

Photovoice as a 'political' project:

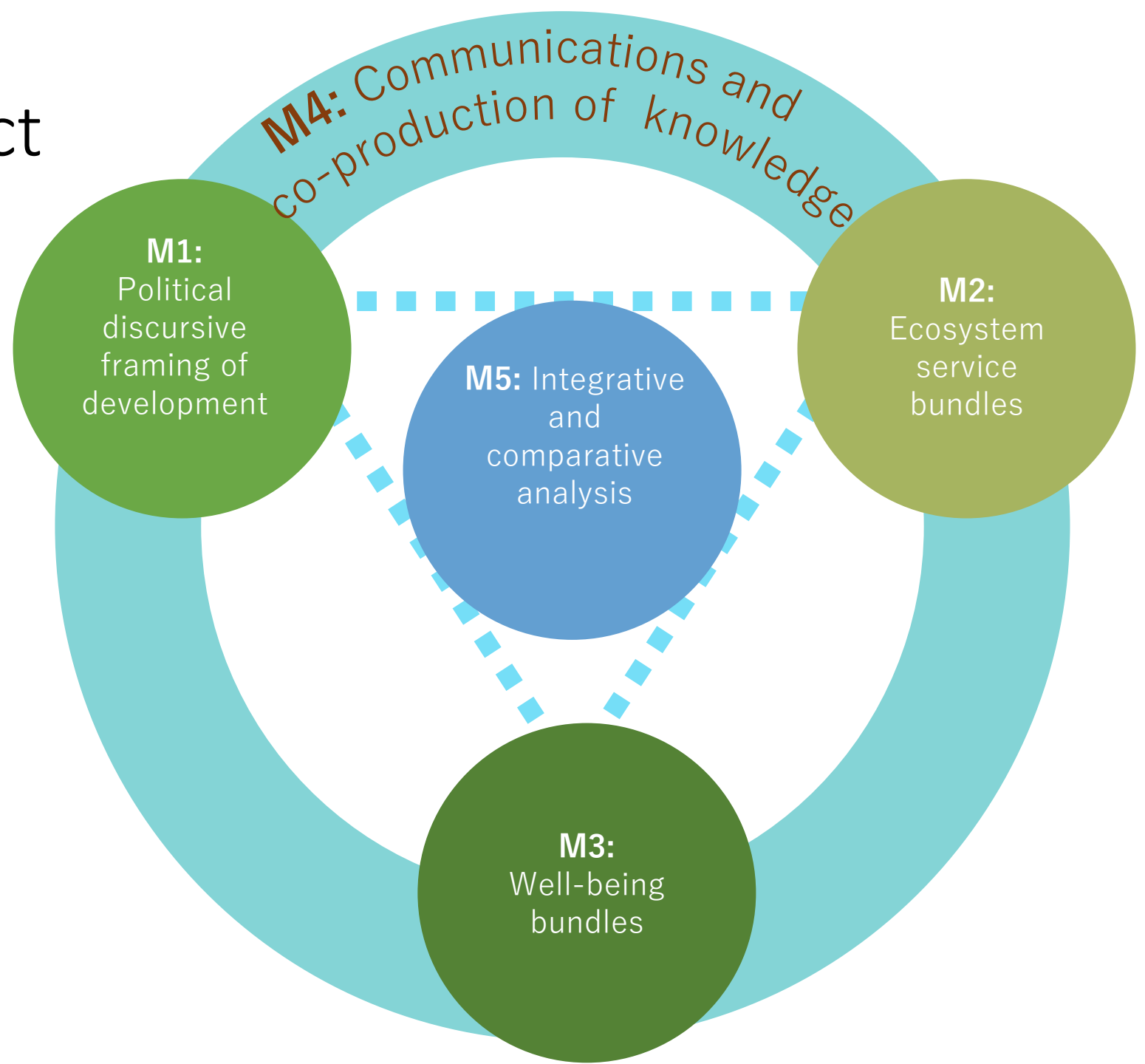
An introduction & guide to implementing
Photovoice in frontier regions



