

Background Statement

In 2013, Cambodia was still grappling with the challenges of its complex history, which has been marked by the aftermath of civil war and the genocidal regime led by Pol Pot (Kiernan, 2001). These historical events left the country in a state of severe food insecurity, as documented (Sedara *et al.*, 2002). However, the concept of food security in this context goes beyond basic nourishment; it serves as a basis for stability, both financially and politically, and is thought to be essential to societal recovery (Boonyabanha *et al.*, 2019). The claim made here is that with the importance of addressing food poverty, particularly in rural agricultural communities, there has been a growing acknowledgement of the role that entrepreneurship can play (Amoako and Lyon, 2014; Dzingirai, 2021; Omeihe, 2023). But the question here is: Can insights from the study of Cambodia's context provide a rich understanding of entrepreneurship's potential to transform food security?

The following discussion in this working paper includes a reflective review of the field to briefly set the stage for some concepts and findings that have a core bearing on food security. It also outlines key insights from a Synthetic Inception Report, which may have

theoretical relevance to improving food security. The report was part of an Agriculture Development Denmark Asia (ADDA) project spanning from February 2011 to February 2015. Such an understanding might prompt insights into the process of food transformation, and specifically forge a robust link between food security, economic growth, and community resilience. These can make a significant step toward addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by food insecurity in the region.

For the present purposes, the paper draws on the aspect of reflexivity, which we refer to as an introspection of the lead researchers reality and experience—this we refer to as a rare methodological strategy (Omeihe, 2019). It is important to clarify at the outset that much of the experience in the field can offer unique insights that inform and influence policy and practice in food security and entrepreneurship in similar global contexts

Paper Methodology

While there is certainly an acute need to distinguish between concepts and approaches within a methodological arena, we believe that there is still much to be gained by an occasional definition of what autoethnography means. For this paper, we attempt to describe autoethnography as a qualitative research method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography. This involves the researcher using self-reflection and writing to explore their personal experiences and connect these autobiographical stories to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Essentially, it's a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context, which merges individual experiences with cultural and educational contexts, making it suitable for this research.

Building on the foundational work of Duncan (2004) and Ellis *et al.* (2011), we embarked on a retrospective exploration of our roles as educators and entrepreneurs. This investigation was specifically framed within the context of addressing the pervasive challenge of food insecurity in Cambodia, undertaken by the lead researcher. Through this reflective process, we conducted a comprehensive summative analysis (see Omeihe and Harrison, 2024), which included the identification of key categorisation processes and the extraction of relevant themes. This approach not only facilitated a detailed presentation of the experiences, challenges, and achievements but also provided us with a robust understanding of the complexities of entrepreneurial education. One of the primary strengths of autoethnography is its ability to locate theoretical constructs with real-world applications. Put simply, this method offered us a lucid, firsthand perspective that significantly deepened our understanding of the phenomenon which we aimed to uncover.

The Project

ADDA was tasked with the implementation and management of the Innovative Approaches to Food Insecurity for urban and peri-urban poor in Siem Reap (INFOSE) project and was funded by the European Union. This initiative primarily aimed at assisting households living on less than \$2 per day, including single-parent families, extended families, vulnerable

youth, migrants, and disabled individuals, with incomes ranging from 30 cents to above the \$2 global poverty line. The project set an ambitious goal to increase family incomes by over 500% potentially. The focus of INFOSE was on fostering agro-processing organisations and other related business ventures, employing three principal strategies: Business Development Service (BDS), Training in Micro Business Management, and an Advisory Service to reinforce the BDS. The BDS provided various services, such as assistance in formulating business ideas, training in creating business plans, and facilitating access to micro-loans and seed funding. These services were delivered by Micro Business Development Facilitators (MBDF), led by a Micro Business Development Specialist (MBDS). Importantly, these positions were held by local Khmer staff, reflecting the project's commitment to building lasting capacity in the region.

Reflexivity

The project manager from INFOSE contacted the lead researcher after attending the free business workshops he developed and conducted in Siem Reap. The project had been looking for someone with business development experience combined with training skills, something that had been hard to find in Cambodia. INFOSE aimed to enhance community capacity, focusing on creating a structured set of micro-business training for both new and existing businesses. The role had two key elements, review the current BDS offering concerning the entrepreneurial training and then develop a suite of tools that could be used by MBDFs when working with future businesses.

A 2-week review process was undertaken, which involved shadowing the MBDFs out of the field, as they actively supported their clients. Crisscrossing the rural communes outside of Siem Reap, introduced the lead researcher to a range of enterprises (Table 1) that were far removed from any previous large corporation and mainly UK experience. Rice wine production, frog farming and a mini production line of unlicensed Angry Birds money boxes were all some of the income generation opportunities that the participants had decided to follow.

