

# BRIEF

## Photovoice: A Participatory Method for Elevating Community Voices in Social and Behavior Change Programming

### 1. Overview of the Photovoice Method

Photovoice is a participatory action research method rooted in social justice and health equity. Originally developed by Caroline Wang in the early 1990s, drawing on Paulo Freire's principles of critical consciousness and anti-oppressive education, Photovoice places cameras in the hands of people — especially those who are marginalized or overlooked — enabling them to document their realities through photography, critically analyze their images, and use them as tools for dialogue, advocacy, and community-driven change.

Unlike traditional research methods where outside investigators drive the narrative, Photovoice shifts power to the participants themselves. They decide which stories are told, how they are framed, and what action should follow. This makes it especially valuable in contexts where conventional approaches may be culturally inappropriate, inaccessible in low-literacy settings, or insufficient to capture the lived experiences of those most affected by health and nutrition challenges.

World Vision has adopted Photovoice as a core participatory methodology within its Social and Behavior Change (SBC) programming, developing a comprehensive implementation package that includes the Photovoice Training Manual for Community Facilitators, Photovoice Guidelines for Projects and Research, and standardized tools for consent, data collection, and dissemination.

### 2. When and Why to Use Photovoice

Photovoice is recommended when organizations seek to:

- **Genuinely engage communities** in identifying issues and solutions from their own perspective
- **Conduct formative research** that captures context, nuance, and lived experience to inform SBC intervention design
- **Empower marginalized groups** — including adolescents, women, caregivers, and people with disabilities — to become agents of change
- **Advocate for policy and program change** using powerful visual evidence and first-person narratives
- **Work in low-literacy or trauma-sensitive contexts** where written or verbal methods may be ineffective or intrusive
- **Evaluate programs** from the beneficiaries' point of view, uncovering unintended consequences or unexpected strengths

Photovoice can be applied across the entire program cycle — at the planning stage as a needs assessment tool, during implementation to identify barriers and enablers, and at evaluation to understand impact from the community's perspective.

### 3. How Photovoice Works

The **SHOWeD Framework** is central to the Photovoice process, guiding participants through critical reflection on their photographs:

Step	Question
S	What do you See here?
H	What is really Happening here? (Why did it happen?)
O	How does this relate to Our lives? (How does this photo make you feel?)
W	Why does this challenge (problem) or strength (opportunity) exist?
D	What can we Do about this?

**The 10-Step Process:**

- Step 1:** Identify your target audience — policymakers, community leaders, or other decision-makers who can act on findings
- Step 2:** Recruit participants — 7–20 community members using purposive or convenience sampling
- Step 3:** Introduce the Photovoice methodology — orientation on study objectives, process, and ethics
- Step 4:** Obtain informed consent/assent — including photo release forms for subjects photographed
- Step 5:** Pose study questions — co-developed with participants to guide photography
- Step 6:** Train participants and distribute cameras — covering photography techniques, ethics, and safety
- Step 7:** Provide time for photo-taking — typically one to two weeks
- Step 8:** Discuss photographs and identify themes — using SHOWeD in individual interviews and group workshops
- Step 9:** Analyze data — through collaborative sorting (affinity mapping) where participants group similar photos, name categories, and vote on priorities
- Step 10:** Showcase findings — through photo exhibitions, photobooks, policy briefs, or community dialogues

**Three Tiers of Complexity:** The method is designed to be adaptable to different organizational capacities and research goals:

Tier	Description	Timeline
Elegantly Simple	Community Facilitator leads a small group through basic Photovoice steps; minimal analysis; community exhibition as output	3–4 weeks

Moderately Complex	Multiple communities; trained CFs lead the process; group discussions + collaborative sorting + affinity mapping; photobook as output	8–15 weeks
Rigorous Research	University or consultant partnership; audio-recorded sessions; qualitative coding (e.g., MAXQDA); IRB approval; published research	6–12+ months

## 4. Photovoice as a Facilitator-Led Process

World Vision's approach emphasizes building local capacity through Community Facilitators (CFs) who are trained to lead Photovoice in the communities where they work. The 4-day Photovoice Training Manual for Community Facilitators prepares CFs through an experiential, learn-by-doing approach:

