

## The Power of Images

A Thematic Discussion Series hosted by Neue Deutsche Museumsmacher:innen and SuSanA (December 2021)

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### 1 Introduction

In this day and age, we are constantly engaging with visual media in form of images across the internet on different platforms. We are not just consumers but also producers of the images that have become an integral part of how information is communicated. They don't just illustrate a story or situation; they are carriers of information themselves and influence what we think of or how we view a specific event or story. They influence how we view the world and make sense of what is happening. Because of this, we must be mindful of how we use them and what message they communicate.



Example 1. ©iwaria

Diversity celebrates difference yet ensures that we all feel seen. Diversity should be encouraged because it fosters equality, counteracts discrimination and disenfranchisement, and represents society – both on a local and global level – as it is. It encourages them to embrace their identity.

It is often assumed that photographs are objective and depict reality as it is. But photographs are always subjective; they are made with and used with the intention to show or highlight a specific narrative, activity, or project. Editing and post-production tools also influence how we view and understand a photograph. The context in which the image is shown also influences the way images are interpreted. Furthermore, the audience, their background, and their ability to decode images also play a role in how it is viewed and understood.

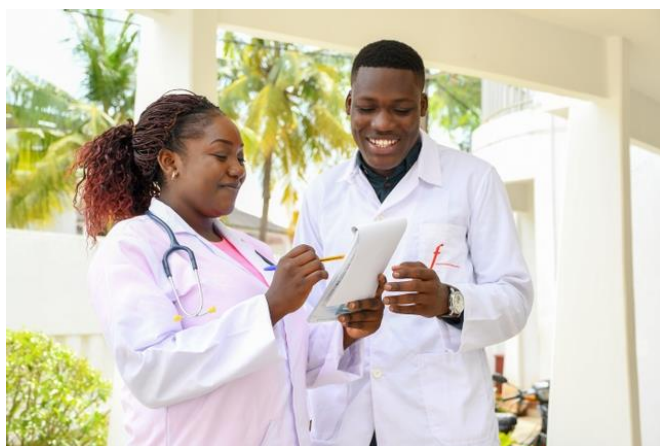
These topics were the starting point for the development of the thematic discussion on the SuSanA forum. Our goal was to raise awareness for these issues through discussion and by providing examples of what these images could look like as well as point out where images used within development aid and specifically within the WASH sector are lacking.

### 2 Portraying Diversity and counteracting Stereotypes

Within development aid and humanitarian relief, images serve multiple purposes: They are used to highlight and give attention to a specific cause, to raise financial support and for public relation purposes and they are used within reports and academic literature. Furthermore, there is an incentive to create images that evoke sympathy and compassion in the viewer. This is generally achieved by depicting vulnerable populations and communities or showing people in vulnerable situations. The photo in turn is taken in a way that highlights this. Visual representations and specifically photographs are never neutral. The photographer as a person has his own cultural and societal background, experiences, and points of view.

But this can be problematic for multiple reasons as stereotypes exists in many forms. Generally, when it comes to visual culture and development aid, the emphasis generally lies on showing those most vulnerable, which are generally understood to be women and children. While many NGOs have moved away from focusing on showing only hardship and poverty towards showing more positive images that show how people benefit from the programs and projects. Gender

stereotypes are prevalent in the media, women have also become the focus of not just many development projects but also of the images themselves. Many of the images, specifically those used for advertising and PR, are often produced for the global north, an audience that is not a homogenous group either, and each react differently to these images due to their own backgrounds, their race, and their ethnicity. Due to the purpose that the images serve, it can be easy to fall into the trap of repeating stereotypes and cliches, not only in relation to race, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, or class but also by reinforcing a neo-colonial view of the Global South. Gender stereotypes for example are harmful because they disorient an individual's perception. Studies have indicated that young children's interpretation of gender is largely influenced by the environment and media around them.



Example 2. ©iwaria



Example 3. ©iwaria

To end the discussion, we structured the last two posts as a “how-to”, by addressing how stereotypes and hierarchies can be avoided in photographs through composition and how the picture is taken. With the last post, we wrapped up the discussion by acknowledging that it can be difficult to avoid cliches and stereotypes in images and that it is always important to take the context and the purpose into consideration, when choosing images. We then linked to different databases that focus on diversity and we find represent a mindful and respectful approach to visual communication.

Initially, we wanted to develop and conduct the discussion together with SuSanA members from the Global South. Unfortunately, this was not possible. It would have been valuable to also have their insight and be able to benefit from their knowledge and experience. As a group we agreed that we would have employed them as sub-contractors to ensure that they would be paid for their work.

