

What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory research method combining a creative and accessible tool, photography, with a ready-to-use step-by-step process backed by robust theory.

Born in social sciences, Photovoice has spread to different areas thanks to its many benefits. It especially helps social workers involving local communities in exploring issues they experience in their daily life and raising their voice about them.

Compared to "traditional" self- and collective expression methods or other participative research methods, Photovoice is uniquely inclusive thanks to several characteristics.

As a community-based, participatory, qualitative research method combining photography with grassroots social action, photovoice indeed relies on the following key features:

Visually Based

It uses photography as an accessible tool and rich visual support for the creation of collective meaning;

Participatory

Its participants are not passively answering questions but actively co-constructing all aspects of a photovoice project, becoming "co-researchers";

Qualitative Research

It allows to collect data expressing individual & collective representations and perceptions of one's reality, providing rich subjective material to co-interpret;

Social Action

The resulting knowledge, impactful visual material and narratives is used to inform and impact policy-making towards positive social change.

Photovoice in youth and social work

Photovoice is indeed an extremely powerful tool in youth & social work. Through the use of photography, it helps empowering participants regardless of their skills or expertise in:



Recording and reflecting upon their **community's strengths and concerns**;



Promoting **critical dialogue** and knowledge about social issues;

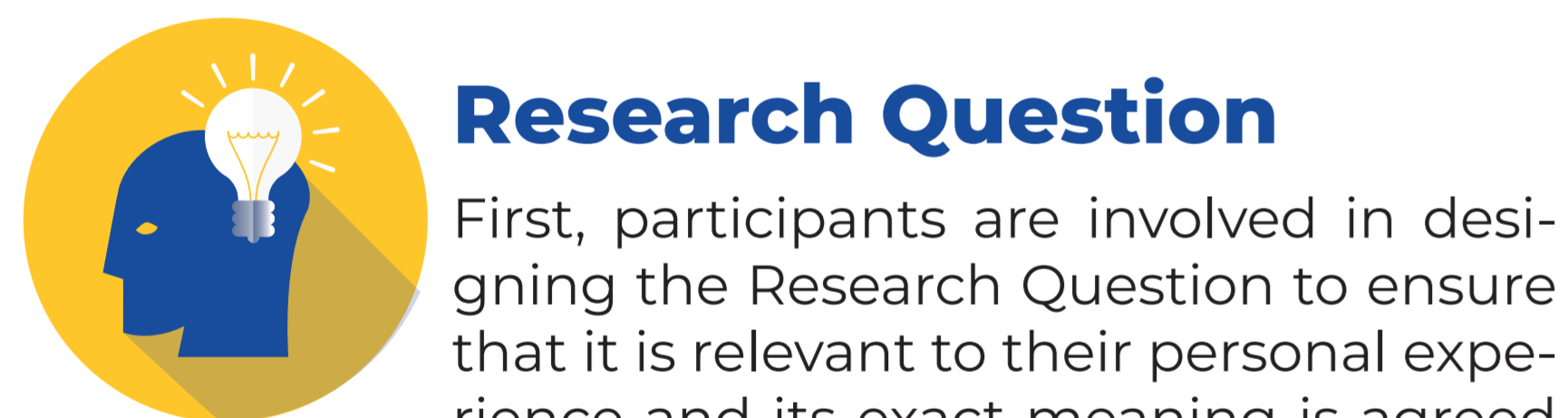


Advocating for their rights by better reaching policy makers through attractive, visual material.

As a method of reflection and reporting which facilitates the formulation of collective messages and gets them across by using photographs, photovoice has progressively been used in more and more diverse settings, going far beyond its original purpose as a participatory research method.

Its original features make photovoice especially adapted to the inclusion of marginalised groups in the public sphere: it is a way to give a voice to communities who, because political frameworks and policies do not offer them an adapted space to express themselves on issues of common interests, usually remain excluded from the political sphere.

How to use Photovoice with your target group in four steps



Research Question

First, participants are involved in designing the Research Question to ensure that it is relevant to their personal experience and its exact meaning is agreed upon by all participants. If the context "mandates" a specific topic, participants are at the very least involved in choosing its exact wording. If the context allows more or even complete freedom in the choice of topic, involving participants in this early stage guarantees that the selected topic and resulting question are meaningful to them and not based on misleading assumptions.

Then participants go through a dedicated session providing them with time and an adapted setting to think of their personal answers to the Research Question. The focus here is on formulating individual answers, i.e. answers expressing every single participant's views. Participants can, however, discuss their personal answers in order to stimulate each other's individual reflections and brainstorm about how to express these answers through photographs.



Taking Photographs

The participants have already been trained in the use of the camera. In the preparation stage and through practice, participants get familiar with the aesthetic and technical aspects of photography and they gain confidence in their own creative skills, which fosters better results in the long-term.

Participants are prepared and accompanied through the "fieldwork" allowing them to take photos which convey the ideas they have come up with in the previous stage. During the fieldwork, the researcher/facilitator is mostly in charge of providing them with the right setting to take photos, e.g. the time and place providing opportunities to take the pictures participants have planned.



Selection Process

Participants write down "captions" or annotations to accompany their photographs, detailing and making explicit what they want to communicate through them.

They share their individual photos and accompanying stories with the rest of the group, and then discuss the resulting stories and messages: Are there common themes? What is important to the group?

As a result of these discussions, participants select a few photos only, focusing on the ones that most – if not all of – the group can relate with and agree upon. To that end, the final pictures and stories constitute a common answer to the Research Question. In this way the results of Photovoice, including both pictures and narratives, express not one individual's story, but rather a group message.



Exhibition

In the end, the participants use their results – the final pick of photos and narratives – to reach out to the "power brokers" who have the means to influence their life. This dissemination phase is a crucial part of all Photovoice projects, as it is essential to guarantee its positive social impact: the sharing of thoughts and opinions with decision makers allows to share what is important to participants and advocate for change on the selected topic.

This is usually done through the organisation of a Photovoice Exhibition inviting policy-makers and other stakeholders to meet the participants and discuss their results. However, this dissemination of results can be adjusted to the Photovoice project's context: for instance, the "power brokers" are not necessarily politicians depending on the topic, and a public photo exhibition is not always the best way to engage them!

As part of the VOICE project, young students and youth & social workers from Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands were trained to become Photovoice facilitators themselves in May and July 2022.

They studied the theoretical aspects underlying the Photovoice method and, as part of a "hands-on" learning experience, they also went through their very own Photovoice process as participants.

You can check their diverse results! While being the VOICE participants' own contribution to the European Year of Youth, these results also showcase how effective Photovoice is in facilitating self- and collective expression, and to what kind of authentic and impactful outcomes it can lead to!