

# *PhotoVoice*

## *A starting point for social action?*

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### *Work at the 'sharp-end'*

I start from the premise that social action on any issue of concern (whether we see this as 'a problem' or as some prefer, as 'an opportunity') needs to at least involve, preferably be led by, the people who directly affected by the problem. These 'primary' or 'direct' stakeholders – the people at the sharp end of the problem – may need help from 'secondary'/'indirect' stakeholders – people who also care, some of whom work as volunteers or professionals with statutory or voluntary/community agencies set up to tackle the problem. But if the people directly affected are not engaged as part of the solution then, I suggest, we do not have a solution to the root problem – only another bandaid patching up a hole in the existing system of 'welfare' that is itself part of the wider social problem we face today.

If this seems harsh then please consider:

- Approximately 90% of the available welfare resources go into meeting the concerns of about 10% of the community – and most of these through the wages/salaries and support costs of people employed in the welfare industry. Very little of the available resources actually go to the people directly affected so that they can deal with their own issues of concern.
- Our first welfare state is set up to deal with the needs of people who cannot cope – people in imminent danger of a breakdown – but the vast majority of the population is either coping or is in various stages of stress or distress short of breakdown. Many are aware that if their concerns are left unattended this distress may escalate to breakdown. However when such people approach the welfare agencies the response is usually either to suggest they can cope or to respond as though the situation was in or near breakdown. Indeed, the ability to get assistance from the current welfare system may depend on presenting the concern as though it was an imminent breakdown situation. In a time of limited resources it is the cases that can be seen to be 'urgent' that get attention. In everyday language, it is usually the 'squeaky wheel' that gets the oil.
- Unfortunately this approach often invalidates the perception and concerns of the majority and/or dis-empowers those who are directly affected – most of whom, with a different kind of help would be able to cope and, perhaps as important, tackle the root problems that lead to the community stress/distress in the first place.
- This analysis is not new. It has been the basis for the shift of emphasis from 'social work' to 'community work' that many activists and educators have

been struggling with for at least three decades now. But in the process we have seen the growth of a community work industry and economy. With all the hoops and hurdles now in place, community funds for projects are frequently accessible only to the 'secondary stakeholders'. I don't wish to minimise the integrity and commitment of people who work as volunteers or employees with agencies that share the 'concern' – but at the end of the day these 'secondary' stakeholders can go home to a world that is not directly affected by the success or failure of social action on the issue.

- In addition we face one further obstacle. Within the group of direct stakeholders there are those who are known and have some engagement with the existing community work agencies; and those who remain relatively 'invisible'. Among these 'clients' there are often both people in need of support and some who take on 'community leadership' working with the agencies to tackle the problem – but there is usually a much larger group that the agencies are aware of but often have little or no contact with. The first group are relatively easy to work with. They are often the starting point for agency-led social and community action. But there is a recognition by many activists in the field that it is the larger second group who need to be 'mobilised' if real participation of direct stakeholders in seeking solutions is to be achieved through social and community action. Unfortunately, many of the tools in the current kit-bag for community action do not seem to be effective in reaching these people. Indeed, at best, the community-work social action tool-kit seems designed to mobilise people around a sense of indignation – anger against social injustice – but has little to say about how to work with the more prevalent problem of community apathy, particularly among those who have most to lose if the situation remains unchanged.

If we accept the premise that there is a need to engage the 'direct stakeholders' in defining how they see the problem and what is to be done – (and as important how and by whom) what processes, tools and techniques can assist this engagement?

It is in this context that I'd like to locate the idea of photo-voice as a community development tool for starting the process of engagement of the direct stakeholders in a various issues and concerns. Combined with other tools it has the potential for developing long term involvement of these stakeholders in social action to bring about real social change in the root problems – involving these people in a process of personal and social growth and starting them on the road to developing ideas for change and building alliances with other (direct and indirect) stakeholders around social action that they define as necessary.

### ***Origins of Photo-voice.***

The literature on photo-voice credits a group of action-researchers in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the USA with the idea of giving disposable cameras to homeless 'street' people and inviting them to take pictures that represent their world – to photograph the world as seen through the eyes of the homeless. Conversations with these people about the choice of pictures they had taken, their significance and the personal stories behind these pictures were then recorded, transcribed and edited – a collaborative

process between the ‘action-researchers’ and the homeless – and turned into a Photo-Voice exhibition. The wider community were then invited to see and hopefully better understand this world of the homeless – one that was until then either invisible or marginalised within the community. Since then the idea has been applied in many different situations with other groups of marginalised people using the process to give the wider community a chance to see through the eyes and hear through the voice of those otherwise invisible and unheard.

