Lessons Learned Piloting PhotoVoice in Complex Settings for Qualitative Inquiry

May 4, 2023

The top photo shows vegetable cultivation in Syria, while the photo below shows a PhotoVoice training workshop in Venezuela.

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ACRONYMS

BHA	Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
i-APS	International Advisory Products and Systems Ltd.
IP	Implementing Partner
KII	Key Informant Interview
PAR	Participatory Action Research
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared by International Advisory, Products and Systems Ltd. (i-APS), a woman-owned and -managed consulting firm that leverages global expertise with local presence to transform organizations and communities into partners for change. The PhotoVoice project was designed and implemented by i-APS and our affiliate VZ-APS team members in Venezuela. We express our sincere gratitude for the feedback and support provided by the implementing partners for this project. As participant-led inquiry, this report would not have been possible without the dedication and contributions made by the women participants in Venezuela (called PhotoVoz) and Syria.[1]

Accompanying PhotoVoice materials

The PhotoVoice pilot aimed to test the application of PhotoVoice in two non-permissive contexts (Syria and Venezuela), to generate learning and recommendations for this form of qualitative inquiry. The pilot project produced a series of materials that accompany this report:

- *PhotoVoice Facilitator Guide*
- *PhotoVoice Summary Brief*

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[1] We use the term beneficiary here to mean people who receive humanitarian aid and assistance as part of specialized USAID BHA programs. We note that there is a body of literature that rejects the term "beneficiary" for its implied passivity, but we recognize it is an evolving discussion and still used in certain contexts. Having said that, in the spirit of PhotoVoice emphasizing a participant-led process, we use the term "participant" in this report.

Privacy and confidentiality

Due to the nature of the complex operating contexts of Syria and Venezuela, details about participant names, locations, and the identity of local implementing partners are not provided to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of those involved. This ensures that the approach and public reporting related to this project is in line with the standard operating procedures of USAID-funded implementing partners in both Venezuela and Syria.

Consent has been given to take and use all photos in this report. Unless otherwise indicated, all photos were taken by PhotoVoice participants.

Syrian woman spraying pesticides on tomato and pepper plants, photo taken by PhotoVoice participant in Syria

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Purpose of the PhotoVoice pilot

> *"A project like this changes everybody."*
> – PhotoVoice team facilitator in Venezuela[2]

This report illustrates the potential of PhotoVoice as a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method and unique form of qualitative inquiry in complex and non-permissive environments.[3] The purpose of this pilot project was to use PhotoVoice as a form of qualitative data collection as part of routine monitoring and evaluation activities for selected food security projects in two non-permissive settings, Venezuela and Syria, to test the methodology and generate lessons learned and practical recommendations.

The PhotoVoice process allows selected participants to address outcome monitoring, process monitoring, unexpected and unexplained achievements, and unintended effects of program interventions.[4] During PhotoVoice, participants can provide inputs into monitoring through identifying the most important themes and priorities from their perspective. By engaging directly with participants in the design of the process and having participants determine what to take photos of, PhotoVoice seeks to empower traditionally marginalized communities by critically reflecting on their realities, engaging in collective dialogue, and voicing concerns to decision-makers. By creatively giving expression to their lives and issues, photographs act as a vehicle for self and communal development in the hopes of catalyzing discussion, reflection, and, ultimately, change. The results and the pilot project demonstrated the effectiveness of the PhotoVoice method as a practical qualitative research tool that can be adapted to non-permissive settings. Moreover, it was an empowering process that inspired critical reflection and facilitated communal action for social change.

There is a growing interest in utilizing PhotoVoice in the humanitarian sector, but it is still relatively undeveloped and unexplored, particularly in complex settings. As a cross-cutting, multidisciplinary, and participant-led approach, PhotoVoice has the potential to change how

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[2] Quotations opening each section were provided during project data collection, unless stated otherwise. Identities are withheld in accordance with safety and ethical procedures.

[3] USAID defines a non-permissive environment as a context, at the national or sub-national level, in which uncertainty, instability, inaccessibility, or insecurity constrain USAID's ability to operate safely and effectively.

[4] Rather than use the term "beneficiary," in the spirit of PhotoVoice emphasizing a participant-led process, we prefer to use the term "participant" throughout the report. We refer to participants as people who receive aid as part of USAID/BHA operations and took part in the PhotoVoice project voluntarily.

research is conducted in these settings. The PhotoVoice method can provide direct, actionable feedback to IP agencies and relevant stakeholders, which can be used to support meaningful change during program and grant periods – a unique strength of this process. By demonstrating the effectiveness and appropriateness of PhotoVoice in complex settings, IPs have practical guidance for how to adopt PhotoVoice as part of routine monitoring and ultimately improve their programming and the resulting food security situation for the targeted populations.

Summary of the report/pilot approach

The report presents the results of the pilot project involving the use of PhotoVoice in two non-permissive humanitarian settings, Venezuela and Syria, conducted between February and December 2022. The report first introduces the concept of PhotoVoice as a form of PAR, and the potential contribution the method can have in humanitarian processes and monitoring and evaluation methodologies. The report then presents the results of the pilot and application in Syria and Venezuela as case studies, presenting the practical and operational considerations and adaptations to the PhotoVoice methodology. Finally, in line with the objectives of the pilot project, this report analyzes the pilot project, including lessons learned and recommendations, to inform future processes and use by IPs.

PhotoVoice

"[PhotoVoice] helped with empowerment of the women because they could ask questions in the sessions and receive answers, and they were learning about how they could detect problems."
- Facilitator in Syria

PhotoVoice was established as a visual and participatory action methodology in the 1990s to promote creative expression and social change. Described by its creators as "a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique," it is a qualitative community-based participatory approach that aims to document the reality of marginalized populations.[5] PhotoVoice is classified as a type of PAR which, according to Bradbury and Reason, is summarized as a qualitative research method that is "grounded in lived experience, developed in partnership, addresses

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[5] Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, "PhotoVoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment," *Health Education & Behavior* 24, no. 3 (1997): 369–87, https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309.

significant problems, works with (rather than simply studies) people, develops new ways of seeing/interpreting the world (i.e. theory), and leaves infrastructure in its wake."[6]

PAR is a context-specific research method that involves community members in research processes to ground data and action in "community realities, needs, and expertise."[7] This allows for reflection, collective action, and collaboration between researcher and participant to understand and improve upon practices. The research, action, and reflection cycle are a key aspect of the approach, and one that PhotoVoice draws on.[8] PAR methods such as PhotoVoice can empower marginalized and underserved communities to share their realities with program implementers and donors, thereby facilitating a common understanding of the project environment and individual experiences, which ultimately can be used to further refine, adapt, and improve programming.

The PhotoVoice method and its theoretical framework were designed based on a nine-step strategy drawing on feminist theory, critical thinking, and collective action pedagogy to foster empowerment, dialogue, and community action.[9] In particular, the reflection-action cycle of the PhotoVoice method draws heavily on the work of Paulo Freire, which emphasizes bringing discussion groups together to stimulate communal dialogue and critical thinking.[10] The PhotoVoice method is now widely used in public health and social sciences. Many universities provide courses on the approach and numerous organizations provide consulting services on the methodology for use by nongovernmental organizations and others working in applied contexts.

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[6] Hilary Bradbury and Peter Reason, "Action Research: An Opportunity for Revitalizing Research Purpose and Practices," *Qualitative Social Work* 2, no. 2 (June 2003): 155–75, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325003002002003.

[7] Linda Liebenberg, "Thinking Critically about PhotoVoice," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (February 21, 2018): 160940691875763, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631.

[8] Fran Baum, Colin MacDougall, and Danielle Smith, "Participatory Action Research," *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 60, no. 10 (October 1, 2006): 854–57, https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.028662.

[9] For further reading see: Wang, Caroline, and Mary Ann Burris. "PhotoVoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment." *Health Education and Behaviour* 24, no. 3 (1997): 369–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309.; Caroline C. Wang, "Youth Participation in PhotoVoice as a Strategy for Community Change," *Journal of Community Practice* 14, no. 1-2 (January 2006): 147–61, https://doi.org/10.1300/j125v14n01_09.; Linda Liebenberg, "Thinking Critically about PhotoVoice," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (February 21, 2018): 160940691875763, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631.; Emanuele Fantini, "Picturing Waters: A Review of PhotoVoice and Similar Participatory Visual Research on Water Governance," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 4, no. 5 (June 2, 2017): e1226, https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1226.

[10] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Penguin Education, 1972).; Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1965; repr., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

PhotoVoice gives responsibility to participants to define and identify what is important to them and the community. Cameras provide a visual participatory technique that allows participants to highlight aspects of their lives, share knowledge, and present their "voice."[11] Photographs are then used as a vehicle for participants to engage in discussion and debate to gain new understandings and identify common themes, challenges, and possible solutions. The method specifically details how the photos and narratives – decided through group discussion – should be facilitated by researchers to share findings with community leaders, policy makers, and other relevant stakeholders through presentations or exhibitions. In this way, participants not only recognize their knowledge is vital to the process, but they also gain confidence and the ability to advocate for the community with powerful actors who are usually inaccessible to them.

