

# Facilitating Youth Participation in a Context of Forced Migration: A Photovoice Project in Northern Uganda

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This paper describes a documentary photography (Photovoice) project conducted in 2007 with young people (ages 12 to 16) living in an internal displacement camp in northern Uganda during a time of great transition following more than 20 years of civil war. Twelve students were randomly selected from three schools after several weeks of instruction in English and photography. Over the course of six weeks, students used digital cameras to document life in their communities. The students and the facilitators met weekly to discuss the images and to identify and reflect on community issues. The students' work was then used to advocate for community change and to raise support for their secondary school fees. This paper reports on the adaptation of the Photovoice method (Wang and Burris 1994, 1997) in a setting of internal displacement to be a tool for engaging youths in conversations about their communities and pursuing individual and social change.

**Keywords:** Forced migration, photography, internal displacement, photovoice, youths, participatory action research

## Introduction

Refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees must be at the centre of decision-making concerning their protection and well-being. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the protection problems they face, it is essential to consult them directly and to listen to them (UNHCR 2006: 1).

While stories about the displaced and dispossessed are most commonly told by external observers, such as humanitarian agencies, journalists, and academics, it is becoming more common for forced migrants to be heard 'in their own voice'. These personal accounts, whether written, spoken, or captured on film, often present a narrative of resilience that is absent from outsider accounts that tend to focus on assumed helplessness (Rajaram 2002).

More generally, these firsthand narratives offer a unique emic perspective that may, in useful ways, challenge the conventional wisdom—the dominant cultural narrative (Rappaport 1995, 2000)—about the realities of forced migration and ‘durable solutions’ (Brookings 2007). As this presumption is adopted more widely into practice, those grounded in the lived experience of forced migration are increasingly being asked to participate in decision-making and the generation of knowledge (e.g., Demusz 2000; UNHCR 2006)—though the nature and extent of participation can range widely (Donà 2007).

### *Photovoice*

One method of grounded inquiry and social action is Photovoice, a type of participatory action research in which participants photograph daily life, discuss the images in small groups to reflect on community strengths and weaknesses, and appeal to policymakers in the interest of social change (Kenney 2009). In this paper, we describe a project that used the Photovoice method (Wang and Burris 1994, 1997) with youths in an internal displacement camp in northern Uganda during the early stages of return and resettlement<sup>1</sup> following more than two decades of a civil war that remains unresolved (Izama 2008). This report highlights methodological innovations for conducting Photovoice projects in low resource settings. The techniques described in this paper are particularly relevant to efforts to include the voices of youths in settings of forced migration who are often not represented in decision-making and knowledge generation (Boyden 2001; Young and Barrett 2001; Guyot 2007).

The use of visual images in social sciences and social action dates back to the nineteenth century (Hockings 2003; Davey 2008). Documentary photography has a long-standing history of addressing and illuminating the needs of disenfranchised and displaced groups (Pink 2001; Kenney 2009). In anthropology, Collier was the foremost proponent of using visual images systematically to understand human experience (Collier and Collier 1986). In the last 20 years, there has been reconsideration and reformulation of how photography might be used in research (Banks and Murphy 1997; Pink 2001, 2006). Rather than simply representing human experience, the creative process of photography has developed into another method for understanding (Pink 2001, 2006). Of particular interest for our work has been the emphasis on collaborative methods for constructing knowledge and understanding experience. As Pink (2001) notes, this places new demands on social scientists to understand the visual and textual practices of their collaborating research participants. Collaborations are likely to be more successful to the extent that the methodology and research process is grounded in the practices and culture of the informants. The methodology of Photovoice provides a systematic framework for engaging research participants as producers of images and words about their experience that is

consistent with an emerging 'new ethnography' (Pink 2001, 2006) and with our interest in social ecology (Moos 1976, 2002).