Day	Focus	Key Activities
Day 1: Getting the Picture	Foundations	Introduction to Photovoice; camera skills; study question development; photo design
Day 2: Telling the Story	Analysis & Ethics	SHOWeD framework practice; preventing problems; consent and assent; group discussion facilitation
Day 3: Putting It All Together	Planning & Sorting	Recruiting participants; processing photos; collaborative sorting and category-building
Day 4: Finishing Strong	Outputs & Celebration	Planning exhibitions; creating photobooks or final products; closing celebration

CFs experience every step of Photovoice as participants themselves before leading the process with community members, ensuring deeper understanding, confidence, and fidelity to the method's participatory spirit.

## 5. Evidence from the Field

World Vision has implemented Photovoice across multiple countries, generating powerful evidence of its effectiveness as a formative research and community empowerment tool. Two recent implementations illustrate the method's adaptability and impact:

### Mozambique: Adolescent Nutrition Photovoice Study (2023–2024)

<b>Context</b>	Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) affects 56% of girls aged 15–19 in Mozambique
<b>Location</b>	Monapo District, Nampula Province
<b>Participants</b>	16 adolescent girls aged 13–20 (purposive sampling)

<b>Partners</b>	Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture; Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
<b>Funding</b>	World Vision Canada / Global Affairs Canada (Every Girl Can Initiative)
<b>Study Questions</b>	1) Challenges to eat healthy foods, especially iron-rich foods; 2) Opportunities to eat healthy foods; 3) Social and gender norms influencing dietary habits

**Process:** Participants were trained on study objectives, ethics, safety, and basic photography, then given cameras for a one-week photo-taking period. Two group workshops and 16 individual interviews were conducted using SHOWeD. Each girl selected the photo that best represented her experience, provided a narrative caption, and contributed to a collaboratively produced photobook.

**Key Themes Identified by Adolescent Girls:**

- **Gender inequity** — Young mothers bearing disproportionate responsibility for food provision
- **Food insecurity** — Communities surviving on two meals per day of cassava leaves during lean season
- **Social connections** — Peer relationships as protective factors for well-being and nutrition decision-making
- **Grandmothers' role** — As valued pillars in family structure and nutrition support
- **Markets and entrepreneurship** — Mothers modeling food access strategies for daughters
- **Infrastructure** — Roads as determinants of food access and services

*"It's so difficult for a young woman like her to find herself doing this kind of thing because there are those who say, 'I can't do it because I'm a girl.'" — Amissina, 20 years*

*"My dream is that everyone is happy, eats well, has roads... and studies well." — Agira, 16 years*

**Output:** An Adolescent Nutrition Photobook shared with MoH, MoE officials, community leaders, and participants. Findings informed the refinement of the adolescent nutrition curriculum under the Every Girl Can Initiative.

**Indonesia: Infant and Young Child Feeding Photovoice Study (2024–2025)**

<b>Context</b>	Suboptimal dietary diversity and high consumption of ultra-processed foods among children under five in East Lombok
<b>Location</b>	Sembalun and Pringgabaya sub-districts, East Lombok District, West Nusa Tenggara Province
<b>Participants</b>	Inaq-Inaq (mothers) of children under five
<b>Partners</b>	Wahana Visi Indonesia
<b>Funding</b>	WVUS Accelerator Fund, WV International, WV Australia

<b>Study Question</b>	"How can we support Inaq, families, and communities to care for and provide nutritious food for children over 6 months?"
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**Process:** Co-facilitated by Esther Indriani, Diana Hardianti, Nurul Laili Irmayani, and Riz Adhima, mothers took and analyzed their own photographs over a three-month period using the Photovoice method. Group workshops, individual SHOWeD descriptions, and collaborative sorting produced two sets of community-defined themes. Photo exhibitions were held with families, health workers, and government representatives.