PhotoVoice is a particularly effective qualitative method for many reasons. For one, it gives tools to people from underrepresented groups to build awareness and advocate from their own perspective. Therefore, it is truly participant-led at every stage of the process and can impact social circumstances by increasing the research participants' sense of agency and empowerment.

Not only does this method provide value to participants in the research, but it also offers a myriad benefits to IPs as a form of qualitative inquiry. More specifically, the ongoing direct and actionable feedback provided throughout the process means that IPs have flexibility in how they use the information captured, such as triangulating the themes and information from photos alongside other monitoring approaches, to support program adaptation and learning.

PhotoVoice in humanitarian settings: Application and justification

As a participant-led qualitative research methodology, PhotoVoice has proven particularly effective in development contexts, but has not been piloted extensively in humanitarian or emergency monitoring settings.[12] Among other reasons, organizations may lack the awareness or resources to conduct effective qualitative research methods like PhotoVoice. PhotoVoice has the potential to improve upon existing qualitative research methods because it is explicitly participant-centered and, in this specific pilot, woman-centered.

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[11] Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, "PhotoVoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment," *Health Education and Behaviour* 24, no. 3 (1997): pp. 369-387, https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309.

[12] A recent example of the PhotoVoice method in development contexts, specifically the WASH sector, is: Amina Bhakta, "Uncovering WASH Realities through PhotoVoice," *The Sanitation Learning Hub* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2020), https://sanitationlearninghub.org/resource/uncovering-wash-realities-through-PhotoVoice/.

In humanitarian settings, the majority of data from monitoring and evaluation processes is collected by quantitative methods. To supplement this, qualitative research methods are often employed, either concurrently or separately. However, qualitative research is usually limited to traditional methodologies such as key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). Food security projects can be seen as areas in need of improved assessment via qualitative research methods, as it is often difficult to provide useful results with the current methods within the timeframe of program implementation.

Therefore, there is a critical need to move beyond traditional quantitative data and conduct more rigorous qualitative research to better understand complex emergency situations and the implementing environments, it is important to understand the far-reaching consequences of these realities for participants who are often unheard or excluded from traditional research methods. Researchers and stakeholders in the field are obligated to constantly critique, examine, and adapt research methods to best understand and address participants' needs and improve program implementation. To improve methods and results while simultaneously following humanitarian principles, research methods need to prioritize participants throughout the process. For these reasons, this project employed PhotoVoice, a qualitative PAR method that is relatively easy to implement, and provides participant-centered data that can have a meaningful impact on food security programming. The PhotoVoice method not only reaches the target audience, but it is also led by them.

Sun-dried figs, prunes and zucchini in Syria

COUNTRY CONTEXT FOR THE PHOTOVOICE PILOT

"The change was in the role of the rural women. The women who participated were able to share their voice and speak up."
– PhotoVoice team facilitator in Syria

According to Humanitarian Action, "the largest global food crisis in modern history is unfolding."[13] As hundreds of millions of people suffer from food insecurity, starvation, and malnutrition globally, there is an urgent need to improve emergency response and delivery. Acknowledging this, i-APS selected food security programs for this PhotoVoice pilot project to identify entry points of improvement, specifically for monitoring and evaluation processes.

This report focuses on the application of PhotoVoice in two non-permissive settings: Syria and Venezuela, two countries with acute humanitarian situations, including mass displacement and chronic food insecurity. Looking at 2022 data from the Fragile States Index, Syria and Venezuela are placed in the categories of "high alert" and "alert" respectively, and both are classified as being among the most "long-term worsened countries."[14] The International Rescue Committee's Emergency Watchlist for 2023 features both Syria and Venezuela among the top 20 countries globally "at greatest risk of new or worsening humanitarian emergencies."[15]

Syria represents one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. the civil war, which began in 2011, has caused protracted and reoccurring conflicts devastating long-term consequences. Over 306,000 civilians have died as a result of conflict, and Syria has the largest number of internally displaced people in the world at 6.9 million. Additionally, an estimated 5.6 million Syrians are registered as refugees in neighboring countries.[16] As of 2022, 14.6 million people

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[13] Humanitarian Action, "Global Humanitarian Overview 2023," Humanitarianaction.info, 2022, https://humanitarianaction.info/.

[14] Fund For Peace, "Fragile States Index Annual Report 2022," *Https://Fragilestatesindex.org/2022/07/13/Fragile-States-Index-2022-Annual-Report/* (Washington D.C.: Fund For Peace, 2022).

[15] International Rescue Committee, "IRC Emergency Watchlist 2023" (IRC, 2022), https://eu.rescue.org/report/irc-emergency-watchlist-2023.

[16] OHCHR, "UN Human Rights Office Estimates More than 306,000 Civilians Were Killed over 10 Years in Syria Conflict," OHCHR (United Nations, June 28, 2022), https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/un-human-rights-office-estimates-more-306000-civilians-were-killed-over-10.

are in need of humanitarian assistance.[17] According to the 2022 OCHA overview: The humanitarian needs in Syria are severe across all sectors, with significant health, education, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), shelter, protection, and food needs. Years of conflict have left healthcare centers, hospitals, schools, and water and sanitation systems damaged or destroyed.[18]

Food insecurity remains an extreme issue with the latest figures from 2022 ranking Syria at "alarming" hunger levels.[19] There are now record numbers of Syrians at risk of hunger: 12.4 million people are estimated to suffer from food insecurity, which the World Food Programme (WFP) has deemed the "highest number ever recorded in the history of Syria."[20] Drought and harsh winters coupled with poor water infrastructure have affected food production, exacerbating the dire situation.

Venezuela has been plagued by an economic crisis, widespread violence, political corruption, poverty, and the deterioration of essential social services. As a result, there are over seven million Venezuelan refugees and migrants, mostly in Latin America and the Caribbean, making it "one of the largest displacement crises in the world."[21]

Millions more are extremely vulnerable, and three out of every four Venezuelans are living in extreme poverty.[22] Over 12.3 million people need food assistance and as of 2022, Venezuela has the third highest food inflation in the world.[23]

Figures from late 2022 showed signs of economic growth, which led to some reductions in poverty rates and food insecurity levels. But overall, the situation remains dire. Inflation, fuel shortages, lack of healthcare, and increased crime continue to spell trouble for Venezuelans. Migration is also set to continue, and hunger continues to be the main reason for leaving.

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[17] ACAPS, "Syria Conflict," ACAPS, 2022, https://www.acaps.org/country/syria/crisis/conflict.

[18] OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic" (OCHA, 2022).

[19] 2022 Global Hunger Index, https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2022.pdf.

[20] Action Against Hunger, "11 Years of Conflict in Syria: Threat of Hunger Has Never Been Higher - Syrian Arab Republic | ReliefWeb," ReliefWeb, March 2022, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/11-years-conflict-syria-threat-hunger-has-never-been-higher.

[21] UNHCR, "Venezuela Situation," UNHCR, 2022, https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/venezuela-emergency.html.

[22] International Rescue Committee, "IRC Emergency Watchlist 2023" (IRC, 2022), https://eu.rescue.org/report/irc-emergency-watchlist-2023.

[23] International Rescue Committee, "IRC Emergency Watchlist 2023" (IRC, 2022), https://eu.rescue.org/report/irc-emergency-watchlist-2023.

In both Syria and Venezuela, continued deteriorating conditions mean people are increasingly unable to meet basic needs. Women, children, and other vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected, resulting in negative coping mechanisms. USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) operations have a significant presence in both Syria and Venezuela to address ongoing humanitarian needs with a range of different programs for food, health, WASH, security, and economic support. In terms of food security specifically, BHA aims to support organizations such as UNICEF, WFP, and various NGOs to provide food and nutrition assistance within these countries, as well as to refugees in neighboring countries.

In Syria, monthly USAID BHA food assistance reaches 6.6 million people both in the country and in neighboring countries.[24] Programs include cash transfers for food, emergency nutritional products, monthly in-kind food rations, wheat flour and yeast distribution to bakeries, and awareness campaigns to prevent chronic malnutrition. In Venezuela, assistance reaches more than 750,000 people along with 1.5 million in neighboring countries.[25] USAID BHA funds NGOs and UN partners to provide meals and food kits, while other assistance includes cash transfers for food, food vouchers, and additional capacity building on nutrition and WASH.

It is imperative to reflect on these processes to ensure effective delivery and adherence to best practices and humanitarian principles. Moreover, offering alternative methods can be critical to develop and improve monitoring and evaluation processes. PhotoVoice is one such method, and the next section will highlight the potential it offers in humanitarian and emergency contexts.

Table 1. Country Operating Contexts in Syria and Venezuela

Operating Contexts in Syria and Venezuela	
Syria	**Venezuela**
• Several locations where implementing partners operate are active conflict settings and have large numbers of displaced people. • Disruption in routine civil society is the norm.	• Donor and implementing partner confidentiality remains paramount (identity of local IPs is often confidential to protect implementers and beneficiaries).

