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Managing Fieldwork in Urban Cambodia: Lessons Learnt from the Survey Project

Assessing MSME Market Dynamics and Resilience in Phnom Penh: Challenges and Opportunities

Mao Sosengphyrun

Fieldwork Report
December 2025

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Lessons Learnt from the Survey Project "Assessing MSME Market Dynamics and Resilience in Phnom Penh: Challenges and Opportunities"

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Any limitations or shortcomings in this report are entirely my own.

Abstract

This report shares fieldwork experiences from a large-scale survey conducted in Phnom Penh in early 2025, focusing on micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Khan Meanchey. With over 14,000 businesses surveyed, the project aimed to gather reliable data to support policy decisions and project planning, particularly by capturing information about businesses that had closed or were at risk of closing. Although the use of digital tools, experienced researchers, and a dedicated field team helped ensure smoother operations, the team still encountered several practical challenges. These included delays in coordinating with local authorities, equipment issues, extreme weather conditions, and language barriers. By remaining flexible—rotating field teams, using backup tools, and adjusting plans based on conditions—the team completed the fieldwork effectively. This report offers key lessons and practical recommendations for those conducting research in fast-changing urban settings like Phnom Penh.

1. Introduction

Managing fieldwork and data collection in Phnom Penh plays a pivotal role in shaping real-world decisions—particularly in policy making, programme design, project development, and academic research across key sectors such as economic development, urban planning, public health, and education. These sectors form the backbone of Cambodia's socio-economic growth. As the capital and most urbanised city in the country, Phnom Penh presents both unique challenges and promising opportunities for conducting fieldwork.

With a 3.1 percent population increase in 2024—pushing the population to approximately 2.4 million—Phnom Penh has been changing rapidly in recent years. New buildings, roads, and infrastructure continue to emerge, while increasingly diverse socio-economic and environmental conditions have created a dynamic landscape for researchers, practitioners, and academics. This complexity provides a rich setting for data collection efforts that inform decision-making and planning.

Technological advancements, including mobile data collection tools and cloud-based platforms, have improved the speed and accuracy of data gathering over the past decade. However, challenges remain. These include time constraints, delays in obtaining approval from local authorities, unpredictable weather, traffic congestion, and difficulties in reaching certain groups of respondents. Ethical considerations and building trust within communities are also essential, especially when dealing with sensitive or personal information.

Overcoming these challenges requires a strong understanding of the local context, timely coordination with stakeholders, strategic fieldwork planning, effective budgeting, and the recruitment of capable and committed enumerators. This report shares key lessons learnt from managing a large-scale survey project titled *"Assessing MSME Market Dynamics and Resilience in Phnom Penh: Challenges and Opportunities."* The project covered a sample of 14,820 MSMEs in Khan Meanchey and was conducted in early 2025. Drawing on field observations, enumerator feedback, and coordination with local authorities, this report highlights the operational realities of urban data collection. It offers practical recommendations to improve fieldwork management in future projects.

2. Overview of fieldwork management in Phnom Penh

2.1. Fieldwork management and site selection

In Phnom Penh, effective fieldwork management requires more than simply organising data collection. It demands strategic planning, close coordination with local stakeholders, and hands-on supervision throughout the process. Proper fieldwork execution ensures that the data collected is accurate, reliable, and relevant to the city's rapidly changing urban landscape.

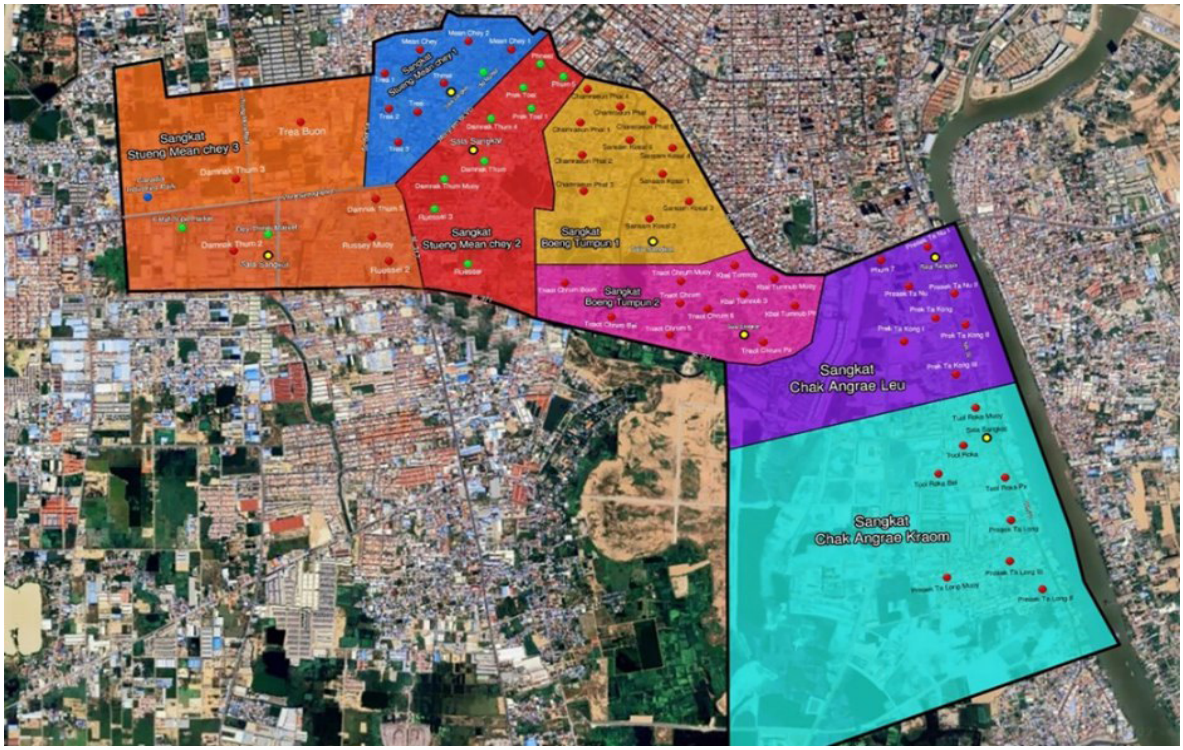
Khan Meanchey, selected as the primary research site, is recognised as one of the most challenging areas for data collection in the capital. As of 2022, it was the second most populous district in Phnom Penh, with a population of 282,067 residents[1]. The district encompasses seven Sangkats and 61 villages, characterised by a high population density and a diverse mix of economic activities (see Figure 1).

