

Facilitating Youth Action for Sustainable Community using Photovoice*

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I. Introduction

Photovoice is an innovative participatory action research method that uses photo images, participant voices (textual explanations), and discussions of photos to make voices heard and to elicit action. The method is rooted in two different networks. While Caroline Wang (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1994 & 1997) popularized Photovoice in academic and policy research, particularly in public health in the US, the UK organization “PhotoVoice” focuses more on creating income-generating opportunities and facilitating self-advocacy for the oppressed (Blackman, 2007). Nevertheless, the methods and aims in the networks of the two countries are very similar. The following are the aims of Photovoice (1) to enable people to understand community needs and strengths, (2) to increase individual and community empowerment, (3) to enhance community engagement in action, and (4) to reach policy makers through advocacy by promoting dialogue and knowledge through group discussion of photographs (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Since its development in the mid-1990’s, Photovoice has been used in various fields such as social work (Molloy, 2007; Wilson et al., 2007), community development (Purcell, 2007), public health (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), community psychology (Nowell et al., 2006), and sociology (Booth & Booth, 2003). The present study applies Photovoice to deepen peer relations among community youth leaders in suburban local communities outside of Metro Manila in the Philippines and to increase their awareness of their community in order to facilitate youth action for sustainable community.

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II. Background of the Project

This project was undertaken in connection with Children and Youth in Action for a Sustainable Future (CYASF), a program supported by the Asian Social Institute (ASI) in Manila, the Philippines. CYASF aims to empower youth to become actively involved in environmental issues and community development. It provides a holistic youth program and encourages youth leaders to conduct volunteer work in their own communities. It also complements and supports the initiatives of existing youth organizations in the area.

In the Rizal Province, CYASF is considered to be the youth expression of Co-creating Sustainable Bioregional Communities (CSBCom), which is a movement that promotes “a meaningful life and way of living that is rooted in spirituality and richness of local culture and nature.” The outcome of the Photovoice project will be used as a medium for participatory learning, planning, and action processes involving a greater number of youth leaders in three municipalities of Rizal—Angono, Binangonan, and Cardona, which together cover 31 *barangays* (the smallest administrative division in the Philippines).

III. Focus of the Research

The Photovoice project focuses on community youth and sustainable development. At the end of the project, the participants are expected to be able to show images of the various aspects of both, their community life and environment that they want to maintain or develop for future generations and the visible threats to sustainability. This information was provided to the youth in the project orientation. Participants were given the freedom to identify and choose the images, and explain their meanings.

1. Goals and Objectives

As mentioned in Section I, the first two aims of Photovoice are to enable people to understand community needs and strengths and to increase individual and community empowerment. To accomplish these, the following project objectives were set:

- ① To develop self- and community-awareness of the situation of local communities and to identify areas for sustainability from the perspective of the youth.
- ② To enable the youth to use photography to capture specific images of their community life and environment that are valuable for them.
- ③ To stimulate participants’ interest in photography as an artistic and social expression and to keep the general public informed of their issues and concerns.
- ④ To enhance teamwork among the youth participants and improve their confidence in peer-to-peer interaction.

2. Expected Output

To achieve the last two aims of the Photovoice project (to enhance community engagement in action and to reach policy makers through advocacy action) the following outputs were expected.

- ① Discussion and identification of various aspects of both, community life and environment that the youth wish to sustain and threats to the sustainability of these aspects.
- ② Selection of the 100 best photos taken by the youth in their community of residence.
- ③ Photo exhibits in Cardona and Angono, made in partnership with the local government, where youth viewers vote for their five favorite photos.
- ④ Simple project documentation: a research report, photo documentation, etc.

IV. Method

The project was carried out in four phases: (1) Preparations and Consensus Building, (2) Workshops, (3) Exhibition and Public Awareness, and (4) Evaluation, Report Writing, and Dissemination.

1. Preparations and Consensus Building

Preparations for the project began in March 2008. After ASI and the author agreed to conduct Photovoice with CYASF, the project goals and objectives as well as the budget were clarified, and a professional photographer was selected as one of the project facilitators. Then, the project was announced in three municipalities of Rizal, and the participants were selected among the youth cooperators of CYASF. Around 22 youth leaders enlisted—ten from Cardona, two from Binangonan, and ten from Angono. Four dropped out due to other commitments. Because the participants from Binangonan were small in number, they were grouped with those from Cardona, and the workshops were conducted for 22 youth leaders divided into two sub-groups—Angono and Cardona.

2. Workshops

In accordance with *The PhotoVoice Manual* (Blackman, 2007), the following steps were enacted from September to November 2008.

