

EXPLORING PHOTOVOICE

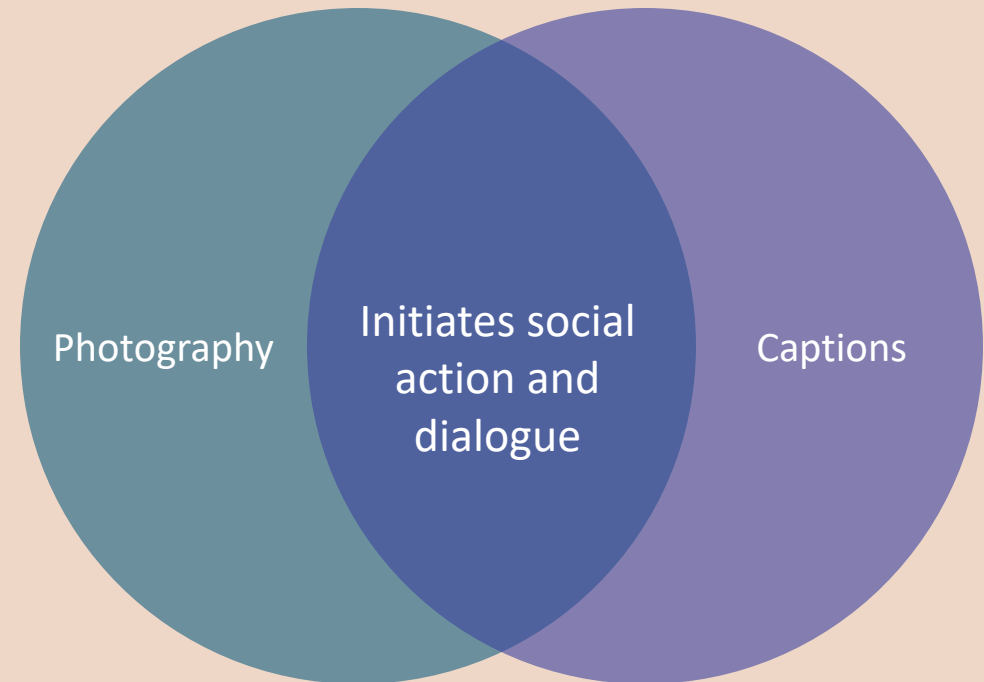
CUL AND IDS PHOTOVOICE TOOLKIT

Content

1. What is Photovoice?
2. Why Photovoice?
3. When Should You Use Photovoice?
4. Who is Involved in Photovoice?
5. How to Implement a Photovoice Project
6. Photovoice Case Study: FRESH Sri Lanka
7. Photovoice Resources

What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory research tool through which 'people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.' (Wang and Burris 1997, 369) Introduced by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, it provides participants with an opportunity to use photography and the 'immediacy of the visual image' (Wang and Burris 1997, 369) as a means of creating awareness and sharing knowledge about critical community issues. The photographs taken by participants are typically 'captioned' in order to clarify the participants' perspective. It is this combination of 'photo' and 'voice' of the photographer that give a powerful, first person insight into lived experiences.



Why Photovoice?

Wang and Burris (1997) highlight three main goals:

- (1) Enabling people to record and reflect on their communities' strengths and weaknesses;
- (2) Promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs;
- (3) Reaching policymakers.



Adaptable and Easy to Use: A camera is all one needs to be a part of the photovoice process (camera or mobile phone camera). Participants should be given the freedom to take photographs that they believe conveys important insights about their community. The process is also 'highly flexible and can be adapted to different communities & contexts'.



Powerful and Memorable: 'A picture is worth a thousand words' is a universal adage that speaks to how powerful the visual image is. The use of photos in this participatory research process allows us to understand the realities and perspectives of those taking the photographs.



Engages the Community: Photovoice gives participants a chance to tell their own story, take the photographs themselves and share insights into their communities to audiences that are often detached or unaware of their lived realities (especially policy makers).

When Should You Use Photovoice?



Raise awareness about a community issue



Inform policymakers about critical issues



Empower communities to tell their own stories

Who is Involved in Photovoice?

Participants

Photovoice aims to highlight a community issue and brings together a group of community members, who have agreed to take photographs and share their perspectives on the issue.

Facilitators

The success of the photovoice process also largely depends on the facilitators. Facilitators must have a good understanding of the community and establish a good rapport with the participants in order to make them feel comfortable in sharing their insights on community issues.

Community Members to Policy Makers

The primary goal of photovoice is to generate change within communities. The photographs are important storytelling tools through which the participants can highlight crucial community issues to those with decision making power; who may be other members of the community, local organisations or policy makers who may not always understand the lived realities of the community. Photovoice is often 'action orientated', by raising issues to these audiences, it starts the process for them to understand, support and implement policies that would improve the participants' communities.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

There are many ways to implement a photovoice project which will depend on the local context, your resources available, and the level of sensitivity of the issues being raised. These steps are intended to provide a basic guide of the core components for implementing a photovoice project in your community.