A significant number of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)—both formal and informal—operate across the district, reflecting its dynamic economic landscape. In addition to MSMEs, Khan Meanchey is also home to a substantial manufacturing sector. The district hosts

1 District Population Projection 2020-2033, National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, July 2023, p. 56.

numerous garment and textile factories and an industrial park that are integral to Cambodia's export economy. For example, M&V International Manufacturing Ltd., located on National Road No. 2 in Sangkat Chak Angre Kraom, employs more than 5,500 workers. Similarly, Smart Shirts Garments Manufacturing Co., Ltd. operates in Phum Damnak Thum 3, Sangkat Steung Meanchey 3. Moreover, the Canadia Industrial Park houses numerous garment and textile factories, contributing significantly to Cambodia's export economy. At its peak, the park employed over 13,000 workers, creating a vibrant micro-economy that supports various ancillary businesses, including food vendors and service providers.

Figure 1: The geographic map of Khan Meanchey



Source: Author's own design

The research team selected Khan Meanchey specifically because of its diverse economic structure and the high concentration of MSMEs, which provided a rich field for studying various business types and their characteristics. Moreover, Khan Meanchey has also become a key destination for internal migrants seeking employment, contributing to the expansion of informal businesses operating outside the formal regulatory framework. This migration trend further complicates data collection, as informal enterprises may lack fixed locations, formal registration, or consistent operational hours.

Managing data collection in a complex district like Khan Meanchey requires a systematic and well-coordinated approach. This involves setting clear research objectives, developing detailed logistical plans, selecting appropriate data collection tools, and recruiting and training field staff who are familiar with the local context. Equally important is the application of real-time quality control mechanisms to ensure data accuracy and consistency throughout the process.

Close collaboration with local authorities and community members proved essential in building trust, upholding ethical standards, and facilitating smooth fieldwork operations.

The active involvement of key stakeholders—such as village chiefs and Sangkat officials—not only minimised community resistance but also helped legitimise the research in the eyes of

participants. Their support significantly improved respondent engagement and enhanced the overall reliability of the collected data.

2.2. Data collection planning and preparation

At the outset of the data collection phase, the research team held internal discussions and obtained approval from the management team for the fieldwork plan, strategy, and budget. A formal request letter was then submitted to the Governor of Phnom Penh, seeking authorisation for relevant municipal offices in Khan Meanchey—including 7 Sangkats and 61 villages—to support and cooperate with the data collection team. The request letter was dispatched to the Governor of Phnom Penh on 18 March 2025. Typically, the approval process takes at least 15 days, but due to the urgency of this data collection project, approval was granted in just 12 days. The official letter was released on 4 April 2025.

Although the original plan scheduled data collection to begin on 1 April 2025 for 10 days, unforeseen challenges (outlined in the *Challenges* section) led to delays. The revised schedule started on 9 April 2025 and was divided into three phases: the first phase took place before Khmer New Year, from 9 to 11 April; the second phase resumed after the holiday, from 21 April to 1 May; and the final phase ran from 6 to 10 May 2025, resulting in a total of 18 days of fieldwork.

For the first phase of data collection, the CDRI research team selected three Sangkats—Stueng Meanchey 1, Boeung Tompun 1, and Chak Angre Kroam—that together comprise 28 villages. These areas were chosen based on the research sampling method, with geographic distribution within Khan Meanchey taken into account to ensure that the selected Sangkats represented all seven Sangkats in the study area. Time constraints and budget limitations also influenced this decision. By focusing on these three areas first, we aimed to efficiently utilise available resources and ensure complete data collection from all established businesses without missing any target areas.

In the second phase, three more Sangkats—Chak Angre Leu, Boeung Tompun 2, and Stueng Meanchey 2—were selected, which included 27 villages in total.

The remaining Sangkat, Stueng Meanchey 3, comprising six villages, was covered in the third and final phase. This Sangkat is the largest in Khan Meanchey and includes various types of businesses such as factories, wax markets, vendors along the road and industrial parks. It is also home to a large number of migrant workers and residents who have relocated to the area for employment or to run businesses. The research team decided to reserve this Sangkat for the final phase so that all remaining enumerators could collaborate and complete data collection together in accordance with the additional plan.

Upon receiving the official authorisation letter from the Phnom Penh Governor, the fieldwork coordinator played a critical role in engaging with local authorities at all administrative levels—from the Khan office down to the Sangkat and village levels—to establish their collaboration fieldwork team. This process included gathering contact information and geographic coordinates for all villages, which were shared with enumerators to ensure smooth coordination and communication throughout the fieldwork.

