Lessons Learned Piloting PhotoVoice in Complex Settings for Qualitative Inquiry

Executive Summary

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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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 staff members and organizations including 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 in Venezuela and Syria for this project.

As a project utilizing participant-led research, this report would not have been possible without the dedication and contributions made by the women beneficiaries selected for participation in Venezuela (called PhotoVoz) and Syria.[1] Though their names have not been provided to protect their privacy, we at i-APS express our sincere gratitude for their support.

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 brief:

- PhotoVoice Facilitator Guide
- PhotoVoice Full Report

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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 selected for this pilot, details about participant names, locations and even the identity of implementing partners has not been 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.

Informed consent has been given to take and use all photos in this report.

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 pilot project sought to utilize PhotoVoice,[3] a visual ethnography and participatory action methodology, as part of routine monitoring and evaluation processes in non-permissive settings as it is relatively undeveloped and unexplored in such contexts. PhotoVoice is a participant-centered, (and in this instance woman-focused) qualitative inquiry that allows traditionally marginalized communities to highlight what they find to be the most important themes and priorities for additional attention which are then communicated to relevant stakeholders. In this way, PhotoVoice is a type of participatory action research (PAR) insofar as it draws on reflection, collective action, and collaboration to understand and improve practices. Photographs essentially serve as a prompt to stimulate discussion, develop critical thinking, and encourage listening to peers while at the same time bridging the gap between community and decision-makers.

The goal of this pilot project was to apply the PhotoVoice methodology in USAID-funded humanitarian projects and determine the appropriateness of PhotoVoice as a monitoring tool and a form of qualitative participatory inquiry in non-permissive settings. The majority

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[2] Quotation provided during project data collection. Identity is withheld in accordance with safety and ethical procedures.

[3] 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.[3] PhotoVoice can be classified as a type of participatory action research, which, according to Bradbury and Reason, is summarized as a qualitative research method that is: Grounded in lived experience, developed in partnership, addresses 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.[3]

of data in these settings tend to be collected through traditional research methods such as surveys, interviews, or focus group discussions which can be limiting and not fully representative. Food security projects, in particular, are areas in need of improved assessment via qualitative methods. PhotoVoice was therefore chosen to offer another form of qualitative research that is relatively easy to implement and provides participant-centered data that can have a meaningful impact on food security programming. Through PhotoVoice, critical entry points are identified for stakeholder engagement and service improvement of aid provision. Furthermore, the empowerment of women is a benefit of PhotoVoice worth exploring in the humanitarian context, something that this pilot intended to achieve and demonstrate. Existing research has shown PhotoVoice to increase power and agency. Therefore, in the traditionally extractive context of humanitarian evaluation and monitoring programming, the PhotoVoice method could also have a positive impact on the lives of the participants.

Syria and Venezuela were selected as locations for the pilot project due to the acute humanitarian situations in each country, including mass displacement and chronic food insecurity. The findings from this project are designed to inform implementing partners, USAID, and other humanitarian organizations about the practical use of PhotoVoice in humanitarian contexts alongside other methods of qualitative data collection.
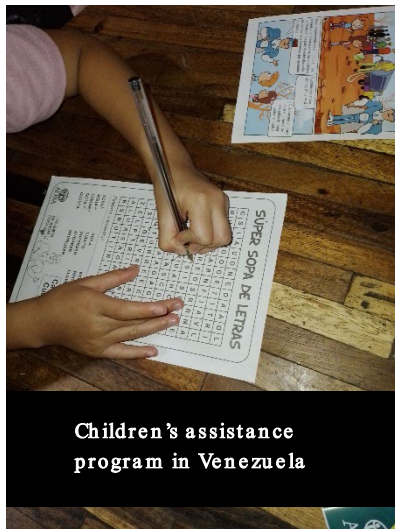
Children's assistance program in Venezuela

Bonding exercise during Photovoice training in Venezuela

METHODOLOGY

This particular PhotoVoice pilot project, developed by International Advisory, Products and Systems (i-APS) (hereafter referred to as "PhotoVoice Team") was proposed as a participant-centered, woman-focused qualitative research method that can be implemented in humanitarian settings. Given the complex operating conditions in Syria and Venezuela, the PhotoVoice Team needed to develop an operational framework that could guide a successful implementation, as well as allow for adaptations in other complex contexts. The methodology devised was informed by extensive desk review of literature, existing PhotoVoice projects, and best practices operating in both settings.

Step one: Select location and implementing partners

Selected pilot locations had to reflect the reality of challenging humanitarian settings. As such, Syria and Venezuela were chosen because of their respective complex operating contexts. The current legal and operational presence of i-APS in both locations was also a factor in country selection as it meant existing knowledge could be integrated into the pilot.

The PhotoVoice Team conducted outreach to USAID implementing partners (IPs) who had food security interventions and programs in these countries. The team selected one IP in each country and developed a memorandum of understanding outlining roles, responsibilities and expectations for the pilot.

Key Operational Considerations

Country Operating Contexts	
Syria	**Venezuela**
- Several locations where implementing partners operate are active conflict settings and have large numbers of displaced people. - Disruption in routine civil society fabric is the norm. - Flexibility and high awareness of safety and security are required due to active conflict. - Assistance that was the subject of PhotoVoice Pilot: Food assistance: Home vegetable gardens (delivered in line with growing season).	- Donor and implementing partner confidentiality remains paramount (identity of local IPs are often confidential to protect implementers and beneficiaries). - 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 that was the subject of PhotoVoice Pilot Food assistance: Food kits (delivered at routine intervals) and water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Step two: Facilitator selection and training materials

i-APS recruited three facilitators (all female) in Syria and two facilitators (one male, one female) in Venezuela by taking into account key competencies, vetting procedures, and local knowledge. The facilitators were trained using the Facilitator Guide developed as part of this pilot, through a combination of online and in-person training. The specific goal in developing these materials was to create an operational framework that could guide successful implementation in both countries, while at the same time allowing for participant-led contextualization and adjustments provided by facilitators from the countries where the work was occurring.