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[24] USAID, "Syria | Humanitarian Assistance | U.S. Agency for International Development," www.usaid.gov, https://www.usaid.gov/humanitarian-assistance/syria.

[25] USAID, "Venezuela | Humanitarian Assistance | U.S. Agency for International Development," www.usaid.gov, https://www.usaid.gov/humanitarian-assistance/venezuela-regional.

Operating Contexts in Syria and Venezuela	
Syria	**Venezuela**
• Flexibility and high awareness of safety and security are required due to active conflict. • Assistance selected for the PhotoVoice Pilot: Food assistance, including provision of home vegetable garden kits to participants (delivered in line with growing season).	• Political sensitivity between U.S. government and Venezuela relations requires teams to maintain a "low profile" in their work. • Crime and petty theft are a concern in some locations. • Assistance selected for the PhotoVoice pilot: Food assistance, including delivery of food baskets (delivered at routine intervals) and WASH.

METHODOLOGY

"[PhotoVoice] is important because it generates a new way to learn about the needs, suggestions, gratitude, complaints and perception of the beneficiaries."
– Implementing partner in Venezuela

This PhotoVoice pilot project, developed by i-APS, was proposed as a participant-centered, woman-focused qualitative research method that can be implemented in humanitarian settings without complex analytical tools or advanced statistical methods. This section provides an overview of the PhotoVoice methodology and how i-APS adapted it to the its Syrian and Venezuelan contexts through two case studies.

PhotoVoice is unique in that participants can provide feedback on a project from their own perspective through taking photos. The experience and stories are then shared with stakeholders who have the power to address the issue or change unfavorable conditions. It is a dynamic and socially binding process, and researchers and stakeholders alike must "take seriously the impact of someone sharing their experience for the first time, or the impact of articulating through image what it means to live the life that they are living."[26] This can be

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[26] Kathleen Roe quoted in: Robin Evans-Agnew, Robert Strack, and Kathleen Roe, "Exploring the Best of PhotoVoice Series 1: An Introduction to PhotoVoice," Podcast (The HPP Podcast, 2022), https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/s2-ep-9-exploring-the-best-of-PhotoVoice-series/id1547503833?i=1000552656294.

particularly apt in humanitarian settings to identify critical entry points for engagement and service improvement.

The empowerment of women is a benefit of PhotoVoice worth exploring in the humanitarian context, something that this pilot sought to achieve and demonstrate. The method goes beyond statistics – for everyone involved. While an important research method, separately, it is invaluable for participants, both affording them the opportunity to learn more about their lives and think critically about their surroundings and positioning them to agitate for social action. In this way, PhotoVoice challenges unequal power relations while also addressing basic needs.[27] And while this outcome is important, the process of arriving at the outcome is equally important. The process supports participants in gaining new skills, strengthening social networks, sharing information, and working as a collective for a common goal. Even looking for things to photograph is a critical thinking process, and participants start to see things differently. The process of choosing the photo and creating the accompanying narrative sparks reflection on why they chose that photo, what story it tells, and how it relates both to the group and the wider community. In this way, the photograph is a prompt to stimulate discussion.

The presentation is a very important aspect of the process as this not only showcases the work of participants, but it is also a chance to communicate with a range of decision-makers, many of whom are typically inaccessible to participants. PhotoVoice creates a space for participants to take ownership and convey their needs and show themselves to donors as full people, which are sometimes not accounted for in top-down, donor-driven aid programs. In this way, IPs, community leaders, and NGOs can draw on reflections, create action plans, and implement a course of action that is grounded in participant feedback. PhotoVoice therefore is a space to expand networks and act as a bridge to include communities in decision-making processes.

Ultimately, the PhotoVoice method reflects a live experience and a multiplicity of stories that adds an element of connection. This is the true strength of the method, best described by Dr. Robert Strack who puts it like this:" If you look at human experience, it's really about sense making. Researchers come at it with data and logic, but most people operate from a

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[27]Catherine Campbell et al., "Picturing Social Change: PhotoVoice for Health, Community and Development," Video, *LSE Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science*, 2012, https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/picturing-social-change-PhotoVoice-for-health-community/id481006731?i=1000524869418.

realm of connection and humanity and the thing about PhotoVoice is it provides a platform for a little bit of both".[28]

Use of PhotoVoice in non-permissive settings: Syria and Venezuela pilots

Based upon a detailed desk review of published literature related to previous applications of PhotoVoice and an understanding of the general approach as outlined above, i-APS designed and developed a PhotoVoice training program that had to incorporate several methodological strands.[29] The training program included program design, coordination, training, and implementation to ensure the pilot was context-specific, while being adaptable to other humanitarian settings.

Step 1: Select location and implementing partners

To demonstrate the adaptability of the PhotoVoice process, it was important to conduct research in challenging humanitarian contexts. As such, Syria and Venezuela were selected for this pilot based on the scale of their respective humanitarian crises, their difficulty in terms of security and operating environment, and international community humanitarian priorities. Furthermore, i-APS already had legal and operational presence in these locations, meaning existing geographic presence and knowledge of the local context could be integrated into the pilot. Despite their differences, each of these locations have similar food security programming and interventions in place, which allowed for a multi-national approach.

Protection and location presented significant barriers at the inception phase, and the timeline had to accommodate flexibility to allow for the complex operating conditions. As a result, the inception phase spanned several months to identify and select IPs and secure their participation. This included conducting outreach to IPs in Venezuela and Syria to explain the purpose, objectives, and limitations of the PhotoVoice project working with both headquarter/home office teams and country program teams.

After securing the selected organization's commitment to the project, the PhotoVoice team developed a written agreement with roles and responsibilities outlined in a memorandum

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[28] Robert Strack quoted in: Robin Evans-Agnew, Robert Strack, and Kathleen Roe, "Exploring the Best of PhotoVoice Series 1: An Introduction to PhotoVoice," Podcast (The HPP Podcast, 2022), https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/s2-ep-9-exploring-the-best-of-PhotoVoice-series/id1547503833?i=1000552656294.

[29] A PhotoVoice Facilitator Guide was developed by i-APS covering a range of different modules and step-by-step guidelines to train facilitators in implementing PhotoVoice in non-permissive settings.

of understanding with each organization. This included significant coordination among IPs, local staff, facilitators, and participants to ensure operational and procedural cohesiveness and safety and security.

Implementer Tip

- Build in adequate time during inception/design phase to identify implementing partners and explain the nature of the project. Implementing partners may need support to understand PAR and PhotoVoice, as the method may be new and unfamiliar, both for teams responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and for implementing teams within the organization.

- IPs may need multiple levels of approval before agreeing to join, especially if they are working with several local organizations. This may include both approvals for headquarters and program or field teams.

- Outline respective roles and responsibilities in a Memorandum of Understanding and be flexible during implementation if changes are needed.

Step 2: Facilitator selection and training materials

Develop contextualized PhotoVoice training materials

The PhotoVoice Team conducted extensive desk research of existing PhotoVoice projects and best practices from previously published work.[30] The team then used that desk review

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[30] For further reading see: Wang, Caroline, and Mary Ann Burris. "PhotoVoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment." *Health Education and Behaviour* 24, no. 3 (1997): 369–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309.; Caroline C. Wang, "Youth Participation in PhotoVoice as a Strategy for Community Change," *Journal of Community Practice* 14, no. 1-2 (January 2006): 147–61, https://doi.org/10.1300/j125v14n01_09.;Stephanie Amos et al., "Facilitating a PhotoVoice Project: What You Need to Know!" (The Nova Scotia Participatory Food Costing Project, 2012).; Linda Liebenberg, "Thinking Critically about PhotoVoice," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (February 21, 2018): 160940691875763, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631.; Lori J. O'Malley and Sonya E. Munsell, "PhotoVoice: An Innovative Qualitative Method in Research and Classroom Teaching," *Educational Research: Theory and Practice* 31, no. 1 (2020): 26–32.; Ting Wang, "Using PhotoVoice as Methodology, Pedagogy and Assessment Tool in Education: Graduate Students' Experiences and Reflections," *Beijing International Review of Education* 2, no. 1 (April 3, 2020): 112–35, https://doi.org/10.1163/25902539-00201008.;

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to develop a training methodology informed by this research, humanitarian principles, and practical considerations based on the contexts of both countries. Our specific goal in was to create an operational framework that could guide successful implementation in both Syria and Venezuela, while allowing for participant-led contextualization.

The training was delivered in English, Spanish, and Arabic by senior members of the PhotoVoice Team using the training package, which consisted of a facilitator handbook, PowerPoint slides, and consent form templates. The training was organized into a series of eight modules which included an overview of the PhotoVoice pilot; anticipated project schedule and how to facilitate the process; team building amongst the participants; humanitarian ethics, including the "Do No Harm" principle; obtaining informed consent; safety and security; and photo guidelines.