To optimise fieldwork planning and resource allocation, the pre-fieldwork has been used to assess the size of each village and the number of established enterprises within it. This evaluation facilitated the determination of the appropriate number of enumerators to assign to

each village and enabled accurate estimation of the time required to complete data collection activities in each location.

Data collection used KoboToolbox, a widely used open-source platform for field research. Enumerators conducted face-to-face interviews with MSME representatives in the targeted areas. All responses were recorded and uploaded to the central server once a stable internet connection was available. Tablet devices used for data collection were secured with login protection, and all data submissions were encrypted and synced daily to ensure privacy and security.

Twenty enumerators were recruited in line with CDRI's policy through a rigorous screening process that prioritised candidates with strong data collection experience, particularly in the MSME sector. Gender equity was ensured, with the team comprising 50 percent male and 50 percent female enumerators.

All contracts, terms of reference (ToRs), and insurance coverage were handled by the HR and procurement teams to ensure legal compliance. Insurance was provided to cover any potential fieldwork-related accidents or risks. Enumerators were responsible for arranging their own daily transportation, with costs included in the project budget.

Following recruitment, all enumerators participated in a two-day training session that focused on understanding the questionnaire structure, fieldwork planning, data collection techniques, and research ethics. The training included a half-day pilot test, followed by a half-day debriefing session to gather feedback, which informed revisions to the questionnaire and updates to the KoboToolbox form.

To build trust and encourage cooperation during fieldwork, enumerators were instructed to follow a clear introduction protocol and adhere to data collection guidelines. This included properly introducing themselves and the purpose of the study, mentioning the endorsement letters from local authorities, showing their enumerator and mission ID cards, and communicating respectfully with respondents.

Figure 2: Enumerators training activities

Source: CDRI/Chhorn Dina

By dressing appropriately, greeting participants politely, and using the local dialect, enumerators fostered trust and reduced respondents' hesitancy, leading to more open and accurate responses. Before starting each interview, enumerators explained the purpose of the study, obtained informed consent from all participants, and ensured that their responses would remain anonymous (see Figure 2).

3. Methodology and data collection strategy

3.1. Methodology

A quantitative survey was conducted to collect structured data from representatives of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The survey aimed to gather numerical and categorical data to assess key indicators aligned with the research objectives, including:

1. Assessing the current state of wholesale and retail trade MSMEs over the past 6–12 months, such as business closures, declines, growth, and newly opened enterprises in Khan Meanchey, Phnom Penh.
2. Identifying internal and external factors contributing to the success or failure of wholesale and retail trade in MSMEs.
3. Understanding practices related to cash flow management, marketing and sales, and daily operations that influence MSME performance.
4. Examining the effects of government regulations, market competition, and saturation (e.g., an excessive number of similar businesses in each area) on MSME profitability and sustainability.

3.2. Data collection strategy and guidelines

3.2.1. Interviewed businesses

The research team developed a detailed data collection strategy guideline to ensure that data collection followed standardised procedures. This guideline outlined the criteria for selecting eligible business types and specified which types of businesses should be included or excluded from interviews.

According to this strategy, enumerators were instructed to visit every household within the selected villages to identify both currently operating businesses and those that had closed. The goal was to produce a comprehensive listing that captured recent shifts in the local economic landscape, ensuring that no business was overlooked, particularly those that had closed and in wax markets.

To identify closed businesses, enumerators were encouraged to gather information from various sources. These included:

- Local authorities (e.g., village chiefs and Sangkat officers),
- Contact numbers posted on old business banners or signs,
- Neighbours and surrounding business owners,
- Current occupants or tenants who took over the space from previous businesses, and
- Rental house owners or landlords who often have records or knowledge of past tenants and business operators.

If multiple businesses had closed at the same location within the past 12 months, enumerators were required to collect information on each of them, including the reasons for closure. This inclusive approach helped capture even informal or short-lived enterprises.

3.2.2. Observation businesses

In addition to conducting interviews, enumerators were instructed to use observation and geolocation to document specific types of establishments that did not require direct interviews. These included:

- Public institutions and buildings (e.g., schools, administrative offices)
- Commercial buildings and financial institutions (e.g., banks, MFIs)
- Political party offices
- Religious buildings
- NGOs and civil society organisations
- Warehouses and association offices

The aim was to accurately map the physical presence of these entities, contributing to the spatial dimension of the analysis.

3.2.3. Excluded businesses

Certain types of business establishments were excluded from the survey to reduce data bias and maintain focus on relevant targets. Excluded businesses included:

- Mobile vendors
- Businesses operating within traditional markets or supermarkets
- Businesses located within public administration buildings

These exclusions were made because mobile vendors could contribute to data inconsistencies, and businesses located inside markets are generally more stable and resilient than those operating independently in other areas.

4. Field implementation

Unlike conventional setups with team leaders, this project used a flat structure in which 20 enumerators reported directly to a single coordinator. As the CDRI policy requires team leaders to also collect data, this structure prevented disruptions to fieldwork. Given the large sample size, all team members had to remain focused on collecting high-quality data. The fieldwork coordinator and research team managed logistics, monitored quality, resolved issues, and supported enumerators. Despite the larger supervisory load, the flat structure allowed for faster communication and consistent oversight.