Photovoice training in Syria showing trainer and participants.

Step three: Select PhotoVoice participants

PhotoVoice facilitators selected participants using lists provided by the IPs. Sampling was determined by several key criteria: participants had to be current recipients of the IP's program in the selected country; they had to be willing to participate with informed consent; and participants had to be women, as the pilot was specifically focusing on women. Purposeful sampling was employed and women from a range of ages, marital status, and

income levels were selected. The Facilitators obtained informed consent from all participants and explained the project would not provide any monetary benefit.

Step four: Implement PhotoVoice

Training for participants followed the modules developed by the PhotoVoice Team. Participants were introduced to each other, the project, and core humanitarian principles including consent. The pilot was explained in-depth with the main aim of orienting participants to this type of participatory-led program while at the same time adhering to key safety and protection parameters.

PhotoVoice aimed to provide participant-led feedback directly to the USAID IP on a regular basis throughout the activity period. This happened through photographs and storytelling and culminated in a final presentation which served the dual purpose of highlighting all the participants' work while also communicating their needs with decision-makers.

In terms of data collection and analysis of the pilot project itself, photos and presentations created by participants were analyzed; feedback surveys and interviews were conducted with all participants, facilitators, and IPs; and results were complemented with additional data provided by internal reports submitted to IPs in relation to program delivery and results.

Photovoice training workshop in Venezuela

Ethical considerations and risk mitigation

Participant protection was the priority throughout the pilot. Standard ethical practices were adhered to including obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality of information and data. Accounting for this, detailed risk assessments were conducted in line with the humanitarian "Do No Harm" principle, which affected decisions relating to camera phone provision and communication procedures. This included reaching agreement among the PhotoVoice Team and all participants that all photos would be de-identified, including

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blurring faces and ensuring that specific locations could not be determined from the photos; and participants were instructed to prioritize taking photos without persons, given the conflict setting of Syria and political and economic conditions of Venezuela.

CASE STUDIES AND MAIN FINDINGS

The results from this pilot project indicate the process worked as both a research method *and* a social change initiative. Findings showed that PhotoVoice is accessible for organizations to adopt, adapt, and implement as a PAR method in humanitarian settings. Importantly, the process was deemed successful because the women who participated gained new skills, empowerment, and agency. Participants led the process and were empowered to advocate to decision-makers to address their needs.

Through interviews and surveys from participants, facilitators, and implementing partners in both Syria and Venezuela, feedback was triangulated to analyze key findings, which are detailed below:

✓ In-depth training of the PhotoVoice method is required.

✓ Small sample sizes can be both an asset and challenge.

✓ Operational challenges vary but can be mitigated even in non-permissive settings.

✓ Facilitators are critical to the success of PhotoVoice.

✓ Women were empowered through their participation.

✓ The method provided a creative way to communicate needs to decision-makers that was participant-led.

✓ Most participants would do the project again given the opportunity.

✓ Implementing partners play a key role in the project.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lesson: Detailed safety and risk assessments are imperative to respond to operational conditions if implementing PhotoVoice in a complex or non-permissive setting.

Recommendation: 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.

Lesson: Participant safety should be prioritized throughout the process, and risks can be mitigated with detailed training and adaptations.

Recommendation: Given the sensitive nature of taking photos and the focus on women in this pilot project, ensure you have established connections with local protection actors. Train both facilitators and participants on how to de-identify photos and ensure safe photography practices.

Lesson: Non-permissive settings require a high degree of flexibility.

Recommendation: Adapt training guides to context-specific conditions. Challenges should be identified early in risk and mitigation assessments, but the nature of the program and group dynamics also allow for adjustments within the duration of the project. Therefore, as issues arise, it is important to keep decisions and solutions participant-led.

Lesson: Facilitator or field team selection is critical to the success of PhotoVoice.

Recommendation: 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 beneficiary demographics. Build in plenty of time to train facilitators in detail and practice the methodology with them.

Lesson: Integration of PhotoVoice into routine monitoring and evaluation can support more detailed data collection.

Recommendation: Encourage adoption of PhotoVoice alongside monitoring and evaluation approaches, including when IPs develop monitoring, evaluation, and learning plans. Use with other methodologies such as surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions and triangulate data to give a comprehensive analysis and understanding.

Lesson: Consistent communication with all stakeholders allows greater engagement with IPs.

Recommendation: Facilitate feedback with IPs early in the process, especially identification of challenges, as this will aid in initiating action and potential change. Include IPs in ongoing updates about PhotoVoice, including initial findings and learnings.

Lesson: A receptive environment is important for the empowerment of participants.

Recommendation: Take time to ensure the training process is thorough and that participants are clear on all procedures and expectations. Equally, engaging IPs and ensuring the process is representative of participants' voices will aid in sharing, critical thinking, and communal action.

Lesson: Implementing PhotoVoice in tandem with other programs has many advantages.

Recommendation: Including additional educational sessions on cross-cutting themes and programs can help program impact. Develop stronger integration between the photos and feedback produced by participants in PhotoVoice, and application to current or future humanitarian programming, by establishing close coordination and planning with IPs when adopting this methodology.