**Key Themes — Sembalun Sub-district (21 photos → 4 themes):**

- Bonding between parents and children — Fathers' involvement in feeding and play
- Children's eating patterns — Picky eating, screen-time feeding, spicy food concerns
- "I'm caught off guard..." — Children accessing ultra-processed snacks without mothers' knowledge
- Healthy and affordable foods — Including the Begibung tradition of communal eating

**Key Themes — Pringgabaya Sub-district (16 photos → 6 themes):**

- "My child only eats rice" — Limited dietary diversity driven by economic constraints
- Delayed complementary feeding — Grandmothers advising against early solid foods
- Children with disabilities — Access barriers to health and education services
- The hunger strike (Gerakan Tutup Mulut, GTM) — Children refusing to eat
- Ultra-processed snacking — Mothers' frustration at being unable to stop UPF consumption
- Healthy and affordable foods — Including the Berayan tradition of cooking together with neighbors

*"Hopefully I can be a better mother." — Inaq participant*

*"This is a photo of my own child." — Inaq participant at the Sembalun exhibition*

*"Thank you for letting us tell stories about our children through Photovoice." — Inaq participant in Pringgabaya*

**Linked Outcomes (IYCF Project):** Photovoice findings directly informed the design of a 3-session parenting crash course. Quantitative results showed:

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Endline</b>
Minimum Dietary Diversity	72.6%	84.1%
Received legumes and nuts in last 24 hours	60.9%	77.9%*
Positive Parenting (Brigance Item 13)	62.3%	87.7%

\* Statistically significant change. 100% of caregivers who attended the crash course sessions reported the classes helped them improve child caring and feeding in daily life.

## 6. What Makes Photovoice Distinctive

Feature	How Photovoice Differs
Power	Participants drive the narrative — they decide what stories are told and how
Accessibility	Works in low-literacy contexts; photography transcends language and education barriers
Dual output	Generates both rigorous formative research data and powerful advocacy tools (photobooks, exhibitions)
Ethical grounding	Prioritizes consent, safeguarding, and participant ownership of data
Cultural adaptability	SHOWeD framework can be translated and adapted (e.g., ORPA in French, Spanish, Portuguese)
Capacity building	Participants gain photography, critical thinking, public speaking, and advocacy skills

## 7. Key Lessons Learned

- **Community voice reveals what surveys miss.** Photovoice uncovered insights invisible to quantitative tools — such as the role of grandmothers in undermining or supporting feeding practices (Indonesia), the emotional weight of food insecurity on adolescent girls (Mozambique), and the tension between caregiver knowledge and social pressures around ultra-processed foods in both contexts.
- **Participants become co-researchers, not subjects.** Both projects demonstrated that when community members lead the inquiry, engagement deepens, reflection increases, and ownership of solutions grows. Mothers and adolescent girls moved from passive respondents to active agents of change.
- **The method adapts across cultures, ages, and topics.** From adolescent nutrition in Mozambique to infant feeding in Indonesia, Photovoice proved flexible across diverse populations, languages, and programmatic priorities — while maintaining methodological consistency through the SHOWeD framework.
- **Formative research directly informs intervention design.** In Indonesia, Photovoice findings shaped the parenting crash course curriculum, creating a clear pipeline from community insight to program action. In Mozambique, findings informed the adolescent nutrition curriculum.
- **Photobooks and exhibitions serve multiple purposes.** They function as advocacy tools for policymakers, validation products for participants, and communication assets for programs — reinforcing dignity, agency, and visibility for those whose voices are rarely heard.

## 8. Scalability & Replicability

World Vision has developed a complete Photovoice implementation package ready for adoption across its nearly 100 country offices and by partner organizations:

- **Photovoice Training Manual for Community Facilitators** — A replicable 4-day training framework with three tiers of complexity, adaptable to varying organizational capacities
- **Photovoice Guidelines for Projects and Research** — A comprehensive 10-step guide with ethical frameworks, consent/assent templates, interview and workshop guides, FAQs, and references

- **Photobook templates** — Demonstrated in Mozambique and Indonesia as replicable output formats
- **Low-cost design** — Participants can use smartphones or basic digital cameras; outputs range from community exhibitions to printed photobooks
- **Community-based implementation** — Reliance on Community Facilitators and CHWs ensures sustainability and integration with existing health structures
- **Complementary to existing SBC approaches** — Photovoice serves as a formative research entry point that feeds directly into the design of SBC interventions such as Timed and Targeted Counseling, Nurturing Care Groups, and community dialogue platforms