### 3 Summary of the Thematic Discussion

The thematic discussion on the SuSanA forum began with an introduction post on October 12, 2021. This post introduced the forum members to the discussion leaders, Jasmin Alley, Janice Mitchell, and Susanne Wernsing and presented our work and research backgrounds. Following the introduction, a first two posts were made on the October 13 and October 14. The first post addressed the topic of cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication by introducing the Bennet scale as a model for self-reflection. This post was meant to frame the following discussion, which took a more direct approach discussing how images are used and what they can represent. The second post built on this explanation by looking at how diversity can be represented and what representation means in relation to images. This was expanded upon in the next post, by using examples of how illustrations are used in the WASH sector. The post was meant to make readers aware of patronizing intent and infantilization in images.

#### 3a Analysis of Discussion

The posts did get a good number of views, but very little engagement in terms of replies or discussion. Comparing the outcome to other thematic discussions this appears to correspond with the pattern or level of activity on the forum in general. The posts may generate more views over time as other thematic discussions show. The posts received significantly more views when people commented. Two people commented on the posts. The commentators made great points that added to the discussion. The discussion ended on the 22nd of October 2021. The posts only had 1161 views all together, the last two posts receiving the most views: the fifth post received 366 views and the last post received 235 views.

The few comments that were made, brought up interesting points that expanded the discussion and addressed points such as consent, representation and gender equality in visual media including in the images that we used as examples. They also pointed out the way that images used by NGOs and in the context of development aid, too often focused on only showing images of poverty and war, wildlife, hunger and drought,

vulnerable communities and not the “entire” picture that would also include the economic growth that happens in there, the huge variety in culture and traditions, daily life and more. The images used had the effect of affirming (neo)colonial narratives of the Global South as poor and underdeveloped without addressing the roots of this narrative or asking what “development” means for these countries and communities individually. This could have a lot of potential for the WASH sector specifically, as everyone, no matter what their economic background is, benefits from the sanitation infrastructure as well as the research done and many of these projects are undertaken in collaboration with local actors, universities, etc. It should be understood that showing a positive outlook of things in an area of it may actually show that with some of the targeted audience there is hope for communities of interest.

## Quick Links to the Thematic Discussion:

### Background Information for the discussion:

[The subtle power of images](#)

[Introduction to the thematic discussion on representation and visual culture](#)

### Week 1 Discussion:

[Images and representation - how can we avoid reproducing and affirming stereotypes in images?](#)

### Week 2 Discussion:

[Illustrations and representation - are some posters and schematics infantilizing and patronizing?](#)

[Using image composition to avoid hierarchies](#)

[How to find the images you're looking for?](#)

### Thematic Discussion Series:

[About the Thematic Discussion Series \(TDS\)](#)

[Thematic Discussion Series Compilation](#)

## 4 SuSanA Website and Publications

. It can be assumed that the images and illustrations used across the SuSanA website and in publications in general show projects that the different SuSanA partners are involved with. This is not always clear, because some images lack captions that explain what is shown, who is shown or where this is taking place and because it is also not always clear how the images relate to the text (this could also be due to a lack of captions). This also makes it seem as if the images are only a second thought and seen as less important in comparison to the text. But the images are the first thing that people who view the publications or the website see; they are what draws people in and grabs their attention, even if it is a report or academic paper. Using captions gives the viewer a better understanding of what they are seeing. Captions are also a way to individualize the people in the photograph and to ensure that they are not just “anonymous actors” used purely to

highlight the activities of the NGO; if we know the context of the photograph, we not only understand what we're looking at, we also view the people in the photograph in a different way, they become active vs. passive.

The images used within reports and academic literature are meant to visualize what is described in the text, yet while looking through the SuSanA website, we often had the impression that the images did not directly relate to the text, they seem to serve a purely illustrative function. Many of the photographs show across the website and in publications are of women and children, men are rarely shown. Focus on women has good intentions, but it can also lead to enforcing stereotypes about gender and inequality and negative views of men in the Global South. Gender inequality exists all over the world, in some areas more than in others, but these images place the burden of overcoming this inequality on the shoulder of the women as well as the burden of “advancing” their communities. The absence of men can suggest that men in general are not open to change and are not part of making this change. It is certainly important to highlight the contributions of women, but it is also important to show those of men and it is even more important to show men and women working together and supporting each other. On the other hand, the absence of men may mean that they are overlooked when they may equally need help in the case that they are vulnerable.