Step 1: Conduct your own research on photovoice and speak to stakeholders who may have implemented photovoice previously.

Conducting photovoice in your community for the first time can be overwhelming. It is always a good idea to think through the use of photovoice in your community or other communities and speak to those that facilitated the process (if possible) in order to understand what may work well and what may not work. This will help prevent similar oversights and contribute to the overall effectiveness of the photovoice process.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

Step 2: Select the participants.

When selecting participants for the photovoice process, it is important to choose a group of participants that represent different aspects of the issue you are trying to highlight in the community. Although a camera or mobile phone is a necessary tool for the photovoice process, it should not determine who participates. Once the participants have been selected, it is important to introduce the process to them to ensure that they understand and are willing to participate. Working closely with a leader or representative of the community can help this process and build trust.

Step 3: Organise a workshop and introduce photovoice to the participants.

Once participants have agreed to take part, gathering participants in an introductory workshop is an important step in the photovoice process to introduce the project, the team, the methodology. A good place to start is with an ice breaker or photo activity that allows participants to get to know each other and feel more comfortable around interpreting photos.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

Step 3: Organise a workshop and introduce photovoice to the participants (continued...).

The first photovoice workshop should provide simple guidance on factors to consider when taking photographs (i.e., framing, light, keeping the phone/camera still) as well as ethical considerations (such as confidentiality, safety, consent). Participants should also be guided through the 'captioning' process, to draw out the thoughts, experiences and feelings behind their photos. This should be interactive and fun, and considerations of literacy should be factored in and supported.

Step 4: Obtain consent and ethical considerations.

Photovoice requires special considerations around consent, and there are three different types of consent or permissions to consider, which each occur at different times in the project:

1. Consent from participants to be involved in the project. This should be captured in the initial workshop.
2. Consent/ permission from other people to be photographed. This may be written or verbal and should be obtained by the participant when the photo is being taken.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

Step 4: Obtain consent and ethical considerations (continued...).

3. Consent from participants on how they would like their photos to be shared. For example, in an exhibition, on social media, in research papers.

a) Anonymity: As the photographs taken by participants may reveal personal information, participants should be informed from the onset that they retain control over what is shared publicly/is associated with their name. They should be given the choice if they would like their name to be mentioned as the photographer or if they prefer anonymity. The risks associated with each should be clearly explained to participants. This should happen after the photos have been taken.

Additional ethical considerations:

Compensation: If the project budget permits, it is good practice to compensate the participants for their time and effort. Compensation for mobile data charges/transport should be provided.

Participants should also be encouraged to ask any questions about the process to ensure that they understand what they are consenting to, and this should be done throughout the project. The contact details of facilitators should be made easily available should anyone wish to follow up privately.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

Step 4: Obtain consent and ethical considerations (continued...).

It is important to note that those facilitating the photovoice process must convey the above information in a language that is understood by the participants in the first workshop, before the photographs are taken. Printed copies that communicate the above (e.g. consent forms), with signatures of the participants must be provided to all participants, and such forms must be carefully explained to avoid any misunderstanding.

Step 5: Facilitate the photo-taking process.

Providing a few themes to help guide the participants' photography is encouraged. These can come from the research team, or be co-created with the participants. Keep in mind, however, these prompts should be broad enough that participants are given the freedom to take photographs that best represent their situation, rather than be overly specific or prescriptive. Participants should also be given sufficient time to take the photographs and send them to the facilitator/s via applications such as WhatsApp or any other accessible and/or affordable means of communication.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

Step 6: Initiating one-on-ones with the participants to discuss captions and finalise photographs.

A photograph without an accompanying caption is limited in the information it can convey. Participants should be encouraged to send in photographs with captions in the previous step (Step 5). One-on-ones with the participants could help shortlist their favourite photographs and develop captions that tease out the rich experiences behind the photograph.

Facilitators could use the SHOWeD technique to help participants caption their photos, through asking the following questions:

- What do you See here?
- What is really Happening here?
- How does this relate to Our lives?
- Why does this condition Exist?
- What can we Do about it?

This technique used alongside the photographs helps to avoid surface level descriptions of a photograph, and reveals more nuance about the situation.

How to Implement a Photovoice Project

Step 7: Organise a final workshop and exhibition.