The idea is simple. There are a few complexities that can and perhaps should be added like:

- Basic training in how to take photographs – an opportunity for people to learn from photographers who share the concerns and who might wish to contribute to the project as secondary stakeholders
- Some exploration of the ethics of taking photographs of other people – the need to get permission when entering into and taking away images of the world of another – something that many camera-toting tourists around the world might benefit from.
- Closely related to ethics – discussion of the question of personal safety. At its most basic, how to go about the task of taking photographs without getting your head kicked in on the street by someone else for whatever reason.

Add to these some of the details like: getting photographs developed, choosing prints to be enlarged as the basis for discussion, working with individuals and with groups in discussing the pictures, capturing the stories (recording, transcribing, feedback and the absolute right of the direct stakeholders to control what is to be used) organising the exhibition – particularly the work to attract the community to come and see it.

Controversially, much of the literature stresses the importance of getting prior commitment of policy makers to at least consider proposals for change. While some in-principle commitment is useful this work of promoting the ideas and negotiating support from secondary stakeholders – including policy makers, people who hold the funding purse strings and the media who can influence culture change – is, I suggest something that the primary stakeholders also need to be involved in and ideally directing from the outset. It is all too easy for a photo-voice project to be coopted to serve the agenda of people in power or those employed within the community development industry – however well-meaning – and thereby continue the dis-empowerment of the direct stakeholder group.

Now it is easy to complicate it further. At the end of this brief paper I will give some references and user-friendly internet/web-links to sources of information on photo-voice in general and examples of its use in a wide range of contexts. Many of these, I suggest, do over-complicate it with prescriptive lists and various do’s and don’ts. Some of these are useful in prompting us to think about key issues but we putting a tool for social change in the hands of the direct stakeholders and working with them to define and present the pictures and words that represent **their** concern. If these key principles are kept in the forefront of our intention, then much of the rest will be commonsense.

So keep it simple. But also recognise that it is subtle. It is about enabling people to:

- Record and reflect on their concerns;

- Engage in critical discussion with other stakeholders – direct and indirect – about their concerns;
- Identify the pressure points for change – personal and political;
- Begin strategically planned action to implement this change – starting with a photo-voice exhibition that reflects their concerns and ideas to the wider community.

The photo-voice idea is a tool. It is a creative tool that provides a vehicle for the kind of discussions with direct stakeholders that might empower them to undertake action for social change about the issues that concern them.

Alongside it we may need to employ: other tools for personal and social growth, appropriate personal and social skills and attributes for action researchers who act as ‘catalysts’ for change, and critical education-through-social action processes appropriate for the situation. In other parts of the toolkit I will explore some of these other tools

### ***Photo-Voice Resources:***

The leading voice in this field is Caroline Wang at the University of Michigan, School of Public Health. I suggest the following sources for an overview of her work:

- **On the web:** <http://www.photovoice.com>
  - This provides a series of simple but informative pages summarising
    - The background to the idea.
    - The method – with a perhaps over-comprehensive list of the ‘stages’ of a photo-voice project.
    - Details on some photo-voice projects she has been involved in.
    - A set of abstracts from published papers on issues such as photo-voice ethics, it’s role in participation action-research, and applications across a wide range of concerns.
    - Some sample photographs and the ‘voice’ commentaries.
- **As journal articles:**
  - Wang, C and M.A.Burris (1997). *Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment*. Health Education and Behaviour, Vol 24 (3): 369-387.
  - C.C. Wang, and Y.A. Redwood-Jones (2001) *Photovoice ethics: perspectives from Flint photovoice*. Health Education and Behaviour, Vol 28 (5) 560-572.
- **As a Book Chapter:**
  - C.C. Wang (2003) *Using photovoice as a participatory assessment and issue selection tool: a case study with the homeless in Ann Arbor*. In Minkler, M. and N Wallerstein Eds. (2003) *Community based participatory research for health*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass

**Internationally**, the idea has been taken up in a variety of countries:

- **PhotoVoice** (see <http://www.photovoice.org>) is an international non-profit organisation, based in London, UK. working to “support people in need around the world to use photography as a medium to speak out about their concerns, hopes and fears”. It works with both international organizations and local partners to provide in-field photojournalism workshops “for those living

on the fringes of society” and provides the web platform for these groups to exhibit and market their work. This website provides a global forum for the practitioners and beneficiaries of participatory photography projects around the world.

- **In Australia** photo-voice has been used in the area indigenous sexual health see
  - <http://www.mariestopes.org.au/country-aust-proj1.html>
  - <http://www.abc.net.au/milduraswanhill/stories/s657006.htm>
  - <http://www.nrha.net.au/nrhapublic/publicdocs/conferences/6thnrhc/larsonpaper.htm> – this last is a copy of the paper given to the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Rural health Conference titled: *Looking, listening and learning from young people through photographs: a photovoice project with young Aboriginal people in Carnarvon, Western Australia* by Ann Larson Elsie Mitchell and Marisa Gilles

A search of the web will yield a variety of other links.

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