1) Establishing Group Dynamics and Goals (Session 1)

Participants were given an orientation to Photovoice, and the project objectives were clarified. Most of the participants expressed that they were interested in joining the project in order to learn photography and gain new experiences. Group dynamic exercises were conducted to allow participants to get to know each other better and to facilitate group

cohesion. Input on participant's level of communication was provided to them by the project facilitators. The Index of Peer Relations (IPR; Hudson, 1992) was also administered to participants to assess the level of peer relations at the beginning and end of the session. This 25-item, seven-level Likert scale is designed to measure the magnitude of a problem that the respondent has with peers. The score, calculated by a unique scoring procedure, produces a range from 0 to 100 in which higher scores indicate greater magnitude or severity of problems.

2) Introduction to Photography (Sessions 2 & 3)

Following the input on communication, participants performed the Photolanguage exercise, in which they learned how to relate with photos by choosing an image that they identified with from a pre-given set (Gonzales, 1981). Personal sharing followed in small groups. Each group drew the essential themes of the sharing on Manila paper incorporating its members' photos. Group outputs were displayed on the walls.

Then, the youth were given a lesson on basic photography, which included topics on how to use the camera, photo-shooting skills, and photo interpretation. Ten instamatic film cameras were distributed and shared by 20 participants, and each received one roll of film. Practice shooting was given as an assignment.

The photos were developed and critiqued in the following session. The facilitators pointed out photographic errors and suggested improvements. Then another roll of film was distributed to each participant to shoot additional images.

3) Speaking Out through Photography (Session 4)

The second roll of film was developed for all participants, and in this session, participants chose their best shots and explained to the group why they took them. The participants were divided into two groups, in which each group made a photo essay of their work. The creative works were displayed on the wall, and the participants voted for the best photos and selected 100 for exhibit.

The Cardona group clustered their photos into themes, whereas the Angono group created a single photo story. After some discussion and clarification of the message they really wanted to convey to viewers, the Angono group also decided to adapt the thematic clustering of photos for their final presentation. Both municipalities combined their photos.

4) Strengthening and Personalizing the Message (Sessions 5 & 6)

This stage was quite challenging for everyone. To strengthen the message, participants underwent three phases of reflection and processing. The first was a personal reflection on each photo wherein participants pasted the selected image on bond paper and wrote a description of why they had taken that particular photo. They also gave each one a title and included their name and the location where the photo was taken.

The second phase was a peer review of all the photos and a refinement of the captions. Then, the emerging themes were identified and discussed. In the beginning, the themes identified were very concrete descriptions of the images, e.g., religiosity, nature, urbanization, children, etc. The facilitators guided the group to consider the essence of the emerging themes and the messages that the photographers were trying to convey. In the process, the titles of the themes were modified, and the participants decided to focus on seven major themes.

The third phase was the process of re-clustering the photos according to the themes that were agreed upon. Participants had conflicting opinions about how to classify some photos, but eventually, they were able to come to agreements. The caption for each theme was written out near the end of the session.

3. Exhibition

The exhibition involved more hard work and pressure. ASI staff and volunteers offered their help in order to meet the deadlines and create a good exhibit. They first planned the setup, and then some of them worked on the invitations and the program. It was the first time that the group had created an exhibit, and they worked for several days to mount 100 enlarged photos, add the captions, and create an artistic display. The remaining small photos were also clustered and included in the exhibit.

The first exhibit was held at the municipality of Cardona at the Senior Citizen Center in November 2008 (see Photo 1). The launch was attended by several local government officials, government workers, representatives of civil society, ASI officers and staff, and friends of the youth. It included a program in which certificates were awarded. The feedback from viewers was very encouraging. They commended the participants on the depth and meaningfulness of the photo messages, the artistic quality of the shots and displays, and the efforts of the youth to learn more about their community and make their own contribution to society. Other youth groups also performed to entertain the guests.

The exhibit was also held later at the University of Rizal in Angono, the ASI in Manila, and Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan.

1) Voices of the Youth

Seven major themes emerged from the photos and “voices” of the youth. The first theme was KALIKASAN (Nature), for which the project participants selected 22 photos that focused on the beauty of nature and blessings from God. Photo titles included “Seeds of Livelihood,” “Golden Harvest,” and “Happiness in Nature.” Most of the photos are about appreciation for the beauty of nature, but some reflect the meaning of life through nature. For example, the voice of the photo titled “Flow of Life” (see Photo 2) is “Our life is like a drama. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are sad. Our lives will not be meaningful if we do not look for meaning. We are like the plants that sway with the cool wind. In the same way, we have to go by the stream of life.”