Select and train PhotoVoice facilitators

i-APS used its established recruitment practices to recruit and train three facilitators in Syria and two facilitators in Venezuela. When selecting the facilitators, i-APS considered several factors including prior experience working with recipients of humanitarian assistance, demographic profile (e.g., age, gender, cultural identity), knowledge of the communities, and ability to manage the program. In taking a highly contextualized and local approach, i-APS did not consider minimum education criteria given the different operating conditions of Syria and Venezuela. Instead, i-APS identified candidates with the key characteristics mentioned above and conducted detailed training individualized to ensure they were operating under consistent guidelines, while also building their capacity for program management. i-APS conducted the trainings in two parts: an initial online training covering key operating principles and humanitarian standards, and a second comprehensive in-person training in all locations led by i-APS country managers.

Step 3: Select PhotoVoice participants

The PhotoVoice team utilized participant lists provided by the IPs in each location to purposefully select adult women in a range of ages (from 18-56), marital statuses (single, married, widowed), and income levels. Purposeful sampling was chosen, given the objective of the PhotoVoice pilot was primarily to learn if this qualitative monitoring approach could be implemented and adapted to complex settings. Further-more, purposeful sampling was selected because of the intricate operational circumstances and emphasis on participant-led approaches. Therefore, the sampling method, akin to other qualitative monitoring methods, was not representative of the entire beneficiary cohort.

To develop the purposeful sampling frame, i-APS PhotoVoice team contacted each IP to understand the specific BHA-funded activities being implemented, the location of those activities and profiles of their beneficiaries. Based on this information, the team then requested beneficiary lists from the IPs to select the participants.

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The PhotoVoice team considered several key primary criteria before selecting participants. Firstly, the participants had to be female, current recipients of the IP's program for the specific project chosen (e.g. recipient of home vegetable garden kit), and meet the IPs vulnerability criteria. After satisfying the primary criteria, facilitators were instructed to then us additional secondary criteria, such as the willingness to participate with informed consent, without the provision of financial compensation. Moreover, the participants needed to be easily accessible, to establish routine meeting points during implementation of the project (e.g., bi-weekly meetings).

Country-level facilitators then invited the selected participants to the PhotoVoice process and informed them of the project and their expected role. Facilitators used consent forms using standard language and translated them into Spanish and Arabic. The information regarding consent was communicated using knowledge of local customs to convey possible risks and time commitment in a way that participants could understand.

The operating conditions in Syria and Venezuela are complex, both for safety and security in Syria and the overall complex political context in Venezuela, and this can impact willingness to participate in an activity that does not provide a direct financial benefit. Additionally, in an active conflict setting such as Syria, consideration of meeting points and travel for participants had to be considered, as the local context may limit their ability to participate or require operational flexibility. Further, gender norms had to be considered given the context in Syria differs greatly from Venezuela, in which the role of Syrian women in society is far more restricted.

Limitations:

Given the purposeful nature of the sampling, the findings of the PhotoVoice project relating to the underlying humanitarian assistance being provided are not statistically representative.

Step 4: Implement PhotoVoice

Train participants and establish operating guidelines

Facilitators in each location conducted trainings with participants based on mutually convenient location and times using the training modules developed and referenced previously in this report. The facilitators provided each participant with an Information Sheet and an Informed Consent form (in Arabic or Spanish), which described the project and their voluntary participation (which could be withdrawn at any time) and emphasized that there would be no impact if they determined they did not want to participate. The PhotoVoice team used a participant-centered training approach to ensure that limited time would be required of participants and to orient participants to this type of participatory-led inquiry.

Sample Selection Tips in Non- Permissive Settings

- Determine method of sample selection based on the PhotoVoice project objectives.
- Build safety planning into sample selection: select locations to minimize travel time and distance within and between locations. Identify travel routes prior to finalizing sample selection.
- Non-permissive settings may have conditions that can impact the full participation of beneficiaries selected. Build in a larger sample size to accommodate participant drop-off during the PhotoVoice project duration.

The training was divided into modules, which were the same as those used for training the facilitators and provided key information about the project. Initial modules defined PhotoVoice and participant-led research; described the nature and time required to engage in the project; and emphasized that consent is always voluntary. The training also included sufficient time for participants to reflect and ask questions. The training modules also included discussion of the local safety and security considerations, as well as overall humanitarian standards applicable to this pilot. In addition, the facilitators emphasized that the pilot was participant-led, meaning they would choose what to take photos of. At the same time, it was stressed that key parameters had to be followed to ensure the safety and security of all persons, including taking "appropriate" photos whereby the identity or location of participants would not be revealed. Finally, the training included information about protection signposting to relevant protection actors in each location, as well as expectations for engaging in the PhotoVoice pilot.

Ethical considerations and risk mitigation

The PhotoVoice team adhered to all standard ethical practices related to qualitative research, including transparently describing the pilot, its objectives, and obtaining informed consent, as well as limiting the collection and access to personally identifiable data. The identity and data of subjects (individuals and organizations) were protected and anonymized. The PhotoVoice method, however, has additional ethical considerations due to the sensitive nature of data collection, i.e., photography and non-permissive settings of Syria and Venezuela. Due to the sensitive nature of taking photos involving humanitarian program participants, and as this type of research had not been previously conducted in emergency settings, participant protection was prioritized at every stage of the project. This included training participants on how to take photos, as well as considering who or what the subject of the photograph was and to whom and how the photo would be presented. Permission was also granted for researchers to use photos.

Implementer Tip

- Explain and capture informed consent in a language that is accessible to participants. This may involve conversations about the project, its objectives, limitations and risk.
- Adhere to standard ethical guidelines and 'do no harm'.
- Consider establishing referral pathways to protect actors in the area.
- Assess the risks of providing phones or some method of taking photos and communicating with participants.

Core activities to assess and mitigate risks included providing risk assessment to participants; drawing on PhotoVoice team's existing geographic presence in the locations and knowledge of the local context; emphasis on obtaining informed consent in a language that is relevant for participants; establishing protection referral pathways for services available with protection actors in the area; and guidance in the form of one-to-one conversations and group discussions on how to de-identify photos to ensure protection of all persons.

Recognizing that previous PhotoVoice projects have usually provided a disposable camera – or similar – to participants, this pilot had to adapt operations to the specific humanitarian

context. This was done based on rigorous risk assessments and in line with the "do no harm" ethical principle. Given the non-permissive settings of both Syria and Venezuela, a key consideration was whether it was ethical and safe to provide participating women a simple phone containing a camera for the purpose of taking photos and maintaining communication during the PhotoVoice pilot.[31]

During the participant selection stage, the team assessed that, based on the location and profiles of participants, the majority already had phones with photo-taking capabilities. In Syria, based upon a risk assessment, the PhotoVoice team explicitly determined that it would not be safe to provide the women with phones, as doing so would place their personal safety at risk in light of prevailing community, household and gender norms. In Venezuela, the team provided a limited number of phones that were commonly available in the local market for use during the project, and the phones were returned to the local PhotoVoice team upon completion. As outlined later in the findings, the availability of phones with cameras amongst the population selected can impact participation in the project, but must be balanced against potential risk to personal safety that can result from providing such phones in non-permissive settings.

Photo taking and routine meetings

While the overall PhotoVoice process and goals were the same in all locations, implementation varied due to the nature of the project being participant-led, taking into account community norms, group dynamics and safety and security concerns. For example, the number of sessions held differed among locations to suit the needs of the group. All sessions, however, followed the same format, involving photo selection, discussion, and narrative story writing.

Good facilitators were key to the success of project implementation. They delivered comprehensive training, ensured participants were involved despite the novelty of the project, and encouraged creativity. During the project, participants in both locations in Venezuela and Syria took part in three story writing sessions each. In these sessions, they collaborated to select the pictures they had taken and develop key, creative messages for dissemination. This process was entirely participant-led, and while facilitators were available to guide and answer questions, the participants decided what made photos important to them. They also conducted the identification, selection, and narrative creation. The facilitators in both locations offered guidance in the selection of possible stakeholders to

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[31] Considerations also included local procurement and availability of items. Particular care had to be given to avoiding procurement of items not readily and commonly available in the local market in order to avoid attracting too much attention to the project and selected participants. The PhotoVoice Team also considered compliance with all United States sanctions for Syria and Venezuela.

share messages with, such as the local implementing partner, the donor (in Syria only), community members, and other local stakeholders.

Facilitators prompted the discussion through a series of questions, such as "What is in the photo?", "What story or message does this photo tell?", and "Who is the photo about?". In both pilots, the participants identified the IP as the target audience, as the IP that was the organization providing the underlying humanitarian aid and who the participants wanted to influence. The only limitations that the facilitators placed on these discussions pertained to safety and security. This meant, for example, ensuring children were not identifiable in photos, that informed consent was obtained, and being cognizant of whom the message would be shared with and how.

Photovoice training in Venezuela, as taken by facilitator

Toward the end of the six-to-eight-week implementation period, participants and facilitators prepared and curated a final presentation, which served the dual purpose of highlighting all the work they have achieved while also communicating their needs with decision-makers. The form and manner of the stakeholder meetings was determined based on discussions with the participants about their goals and what photographs and messages they wanted to share.

