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Guide on the Use of Images
by Neue Deutsche Museumsmacher:innen and SuSanA (December 2021)

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 of the images but also producers of these images that have become an integral part of how information is communicated, and the attention attracted. 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.

Diversity celebrates difference but it also 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 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 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 PR purposes and they are used within reports and academic literature. Images are a tool for social change for marginalised groups. 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 exist for example in various forms. When it comes to visual culture and development aid, the emphasis lies on showing those most vulnerable which are generally understood to be women and children. However, it many NGOs have moved away from focusing on hardship and poverty towards showing more positive images on 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. 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. 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.

3 The Use of Images

Taken together, the elements listed below, as well as other elements of image composition such as post-production tools, influence how the image itself is understood and how the people in the image are perceived. Therefore, it is important to always take into consideration how the images are used and for what purpose. Images should reflect the diversity of a society and not fall into cliches or stereotypes.

It is not just about who is shown in a photograph but also how. Images can reflect societal hierarchies, existing stereotypes and reinforce them. But there is no blueprint or a clear set of do's and don'ts when it comes to image composition. Context is key and should always be taken into consideration when selecting images. Yet certain tendencies can repeat themselves to the point where we become unaware of their negative and harmful influence. Therefore, it is important to be mindful and deliberate when taking pictures and selecting images for print or the web.

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3a Taking the Photograph

- Ask if people want to be photographed, including children themselves and not just their parents
- Share the intent and purpose of the photographs to all participants in a clear and comprehensible way
- Provide translation of consent forms or work with translators in case of language barrier
- Allow the participants to see the photo, so they know what it looks like and what they look like in the photo
- Take their feedback into consideration
- Speak with those shown in the photographs to allow them to express themselves and to hear their story
- Make the media content that they were a part of available to them
- Let them take the images themselves if possible
- Work with photographers from their communities or that have a shared background, language, etc.
- Maintain and know your boundaries at all times especially when working with marginalised individuals

Image Size and Frame Selection

The frame selection is an important element of the overall image composition:

- To make sure that those shown in the photograph are depicted equally, they must be each shown in a similar manner, this can be achieved by showing them on the same pictorial level or visual axis (Example 1)

Example 1. ©pexels

The Camera Perspective

The perspective from which a photograph is taken, influences how the people in the photograph are viewed:

- At eye level with the viewer is a neutral point of view
- Taken form below, the person or people in the photograph can appear threatening or menacing. Yet they can also come across as confident, but this depends on the situation show and what they are doing (Example 2)

Example 2. ©pexels

- A photo taken from above (Example 3) gives the impression that the people or the person shown are vulnerable and helpless
  - A photograph taken from above also suggests that there is a hierarchy in place and the viewer of the photograph is at the top
  - While this can evoke empathy or sympathy from the viewer, it takes away from the subjects' self-confidence and agency
  - Furthermore, as the viewer, we are literally looking down on them, suggesting that we have more power and they are helpless, depending on who is shown, this can reinforce and affirm stereotypes and cliches about people and groups
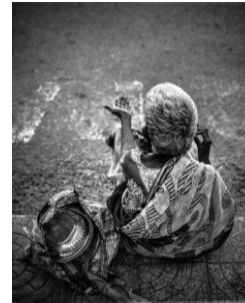

Example 3. ©unsplash

Exception: In some instances, it makes sense to take a photo from above or from below (Example 4). This could be the case when trying to show a bigger scene that cannot be captured in another way (from above) or when trying to emphasize that someone or something is very tall or very high up (from below)

Example 4. ©pexels

The Image Composition

- People that are positioned in the front dominate the scene and become the center of the photograph; they are the first thing the viewer sees
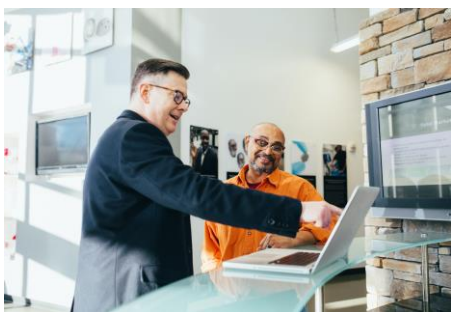
Example 5. ©pexels

- The same applies to people that are actively doing something, e.g. speaking or explaining something, are in movement; they are also perceived as more dominant than those that are passive because they are listening or watching

Example 6. ©pexels

The Visual Axis

- The visual axis is the imaginary line from one person to another person or an object in an image, they guide the viewers focus and their attention; if a person or people in a photograph all look toward a specific object, person or action, the viewer's focus will also be guided towards what they are looking at.

Example 7. ©pexels

- This person or object thus received special attention and becomes the focus of the image, therefore it is important to take this into consideration in the composition of the image; is the person/people or object meant to be the center of attention and if so, why?

3b 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. The list below outlines some of the things to look out for and to take into consideration.

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?
- How are women shown in comparison to men and vice versa?

3c 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.

4 Bibliography

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