Eleven photos were selected for the second theme, KINABUKASAN (Future). Among them were photos titled “Innocence of Children,” “Smile of the New Tomorrow,” and “A Room in Paradise.” As demonstrated by the photo “Many Heads are Better than One” (see Photo 3), which is voiced as “It’s a joy to be together. It’s a joy when there are many. Each child has an idea. If put together, hope is formed,” many photos and voices in this category manifest the participants’ dreams and express that children are the community’s future.

Among the nine photos selected for the third theme, HANAPBUHAY (Livelihood), were those titled “There is Money in Fish,” “Vegetables Give Life,” and “Domestic Animals, Partners in Life.” Under the fourth theme, DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES, were 22 photos with titles such as “Development, Cause of Destruction,” “Picking Garbage,” “You are a Dead Fish,” and “Floods Again” (see Photo 4), which was given the voice “Floods again. I don’t want to get wet anymore. When will this end? I don’t want to be doused again.”

The fifth theme was PAGKABALISA AT PAGKABAGABAG (Anxieties and Unease), and among the eight photos selected were “It’s Hard to be Poor,” “Dark Sky,” and “An Impoverished Destiny.” Most these photos and their voices represent sadness in the lives of the participants and a reflection of poverty. For example, the voice of the photo titled “Mirror of Life” (see Photo 5) is “The person’s reflection on the wet pavement symbolizes poverty. The vague reflection of the person represents poverty because it is just like a mirror whose image is unclear and uncertain, like poor people’s day-to-day struggle in life.”

Eight photos were selected for the sixth theme, FAITH, and the last theme, PAG-ASA (Hope). Among the photos for FAITH were “Will there be Light?” “The Angel of Judgment,” and “A Witness of my Childhood.” Photos titled “In the Middle of the Dusk” and “What Future Awaits Us?” were selected for PAG-ASA. The voice of the photo titled “Run for a Race” (see Photo 6), which is also categorized under PAG-ASA, says, “Let us have a race to the school so we may have new knowledge, new beginnings. Let us join each other in changing the world.” Most photos and voices for PAG-ASA are about aspirations for hope and the participants’ eagerness to take action to create a better community.

2) Insights from the Photos

Overall, the photos and voices of the community youth revealed their own perspectives of their communities, their joys and anxieties, and the situations that were disturbing for them. While they may have been uncertain of what lay ahead, they were still hopeful for the future. They expressed strong faith and spirituality. Specifically, the voices given to the photos seem to demonstrate that

- ① The youth are happy and at peace with nature, and they appreciate the vibrancy of their community life;
- ② They are experiencing a life in transition—from rural to urban, from traditional to modern, from a simple to a complicated life—and this is not easy for them;

- ③ The youth are greatly disturbed by images of poverty in their communities and in their personal lives, e.g., the garbage problem, flooding, and the destruction of the environment;
- ④ They hang on to some glimmers of hope within and around them, and they take strength from friends, families, and their own faith in God; and
- ⑤ Taking action, going to school, and charting their own destinies are considered to be the key to overcome the difficulties and challenges of the present life.

V. Evaluation

The fourth phase was an evaluation of the project. In this study, the project impact was measured by observation throughout the project, a focus group interview afterwards, and an analysis of score changes on the IPR before and after the project. The impact was also evaluated by how much action for sustainable community the youth initiated after the project.

1. Focus Group Interview and Observation

The participants were able to deliver the expected outputs of the project, including learning the basics of photography and taking good and meaningful pictures, developing competencies such as the use of a camera and the ability to communicate and express oneself, coming up with an exhibition by themselves, working in a group, and leading a program. All these contribute to self-development or personal growth. The degree of impact, however, depends on the extent of individual participation. About half of the participants actually took a lead, while the others merely followed. However, all experienced personal growth. In their testimonials and the focus group interview, the participants made the following statements.

“I thank Photovoice because we learned to use the camera, and the nice feelings we had during the entire process.”

“I learned to defend my craft to everyone. My self-esteem was fully developed.”

“I am very thankful to Photovoice because I was given a chance to be involved.”

“I learned to explain my insights and my point of view with the pictures that I took.”

“It’s worth it. I really appreciated the things that are happening in our environment.”

“I was not very happy during the first session because I was not so concerned about my community—until we took the pictures. I was awakened to the situation of my community, and my interest in Photovoice got deeper. I am now concerned about the issues in my community.”