The PhotoVoice team analyzed the pilot project in line with the objectives of the pilot, which was to determine if the methodology is a viable form of qualitative inquiry in humanitarian contexts. This included analyzing participant photos and themes and conducting interviews with participants, facilitators, and IPs.
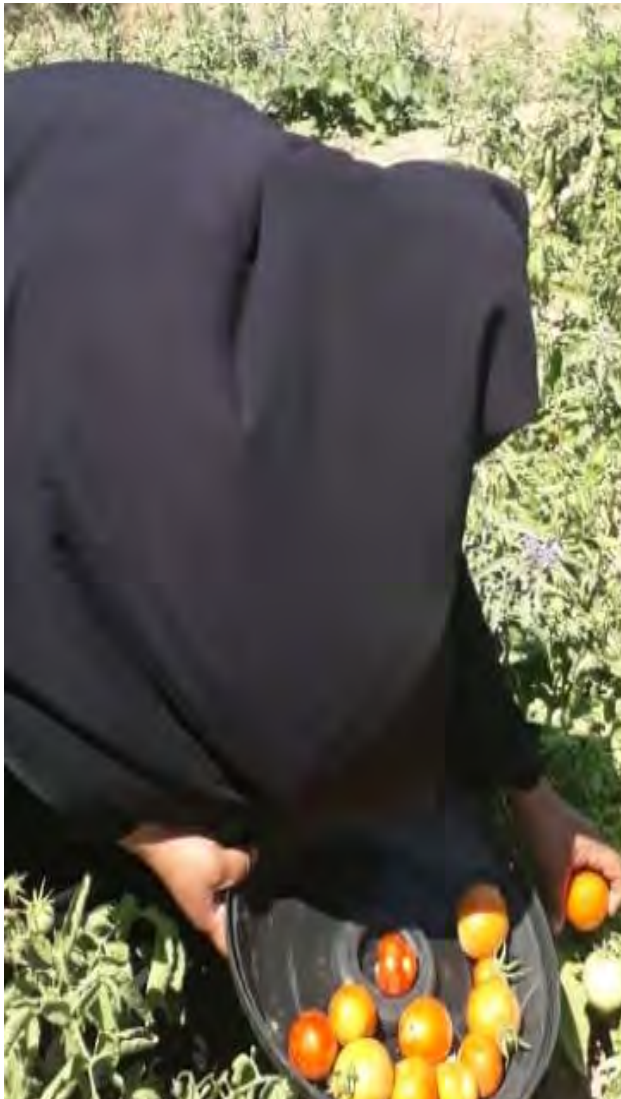
**Handpicking tomatoes
from the garden in Syria**

**Photo of special lunch prepared by
Venezuelan PhotoVoice participant to
show her love for her daughter**

CASE STUDIES

Syria

PhotoVoice Implementation: Working with the IP, PhotoVoice facilitators selected three locations in Syria based on current project activities that were funded by BHA and access to participants. The facilitators used purposeful sampling to select 10 participants from each of the three locations (30 women total) who identified as current participants of the program and who provided consent to participate. The sample was evenly distributed across the three locations and a local facilitator, hired by i-APS, was assigned to each location. Facilitators were all Syrian women trained in the PhotoVoice process and familiar with the local population, customs, and norms. Between June 18 and July 30, 2022, 20 weekly PhotoVoice sessions occurred in the three locations.

The format of the sessions differed based on the availability of the participants and their guidance, and that of the facilitators. This included considerations of physical access to the participants, the local security situations, availability of internet to promote sharing of photos between sessions, and what the program participants decided was most appropriate in terms of meetings. Between meetings, depending on internet availability, participants were encouraged to share photos with the facilitator using WhatsApp. In one Syria location, for example, the group meeting sessions of participants were often conducted door to door, with one participant and the facilitator linking together to share photos and updates. This was considered most practical by both the facilitator and the participants given the security dynamics of the area and challenges with travel. In the other locations, the sessions were held in mutually convenient locations where participants routinely gathered, hosting all the participants from the area to discuss photos taken by the participants and initial themes.

During a course of three-story writing sessions in each of the locations, participants worked together to select photo and develop creative messages for dissemination. Facilitators conducted thematic analysis of the photos during review and guided discussion with participants during weekly sessions, which revealed several key themes. In Location 1, pictures were organized into a series of PowerPoint presentations entitled "Rural women at work." These demonstrated the role of women in agriculture and livestock production, where they provide animal feed, preserve and store foods in preparation for winter, and prepare dairy products. Women also identified the theme of "The stages of production and reaching the goal," which examined how the underlying food security project reached the production stage of food preservation. In Location 2, pictures and messages were organized in three presentations entitled "Sustainability of the home garden project," "Environmental conditions and their impact on households," and "Vegetable harvesting and food

processing." In Location 3, participants created three presentations titled ""Preservation, storage, and home economics," "The role of women in agriculture and livestock agriculture," and "Agricultural pests of vegetables."
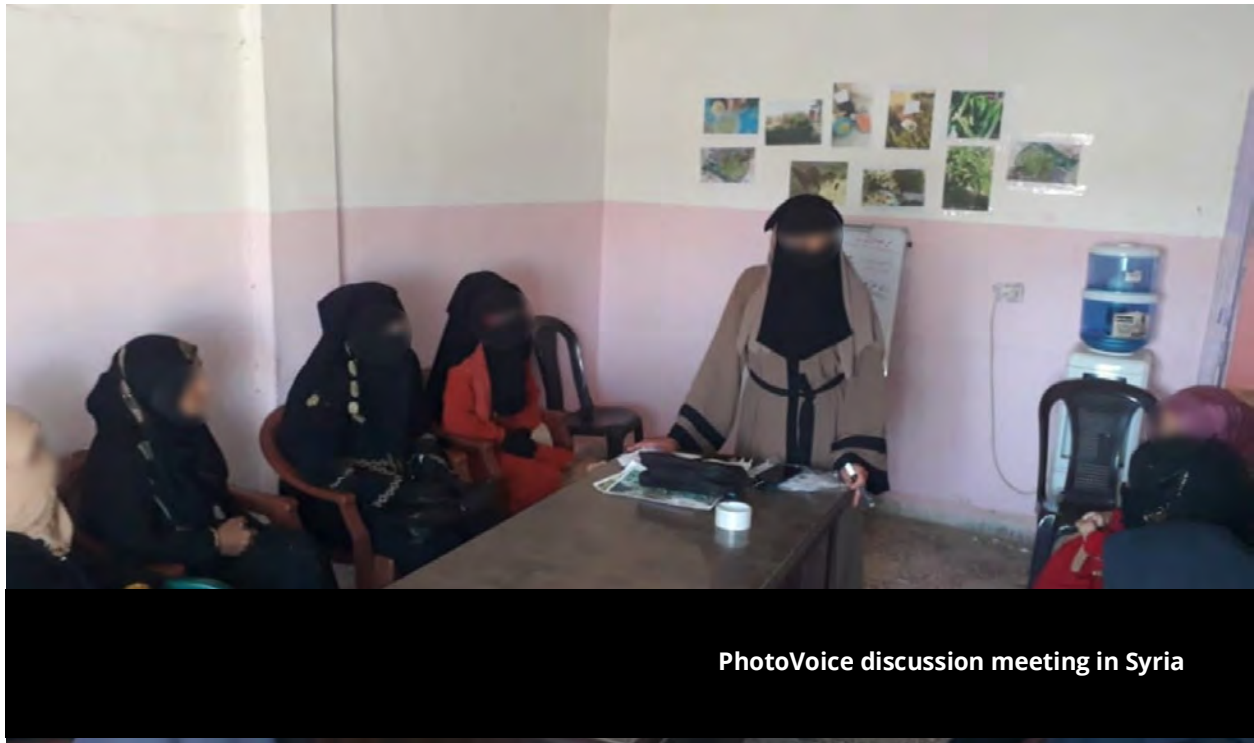
PhotoVoice discussion meeting in Syria

Two dissemination workshops were held with the IP's field staff, management, and community leaders in two of the Syrian locations, with the PhotoVoice participants in attendance. The dissemination workshops accounted for the deteriorating security situation at the time of the project, meaning dissemination of photos to the IP was delayed. Instead, photos were shared electronically, as in-person meetings were not practical. During the eventual in-person workshops, 15-20 photos were printed and taped to the wall, and the facilitators used the opportunity to present messages about cholera prevention at the same time. Participants from Location 2 presented a video they developed to show the results of what they were doing with the abundance of vegetables produced from their home gardens, including storing them for winter. During the sharing of this video, the IP field teams found this information particularly helpful, noting that PhotoVoice should be linked to many more projects, especially those focused on sustainability.

The results of the pilot demonstrated that PhotoVoice can be practically implemented even in a complex setting like Syria. As one facilitator stated: "At the beginning, the women felt that their voices weren't heard, but by the end their success in the PhotoVoice project was the success of the project. The women felt that the success of the project and their insistence

on doing the job will be reflected in the success of the entire project. Their voices will have provided help for the project as a whole."