January 2025

Photovoice methods training, part 1

FairFrontiers Project structure



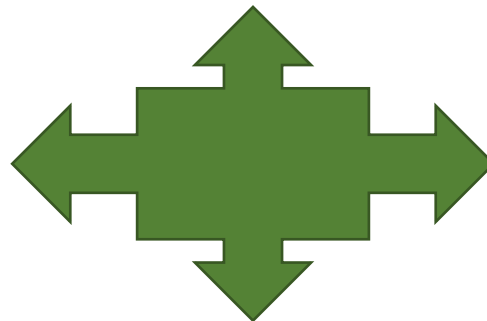
Giving voice and co-production

- **Multiple evidence approach:** understanding different knowledge systems, values and perspectives
- With our project focus on equity, we actively engage groups who are often excluded from decision making processes
 - what are their narratives of change?
 - what are the different visions of sustainable and equitable development?
 - How do we capture these different realities and ambitions?

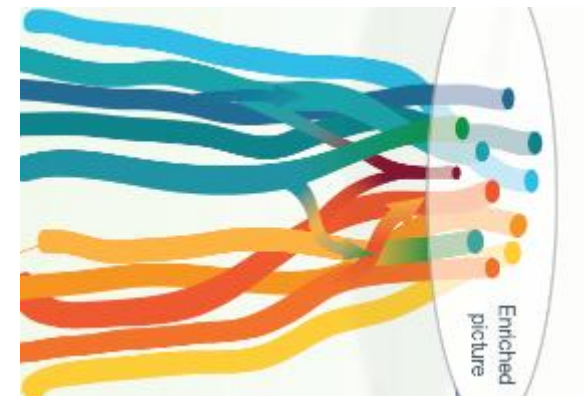
(Colonial) history



Present realities



Future (policy) options



‘Photovoice is to make your photos talk’

Aop, 2019 (Pastres project)

- Photovoice as a method builds on a long legacy of photography as a research medium in anthropology and the social sciences
- Photovoice has a strong emphasis on **participation**. Participants take photographs of their everyday realities and come together to discuss, and represent community issues through photographs and critical discussion and reflection
- Photovoice is an overlap of three theoretical frameworks: empowerment education, feminist theory and documentary photography. All three theoretical frameworks emphasise **community participation for the purpose of social action**



‘Different photographs are captured, different stories are told, and different reflections emerge’

STEPS, IDS

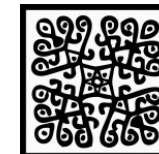
- Photovoice reveals real life experiences, offering often marginalised people a voice and the possibility to engage in critical dialogue around their own realities
- Disrupts existing power relationships
- In sustainability research, photovoice has been used to understand complex relationships to landscapes (Stedman 2014, Briggs et al. 2014), elicit local ecological knowledge about conservation and ecosystem services (Berbés-Blázquez 2012, Beh et al. 2013) perceptions of environmental change and wellbeing (Masterson et al. 2018)



Photovoice in FairFrontiers

Diverse social-ecological changes, diverse development and political contexts, and diverse ambitions for the future