Photovoice is a qualitative participatory method that facilitates contextual understanding and is intended to foster participative opportunities that can 'give voice' to people, communities, and issues often ignored by mainstream society. It is a method that in some ways resembles narrative approaches (Foster-Fishman *et al.* 2005) as a research methodology that includes an empowerment perspective (Rappaport *et al.* 1990; Rappaport 1995; Harper *et al.* 2004). While there are various ways of describing 'empowerment', we use the definition developed by the Cornell University Empowerment Group (as cited in Rappaport 1995: 802):

an intentional, on-going process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources.

In endorsing this definition, Rappaport (1995) emphasized the link between empowerment and resources, stating that the ability to shape one's narrative is an important resource. In this sense, Photovoice is one method for helping marginalized groups to gain 'access to and control over' the creation of their individual and collective narratives.

Wang and Burris (1997: 369) define Photovoice as 'a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.' The actual technique of Photovoice as a method developed in large part through the work of Wang, Burris and colleagues (Wang and Burris 1994; Wang *et al.* 1996; Wang and Burris 1997; Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001). However, Wang and Burris (1994) trace the intellectual history of the method they first called 'photo novella' to empowerment education (Freire 1970; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988), feminist theory, and documentary photography. Several organizations currently exist that use the Photovoice method to pursue social change, including PhotoVoice, an international charity started by Anna Blackman and Tiffany Fairey in 1998 (PhotoVoice n.d.).<sup>2</sup>

There are three main goals of Photovoice according to Wang and Burris (1997): (a) to empower people to document the strengths and weaknesses of their community by photographing daily life; (b) to facilitate communication and dialogue in large and small groups to identify important community issues; and (c) to appeal to policymakers and other people of influence in the interest of social change. Thus Photovoice in theory and practice is participatory, contextually and culturally anchored (Hughes and Seidman 2002), and oriented toward the liberation of oppressed groups.

The Photovoice method has been used to promote change in the lives of many oppressed and disenfranchised groups, including refugees (Berman *et al.* 2001) and other victims of political violence (Lykes *et al.* 2003), mothers

with learning difficulties (Booth and Booth 2003) and Head Start parents (McAllister *et al.* 2005), immigrant workers (Gallo 2002) and Latino immigrant adolescents (Streng *et al.* 2004), gay men and lesbians in post-Apartheid South Africa (Graziano 2004), individuals living with HIV/AIDS (Hergenrather *et al.* 2006) and people who work with this population (Mitchell *et al.* 2005), village women in China (Wang *et al.* 1996), the homeless (Wang *et al.* 2000), and relevant to the current project, street children in Kampala, Uganda (Young and Barrett 2001).

### *Background*

Most young people living in northern Uganda today were born in a time of war. Like many conflicts in Africa, the ongoing civil war in Uganda between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is rooted in a complex history of colonial and post-colonial conflict (Finnström 2008). Now in its third decade, this conflict has resulted in an untold number of deaths, more than 66,000 abductions (Annan *et al.* 2006), and the displacement of nearly two million people (Otunnu 2006).

While a comprehensive peace agreement has not been achieved, the warring parties signed a truce in August 2006 that led to a significant increase in regional stability. And as a result, more than 300,000 people reportedly moved out of crowded displacement camps by the end of the year (USAID 2006). As of September 2008, 59 per cent of the estimated 1.1 million people living in camps in 2005 in the most war-affected districts had either moved to villages or smaller resettlement camps (IASC Working Group 2008). Though the status of the peace talks remains unclear—given the launch of Operation Lightning Thunder in December 2008, a regional military offensive intended to cripple the LRA (Mukasa 2008)—northern Uganda appears to have passed a tipping point in this conflict. Households continue to relocate, many schools have returned to their village locations, and infrastructure is slowly being built outside of camps. This unfolding period of transition was the setting for our Photovoice project.