The process of storing and preserving food is important, as women in the summer save and store vegetables to be a source of many winter meals. The picture shows the role of rural women in managing the affairs of the house and her interest in providing food for her family in the winter season. Rural women are the most important pillar in the operations of the home economy. What we see in the picture will be a raw material for many winter meals, and this raw material was obtained by the woman from her home garden.

Preserved vegetable sauce for winter meals in Syria

Image showing eggplant seedlings in need of water – showing the challenge of growing crops

Photovoice training workshop in Syria


Fresh zucchini and okra in Syria

Vegetable garden in Syria

Venezuela

PhotoVoice Implementation: Working with the IP, PhotoVoice facilitators selected two locations in Venezuela based on current project activities (provision of food baskets, WASH support, and hygiene kits) and in consideration of feedback from the IP. The facilitators used purposeful sampling to select 15 participants from each of the two locations (30 women total). i-APS hired two local facilitators, both Venezuela nationals, who had experience working at the community level and with vulnerable populations. Between June 14 and September 5, 2022, a total of 13 in-person PhotoVoice sessions took place in the two locations. Despite the similarities in the facilitation process, the participants still led the activity and, accordingly, the two groups in Venezuela delivered very different results to their stakeholders. For both groups, women participants communicated with each other and the facilitator via a dedicated WhatsApp group.
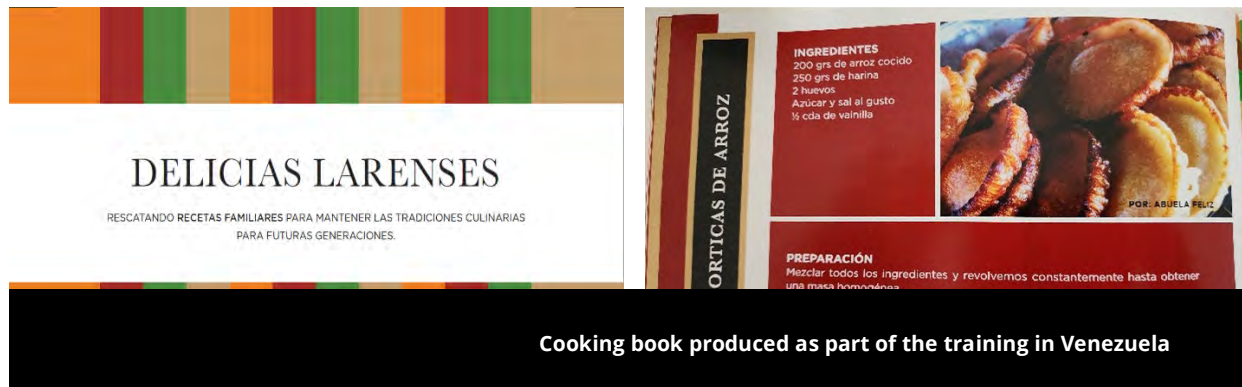
Cooking book produced as part of the training in Venezuela

(Image description: Two-part image with a cover of a cookbook shown on the left and a photo from inside the cookbook shown on the right, featuring a recipe made with rice and flour.)

There were three story writing sessions in each of the two locations where participants described the photos they took, what they meant and identified common themes. A stakeholder meeting was held in Location 1 with the IP's management team (which also oversaw participants in Location 2) and included a presentation of the photos taken by PhotoVoice participants using PowerPoint. The key messages delivered were based on the theme "Cooking at home," where participants shared photos of how they were using the food basket ingredients to meet their family's nutrient needs.

In Location 2, participants agreed to develop a cookbook to compile how they were using the food assistance, as a way of expressing their gratitude for the impact this assistance was having on their life, and to communicate this message to the IP. It was noted that the success of this initiative was attributed, in the part, to the rich tradition of social movements in the community. According to the IP in Venezuela, "participants were familiar with social projects

and entrepreneurship." The recipe book became a family event that created a space to prepare, eat, and share. The photography process also included the whole family. One participant commented, "Now my children also want to take pictures of everything, and they constantly ask for my phone to do it."

Participants relished the opportunity for expression and found both creativity and agency in the method, with one Venezuelan participant stating "now it provokes taking photos of everything." As the project evolved, participants felt a sense of confidence in not only their own abilities, but also in their organizing team and the facilitator. "I didn't know I could take pretty pictures," one reflected. "I became a person who looked at many things through the camera, capable of capturing events and moments that previously went unnoticed," another Venezuelan participant said.

Facilitators in Venezuela commented how sometimes meetings and sessions would continue after the end time because participants wanted to keep talking about how they could support each other. There were also games, conversations, and sharing of personal stories, which created a sense of belonging and a stronger community. One facilitator said, "These participants have difficult lives, but they are benefiting from sharing together. It was nearly a 'group therapy' for the participants. It was an escape."

Fresh vegetables ready for home cooking

Baking pistachio (Venezuelan type of lasagna or cheese pie)

"Creativity is key to keeping everyone in the family happy. In this case, a plantain pasticho with cheese and peas… precisely to make the peas in another way. The important thing is to find a new way of doing things."

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

"They demonstrated that a picture says more than a thousand words."
– Implementing partner in Venezuela

Based upon the learning objectives of the PhotoVoice project, the PhotoVoice Team developed a series of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. These tools were designed to capture feedback and support learning about the pilot, primarily focused on the operational aspects of implementing PhotoVoice and perceptions of participants in relation to the project. This included developing a participant survey – conducted by the facilitators in both Venezuela and Syria – designed to understand their perspective about what worked well and what did not, and whether there was value in having a better understanding of the underlying source of aid they had as a result of participating.

Given the key role that facilitators played in adapting PhotoVoice to the complex Venezuela and Syrian operating contexts, the PhotoVoice Team also designed semi-structured key informant interview (KII) questions for these staff members. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight what went well and what did not during the project, as well as any changes they observed that were observed in participant engagement. Facilitators were also asked to provide their opinions about key learnings to inform future PhotoVoice projects.

Due to the IPs involvement in the PhotoVoice process and considering the potential of IPs implementing PhotoVoice as a robust monitoring mechanism in the future, KII

questionnaires were also sent to the two IPs involved in the project. The interviews were aimed to ensure comprehensive analysis and close the feedback loop. They were asked to explain what the key findings showed based on information provided during the final presentations, if they felt the program worked well or not, and whether PhotoVoice was a good use of operational resources.

The PhotoVoice team analyzed the photos to identify patterns and common themes, which tracked the same themes presented to IPs during the sharing sessions in each location. Further, the team conducted thematic analysis of the participants, IPs and facilitator interviews, with the results outlined below.

Results

There is power in photography. More specifically, what photographs convey, what they are describing, and how they are used as representation can be powerful. With photographs, you can articulate what is important. The beauty, and power, of PhotoVoice is listening to that voice.

A day of abundance, as titled by a Venezuela PhotoVoice participant showing children reacting to receipt of humanitarian food basket.

"The first time we received [the food basket] the whole family went to the meeting place, and we never imagined the amount of products we would receive. That day we had nothing to eat. [W]hen we got home, my children, with great excitement, ripped open the bag where the products came, just like when a child tears the paper of a gift to see what is inside. The best thing is the joy of my children at every opportunity they give the benefit. If I had to define in one word the significance of the program in my life and that of my family, it would be JOY". – Venezuelan woman PhotoVoice participant
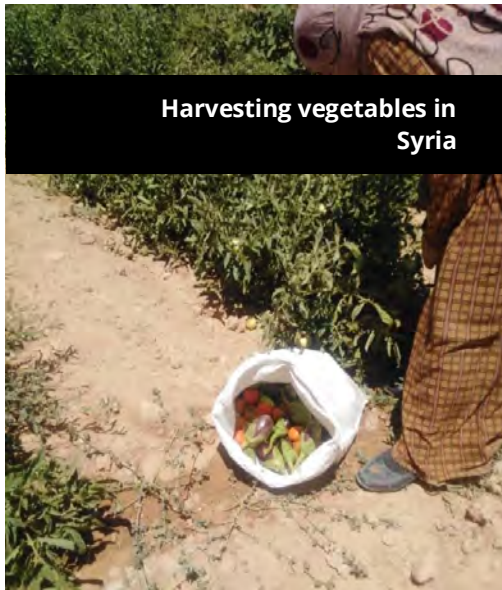
Harvesting vegetables in Syria

"This picture represents the most important stage of the project [harvesting and production of vegetables]. This picture makes you feel confident that you have reached the goal [and] shows that the role of the woman in home farming starting from planting seeds to picking, harvesting, preserving and storing." – Syrian woman PhotoVoice participant.

As PhotoVoice is a relatively new qualitative method in the humanitarian sector, the anlaysis of this methodology included learnings from photographs, narratives, and final presentations, as well as feedback from participants, facilitators, and IPs. These all had to be analyzed through two lenses: first, whether the project's objectives were met; and second, if PhotoVoice is a viable and robust method to include in humanitarian monitoring and evaluation processes.