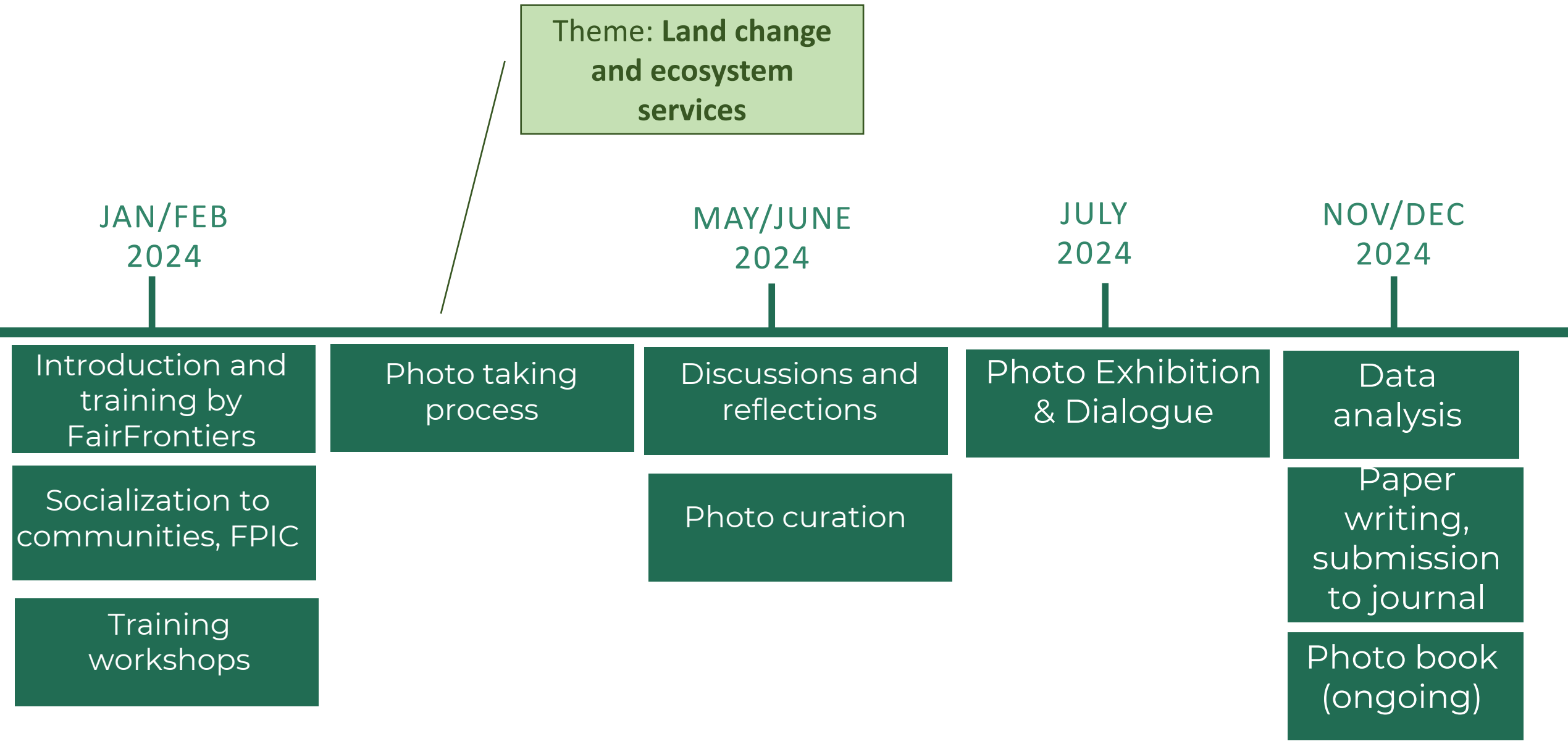
- Photovoice has to be carefully designed to allow for **local and indigenous voices and perspectives** and to enable critical dialogue on the less visible cultural, emotional social and political connections
- Carried out photovoice activities:
 - Peninsular Bengkoka, Sabah (Jan-Aug 2024; paper writing)
 - Sulawesi, Indonesia (Jan-July 2024; paper submitted Nov 2024)
 - Cameroon (Mar-Nov 2025)
 - DR Congo (Oct 2025-Mar 2026)



Case study: Capturing silenced voices within state territoriality in Sulawesi, Indonesia



Timeline



Some of the stories that emerged...

Territoriality



The Forest Boundary that Kept Expanding

I'm surprised, in the past the boundaries of the forest area were located more inside, but over time it kept moving outward. Like this rice field, it's abandoned now [because it has been inside the forest], even though it has been rice fields for four generations and people used to cultivate this land. Now it's banned.