Table 1 *Overview of the key business types with benefits and drawbacks (2012).*

Type	Benefits	Drawbacks
Fish Farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home based business. Not seasonal dependent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water must be within small PH range. Ponds must be limited to 200 fish
Rice wine production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large demand for the product Very profitable (>\$1800 a year) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly skilled Requires asset investment – Still and associated equipment
Cricket farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only 40 day cycle from small to big saleable products Easily scalable with extra nests and cages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very intensive as crickets need to be clean to avoid disease. Overcrowding can lead to them eating each other
Mushroom Farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly profitable (>\$800 a year) Delivers daily cashflow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Startup costs high Spores need renewing every 6 months with additional costs.
Basket Weaving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With locally sourced natural resources can be very profitable Very inclusive with all members of the family able to take part 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A very slow process Difficult to scale and ensure that it is sustainable
Frog Farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only requires small amount of land. A 45-day production cycle. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unless froglets are self-produced then material costs can be high Highly volatile market, with prices responding to wild frog availability
Local Shop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good cash business with high turnover Flexibility for female entrepreneurs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires stock. Location is vital for passing trade.
Moneybox production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group workshop so initial startup costs can be shared. Established market including Tourists. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires on a joined-up value chain and a large degree of trust between families. May be seasonal sales due to reliance on tourists.

These reflected the marketplace that existed with Siem Reap at that time, with organisations either catering for the booming tourist market or focusing on providing goods and services for the local communities. It demonstrates that a wide range of entrepreneurial activities was being undertaken across the communes, supported by the MBDF through the BDS. A synthetic inception report was created and submitted to the project lead at INFOSE, reviewing some of the existing clients and suggesting entrepreneurial training that could be developed to build long-term capacity. The BDS and MBDFs had a clear and detailed process around the development and ongoing support for the project clients.

Shoots of entrepreneurial activity

Success stories were evident within the project. One striking example was a female entrepreneur who, with evident pride, displayed the profit and loss account of her business to William. Her venture involved setting up a small shop at her house, targeting local school children with affordably priced sweets and treats. The BDS's role was crucial: they provided some initial seed funding, business training, and ongoing support through an MBDF tailored to her original concept. This assistance was instrumental, with the seed money enabling her to buy initial stock and later support her business growth. The pride she felt in her business was palpable, especially as she meticulously walked me through her well-worn exercise book, now serving as her business ledger. She dedicated nearly 5 minutes to explaining each entry, linking them back to the training she received.

The moneybox production line, ingeniously tapping into the popularity of a well-known game with its ceramic designs, was a flourishing small-scale cooperative run by three families. They pooled their resources for start-up capital and smartly distributed roles, such as designating one member for entrepreneurial training and appointing their best English speakers to lead sales. Those in the wider family and without a defined role, became the

production staff, crafting these moneyboxes in the middle of their village before allowing them to air dry in the Cambodian heat. Their strategic approach paid off remarkably, as these moneyboxes, catering to the substantial tourist population in Siem Reap, became a resounding success. Capitalizing on the international fame of the game's characters, the business demonstrated the positive impacts of the BDS and the support offered by the MBDF from INFOSE.

Challenges around the project

While the entrepreneurial activities initiated by the INFOSE project did yield success stories, they were not without significant challenges. A case in point was a cricket farming venture that initially showed promise. The farmer had developed the necessary infrastructure but soon faced setbacks as the farm deteriorated, leading to disease spread among the crickets and a consequent drastic reduction in yield.

The MBDF recounted that after the first failure, the INFOSE project provided additional funds to revive the cricket production. However, this pattern of failure and subsequent funding requests was repeated several times. The MBDF and MBDS both stated that they felt the farmer had found a way to access further grants by allowing the crickets to fail and, therefore had decided that this was a more entrepreneurial mechanism to achieve income for his family.

Two primary factors contributed to the persistence of funding business that potentially should have been allowed to fail: the relatively low cost of microfinancing (approximately \$50 for a cricket farm) and the INFOSE project's imperative to demonstrate success. The MBDFs noted that it seemed more economical to finance a theoretically successful venture than to report a failure. The MBDFs observed that labour-intensive enterprises established under the program faced high failure rates, attributed to a lack of entrepreneur motivation and broader socio-economic factors in Cambodia. Notably, about 80% of these businesses failed within their first operational cycle.

