





Photovoice is founded on some basic foundational beliefs. At its core, is the **belief that people of the community itself, not outside experts, are in the best position to understand the strengths and limitations of their community.** This internal view, or 'emic' view, is given an opportunity to be expressed more readily through the photovoice process than is typically seen with other strategies. With photovoice, participants are the ones generating the photo images of their concerns along with the stories and caption that explain their point of view. Valuing the emic point of view leads to additional **core beliefs that people are their own best advocates** and that **critical decision makers can be partners in positive community change** when they are made aware of the issues. Because photovoice encourages a deep analysis of the root causes of the issues identified through the photos and stories captured by participants, the method holds as a foundational belief that **addressing the source of a problem is better in the long term** than simply telling people how to be healthy. Each of these layered beliefs, or 'active ingredients', provides the motivation for communities or groups adopting the photovoice process for community change.

Even though photovoice is a social change intervention, social change happens because an individual, or individuals, become aware of an issue and its cause and are willing to take an action to change something for the better. **A fundamental tenet, or power, of the photovoice process lies within its potential to move individuals through the steps of rising 'critical consciousness'.** At its core, Photovoice moves individuals from a state of *passive adaptation* (to current community circumstances) through an *emotional engagement* with issues (such as concern, anger, or hope), resulting in a *cognitive awakening* (or new understanding) to root causes or reasons for an identified problem. Each of these phases of increased awareness, or critical consciousness, leads to the final stage of an *intention to act* where people involved in the process shift their roles from learners to emerging leaders and social actors in their communities<sup>9</sup>.

## Goals

The *principle goal* of photovoice is to **improve communities by addressing problems at their root.** To achieve positive community change photovoice has sub-goals to:

- **Empower participants** to record community needs and strengths
- **Promote critical discussion** among participants about the root causes of the issues
- Create a platform for participants to **engage with policymakers, local leaders, the media, and the general community population**
- **Create a means for advocates to promote policy, systems and environmental changes** that address the root causes of a problem and are more likely to provide for a sustained positive impact on a community

## Typical Photovoice Steps

While the implementation of photovoice varies, the process follows a typical set of steps.

### Group Formation

Most photovoice efforts begin with the identification of a group of individuals that will be involved in the execution of the effort. Research has identified participation is a primary driver of the degree to which photovoice is able to achieve its aim of addressing root causes and community improvements<sup>5</sup>. Photovoice efforts that begin with a coherent and motivated group are more likely to be successful in their efforts, however, evidence also suggest that the photovoice process **itself** is an excellent facilitator of coherent group formation and motivation for change.

### Grounding Participants in the Photovoice Process

Prior to taking cameras into the community, participants are grounded in the principles of the photovoice process. This initial grounding is critical for group formation, developing a sense of mutual purpose, and ensuring respectful and ethical principles are followed throughout the process. It is important during this early stage of the process to sensitize participants to ethical considerations and to provide strategies to protect the privacy of others as well as protect their personal safety along with that of their organization and community.

### Documenting Issues of Concern

The group begins taking and sharing photos that represent issues of local concern. A common strategy to get individuals and groups into the community taking photos is through the use of Photo Missions that provide a prompt or theme in order to get the group going. It is also used to encourage groups to take photos about a particular issue, or just about general things that they like or do not like in their community.

### Dialogue of Root Causes

Participants select their favorite photos and talk with each other about the meaning behind each photo, and what the group could do to see things change. The photovoice SHOWED mnemonic provides a guide for the common set of questions used to facilitate group discussions.

- S...** What do you **SEE** here?
- H...** What's really **HAPPENING** here?
- O...** How does this relate to **OUR** lives?
- W...WHY** does this problem or situation exist?
- E...** How could this image **EDUCATE** others (the community, policy makers, etc.)?
- D...** What can we **DO** about the problem or situation?

### Writing

Using group discussions of the SHOWED method, the group members are ready to begin telling their stories through captions. Well-written captions provide the context for the photos taken and have the added impact of evoking emotion, insight into root causes, and appeals to actions for addressing the identified concern. This is a critical phase of the photovoice process as photos with captions have been shown to be much more powerful than photos alone. **Because the process encourages critical thinking and communication skills it is likely that participants will strengthen their writing and communication skills.**



## Sorting Issues into Themes

Groups examine the collection of photos and captions that express the idea or stories they want to tell. Because the **goal of photovoice is to educate and influence those who can facilitate local change**, consideration is given to the identification of identify themes within the group of photos, and then select the most compelling photos to focus on.

## Planning Public Dissemination

In order to have a successful photovoice effort, attention needs to be given not only to the most important messages but also to the venues and the list of attendees for the for the public photo exhibits. The group must think through the nuts and bolts of what it takes to host a photovoice exhibit in their community, and plan events that capture the interest of community members and decision makers.

## Hosting a Public Photovoice Exhibit

A culminating, but not final, step of the photovoice process is the public photo exhibit. While the photos and captions provide a rich message, having the opportunity for participants and local decision makers to interact and discuss the photos has the greatest **potential for achieving the desired impact of leading a decision maker to an 'intention to act' on the issue or concern raised**.

## Advocacy for Local Change

While public photo exhibits are a powerful means for educating and raising awareness to local issues of concern, continued advocacy efforts are typically needed to reinforce messages and to follow-up with local decision makers responsible for change. Strategies of this phase can include: additional photo exhibits, use of social media, presentations to local boards, letters to the editor and other media coverage. It is common for the powerful visual elements of photovoice to attract those interested in sponsorship and enhancing the appeal of fundraising efforts to address local concerns. A trait of successful photovoice efforts is the degree to which **the process is able to harness the energy and passions of participants** and those touched by the photovoice process, which is needed for sustaining efforts to address issues of local concern.



## Considerations

Carrying out a photovoice effort has some common challenges that should be considered when planning to use the method. The process does require some resources to carry out and typically include considerations for cameras, printing photos and captions, meeting facilitation and hosting a public photovoice exhibit.

With any community change effort, awareness of the political and local decision-making process is warranted. Some common challenges include getting key decision makers to attend a local photovoice exhibit, decision makers that may lack resources or power to address underlying issues, and encountering those with viewpoints that differ from those expressed by the photovoice group. Additionally, many groups fail to plan and execute adequate follow-up activities after the photovoice event. Such follow-up can be critical to leverage the momentum created at the photovoice event into desired actions for change.

Because community changes can be both challenging as well as slow, those leading a photovoice project should always be attentive to managing the expectations and commitment of the participants. Application of the photovoice effort will always be as unique as the participants, communities, and issues it attempts to address.





## About the Author

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