GUIDANCE NOTES

Ethical Practices in Participatory Visual Research in Humanitarian Settings

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> *Ethics is about much more than providing guidelines about what to do (and not to do) in the field. It is about research integrity well before a project begins, and well after it officially concludes"*
> (Carolyn Lenette, 2019, p. 84).

PART ONE
Introduction

The aim of these guidance notes is to provide support to organizations engaging in participatory visual research in humanitarian contexts and with particular reference to the use of cellphilming, and drawing, with young participants. The notes draw on the experiences of the reseach team in the Participatory Research on Education and Agency in Mali (PREAM) project.

What are Participatory Visual Methodologies?

The term participatory visual methodologies (PVM) refers to a research technique which involves participants conveying their thoughts and experiences through an artistic medium, such as film, photos drawings, digital storytelling and collage. The appeal of using PVMs is their ability to position participants as active co-creators of knowledge, as opposed to more traditional research methods such as surveys and interviews where participants are assigned more passive roles. In practice, PVMs promote agency, self-expression and dialogue, making them particularly practical in research projects involving young people.

Safeguarding and Ethics: A brief discussion

Most development organizations are familiar with the protection of children's rights and safeguarding. Safeguarding and ethics are connected. Safeguarding relates to the responsibility of making sure that people, activities, and programs are not exposing children to any risk of prejudice, abuse, mistreatment, or discrimination and that all concerns related to child protection are signaled to authorities. Safeguarding goes beyond the protection of rights and includes preserving well-being and the fight against different forms of violence, neglect, and exploitation whether they be physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, etc. Safeguarding aims to provide a space that is safe and inclusive. It highlights the duty of care that organizations have towards children.

Like safeguarding measures, ethical guidelines are meant to make sure that research participants are respected and protected. However, in addition to a strong concern for the welfare and safety of participants, which is also present in safeguarding, ethical guidelines have a significant focus on justice and respect for persons. For instance, research ethics is particularly mindful of the respect of private life including anonymity and confidentiality of information, informed consent (adults and parents) and informed assent (children), the right to withhold information or refuse to participate, the right to change their mind, and the right to know how the information provided will be used.

In addition, ethical research practices imply being mindful of the value of participants' time, intellectual property rights, and working in ways that are inclusive and recognise participants' agency. Unlike development projects, research initiatives can be quite short, and researchers may meet the respondents only once or twice. In such a context, means of protection are different. Moreover, since data are usually anonymized, it may not always be possible to take direct targeted action to protect a participant disclosing abuse or mistreatment. Each research project must therefore establish what is possible within its specific context and consider the research methods employed.

Ethical Issues in Participatory Visual Research

Anonymity

Within a zone of conflict, there can be one or several armed groups fighting for political and economic control of a set territory. Therefore, as previously mentioned in "Safeguarding and Ethics" conducting a research study in the setting of a humanitarian crisis can pose potential risks to the safety of all those involved in the project, researchers and participants alike. Not only is it the responsibility of individual researchers, ethics committees and organizations to ensure that participants are knowingly consenting to the implications of joining the study, but there should additionally be precautionary measures in place to minimize the threats to the participants' security. This includes the implementation of anonymity and identity protection when using participatory visual methods as research techniques. Allowing participants to reveal their identities while publicly sharing disfavorable opinions on certain governing bodies is the equivalent of painting a target on their backs. This is why researchers using participatory visual methods should be careful and vigilant when publicly displaying the artworks of their participants. Research organizers should be asking themselves if a drawing, photovoice, cellphilm, etc., is unintentionally revealing the identity of the artist.

A No-Faces Approach

Depending on the participatory visual method being used, there are different ways to look out for unintentional revealing of participants. While the approaches are different, the main goal remains the same; the privacy protection of the artist. In the case of cellphilms, having a no-faces approach greatly improves the likelihood of participants being unrecognizable. This implies that during the creation of a cellphilm, the faces of all participants should be left out of the camera's field of view, whether that means wearing a mask, placing a filter on the screen or filming from the neck down. A good example can be drawn from the Participatory Research on Education and Agency in Mali (PREAM) study The research project involved 120 Malian youth participants and resulted in the creation of 23 cellphilms, all of which show no faces through we often see the participants from the back or from the neck down. This method not only protects the identities of children located in a conflict-affected zone but offers several other benefits.