The following section details results from the case studies, including data triangulated from participants, IPs, and facilitators.

✔ **PhotoVoice requires in-depth training.**

Facilitators in both countries noted that given the unfamiliarity of PhotoVoice and participatory-led inquiry, even more time and more detailed training is needed – for both participants and facilitators. Participants and facilitators noted that they would appreciate even more time for training on key topics, including making sure they fully understand the scope of photovoice, timeline, and how to take quality photos. Facilitators noted that it is important to ensure there is sufficient time and space to explain the concept; that this is a volunteer-based activity; that participants will not be compensated in any way for their participation in the PhotoVoice pilot; and the importance of do no harm.

✔ **A small sample size can be both a challenge and asset.**

While the pilot was designed to work with a small and workable sample size (average of 30 women per country), this created limitations in ensuring the full participation of participants selected, as some participated more or less based on their own household circumstances.

This was particularly evident in Venezuela Location 1, for example, where scheduling conflicts affected women's attendance as well as more practical travel challenges and access to meeting points. At the same time, the IP in Venezuela noted that the small group size was conducive to discussion and decision-making during meetings. Future versions of PhotoVoice may increase the sample size by having a larger number of smaller groups and hosting intermittent large meetings of all groups to share findings among participants.

✔ Operational challenges vary but can be mitigated even in a non-permissive setting.

Technical Accessibility

Phone access and internet availability can affect communication and participation. Participants in the Syria groups found that internet service sometimes prevented communication with facilitators outside of meetings. Further, even in cases where participants had phones, the family or household dynamics over phone use (e.g. shared phone amongst several members of the family) made it challenging for some participants to take photos at times that were most convenient for them. Future projects may explore ways to provide phones or other forms of cameras, while respecting do no harm considerations.

Meetings

Facilitators successfully worked with participants to agree, as a group, on how often to meet and where. By engaging participants in an active way in these discussions, the pilot maintained operational flexibility to adapt to the local security situation especially as security deteriorated during the project in Syria. Adaptations included canceling in-person meetings with participants and instead sharing photos and themes via WhatsApp messages. In Venezuela, common challenges included poor connectivity of cellular networks, which prevented more routine communication between facilitators, and attendance at weekly sessions was sometimes affected by scheduling issues and poor public transport. However, these operational issues were mitigated by being flexible and openness to changing the location of weekly sessions to more convenient locations. The presence of the IP also helped with consistency in attendance in the Venezuela locations. Participants found the routine discussion sessions to be helpful and not burdensome.

✔ Facilitators are critical to the success of PhotoVoice.

As the main face of the project at the field level, facilitators provided a critical role in engaging with participants and supporting coordination with the IPs. Facilitators need to be both adept at learning this type of participatory research design while being open and flexible enough to engage participants and adapt PhotoVoice to the local context and project.

✔ Women were empowered through their participation.

In survey data and KIIs with facilitators and participants, it was clear that women expressed a strong perception of empowerment and, saw value in having their voices heard. One PhotoVoice facilitator in Venezuela explained, "A project like this changes everybody; not just the participants, not just IP, but also the facilitator. For me, it was a formative experience."

The fact that the program had only women participants was a strength in both Syria and Venezuela, because, as women are the center of family life, they included the entire family in the project.[32] This means the impact of the project is widespread, and many said having that contact with other members of the community was a great experience. Most participants felt that their daily lives changed as a result, with some commenting they now view activities or events from a new perspective by exercising critical thinking. Some were inspired to continue working and many expressed an interest in continuing to take photos and reflect on their experiences. One group even produced a cookbook while others became more involved in other IP projects because of the PhotoVoice project.

The IP in Venezuela also reflected on the change they witnessed in participants from the start of the PhotoVoice pilot to completion: "The participants' dedication has been huge, since they have understood the responsibility expected of them, and it has been an opportunity for growth."

✔ PhotoVoice provided a creative way to communicate needs to decision-makers that was participant-led.

The women described several benefits of their participation. They felt more confident, increased their connections, and were able to raise concerns about the assistance they received and talk about solutions with the IPs. They felt empowered, at ease sharing with other women, and enjoyed communicating through photographs. In the words of one woman, "[the] picture is the truest expression of something."

Facilitators observed that the participants changed over the course of the project, from being not sure about the utility of the pilot to gaining agency and appreciating the value in their perspective and voice. One remarked how they could see changes in the lives of participants as well as in the communities and families, explaining that "Nobody could have imagined how important it was to learn how to express themselves via photos." Through the PhotoVoice method, participants discovered what they shared in common. Even though they

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[32] Many Syrian women's lives are restricted with limited integration into public life. Women also face a heightened risk of violence and experience limited access to basic services. The role of women in Syrian society is often confined to the domestic sphere, but this project allowed recognition of the women's hard work in agriculture.

were focusing on food and showing meals to each other, the process was a source of inspiration to everyone because they learned from each other and it provided a means to show love to people they care about.

By the end of the project, participants viewed PhotoVoice as extremely positive. They learned how to express themselves and became more aware of the effects of being participants of the program, not only in terms of the products they receive but also by introducing healthy habits in their homes. The narratives and stories enabled them to capture experiences and sentiments, and to offer a more personal dimension to the IPs. Furthermore, by capturing these experiences through photography, they could more easily retain what they gained from the experience after the pilot project ended. The photographs were a vehicle for expression. Thanks to the PhotoVoice process, participants created galleries of photos, stories to accompany photos, and a recipe book in Venezuela. These were all highly valued as avenues of expression, and participants were incredibly proud of these achievements.

Food items harvested and processed for storage and consumption in winter by rural Syrian women

In the words of one participant: "I feel very satisfied with the [photos]." The story behind the photos was one of the aspects that touched me the most because it was the most important moment that I wanted to reflect on. And with the recipe book, I felt like a winner, because I was able to invent and innovate and know that I can do much more than the recipes that appear there, all with the learning I received in PhotoVoice."

(Note: names featured in recipe book are pseudonyms)
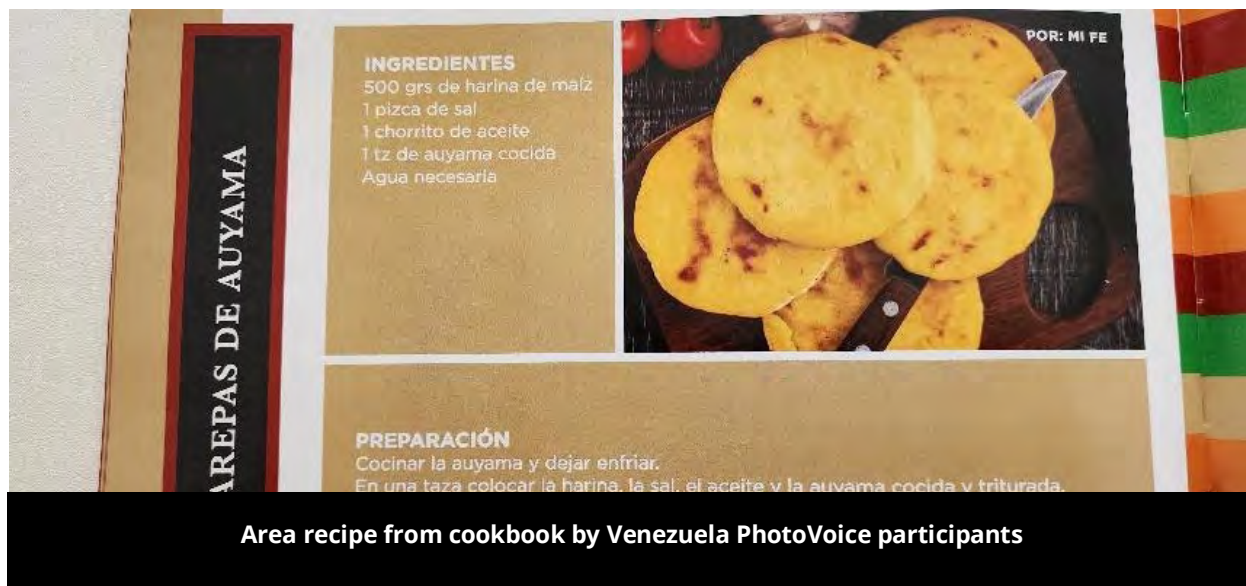
Area recipe from cookbook by Venezuela PhotoVoice participants

The PhotoVoice pilot culminated in an emotional final presentation and acknowledgement of participants' hard work. The IP in Venezuela said: "The last meeting that was held was really a very moving experience, listening to the testimonials, seeing the work done by each beneficiary, seeing what they were able to develop – it was very pleasant, comforting, and enriching."

✔ Most participants would like to participate in PhotoVoice again.

While initially several participants were not convinced of the project's importance, exit interviews and surveys revealed that the majority felt they developed new skills and appreciated that they were able to provide direct insights about humanitarian assistance to the IPs and suggested solutions. Many hoped there would be similar experiences in the future and they would be open to participating in them.