Many photographs used show children washing their hands. This is certainly a seemingly logical image for the WASH sector, but it is not only an image that highlights vulnerability and plays into prejudices about cleanliness, it also obscures what the WASH sector actually does apart from supplying clean water. This was something that participants in a study carried out between November 2014 and July 2015 in the UK, Jordan, Bangladesh, and Niger, initiated by UK INGO Save the Children pointed out. It also addressed the reasons why people let themselves be photographed for or by NGOs and the different motivations behind this decision as well as how they experienced the image-making process and what they thought of the final product. The study revealed the reasons for agreeing to be photographed were manifold: Participants themselves wanted to raise awareness for certain issues, they hoped that their participation could lead to direct benefits for their community, family, and themselves and they also wanted to be heard and seen. Many also already had a relationship with the respective NGO and had positive experiences with them. They felt that this was just another part of the relationship with the organization or a way of “giving back” and securing continued support. In the interviews, many participants, especially the children, described the experience of having their photographs taken as a positive one, others made it clear that they only participated because they were desperate for help. That the people in the photographs were in desperate situations, was also something that people who viewed the images assumed was a given. What not addressed was the interdependence between the Global South and INGOs that is the root of this way of thinking and that everyone who



participated in the study (and the researchers themselves) took as a given.

In the thematic discussion, one commenter brought up the issue of consent when taking photographs of children. Did the photographer ask for permission to not only take the photo but to also publish it? Do those shown in the photographs know for what the images are used for, and have they seen the final “product” with their image? The Save the Children study gives some insight into this: The participants said that they were given consent forms, but in some cases, they said that they didn’t fully understand what this meant and what they were signing. Yet they understood the purpose of the images and understood that showing suffering and poverty is what would bring donations and help. Consent is crucial and it is important that the people in the images understand why they are being photographed and that they are ok with how they are being portrayed. Ensuring that the participants know how their image will be used and that they get to see the final product is also important.

## 5 Conclusion

The thematic discussion overall was positive and will have an impact that goes beyond just the discussion itself, since it will remain accessible on the SuSanA forum in the future. Despite the participation being very low, the hope is that it will have nonetheless sparked some thought and discussions behind the scenes. Our goal was to show how on the one hand, stereotypes and cliches based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and class are often repeated not consciously but subconsciously and that their way to avoiding this is by exercising mindfulness when creating and selecting images to use for publications, social media or on the web in general. We wanted to encourage self-reflection and awareness for these and at the same time show strategies to avoid falling into the trap of using such images. We also provided practical advice, by addressing how reproducing these stereotypes can be avoided by slightly changing one’s approach to taking pictures and by consciously thinking through who is depicted in the images and how.

In this document we expanded on this by also discussing the creation and purpose of images within NGOs and INGOs and the images used throughout the SuSanA website. As a final point, we provided guidelines on how to take photos that go into more technical aspects like composition and perspective as well as guidelines on how to respectfully engage with and work those pictured in the photographs.

## 6 Guide on the Use of Images

### 6a What to consider when selecting images

It is of course not possible to show the multitude of diversity within one photograph or image. Instead, diversity should be represented across the entire media spectrum: within publications, on the website and on social media through the images used. This does not mean that one should not pay attention to diversity and representation within a single image. Paying attention ensures that stereotypes and cliches rooted in race, class, gender, religion, culture, or ethnicity are avoided. What this generally means is to pay attention to the way the image is constructed and to who is shown within the image and how.

#### Who is in the photo or image:

- Who is active and who is passive?
- Who is speaking to whom and who is listening?
- Is it a group of people or a single person?
- What is their assumed gender identity?
- What is their assumed ethnicity or race or religion?
- What is their assumed age?
- Do they have visible disabilities?
- Do the photos used throughout a publication or website show a wide range of diversity in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, etc.?
- Does the photograph affirm or break with stereotypes based on race, gender, or class?
- Does the photo affirm or break with societal hierarchies and stereotypes?

### 6b Using Images or Photographs

- What is the purpose of including an image or a photograph?
- Make sure that the photographs always relate to the text if people are included to ensure that they are not just used for illustrative purposes but that the photograph serves a specific purpose
- Use captions that explain what is shown or possibly is a quote from the people or the person in the image
- Avoid overusing images of children, women and others in vulnerable positions or situations
- Maintain and know your boundaries at all times especially when working with marginalised individuals

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## 8 Contributors

The following contributors made one or more posts on the forum during the current TDS. The contributors are listed in alphabetical order.

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