Vulnerability & precarity



I am a Landless Farmer

This land was inherited from my parents. It was cultivated with maize and groundnuts, but I replaced them with teak and mahogany trees. I hoped that I can use them as material for my children's houses. But since the UNHAS forest was established, I am forbidden to cut trees that I planted myself on my own land. Now, I cannot cultivate this land anymore, I am a landless farmer.

Memories of landscapes



The Abandoned Candlenut Trees

The candlenuts in this photo was planted in my father, while those in the forest were planted by my grandparents. Candlenuts in the forest can still be taken, but cutting down the trees is not allowed. Now there are not many people planting candlenuts, it is easier to plant ginger. Ginger is more profitable. The problem with candlenuts in the village is that they are not productive anymore and cannot be rejuvenated because they are in the forest area.

Understanding the history of territoriality in South Sulawesi

- Territoriality of village forests began in 1920s by the Dutch colonial government
- Over 100 families have claims to land that is now part of the Hasanuddin University Education Forest (HUEF)
- HUEF is situated in the reproduction of state territoriality through its technocratic approach to teaching, research, and forest management
- Photovoice helped to unearth the local people's emotions from loss of lands and their practices of everyday resistance

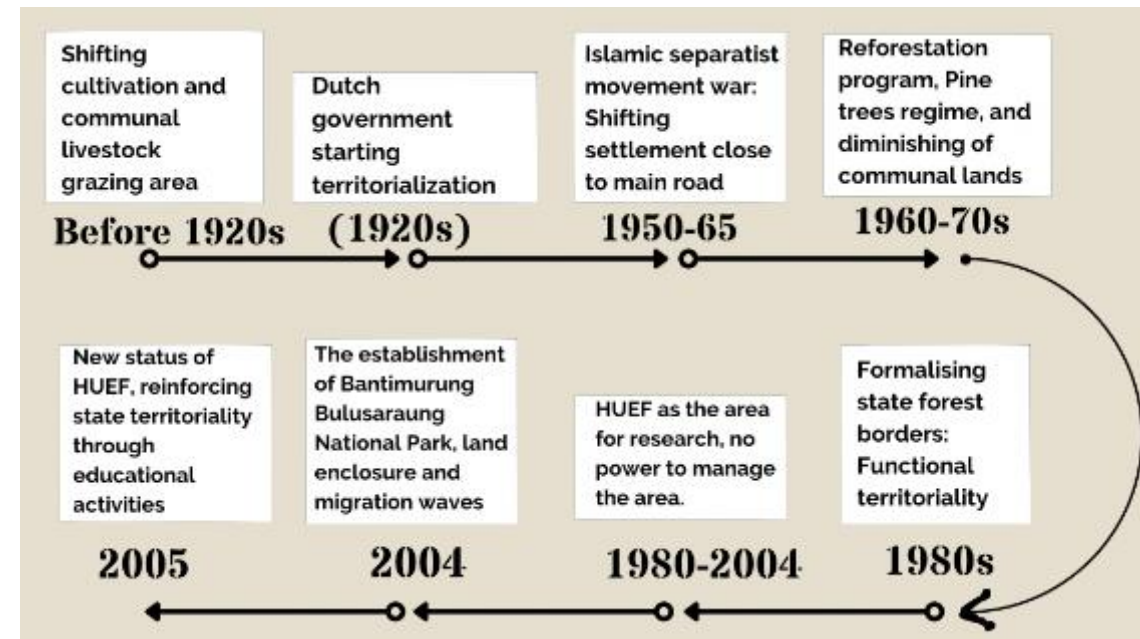
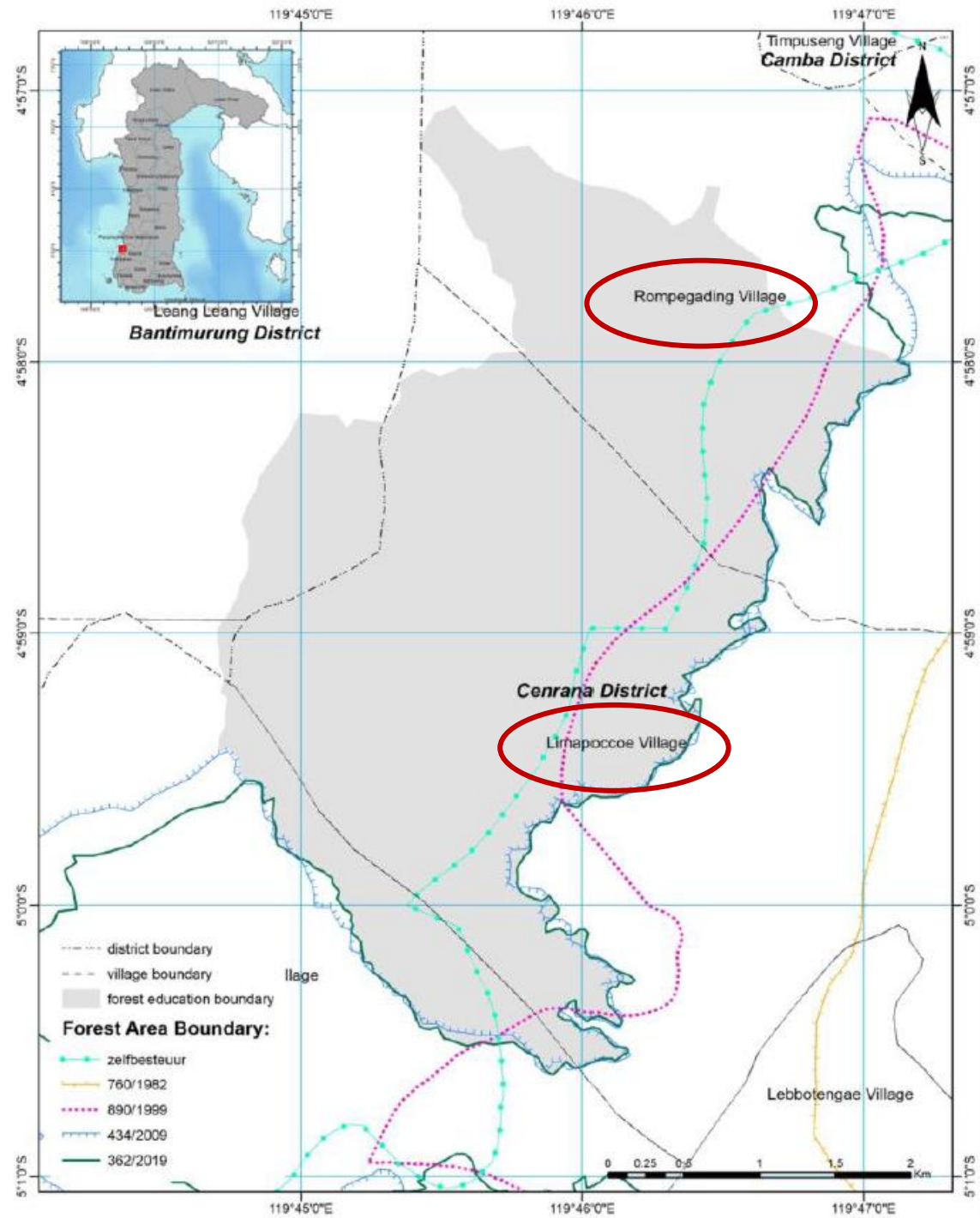


Figure from paper submitted to Forest Policy & Economics: *Decolonizing Hasanuddin Education Forest through a photovoice approach: Juxtaposing everyday resistance and everyday responses* (Sahide et al., in review)





Lessons learnt (1)

Ethics and consent: Very important and should be the first step in process!

Photovoice requires deep collaboration: research partners have spent substantive time building trust with the villagers

Positionality: researchers need to be well aware of our roles as facilitators, and of our biases in this work.