The inner voices of the youth participants were articulated creatively, and the shooting of photos gave them an opportunity to notice the realities of their environment and community life that are often taken for granted. Common opinions held by many that youth have

apathetic attitudes toward their community were somehow altered after viewers saw the exhibition. The Photovoice project had actually facilitated the process of awareness, although there had already been seminal concerns about the issues in the community.

2. Index of Peer Relations

In regard to peer relations, it was observed that while the youth leaders had already been together in several trainings, their interactions were mostly superficial, and they were close only to those who came from the same town. There was a lot of stereotyping between Angono and Cardona youth in the beginning. However, in the process of reflection and dialogue about the photos, greater awareness and appreciation of each others' communities were observed.

This observation is also supported by a change in the scores of the IPR before and after the project. Although only eight out of eighteen participants who stayed till the end of the project completed both pre- and post-tests, the average score on the index fell significantly, from 14.50 to 9.17 ($t = 3.286$, $p = .013$), indicating that peer relations improved after the project.

3. Actions Taken for a Sustainable Community by the Youth

Peer relationships developed, and the elevated confidence and awareness of environmental and community issues boosted the participants' actions to develop sustainable community. Under the support of ASI, CYASF has now set up the following action plans.

1) Tree Nursery and Planting

Tree planting sites were identified in three areas (Talim Cardona side, San Isidro Upper Angono, and Lunsad Binagonan). A minimum of 1,000 trees will be planted each year. Tree nurseries will be set up in Patunhay Cardona or Exodus Ville in Angono: 1,000 per nursery will be planted every year.

2) Waste Segregation and Material Recovery Facilities

The local government is mandated to setup a Waste Segregation and Material Recovery Facility (MRF) in every *barangay*, but oftentimes this is not implemented, or if so, continuation is always a problem due to lack of funds and political will. The youth wish to partner with the government to operate MRF facilities in the Cardona as well as the Binagonan side of Talim Island, and also in upper Angono. Some out-of-school youth and interested adults will serve as team implementers in each area, and CYASF participants will be co-implementers. They will be encouraged to carry out waste segregation and recovery in their respective homes. The youth will also try to establish dialogue with *barangay* officials and concerned citizens to improve the community waste management system and to explore possible collaborative actions.

3) Composting and River/Lake Rehabilitation

With the use of effective micro-organisms (EMs), the youth wish to produce *bokashi*¹⁾ and *bokashi* balls²⁾ to sanitize and expedite the decomposition of organic wastes in MRFs and to help the rivers and shorelines to regenerate themselves with the help of good micro-organisms. Four rivers were identified as project sites. A minimum of 8,000–10,000 *bokashi* balls will be dropped in the rivers each year for a three-year period. The live micro-organisms from the rivers will flow to the shorelines and as they multiply, the waters will be cleaned.

4) Diversified and Integrated Farming System

CSBCom is promoting the Diversified and Integrated Farming System, organic gardening and farming, in the bioregion, and a group of 25 community initiators are currently learning the technology in their Learning Farms. Several youth participants are interested in taking part in the project to re-animate farming and gardening in their backyards and their lots. They also want to support and learn from remaining local farmers who have long been neglected by the community and the government due to the practice of food importation. The experience of hard work with low production and a low price for produce has always discouraged farmers. Now, the idea is to produce food in the backyard to lessen household food expenses and to “go organic” for better health.

VI. Conclusions

This project demonstrated the effectiveness of Photovoice as a creative tool and as a process of creating awareness, developing competence in self-expression, facilitating personal growth, and practicing team building, which in turn facilitate social action.

Advocacy for policy change was not emphasized in the project, but the outputs such as the photos, power point presentations, and documentary report can be used by the local youth organizations and the ASI youth program (CYASF) in their other events and activities, particularly in the municipal planning for action, where a greater number of youth leaders are involved. It can also be shown to other groups to generate awareness of community issues or as a starting point for discussion. Action for change, after all, does not always have to come from authorities and policy makers. The people themselves can initiate action for change on the basis of their own reality assessment and capacities.

It was also demonstrated in this project that the youth (or many other groups) are capable of doing participatory action research. However, given the hard work and rigors of the Photovoice process, serious commitment from participants and adequate guidance and support are necessary.

1) A method of intensive composting

2) A mixture of clay, *bokashi*, and EMs which, when applied to ponds or lakes, will slowly break down, allowing the EMs to escape into the water.

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Photo 1: Photovoice Exhibit at Cardona



Photo 2: Flow of Life (Nature)



**Photo 3: Many Heads are Better than One
(Future)**



**Photo 4: Floods Again
(Developmental Issues)**



**Photo 5: Mirror of Life
(Anxieties and Unease)**



Photo 6: Run for a Race (Faith)