In the initial days, the CDRI research team joined field visits to provide technical guidance, address issues in real time, and ensure protocol compliance. This helped build enumerator confidence and improve field operations through on-the-spot corrections and support.

Daily briefings were held via Telegram, enabling enumerators to raise concerns, share suggestions, and request help. These check-ins ensured smooth implementation and maintained data accuracy and consistency. Even though the team has a proper arrangement for the fieldwork, some challenges still emerged during the data collection processes (see Figure 3).

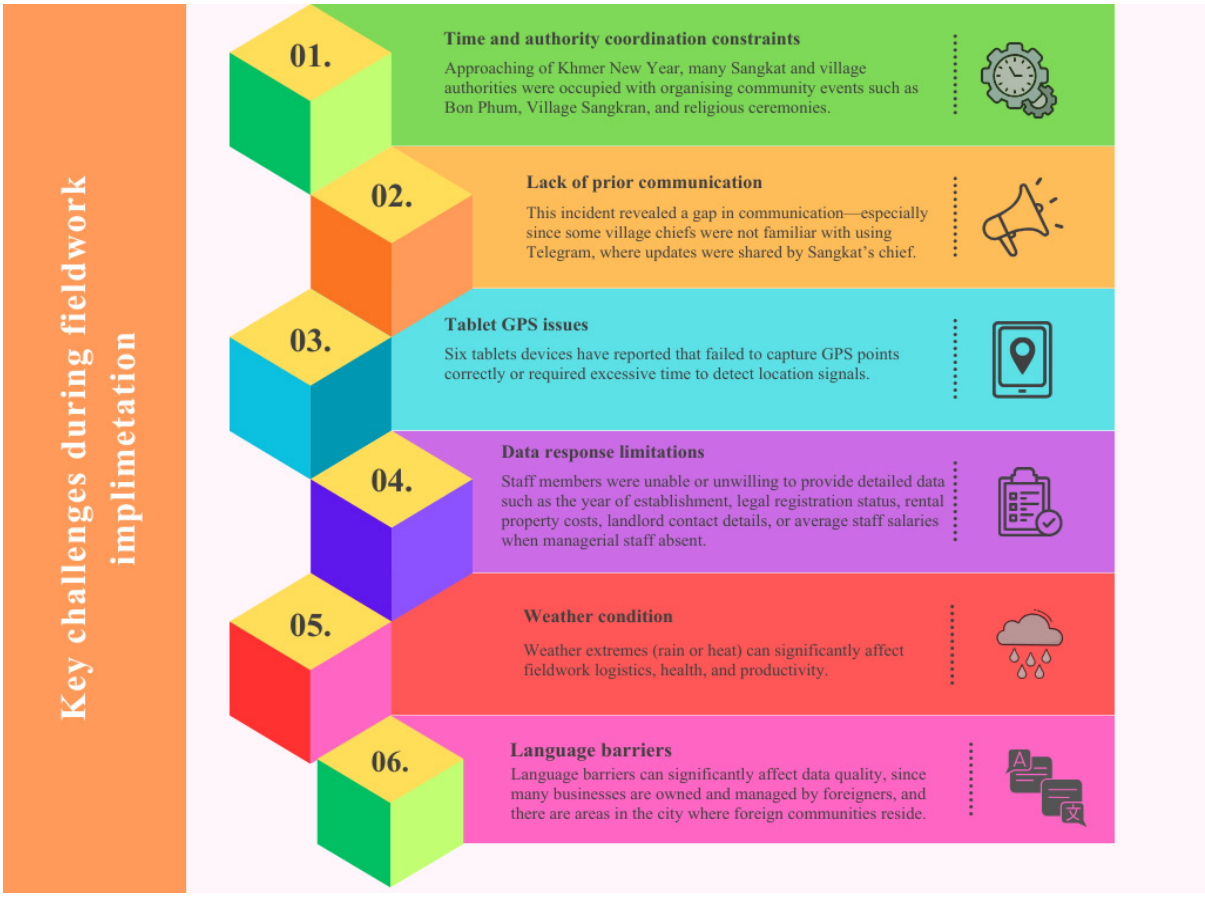
Figure 3: Collaboration with local authorities

Source: Po Vanna/Mao Sosengphyrun

4.1. Phase 1: Data collection implementation and challenges

The data collection was divided into three phases. In Phase 1, each enumerator had three days to complete data collection in one village. They were required to contact local authorities, confirm village boundaries, and secure cooperation, including identifying starting points.

Figure 4: Data collection implementation and challenges



Source: Author's own design

Clarifying village borders helped avoid overlapping with neighbouring villages. Village authority support was key to building trust and reducing refusal rates. If unavailable, chiefs

were asked to appoint representatives to assist. Data collection began in Steung Meanchey 1, Boeung Tompun 1, and Chak Angre Kroam, covering 28 villages. Twenty enumerators were assigned 1–2 villages each, based on size and business density. Due to the Khmer New Year, data collection was limited to 9-11 April 2025.

Many businesses were preparing to close, requiring a tight schedule. By the end, 2,629 businesses were observed. Data was fully completed in 16 villages and partially completed (50–80 percent) in the remaining 12.

The first phase of data collection faced several challenges. These included coordination delays with authorities, limited communication with village chiefs, and technical issues with tablet GPS. Additionally, incomplete responses, language barriers, and adverse weather conditions further complicated the process (see Figure 4).