Entrepreneurs participating in the programme were not insulated from the prevalent corruption in Cambodian society. For the entrepreneurs taking part in this programme, they weren't immune to the corruption that existed as part of Cambodian society. Tax authorities were entitled to receive 10% of their gross income, but clients reported that the tax collectors demanded admin fees many times for each business. They suggested that failure to pay would lead to a visit by the police or other authorities which could end in jail or even violence. Consequently, some business owners maintained three sets of accounts – personal, project-related, and one for tax purposes – to obscure actual income and minimize tax liability.

Post project retrospections

Compiling the INFOSE Synthetic Inception Report provided a crucial snapshot of entrepreneurial activities in Siem Reap at a specific moment in time. A decade later, reflecting on the undertakings of the BDS yields a spectrum of opinions regarding their success. Notably, instances were affirming the notion that entrepreneurship could enhance food security. These success stories often involved motivated individuals or families who identified a market gap and generated income by filling it.

However, the challenges of operating a business in Cambodia during that period were significant, leading to the failure of many startups. Constraints such as the inability to export, an intensely competitive market, and pervasive business-related corruption severely limited income opportunities. The project's goal to stimulate economic activity and augment family income was commendable. Yet, paradoxically, the project inadvertently sustained failing businesses, creating a questionable cycle of support. Despite noble intentions, the outcomes were far from ideal. Efforts to ascertain long-term success metrics through the ADDA revealed a lack of conclusive data. With INFOSE mentioned on their website without accompanying supportive data, the overall success of the project remains, at best, ambiguous.

Areas for further research

To sum up, the point of departure for this working paper is that food security remains a major problem and is likely to increase in the short term (World Economic Forum, 2019; Omeihe *et al.*, 2024). Peprpctibve so far shows that there are four dimensions to food security: food must be available; it must be accessible (primarily meaning affordable); it must be utilised well (appropriately stored, prepared and consumed for the body to make the most of available nutrients); and these things must be stable over time (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). We find that according to the World Economic Forum increasing food insecurity is 'not primarily about a lack of sufficient quantity, but a lack of access – largely due to affordability' (World Economic Forum, 2022). Whilst governments, NGOs and large corporations have a role to play in addressing this challenge, there is increasing recognition that behavioural entrepreneurial activity is an important part of any sustainable development process (Dhahri *et al.*, 2021). Reflection on the INFOSE project suggests four routes for further research into the impact that context and culture have on entrepreneurial activity with the potential to improve food security.

Concerning our findings, we find that the need for effective support for entrepreneurship needs to be at both the micro and macro levels. This perspective unwittingly shared implies that targeted interventions at the community level, of which there are numerous examples in a range of regional contexts (Bonney *et al.*, 2013, Silva *et al.*, 2022, Sher *et al.*, 2019) may be more likely to be sustainable if supported by broader economic policy that encourages and facilitates entrepreneurship (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023).

In this way, we would do well to be reminded about the extent to which the stimulation of entrepreneurship needs to be tailored to the context of the region. This affirms the notion that agricultural entrepreneurship, or agripreneurship (as distinct from subsistence farming) can be an important driver in improving food security in several countries including Indonesia (Zumaeroh *et al.*, 2023), Zimbabwe (Bernard *et al.*, 2013, Dzingirai, 2021) and Malawi (Chivundu-Ngulube and Li, 2019).

This echoes the experience of INFOSE, but it is not necessarily universal even within these regions – see, for example, the broader entrepreneurial context in Malawi discussed by Malawi (Kankwamba and Kornher, 2019)- and in other countries, the implications of entrepreneurship for food security might look different, such as the USA (Allen, 1999, Spring *et al.*, 2022).

While we highlight how normal entrepreneurial risk should not be eliminated, our findings, which are supported by INFOSE showed, that there is a risk that well-meaning external support can distort the entrepreneurial process. In particular, we find that risk and failure are important parts of entrepreneurship (Lane *et al.*, 2019). And whilst the risk of this failure in the context of food insecurity is serious, necessity-driven entrepreneurship is not uncommon (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023) and the issue of how supporting entrepreneurship in developing economies can avoid the ‘toxic charity’ trap is important (Murphy *et al.*, 2017).

Yet, making a case that a focus on female entrepreneurship might be particularly effective in these circumstances Rather than making a broad assumption, we believe that female entrepreneurship seems to correlate with an increase in food insecurity compared to non-entrepreneurs, broadly case studies seem to suggest the opposite (Idayanti and Rejeki, 2018, Pulubuhu *et al.*, 2019, Dedehouanou and Araar, 2020), which was also our experience with INFOSE. This is already an active research area (Barrachina Fernández *et al.*, 2021, Ojong *et al.*, 2021, Corrêa *et al.*, 2022), and placing food security specifically in the context of female entrepreneurship seems likely to yield interesting research.

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