Once the photographs and captions have been gathered, bringing participants back together to collectively view and discuss them is an important step for collective meaning making and an opportunity to draw out common themes. This could take place in a community hall or a space that is easily accessible to the community (Please refer to the Wanathamulla case study). The photographs could be organised thematically, and small group discussions around each theme will help bring out more information, and shared experiences about the community issues highlighted in

the photographs. In this final workshop participants should be encouraged to collectively decide if they would like to display their photos publicly in an exhibition, including who they would like to invite to that. Participants should also be reminded that they are not obliged to share any images, and if they wish to do so permission should be received. (Step 4)

Photovoice Case Study

FRESH Sri Lanka (Wanathamulla)

As part of the Fruits and Vegetables for Sustainable Healthy Diets (FRESH) project in Sri Lanka, which sought to primarily understand people's access to and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, the Institute for Development Studies, U.K and Colombo Urban Lab applied photovoice as one component of the research in two communities. Thirteen participants in the Wanathamulla field site were chosen for the photovoice exercise. They were chosen based on the use and availability of a smartphone, and their ability to commit (time commitment) to the photovoice exercise.

A consent form was shared at the outset, to confirm their consent to engage in the photovoice process. Participants' mobile data and transport charges as well as an honorarium for their time was provided. Respondents were invited to an introductory workshop on photovoice conducted by the Colombo Urban Lab team, at a community centre in the neighbourhood. The invitations were hand delivered to ensure maximum participation. The workshop date was decided based on what would work best for a majority of the participants (in this case, on a Sunday, as participants were free).

Photovoice Case Study

At the first workshop, participants were introduced to photovoice and the use of captions along with the photographs that they would be encouraged to take.

Participants were given three themes, under which they could send in a total of ten photographs to the Colombo Urban Lab Team via WhatsApp, along with an accompanying caption. We accepted multiple modes of caption sending—including through WhatsApp voice notes.

The themes were as follows:

- My favorite vegetable/s to cook
- Fresh fruit seen in the neighbourhood during the week
- Places I procure fruits & vegetables from

Photovoice Case Study

At the workshop, participants were given consent forms regarding how their photographs were to be used. Following this, participants were given about a week to send in photos with captions, after which members of the Colombo Urban Lab team visited them for a one-on-one session to try and understand the stories behind their photos.

Out of the ten pictures sent to the Colombo Urban Lab team, a total of three pictures (i.e., per participant) were chosen by participants along with the captions.

Once the picture and captions had been finalised, the pictures were grouped thematically—(for instance, food preferences and preparation) and printed along with the accompanying captions.

These were displayed on boards at the final workshop and exhibition, during which the participants were grouped based on three themes (on rotation basis) after which a discussion was facilitated. The findings and recommendations from photovoice was later validated through a workshop with community members. [view our findings and recommendations from the FRESH research in this story map](#)

5 Key Reflections from our Research in Colombo

1. The process takes longer than you think to get off the ground.
2. Flexibility in the process and timings is essential to encourage participation at a pace that suits the busy lives of participants.
3. Have a dedicated phone to receive images and captions, back these up regularly to a password protected file on a computer.
4. Participants really enjoyed seeing their own experiences reflected in the photographs of others.
5. Providing refreshments helps break the ice!

Some photos from the final photovoice workshop and exhibition:

Image 1: *“Lunch on a day I was busy with some work at my child’s school.”*

Sabeetha, Wanathamulla.



Some photos from the final photovoice workshop and exhibition:

Image 2: *“This vendor sells fruit in his cart close to the temple where I work as a preschool teacher. Even though it’s convenient, I prefer to buy fruit from a shop that’s properly covered, and the produce is fresh”*

Srimali, Wanathamulla.



Some photos from the final photovoice workshop and exhibition:

Image 3: *Observing the displayed photographs by their fellow participants.*



Image 4: *A focus group discussion during the final workshop and exhibition.*



Photovoice Resources

Community Toolbox. “Implementing photovoice in your community.” <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main>

Gamage, S. 2023. “Photovoice as a Method for Understanding Inclusive Infrastructure: Lessons from Sri Lanka.” *Centre for Migration Research and Development*:1-35. [https://www.inclusiveinfrastructure.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Photovoice as a Method for Understanding Inclusive Infrastructure Lessons from Sri Lanka-1-2.pdf](https://www.inclusiveinfrastructure.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Photovoice%20as%20a%20Method%20for%20Understanding%20Inclusive%20Infrastructure%20Lessons%20from%20Sri%20Lanka-1-2.pdf).

Hunger Free Colorado. “Photovoice Case Study and Toolkit.” <https://www.ihconline.org/filesimages/Tools/Pop%20Health/SIM/SDOH%20Toolkit/PhotoVoice.pdf>

Public Health in the 406. “Photovoice Toolkit: Sharing Pictures to Change Communities and Local Policy.” <https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/publichealth/Tobacco/Publications/PhotovoiceToolkit.pdf>

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. 1997. “Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment.” *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3): 369–387. doi:10.1177/109019819702400309.

This toolkit has also drawn from “Using Photovoice to explore food environments: methodological training” [online training course] by Leah Salm, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton UK, 2023.

COLOMBO
URBAN
LAB



**institute of
development
studies**