Turning tables – community participants have the power to determine which and how their photos and stories are to be shared and with whom

➤ *Requires much more time and support than anticipated, and a lot of patience!*



Lessons learnt (2)

Identity and voice: Local people used Photovoice to express their grievances and emotions over their lands taken by the State.

While there are local acts of everyday resistance, HUEF also practices **everyday responses**, *“a bundle of actions that deal with resistance to maintain the existing dominant power structure while negotiating the interests of the powerless”*.

➤ *How do our research fit within the complexity of contestations and State territorialization?
What are the risks?*



Useful readings (required)

- Beh, A., B. L. Bruyere, and S. Lolosoli. 2013. Legitimizing local perspectives in conservation through community-based research: a photovoice study in Samburu, Kenya. *Society & Natural Resources* 26(12):1390-1406. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2013.805858>
- Castleden, H., T. Garvin, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation. 2009. “Hishuk Tsawak” (Everything is one/connected): a Huu-ay-aht worldview for seeing forestry in British Columbia, Canada. *Society & Natural Resources* 22(9):789-804. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920802098198>
- Masterson, V. A., S. L. Mahajan, and M. Tengö. 2018. Photovoice for mobilizing insights on human well-being in complex social- ecological systems: case studies from Kenya and South Africa. *Ecology and Society* 23(3):13. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10259-230313>
- Mitchell, F. M., Billiot, S., & Lechuga-Peña, S. (2020). Utilizing photovoice to support indigenous accounts of environmental change and injustice. *Genealogy*, 4(2), 51.
- Wang, C., and M. A. Burris. 1997. Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behaviour* 24(3):369-387. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>

Photovoice methods training, part 2

What is Photovoice

Photovoice is a research method based on participant-led photography in “a process by which people can identify, represent and examine their community” → aims to **empower through participant ownership of the research process**.

Photovoice has three main objectives:

1. Enable **reflection of everyday realities** and community issues
2. Encourage **critical dialogue and discussion** of community issues
3. Promote **social change** by communicating issues to society and policy-makers

Limitations and challenges (1)

- Social change processes are complex, and can often involve **conflict**
 - Empowering people to speak does not mean that there is a shift of power to change policy
 - There can be uncertain and unpredictable outcomes with inherent risks
 - Suspicion of photovoice projects as having hidden agendas
 - We need to have clear awareness about political contexts, and sensitivity to potential for suspicion and threats, particularly when working with communities that have a history of political repression and violence
- Photovoice is conceived as a participatory method that enables community participants to lead/control the process ... but this is seldom completely true
 - Often researchers have already defined the project and predetermined the roles of participants -- **risk of 'false empowerment'** when there is little opportunity for meaningful participation
 - We need to be honest about claims of empowerment and address power imbalances

Limitations and challenges (2)

- It is assumed that participants want to use camera technology to express themselves, reflect their own stories and share what they know and how they want to be seen
 - Implies **implicit value judgement** about the expectations of participation and subject positions
 - Not willing to participate may indicate refusal to engage with, to problematize historic or current tensions, or resistance to broader issues beyond the project
 - We need to recognize and reflect on the challenges around participation, non-participation and resistance to Photovoice activities
- Photovoice ‘**hides as well as discloses**’
 - Need to be critical not only about what is visible but also **what has been excluded**, which might indicate sensitive topics, stigma or taboo subjects
 - We need to recognize absences, silences and exclusions as an important analytical step

‘Photovoice is an important method, but only one within the toolbox’

Masterson et al. 2018

- Methods that engage holistic ways of perceiving human-nature relationships must also **acknowledge inequalities between scientific and other forms of knowledge**
- Visual representations of environments, life, and controversy surrounding landscape change take many forms—connecting with **emotions, power relations, cultural processes, and diverse values**
- Larger-scale phenomena are not easily captured through participatory photography, e.g., the influence of historical agricultural or forest policies, or changing rights and access, or non-visible or non-material ecosystem services