Participants described how they learned from the method in terms of observation, evaluation, paying attention to details, and sharing in a group setting. These learnings in turn enabled them to critically reflect on their processes of work, particularly in relation to the food assistance they receive. A Syrian participant reflected how the collective experience and information sharing was invaluable to helping her overcome obstacles: "I started sharing all the pictures with the group because my garden was one of the most successful gardens in the village and I did not have any disease except for the eggplant. I discovered it was caused by the seeds because everyone was suffering from this problem."

The testimonies from the participants themselves are the greatest evidence of the project's success, with one saying, "PhotoVoice is an experience that will stay with us for a lifetime." They recognized their personal development and acknowledged that, after the project, they

have greater capacity for observation and a greater awareness of what can be captured and expressed. It is best summed up in the words of one woman: "Photo Voz helped me not to let myself be overshadowed, both mentally and spiritually. I feel more sure of myself."

✔ Implementing partners play a key role in PhotoVoice.

Communication between the PhotoVoice Team and the IPs, including field or project-based and headquarter teams, is vital. Collaboration with the IPs ensures that PhotoVoice can be linked with existing monitoring and evaluation approaches and used by program teams to identify learning and action points. Moreover, coordination with the IP also supports the IP's "buy-in" into the methodology.

IPs noted that data and findings needed to be shared with team members responsible for implementing decisions. Targeting decision-makers for intervention is critical, especially as this is a real strength of the method; Doing so can also show participants the significant impact that their photos are having on the project. In Venezuela's case, the IP was incredibly engaged and helpful, which strengthened the program and demonstrated how direct and timely feedback can be effective.

The IPs mentioned that attending PhotoVoice sessions would also be helpful for furthering their understanding of the process. As one facilitator commented, "Often the NGOs don't have access to this side of the beneficiaries' perspective and it is absolutely priceless." A particular highlight was gaining an insight they usually would not, as they could see participants' skills being developed and the impact of their program on participants' daily lives. The PhotoVoice pilot showed it was possible to gather information not only about the quality of the products provided through the IP, but also of the staff's service to the participants, changes in their behavior, and that of their family or friends. One IP program assistant said that PhotoVoice "allowed us to discover other tools for monitoring and collecting information more directly from the beneficiary." A Venezuelan field assistant from the IP echoed this and commented that it allowed them "to know if the families are being benefited in a correct way."

Lastly, one IP respondent saw potential for the project to expand to cover other geographical areas while acknowledging the format of smaller sessions generate greater interaction. Expansion is possible, they said, if there is no additional toll on participants. It is also an achievable goal if PhotoVoice continues to work with organizations such as these to synergize activities and efforts.

Cooking with rice

Good quality rice allows you to skip the washing or pre-preparation step.

You save time, save water and feed your family well.

LESSONS LEARNED APPLYING PHOTOVOICE IN NON-PERMISSIVE HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

"She felt that her voice was heard."
– Team facilitator in Syria

The results from this pilot project indicate the PhotoVoice methodology can be successfully implemented even in challenging, non-permissive contexts like Venezuela and Syria, where IPs, participants, and organizations supporting monitoring and evaluation face a range of operational challenges. PhotoVoice worked as both a research method *and* a social change initiative, as the women who participated gained new skills, empowerment, and agency.

The following section details lessons learned and practical ways to replicate the success of these PhotoVoice pilots. While the results are context-specific, it is possible to glean generalized learnings for future adaptations of PhotoVoice.

1. **The selection of a facilitator who can communicate with and connect with participants is critical to the success of PhotoVoice**. Having local facilitators and field team members who represent the population that the PhotoVoice project is working with is essential to success. Local facilitators can incorporate the needed contextual adaptations (language, prevailing norms and beliefs, knowledge of local safety and security risks and mitigation) into the methodology and training materials used for PhotoVoice. As such, facilitators are critical in both facilitating PhotoVoice and keeping participants engaged.

2. **Detailed safety and risk assessments are imperative to respond to operational conditions.** As with any form of inquiry or monitoring, PhotoVoice must prioritize protection and do no harm considerations.

3. **Non-permissive settings require a high degree of flexibility.** Given the uncertainty and ever-changing nature of emergency settings, adaptability is crucial to PhotoVoice implementation. The nature of the methodology allows participants to take the lead in identifying workable solutions that reflect their local operational realities and PhotoVoice teams should include sufficient time in the planning stage to accommodate for flexibility.

4. **Integrating PhotoVoice into routine monitoring and evaluation can support more detailed data collection.** Combining PhotoVoice with other forms of inquiry as part of routine monitoring can aid in the triangulation of data and contribute to more robust insights. PhotoVoice can be supported with surveys, KIIs, FGDs, or even informal interviews. PhotoVoice is a multidisciplinary project and cross-cutting with other BHA programs, and thus by using the methodology alongside routine monitoring, it could reduce the burden on participants, while at the same time integrating learning during the program cycle.

5. **Consistent communication with all stakeholders allows greater engagement with IPs**. Future applications of PhotoVoice should include more regular and established communication and coordination with IPs, including those with the ability to receive feedback on the activities being implemented and to make changes to the program.

6. **A receptive environment is important for the empowerment of participants.** Engagement from participants, facilitators, and IPs helped participants feel like their "voice" was heard. In particular, buy-in from the IP created favorable conditions for potential action to take place and change to be implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

"Photo Voz [PhotoVoice] is an experience that will stay with us for a lifetime."
– Venezuelan participant of PhotoVoice

Based on the results of this pilot, PhotoVoice has potential for implementation in the humanitarian sector both as a participant-led qualitative monitoring tool and as a process for communal social action. It gives voice and power to IP program participants and their respective communities to control the narrative and lead the conversation. Within humanitarian settings, PhotoVoice could become a standardized research method that can be easily adapted to other contexts; yet, the field is currently lacking a toolkit of guidelines. This report, together with detailed training manuals, outlines objectives, lessons, and best practices with the aim of providing an adaptable framework for complex settings. The following section highlights recommendations for future applications of this method informed by analysis of the pilot project.

Ethical and operational recommendations

- Conduct a detailed risk assessment during the inception or design phase of PhotoVoice and ensure that the risk assessment is routinely reviewed and updated during the course of the project. This includes consideration of local safety and security and how the project will adhere to "do no harm" principles.

- Given the sensitive nature of taking photos (and in the case of this particular pilot project, the focus on women), ensure you have established connections with local protection actors. This includes developing and maintaining a Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse plan through an established policy, process, and point of contact. All facilitators should be trained on this, and referral information should be shared with participants.

- Utilize established PhotoVoice training materials (such as the Facilitator Guide developed as part of this pilot) as the starting point for your project, but understand that you will need to contextualize your approach to local conditions and participant demographics. Build in plenty of time to train facilitators in detail and to practice the methodology with them. Troubleshoot possible challenges during the project at the onset and build in flexibility to adapt to them. Ensure your training materials are accessible, both in language and context, to the participants selected.

- Train both facilitators and participants on how to de-identify photos and ensure safe photography practices. This includes not taking photos of people's faces (particularly in complex settings were doing so may place them in danger) and particularly not

taking photos of children. Train, or have the PhotoVoice facilitator conduct a training, on how to de-identify photos through blurring, cropping or pixelating an image. Train participants to delete or remove photos from their devices, particularly if they do not comply with the safety guidelines.

- While PhotoVoice is participant-driven, practical safety and security measures may dictate that their names be withheld when providing credit for photos taken as part of the project. Participant safety is most important.

Implementation recommendations

- Take time to ensure the training process is thorough, including a detailed timeline, so participants are clear on all procedures and expectations.

- Workshops should include camera use and tips accompanied by examples of photos.

- Consistent communication between all stakeholders is important, especially when identifying challenges and linking the process to action.

- Ensure the process is inclusive and outcomes are representative of participants' voices.

- Build in forms and ways to maintain communication and coordination with IPs, especially if the desire is to integrate PhotoVoice into routine monitoring activities.

Supporting PhotoVoice as a monitoring and learning method

- Encourage adoption of PhotoVoice alongside monitoring and evaluation approaches, including when implementing partners develop monitoring, evaluation and learning plans by presenting the methodology as a form of qualitative inquiry that can be used alongside approaches such as key informant interviews or focus group discussions.

- Continue to build the evidence base for PhotoVoice application in humanitarian settings, such as through the materials produced as part of this pilot, the Sanitation Learning Hub's WASH report, [33] and publishing of results of future PhotoVoice projects.

- Develop stronger integration between the photos produced in PhotoVoice, themes, or feedback from participants that emerged as a result of those photos and

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[33] Amina Bhakta, "Uncovering WASH Realities through PhotoVoice," *The Sanitation Learning Hub* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2020), https://sanitationlearninghub.org/resource/uncovering-wash-realities-through-PhotoVoice/.

application to current or future humanitarian programming by establishing close coordination and planning with IPs when adopting this methodology.

- Use PhotoVoice with other methodologies and triangulate data to give a comprehensive analysis and understanding of program strengths and weaknesses.

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