4.1.1. Time and authority coordination constraints

Due to administrative protocol, data collection could not commence immediately after the authorisation letter was dispatched to the Meanchey Administration Office on 3 May 2025. The team had to wait for formal approval from the Khan authorities, followed by the distribution of accompanying orders to each Sangkat to ensure their collaboration. This process aligns with the established hierarchy of local governance and was necessary to gain official support.

Given the tight timeline, the data collection team experienced a five-day delay without any response, despite follow-up phone calls to both the Khan Governor and the Director of Administration. In response, the fieldwork coordinator travelled directly to the Khan's Economic Bureau to advocate for support. As a result, the officer provided verbal approval and shared contact information for further assistance during fieldwork.

Following this, the Fieldwork Coordinator visited the first three Sangkats to seek collaboration, explaining that the formal accompanying order would arrive after Khmer New Year. Through respectful communication and acknowledgement of local authority roles, the coordinator successfully secured cooperation, allowing data collection to begin the following day.

However, with the approach of Khmer New Year, many Sangkat and village authorities were occupied with organising community events such as *Bon Phum*, *Village Sangkran*, and religious ceremonies. Their limited availability posed further coordination challenges. To address this, enumerators—under the guidance of the Fieldwork Coordinator—requested that village chiefs delegate support responsibilities to available community members. This practical approach enabled continued cooperation despite the authorities' commitments.

In situations where local authorities were completely unavailable, enumerators attempted to proceed independently. However, this approach often led to a higher refusal rate, as some community members were uncomfortable participating without official endorsement. In certain areas, authorities explicitly prohibited data collection in their absence, citing concerns about transparency and possible misunderstandings regarding the purpose of the interviews.

To maintain cooperation and minimise refusals, enumerators were instructed to wait for the presence of local authorities before conducting interviews. While this further impacted the timeline, it preserved trust and ensured adherence to protocol.

To mitigate delays, the Fieldwork Coordinator temporarily reassigned enumerators from affected villages to nearby areas where local authorities were available. This allowed those enumerators to assist colleagues and maintain productivity. Once coordination was re-

established in their original locations, the enumerators returned to complete their assignments. This adaptive strategy ensured efficient resource use and enabled the timely completion of data collection across multiple villages.

4.1.2. Lack of prior communication with village chiefs

Some enumerators reported that village chiefs were unaware of the planned data collection activities because the Sangkat administration had not communicated directly with them, despite the research team's official notification sent days in advance. As a result, certain village chiefs initially refused to cooperate, requesting direct confirmation from the Sangkat chief. Upon being informed of the issue, the fieldwork coordinator immediately contacted the Sangkat chief, who clarified the situation and instructed the village chiefs to support the activity. This incident revealed a communication gap—especially since some village chiefs were not familiar with Telegram, where updates were shared. Thanks to swift coordination and prompt clarification, village chiefs resumed their support, allowing data collection to proceed without further delay.

4.1.3. Tablet GPS issues

Before launching the main data collection, 20 tablets were distributed to enumerators for testing during the pilot phase. The goal was to assess the functionality of the questionnaire flow, touchscreen, battery, and GPS. However, on the first day of actual fieldwork, several tablets failed to capture GPS points correctly or required excessive time to detect location signals.

To address the issue quickly, the research team delivered six backup tablets to affected enumerators. Field reports indicated that four malfunctioning devices were Amazon-brand tablets.

While awaiting replacements, enumerators were allowed to use their personal smartphones to access the questionnaire via KoboToolbox using the provided login credentials. This ensured the continuity of data collection without significant delays.

4.1.4. Data response limitations

During the interviews, several challenges arose in obtaining complete and accurate information, primarily due to the limited availability of MSME representatives or managerial staff. In many cases, enumerators encountered regular staff members who were unable or unwilling to provide detailed data such as the year of establishment, legal registration status, rental property costs, landlord contact details, or average staff salaries.

In this situation, enumerators requested contact information for MSME representatives or managerial staff in order to obtain more accurate data. In most cases, they were able to gather additional information, but in some instances, this was not possible due to the unavailability of those individuals.

Some MSME representatives were hesitant or refused to respond to questions related to business registration, fearing potential implications for their tax obligations. Despite these concerns, enumerators made every effort to reintroduce themselves clearly, reassure respondents about data confidentiality, and obtain informed consent. Nevertheless, they respected each participant's decision to either participate fully or skip sensitive questions.

Additionally, although the presence of local authorities helped facilitate smoother data collection in some areas, several business owners—particularly phone shop owners—remained uneasy,

fearing that authorities might later return to collect taxes based on the survey. In response, enumerators played a crucial role in reinforcing the confidentiality of the study. They carefully explained that the information collected would not be shared with tax offices or used for any enforcement purposes.

Another challenge involved identifying contact numbers for closed establishments. In many cases, local authorities, neighbours, and nearby business owners were unable to provide contact details for the owners of these closed businesses. To address this issue, enumerators were instructed to complete the observation form for each of these cases, documenting them as closed businesses.

4.1.5. Language barriers

Language barriers also posed difficulties, especially in establishments owned by foreigners, including Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese and African nationals. In these cases, enumerators attempted to locate translators within the business to conduct interviews. When interviews could not be conducted due to communication challenges, observation forms were used to collect basic information about the establishment.

4.1.6. Weather condition

During Phase 1, the data collection team encountered significant challenges due to heavy rainfall while interviews were conducted. The rain disrupted field movement, preventing enumerators from travelling between business locations and delaying the data collection process by nearly a full day. In the aftermath of the rain, several main and secondary roads became flooded, creating additional barriers to field access.