A guide to implementing Photovoice in frontier regions

Step 1: Design and planning

[Among research team]

1. Identify/decide on the approach and methodology based on the **project's aims and objectives**
 - Will Photovoice be used to elicit local perspectives and knowledge? Or to enable social empowerment and change?
 - FairFrontiers have a general ethics approval from RIHN; will you require ethics approval from your institution?
2. Determine **who should participate and number of participants** – usually depends on project aims and resources
 - What are the criteria: gender, occupation, ethnicity?
 - Discuss logistics: will participants take photos alone or in groups? What is the anticipated timeframe?



Step 1: Design and planning

3. Choosing **equipment** (see Table 17.1 in Milne & Muir 2020)



Table 17.1 Pros and cons of the different types of cameras

Camera	Pros	Cons
Disposable camera	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Easily replaceable if lost– Limited number of shots available, which limits number of photos taken and encourages more thought before taking the photo– Preserves all photographs for discussion– Does not need charger, batteries or electricity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Less available in some locations– Content not confidential as it has to go to an external party for developing– Photographer not able to see the shot taken to verify quality– Lower quality prints– No choice in shooting modes– Easier to lose– Additional time needed to scan images to jpeg
Digital camera	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Re-usable– Variety of shooting modes– Photographer can review images to make sure the shot captures what they require– No limitation on number of shots that can be taken– Can send images electronically– Can manipulate images with participants– Higher quality images for publishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Higher cost– No limitation on number of shots that can be taken. This can lead to over-proliferation.– Risk of theft or putting photographer at risk of theft– Insurance recommended, which has a cost implication– Need for additional batteries and/or chargers– Need to purchase photo printer or factor in additional printing costs for participants to have their own copies
Mobile phone camera	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Re-usable– Smaller and more portable than larger cameras– If participants have mobile phones this can keep costs down and some people might be more comfortable with them.– Variety of shooting modes– Can send images electronically– Can manipulate images with participants– Lightweight charger, quick and easy to charge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Not all people have mobile phones with cameras, particularly older people, children, and people on low incomes in certain countries

Step 1: Design and planning

[Developed by researchers, and discuss with participants]

4. Ethics

- Develop a shared **Code of Ethics**: identify values of the project, roles and responsibilities, ownership of data (photographs, narratives, discussions), data storage, access, copyright, etc.
 - Identify the target audience of policymakers, community leaders or other change-makers (if appropriate)
- This process helps to establish dialogue and build trust between group → need to explicitly acknowledge questions of power and rights



Step 2: Introducing Photovoice

Workshop: Introducing Photovoice

1. Obtain **informed consent** from participants

- Expressed consent should be obtained from participants for the study, and use of their photos and stories
- Either verbal (or signed) consent should be obtained from people who appear in photographs where they can be recognized – this is both about ethics and also about the law

Types of questions to facilitate discussion:

- What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take his or her picture?
- Should someone take pictures of other people without their knowledge?
- To whom might you wish to give photographs and what might be the implications?
- When would you not want to have your picture taken?

Step 2: Introducing Photovoice

Workshop: Introducing Photovoice

2. Understand the participants' relationship to the issues being investigated
 - **Setting the themes** – themes can be pre-defined by researchers or (if appropriate) defined together with participants depending on the project aims and objectives. Important to facilitate a common understanding of the theme and how the theme might be portrayed
3. Photo assignment
 - Clear instructions on number of photos to be taken, and timetable for returning cameras, films and consent forms
 - Provide photo-taking training if needed, participants should have opportunity to familiarize with camera
 - Cameras should only be given out after the discussions, and never at start of meeting!