For one, parents were more inclined to consent to having their children participate in the creation of cellphilms and have those cellphilms be distributed publicly, given that anonymity protects their children from any criticisms or threats. This brings forward another advantage; the ability to express oneself honestly without societal pressures. The participant's reputation and safety are not under attack, giving them the opportunity to freely express themselves without the fear of judgment or punishment. Thirdly, from an artistic standpoint, having the camera focus on the actions taking place in the cellphilm rather than the faces allows the audience to prioritize the message being highlight , rather than focusing on the actors on-screen.

In line with the no-face approach, PREAM's participants used different techniques to convey the messages behind their cellphilms. A cellphilm (see Figure 1) produced by girls combines the two techniques of depicting characters from the shoulder down and filming shadows. In the cellphilm Football, boys used the technique of filming hands holding a piece of paper depicting a sum of money, as can be seen in Figure 2.
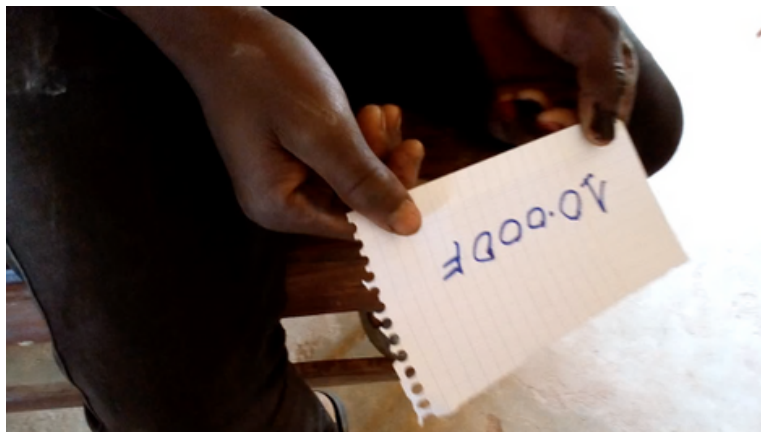

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Gardening*

Figure 2: Screenshot from *Football*

While the no-face approach might be read as a restriction on the freedom of the cellphilm producer and one that refuses a certain intimacy, we draw attention to the possibility that this offers its own aesthetic in relation to the choices producers must make. Choices can be combined to produce particular effects. In Figure 3 the focus is on hands and a bucket with a foot and the skirt of the subject to one side, balancing this.

Figure 3: Screenshot from *Watering the Garden*

We were impressed by the artistry of many of the cellphilms. Figures 4 and 5, for example, exemplify how no-face cellphilms, in having strong visual qualities, emphasize specific elements of young people's lives. The portrayal of arid conditions and the use of distance in Figure 4 conveys a sense of purpose in spite of the isolation, as does the purposeful striding of the boy's feet in Figure 5, along with the full body shadow.

The cellphilm Looking for water begins with what might be described as a choreographed ballet in its opening scene (see Figure 6) of several girls filmed from the back, their arms in identical formation to steady the water jugs on their heads. When the girls come to the tapped barrel to collect the water, the cellphilm focuses on the flow of the water from the tap (see Figure 7). The choice of focusing on the flow of water for more than 45 seconds (a long time in any cinematic production) compels us, as viewers, to recognize what is clearly a significant event. This shot is beautifully framed by a bare foot below a patterned skirt on one side and a bare arm and hand on the other.

Figure 4: Screenshot from *School*

Figure 5: Screenshot from *The Agreement*

Figure 6: Screenshot from
Looking for water

The creators of these various images bring their own artistry to the cellphilms in contributing to the aesthetic of the screenshot. Taken together these images in the figures above are a reminder of how a no-face approach can be central to creative practice.

Figure 7: Focusing on the water in
Looking for water

Applying Filters to Pictures

Another technique to maintain anonymity is the use of filters. Process pictures can be particularly useful to communicate contextual and methodological information with external audiences whether through slideshows, online presentations or printed material but fully hiding the identity of the persons in these images can be difficult.

Applying filters to modify photos artistically can be an easy way to use images with people on them more ethically, for example by making a picture look like a drawing or a painting. Altering images digitally has never been easier. There are several applications that are very easy to use and can apply artistic filters to a picture instantly. Some of these applications are free, others require a one-off payment or a subscription. It is important to remember that the extent to which these filters make a face unrecognizable vary. Also, even when they successfully mask faces, they do not necessarily prevent the persons on the photos to recognize themselves or family members and friends to recognize the persons on the pictures. It may therefore be preferable to use a no-faces approach.

Artistic Creativity

While both no-face and filters are useful in the context of cellphiming, sometimes this method isn't enough to fully protect an individual's identity. For instance, in the context of a small village where everyone is familiar with everyone else, the ability to recognize a person is much less dependent on the viewing of a face.