One enumerator reported experiencing skin irritation after walking through floodwaters, while another developed flu-like symptoms. To respond to these unforeseen challenges, enumerators were provided with raincoats and umbrellas to protect themselves from the downpour. Additionally, the Fieldwork Coordinator delivered basic medication to the affected team members as a precaution.

Despite these quick interventions, the team was unable to proceed with data collection during periods of intense rainfall. In such cases, the Fieldwork Coordinator made the decision to temporarily pause field activities until weather conditions improved, ensuring both the safety of the enumerators and the quality of the data collection process.

4.2. Phase 2: Data collection implementation and challenges

The Khmer New Year holiday was officially celebrated from 14-16 April 2025. However, data collection did not resume immediately after the holiday, as some areas continued celebrations into the following week, and many businesses remained closed during that time.

Phase 2 of the data collection officially began on 21 April 2025 and continued until 1 May 2025, with 19 enumerators. One enumerator was unable to continue due to scheduling conflicts, as the delayed timeline overlapped with their prior commitments to another project.

The initial objective of Phase 2 was to complete the remaining 12 villages that had only been partially covered in Phase 1, with completion rates ranging between 50 percent and 80 percent. To expedite this process, the Fieldwork Coordinator assigned two enumerators to villages with about 50 percent completion and one enumerator to those with around 80 percent completion.

This strategy was designed to ensure timely completion and facilitate a smooth transition to new Sangkats.

The team spent approximately three days finalising data collection in these 12 villages, which included high concentrations of formal businesses and wax market vendors. Notably dense areas included Toul Roka 1 (Sangkat Chak Angre Krom), Sansom Kosal 3 (Boeung Tompun 1), and Trea and Thmei villages (Stueng Meanchey 1).

On 27 April 2025, data collection commenced in three new Sangkats: Chak Angre Leu, Boeung Tompun 2, and Stueng Meanchey 2, covering a total of 28 villages. Based on lessons learnt from Phase 1, the data collection strategy was revised to improve efficiency. Instead of assigning one enumerator to multiple villages, the updated approach assigned two to three enumerators per village.

This new strategy aimed to accelerate data collection, meet tight deadlines, and ensure timely completion across all target villages. As a result, each village was completed within just 1.5 to 2 days, enabling the team to stay on schedule and transition smoothly to the next Sangkat.

4.2.1. Challenges with staffing and training adjustments in Phase 2

Many of the challenges encountered in Phase 1—such as coordination with local authorities, time constraints, respondent refusals, data limitations, weather conditions, and language barriers—were mitigated in Phase 2 through revised strategies. These included improved advance communication with local authorities, clearer information provided to respondents, and a restructuring of enumerator assignments to improve efficiency.

However, a new challenge emerged during Phase 2: staff turnover caused by scheduling conflicts. Following the completion of the remaining villages from Phase 1, three enumerators withdrew from the project due to overlapping commitments with other assignments. This unexpected turnover disrupted the momentum of data collection.

To address the issue promptly, the Fieldwork Coordinator recruited three new enumerators with extensive experience in the MSME sector and years of data collection practice. A targeted training session was conducted in the morning, focusing on the data collection guidelines and questionnaire structure. That same afternoon, the newly recruited enumerators joined field visits to observe the ongoing process and began conducting interviews independently. Although the team adapted swiftly, integrating new members mid-project required additional coordination and quality checks to ensure consistency and data quality were upheld.

4.3. Phase 3: Final stage of data collection and challenges

The third and final phase of data collection marked a significant milestone due to the complexity of the target area—Sangkat Steung Meanchey 3. This Sangkat posed unique challenges stemming from its geographical layout and highly diverse business environment. The area encompasses several factories, industrial parks, and a large concentration of migrant workers who have relocated from rural provinces in search of employment. Although the Sangkat comprises only six villages, its population density and volume of businesses were comparable to those of two full Sangkats in other areas of Khan Meanchey.

To ensure effective implementation within a limited timeframe of just five days, both data collection teams maintained the quality and pace of data collection. This phase began on 6 May 2025, after a five-day break, with only 13 enumerators available. The remaining enumerators

were absent due to illness and overlapping schedules with other fieldwork commitments. Given the reduced team size and the demanding nature of this final stage, the remaining enumerators were required to show strong commitment, adaptability, and time management.

Building on lessons learnt from Phases 1 and 2, the Fieldwork Coordinator adjusted the team assignment strategy. Two enumerators were assigned to each village to ensure more efficient coverage. However, Damnak Thum 2—a village with a high concentration of markets and operating businesses—was assigned three enumerators to match the scale and complexity of data collection needs in that area.

Despite the team's dedication and well-coordinated efforts, an unforeseen challenge emerged: extreme heat during fieldwork. Unlike the heavy rainfall experienced in Phase 1, enumerators in Phase 3 reported that high temperatures made movement and interviewing in the field physically demanding. One enumerator felt unwell due to heat exposure and had to take a one-day leave. In response, the fieldwork coordinator advised all team members to wear caps or umbrellas and to rest in shaded areas or under roofs when experiencing signs of heat exhaustion. While the high temperature slightly slowed the team's pace, it was *less disruptive than the flooding from heavy rain in Phase 1*.