Taking photos

- Participants decide on the motives that they feel best represent the themes and portray their perspectives
 - They can record their needs, concerns and hopes for the future – can include activities, places, people, objects, views, features in the landscape (trees, land, agriculture, animals), etc.
-
- There is **no right or wrong way** about what/how photos can be taken to portray their perspectives!
 - However, need to remind about **ethics** of taking photos



Step 3. Discussions of photos

Photos should be printed for discussion, to enable reflection, interpretation and meaning-making ...

- Participants can **select between 3-5 photographs** that they most wish to discuss – and/or group photographs according to themes
- Discussions about the photographs can be as a group activity if the participants feel comfortable – or on a one-to-one basis if preferred
- In a **group discussion**, the process of individuals presenting their images and accompanying narratives or stories to the group allows the others to share similar or counter stories, and thus enables **a collaborative process of analysis**
 - Generally, a discussion takes around **1 hr (individual) to 2-3 hr (group)**
 - Discussions can be recorded if participants agree



Step 3. Discussions of photos

A model to facilitate photovoice discussions: PHOTO

- Describe your **P**icture
- What is **H**appening in your picture?
- Why did you take a picture **O**f this?
- What does this picture **T**ell us about your life?
- How can this picture provide **O**pportunities for us to improve life?

➤ Important to use this model only as *a guide*, and not to restrict how participants may choose to talk about their images



Step 3. Analysis of image, voice and narrative

- Meaning-making of images, voice and narrative through participant engagement, through researcher-driven engagement and re-contextualizing (Drew & Guillemin 2014)
- Researchers can conduct qualitative analysis and systematic coding of photos and discussion/interview transcripts to identify how participants perceive and represent the themes of the activity
 - Use of theoretical and inductive codes based on the theme

→ FairFrontiers team can support the analytical process!

Step 4. Photo curation and dissemination

- Ideally, **participants make the decisions** on how and for whom the photos and stories are to be shown
 - Many projects organize community exhibitions in public spaces – and will require a curatorial statement that contextualises the project and the themes
 - Can be beneficial to produce **a booklet or photobook for the community**, and as possible dissemination to policy or other actors
-
- If the images portray illegal activities, the film/cameras should be left with an intermediary – who then shares with the researcher, so that the photographer remains anonymous
 - Copies of photos should be given to the participant who created them

! Ethical considerations !

- Four possible areas of **privacy invasion** from Photovoice:
 - Intrusion into private space
 - Disclosure of embarrassing facts
 - Being placed in a false light
 - Protection against use of a person/image for personal benefit
- **Remember that consent needs to be obtained at different points of the project:**
 - At beginning of project for all participants
 - During photo-taking – if the participant takes a photo of another person who can be identified, consent needs to be given either verbally or as a signed form
 - Participants also need to provide consent if the photographs are included in an exhibition or as part of a publication – they may want to know how the information/images will be used after
- **Code of Ethics:** researchers also need to **reflect on our roles as facilitators, as interpreters of the photos and stories, and our value judgements and biases**

Useful readings (required)

- Derr, V., Simons, J. (2020) A review of photovoice applications in environment, sustainability, and conservation contexts: is the method maintaining its emancipatory intents?, *Environmental Education Research*, 26:3, 359-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2019.1693511>
- Drew, Sarah and Guillemin, Marilys (2014) 'From photographs to findings: Visual meaning-making and interpretive engagement in the analysis of participant generated images', *Visual Studies*, 29(1), 54–67
- Milne, E.J., Muir, R. (2020) Photovoice: A critical introduction. In *Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, Sage Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526417015>
- Huber, J.M., Bieling, C., Garcia-Martin, M., Plieninger, T., Torralba, M. (2023) Photovoice: participatory research methods for sustainability, toolkit #8. *GAIA* 32(4):386-388
- Liebenberg, L. (2018). Thinking critically about photovoice: Achieving empowerment and social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1).

Let's start!

- What do we want to gain from Photovoice activity in your region? What is the objective?
- What could be possible themes for the Photovoice activity?
 - How do the themes relate to the FairFrontiers project?
- Where will the activity be carried out? With whom?
 - Do we only consider community members as the participants?