A person's clothes or voice can become identifiable traits that give away the actor's identity. If only one person in a village wears a red hat and a faceless person carrying a red hat is viewed on-screen, it is easy to deduce who that faceless person is. If a participant draws an image containing immense personal detail, it may be easy for villagers to identify the people in the picture. This is why the primary solution to the ethical issue of anonymity and identity protection is creativity. Researchers should ask themselves, in their particular research project involving a PVM, what would make a participant recognizable and how they can artistically solve that potential issue. Some examples of creativity include the following: taking pictures of objects of things that are symbolic of the issues being raised or taking pictures of hands or feet and creating artistic pieces with these images.

PART TWO
What are Visual Ethics?

Ethics means doing the most good and the least harm. It is important to consider the rights of the people involved, when taking photos and creating videos. Thus, visual ethics includes providing participants with options or strategies to support the creation of impactful and anonymous visual data. One way to support participants to think about their decisions when taking photos or making video is to exhibit a collection of carefully chosen photographs that show different types of photo subjects (objects, places, and people who are to varying degrees identifiable).

Have participants take some time to view the photographs, then discuss the photos. This visual ethics discussion hopes to ensure all participants have considered the risks and benefits of identifiable images. Participants have the right to choose to identify themselves or not in their photos or cellphilms. They also can ask others for their informed consent to be in their photographs and cellphilms.

Figure 8: *Visual ethics*

Ownership as a feature of visual ethics is multi-faceted and can be complicated. Participants should be considered the primary owners of the visual media they produce during participatory visual projects. They obtained the consent of anyone featured in the media and they choose to share their photographs and cellphilms with the project. Where possible, they should have the ability to change their mind and retract their media from the project [1]. Discussing the potential audiences early in the process will help participants decide if it is safe to identify themselves and others in their photographs and cellphilms.

Potential audiences include the project team, other participants, friends/family, policy makers and community leaders, and the public. It is also best practice to practice ongoing consent by checking in with participants throughout the project, during the creation of any

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[1] When visuals have been published in print or online the project may have difficulty removing the participants' contributions. This limitation should be made clear in any ethical discussions and consent forms.

public exhibitions, before sharing any images or video online, when using participatory visual methods [2].

Strategies to Address the Potential Risks

Potential Risks

Participants, particularly those who are young, female, trans or gender queer, may be at risk of physical harm or threat when using tablets, cameras, or smartphones in the community. Participants may also be at risk of psychological harm in discussing difficult issues that threaten the status quo or disrupt normative power structures (e.g., gender, sexuality, racism, decolonization, distribution of resources, employment rights, resource extraction).

Some Visual Ethics Questions to discuss

- Is this photograph or cellphilm OK to view publicly? Why or why not?
- Do you think this person knows they are being photographed or filmed?
- How might this persons' consent be obtained before the photograph/recording takes place?
- Is this photograph or cellphilm revealing someone? Why or why not?
- What could you do to take a picture or cellphilm less revealing?
- How do visual ethics link to human rights?

Note: Not all photographs or cellphilms without people in them are necessarily anonymous. An item of clothing, a bruise on an arm, or a landmark, for example maybe very revealing.

the status quo or disrupt normative power structures (e.g., gender, sexuality, racism, decolonization, distribution of resources, employment rights, resource extraction).

Strategies for Mitigating Risk

1. Stay in groups when using the equipment.
2. Make sure the participants have had visual ethics training. They should be sensitive to the local context and whether it is appropriate to take photographs or make videos in public spaces.

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[2] Situations will, of course, vary. We have added phrases like 'where possible' to indicate that the issues may be blurry. The key point is for the team to reflect on what practices will best align with the rights of the participants. Ideally the 'photo subjects' who agreed to be in a picture would also have this right.

3. Be sensitive and aware that participants may have personal experience with trauma associated with issues such as migration, sexual violence, or other potential prompts.

4. Get the proper and necessary permissions from people in charge before conducting the workshop (e.g., local government, elders).

5. Make sure that prior to taking a photo or filming everyone involved fully understands what they are participating in, who will see the photograph, why and the implications of the intended photograph.

6. Make sure that before you post any images online that you have everyone in the pictures' permission and that both you and they understand that once it is online you will have no control on what happens to the image.

Example of Getting Consent

Before taking pictures or filming someone or their property, you may read them the following statement or allow them to read the statement on their own. The template (shown below) can be adapted to include an opportunity to share the picture or video online.