5. Data quality assurance

Ensuring the accuracy and consistency of data collected across all three phases of fieldwork was a top priority throughout this study. A combination of better fieldwork plan, effective training and coordination, preventive measures, real-time monitoring, flexibility and corrective actions was employed to uphold data integrity from the field to the final dataset (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The 7 steps to ensure data quality assurance

Source: Author's own design

5.1. Enumerator training and capacity building

Before the official data collection, all enumerators underwent comprehensive training to ensure consistent and high-quality data collection. The sessions covered questionnaire flow, skip logic, data collection guidelines, ethical considerations, and hands-on practice with KoboToolbox. To strengthen their readiness, enumerators conducted a pilot test using real MSME samples under the supervision of the research team. Feedback was gathered to refine tools and address any issues in KoboToolbox.

Newly recruited enumerators received targeted training, including field shadowing and close supervision by the fieldwork coordinator, with immediate feedback to ensure data quality standards were maintained. These training efforts ensured that all enumerators were well-prepared, confident with the tools, and capable of collecting accurate and reliable data in the field.

5.2. Field observation and spot check

To ensure data quality, the fieldwork coordinator conducted daily observations, spot checks, and back-checks with previously interviewed businesses. Each day, five enumerators were observed, and at least five interview points were reviewed.

These activities helped identify issues like incomplete responses, misapplied skip logic, and skipped businesses. Immediate feedback and on-site corrections ensured consistent and reliable data collection. This hands-on supervision played a key role in maintaining the integrity of the dataset.

5.3. Daily debriefing session

At the end of each day, the team held debriefing sessions to address challenges, clarify misunderstandings, and reinforce best practices. A Telegram group supported real-time communication, as enumerators returned home daily.

These sessions encouraged feedback, peer learning, and strong coordination between the research team and enumerators.

5.4. Using real-time data monitoring

Using KoboToolbox enabled real-time data monitoring by the data specialist, allowing quick checks on submission counts, logic, GPS accuracy, outliers, and missing values. This allowed for immediate follow-up with enumerators when issues arose. This proactive approach enhanced coordination and ensured high data quality and reliability.

5.5. Observation form for inaccessible businesses

To account for closed or unreachable businesses, enumerators used a standardised observation form with GPS coordinates and key notes after all reasonable contact attempts. This ensured every case was documented, supporting data integrity, accurate response tracking, and transparent reporting.

5.6. Quality control under difficult conditions

In response to both weather-related and human resource challenges—such as illness, heat exhaustion, or unexpected staff turnover—quality assurance protocols and data collection guidelines were adapted as necessary while still being strictly maintained. Replacement enumerators received thorough briefings and, where needed, shadowed experienced team members before beginning independent work.

Additional technical and logistical support was also provided to ensure continuity, minimise disruption, and maintain data consistency.

Overall, the combination of structured oversight, real-time feedback mechanisms, effective coordination, and adaptive field management contributed to sustaining a high standard of data quality throughout the project, even under tight timelines and operational pressures.

5.7. Post-fieldwork meeting

After completing all phases of data collection, a comprehensive wrap-up meeting was held with all enumerators. The primary objective of this meeting was to reflect on the overall fieldwork experience, verify data submission, and identify unresolved issues or inconsistencies in the collected data. The meeting served as an important platform for enumerators to share their insights, raise challenges they encountered in the field, and provide constructive feedback on the data collection tools and operational procedures.

This debriefing process allowed the research team to triangulate field observations, assess data quality, and make any final corrections or clarifications before closing the dataset.

In addition to data validation, the session promoted knowledge exchange and team learning. Enumerators discussed the successful strategies they used to overcome common obstacles, such as respondent availability, GPS inaccuracies, and language barriers. These discussions not only helped in documenting lessons learnt but also strengthened enumerators' capacity for future research assignments.

6. Challenges, mitigation strategies, and lessons learnt

The data collection process encountered several challenges, particularly in Phnom Penh, an area characterised by high population density, diverse business establishments, and complex urban environments.

Figure 6: Challenges, mitigations, and lessons learnt

Source: Author's own design

This section summarises the key issues faced during fieldwork, outlines the mitigation strategies employed, and highlights lessons learnt. While each challenge was discussed in detail earlier, this summary emphasises how the team responded and identifies improvements for future fieldwork management (see Figure 6).

6.1. Key challenges: Time constraints and delays in coordination with authorities

Mitigation strategies:

1. Proactive follow-up: When formal approval from Khan authorities was delayed, the Fieldwork Coordinator proactively visited the Economic Bureau in person to expedite the process and secure verbal consent.
2. Direct engagement: To overcome bureaucratic delays, the coordinator personally visited Sangkats to explain the project's purpose and secure local cooperation, even before official orders were received.
3. Delegation requests: During periods of limited availability of village chiefs (e.g., Khmer New Year), enumerators, under supervision, requested that village chiefs delegate their responsibilities to other available village representatives to ensure continued support.
4. Adaptive scheduling: Enumerators were temporarily reassigned to conduct interviews in other villages where local authorities were present and to support fellow enumerators, thereby optimising fieldwork time and minimising downtime caused by access issues.

Lessons learnt:

1. Early, in-person coordination with both Khan and Sangkat levels can significantly reduce approval delays.
2. Flexibility in team deployment is crucial when dealing with unpredictable administrative availability.
3. Building relationships with local authorities ahead of major national holidays is essential to avoid disruptions in access and participation.
4. Avoid scheduling data collection during national holidays, particularly Khmer New Year and the Pchum Ben festival.

6.2. Key challenges: GPS signal loss in dense or enclosed areas

Mitigation strategies:

To address GPS signal failures encountered during the initial days of fieldwork, the Fieldwork Coordinator implemented several rapid-response strategies to minimise disruptions:

1. Deployment of backup devices: Six backup tablets were delivered immediately by the fieldwork coordinator to the affected enumerators to replace malfunctioning units. This quick action allowed the team to resume data collection with minimal downtime.
2. Use of personal smartphones: Enumerators were authorised to use their personal smartphones or tablets as an alternative, accessing the KoboToolbox platform with the provided credentials information. This flexible approach ensured the continuity of data collection while maintaining data integrity.

3. Continuous monitoring and support: The Fieldwork Coordinator maintained close communication with enumerators to monitor device performance, troubleshoot technical issues in real-time, and provide guidance on location data accuracy.

Lessons learnt:

1. Thorough pre-testing is crucial: While initial tablet testing was conducted during the pilot phase, it did not fully simulate real field conditions. Future pre-tests should include full-day field simulations in various environments (e.g., urban, rural, indoor, outdoor) to assess GPS performance under realistic scenarios.
2. Device quality and compatibility matter: The recurring issues with Amazon-brand tablets underscored the importance of selecting high-quality, field-tested devices. Procurement decisions should prioritise models with proven GPS reliability.
3. Backup plans ensure continuity: Allowing enumerators to use personal smartphones was an effective contingency plan that prevented significant delays. This flexibility should be formalised in future field protocols, ensuring that enumerators are briefed on login procedures and device compatibility before deployment.
4. Real-time communication supports fast resolution: The ability to troubleshoot issues through direct communication between the Fieldwork Coordinator and enumerators significantly reduced downtime. Future projects should emphasise maintaining clear, responsive communication channels.

6.3. Key challenges: Limited availability or completeness of data

Mitigation strategies:

1. Enumerators were requested to seek contact details for MSME representatives or managerial staff when regular staff were unable to provide complete information.
2. Follow-up phone calls or visits were conducted to collect missing data from appropriate respondents.
3. Enumerators clearly explained the confidentiality and purpose of the study to reduce hesitation around sensitive questions, especially those related to business registration and finances.
4. To mitigate concerns about tax implications, enumerators emphasised that the data would not be shared with tax authorities or used for research purposes only.
5. For closed businesses with no contact available, enumerators completed observation forms to document them and avoid unnecessary follow-up.

Lessons learnt:

1. Clear communication about the study's purpose and confidentiality helps build trust and reduce respondent reluctance.
2. Well-trained enumerators on data collection guidelines are essential for handling sensitive topics and responding to respondents' concerns professionally.
3. Gathering alternative contacts during initial visits is an effective strategy to improve data completeness as much as possible.

4. Observation forms serve as a useful tool when contact with business owners is not possible, ensuring documentation continues without delay.

6.4. Key challenges: Language barriers

Mitigation strategies:

1. Enumerators sought assistance from staff members or others within the establishment who could act as translators during the interview.
2. In cases where no translator was available and communication was not possible, enumerators completed observation forms to capture basic details about the business.

Lessons learnt:

1. Language barriers can significantly impact data quality, particularly in diverse urban areas with foreign-owned businesses.
2. Having a plan in place for handling language challenges—such as identifying potential interpreters or using observation forms—is critical to minimising data gaps.
3. Future projects should consider assigning enumerators with multilingual abilities where foreign-owned businesses are concentrated.

6.5. Key challenges: Unfavourable weather conditions

Mitigation strategies:

1. Provided raincoats and umbrellas to enumerators to allow continued data collection during light rain.
2. Delivered basic medication (e.g., for skin irritation, flu symptoms) to affected team members.
3. Temporarily paused fieldwork during heavy rain or flooding to ensure enumerator safety and protect data quality.
4. Monitored weather forecasts daily to plan and adjust field schedules accordingly.
5. Advised enumerators to wear caps or use umbrellas during high-temperature days.
6. Encouraged resting in shaded or roofed areas when experiencing symptoms of heat exhaustion.
7. Granted a short leave to enumerators affected by heat-related illness.

Lessons learnt:

1. Weather extremes (rain or heat) can significantly affect fieldwork logistics, health, and productivity. Equipping enumerators with protective gear for both rain and heat is essential for safety and comfort.
2. Flexibility in scheduling and buffer days should be included in the fieldwork plan to accommodate weather-related delays.
3. Clear health and safety protocols are necessary for responding to environmental risks like flooding and heat exhaustion.
4. Regular communication and monitoring help detect early signs of weather-related challenges and take timely action.

7. Conclusion

The fieldwork management process for this data collection project in Phnom Penh presented a range of logistical, operational, and contextual challenges. From delays in authority coordination and time constraints to equipment issues, language barriers, data limitations, and unpredictable weather conditions, the team encountered multiple obstacles throughout each phase of implementation.

Despite these challenges, the flexibility, dedication, and proactive problem-solving demonstrated by the fieldwork coordinator, research and non-research team members, and enumerators enabled the successful completion of data collection. Adaptive strategies—such as direct engagement with local authorities, reassigning enumerators, using personal devices when necessary, and implementing protective measures during extreme weather—helped ensure the continuity and quality of field operations.

Lessons learnt from this project underscore the importance of early and ongoing stakeholder engagement, contingency planning for technical and environmental disruptions, and clear, culturally sensitive communication when working with diverse communities. These insights will be vital for strengthening the effectiveness and resilience of future fieldwork, particularly in complex urban settings like Phnom Penh.

In conclusion, the successful completion of interviews with a large sample size of 14,820 MSMEs reflects strong teamwork, effective coordination, and a deep commitment to ethical and rigorous data collection practices.

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