- Make sure the person really understands what is happening.
- Getting written consent is ideal.
- Anyone who signs the document and agrees to participate should receive a copy of the statement.
- When written consent is not possible obtain clear verbal consent that is witnessed and recorded (e.g., using a cellphone).
- The last line of the paragraph could be changed to read: The photograph/video may be posted on a project website, on social media, online exhibition, or online archive. By giving permission to share this photograph/video online, I understand that this will be shared publicly for anyone to potentially see.

May I take your picture?

> I, _____ (print name), give my permission for a photograph/video to be taken of me for use in the Name of Project (insert Workshop and/or Monitoring exercise), taking place at INSERT LOCATION, INSERT DATE. (Include if relevant: This photograph/video will be displayed at INSERT WHERE PHOTO WILL BE DISPLAYED at the INSERT LOCATION, INSERT DATES). It will be used for educational purposes only (adapt to the context you are using it for). No further use of this photograph/video will be made without my permission. It will not be posted on a website anywhere without my permission
>
> _____
> Signature
>
> _____
> Date

PART THREE
Conducting a Participatory Visual Methodologies Workshop: Establishing the Who, What, Where, and How

We include this section for anyone who is going to lead a participatory visual methodologies workshop with others.

Who?
- Who is the workshop for?
- Who are the participants?

What?
- What are the participants' cultural attitudes towards art, participation, being photographed/filmed, as well as to the issues being addressed in the workshop (e.g., sexuality, gender-based violence, inclusion).?
- What are the ages of the participants? Is there a wide range to cater for?
- What kind of health conditions disabilities will be represented in the group?
- What are the physical conditions of the workshop?
- What are the participants' expectations?

Where?
- Where is the workshop taking place?
- Is the space physically and socially accessible to participants?
- Does the space allow for small group work (e.g., access to safe outside spaces? Quite breakout areas for filming?)

How?
Planning and Preparing the Workshop
Workshop facilitators organize the workshop, prepare the room and the resources that will be used during the workshop and support participants in doing the participatory visual work and exploring the project themes. When there are 8+ participants, it is helpful for a workshop to have 2 or 3 facilitators working as a team.

Workshop Facilitators Should:
- Help participants feel confident and empowered to engage.
- Ensure that there is trust and respect among participants. Ask participants if they feel safe and comfortable with the activity. If not, be sure to provide the participants with more explanation and support in the group you are co-facilitating.
- Ensure that the materials are clear, easy to use, and that participants become familiar with how to use them.
- Be prepared to adapt as necessary to the situation (e.g., perhaps participants can share the materials and technology).
- Facilitators are there to support participants to creatively explore and direct their own media creations.

Prior to the Workshop it is Important to:
Ensure that everyone in the workshop is consenting to participate and is there because they chose to be there. It is also important that everyone is welcomed into this space regardless of their gender, race, sex, class, abilities, ethnicity, and religion.

Have open conversations about what those participating want to achieve. Differences in opinion can be addressed and discussed before the workshop gets underway. Keep expectations about the workshop's outcomes realistic and achievable.

Work collaboratively. As a facilitator you understand who you are working with, what prompt or themes you will likely explore, the instructions you will give, how you will handle questions and ambiguity among team members and how you will assure that participants with differing experiences can join the activities in a manner that is appropriate to them. Everyone can be assigned a distinctive role in contributing to teamwork.

Discuss the participants' needs and interests. Make sure that all participants are engaged in the activities. Give participants additional support if they require it. For participants who do not wish to participate, give them the right to decide, and respect their decision.

Whose voices are being heard, and whose are not?
In some contexts, and groups, individuals with particular social identities tend to feel more comfortable in answering for their group, and in speaking publicly (e.g., boys and men, white people, able-bodied people). This means that 'othered' voices and perspectives tend to be heard less often, even when they make up the majority in the workshop. The intersectional aspects of social identities are dynamic and complicated. It is the facilitator's role to be sensitive to these dynamics and create space for minority or marginalized voices, without being tokenistic.

A goal of these participatory visual methodologies is to model what equality can look like and ensure that everyone is heard, but especially the voices of those typically excluded being recognized as leaders in addressing these serious issues.

Encourage people creating the photovoice images and cellphilms to consider questions such as:
- What are the explicit issues being represented in the photovoice or cellphilm?
- What do you think about the issues in the photovoice or cellphilms?
- In the photovoice or cellphilm, who is often portrayed as a victim? As the perpetrator? As the change agent? What does gender have to do with it?
- How do these scenarios reflect (and reproduce) real life? What stereotypes are being enacted? How does the photovoice or cellphilm challenge norms or stereotypes?

Make sure that the space is

👍 **Safe**   ♿ **Accessible**   ✋ **Quiet**   🧭 **Spacious**

For further reading

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