Our particular geographic setting was an internally displaced persons' camp called Opit and its surrounding villages. Opit is one of the original 'mother camps' to which people from Lakwana, Lalogi, and Ngai sub-counties were displaced. The camp, a former trading centre that was once the headquarters of a rebel movement that predated the LRA, is located approximately 30 km southeast of Gulu Town, the economic centre of the north, on the border of Gulu and Oyam districts. The boundary between these districts represents a soft border between the Acholi (Girling 1960; Atkinson 1994) and Lango (Driberg 1923; Tosh 1978) tribes. Though these tribes have been adversarial at times, relations are largely positive and intermarriage is common. Opit was selected as a study site because news reports and UN maps available in early 2007 suggested that Opit represented a microcosm of the broader process of return and resettlement occurring in the north.

*Educational Setting.* Youths exist in multiple settings, including peer groups, households, schools, and other relational and geographical communities. When households were first displaced and confined to the camps, the social environment grew larger as the physical environment grew smaller. And as this project got underway, the social and physical environments were changing once again. We asked youth participants to depict their experience in these transitioning settings, starting with their schools.

Students in the Ugandan educational system attend seven years of primary school (P1 to P7) and six years of secondary school. In 1997, the Ugandan government established a programme of Universal Primary Education (UPE) to increase enrolment through tuition subsidies. As a result of UPE, education became more affordable to lower income households (Nishimura *et al.* 2008), and primary school enrolment nearly tripled nationwide from 2.6 million pupils in 1995 to 7.4 million pupils in 2007 (*The New Vision* 2008).

A similar programme of Universal Secondary Education was implemented in 2007 (Cocks 2007), but access to secondary school remains a challenge in the north. Students from war-affected districts, girls in particular, struggle to make the transition from primary school (Annan *et al.* 2008). In 2006, the net attendance ratio for schools in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) region was 3.2 per cent, far behind an already low national average of 16.3 per cent (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2007). Most of the attendees were male, as only 0.9 per cent of the secondary school-aged females from the IDP region were attending secondary school at this time.

*A Period of Transition.* For students in their last year of primary school (P7) in northern Uganda, 2007 was a year of transition. Typically, the end of P7 means the start of a career of agricultural/casual labour (*leje leje*) for men and a life of agricultural/domestic work for women. A small percentage of youths have opportunities for vocational training; recent surveys have shown that 19 per cent of male youths and 8 per cent of female youths reported receiving vocational training (Annan *et al.* 2006, 2008). Fewer than 4 per cent will matriculate at a secondary school.

As this project began, however, another transition was underway. Individuals and households encamped in Opit, many since 1996, were moving to smaller satellite camps and back to pre-displacement villages. Mothers and fathers were preparing their fields and building their huts in preparation for younger and older household members to make the transition out of Opit. For some in the camp, this transition may never happen—by choice or by circumstance. For many others, 2007 and 2008 were the start of something new. Youths leaving primary school, either after P7 or at an earlier stage, emerged at a unique moment in this region's recent history. We recruited 12 of these young men and women to document and discuss their lived experience during this period of transition.

### *Study Objectives*

The main objectives of this project were derived from the basic components of the Photovoice method as outlined by Wang and Burris (1997): to empower people to document the strengths and weaknesses of their community by photographing daily life; to facilitate group dialogue to identify important community issues; and to appeal to policymakers and other people of influence in the interest of change. In choosing to work with youths, we also sought to give voice to a group that is often left out of discussions about community issues that affect their lives. By teaching new skills and giving these students a platform, we tried to encourage self-development and critical thinking skills. We also set out to explore new techniques for conducting Photovoice with a digital medium while working in a low-resource setting marked by mass internal displacement.

### **Methods**

As often happens with new technology, an extensive presentation of research participants' Photovoice material is not yet possible with the current conventions and resources of print journals. As one solution, this article is supplemented by an on-line media collection featuring full colour photographs and audio recordings referenced in the following sections (Green 2008a).<sup>3</sup>

### *Participants*

In October 2007, Opit IDP Camp was home to approximately 16,000 people, most of whom had been forcibly displaced from villages located within a 10 km radius from 1996 to 2004. During this period, five primary schools were also displaced to Opit because of the insecurity; 'temporary' school buildings were constructed near the existing school, Opit Primary. When this project was launched in June 2007, one of the displaced schools, Lukwir Primary, had recently returned to its village location 5 km away. We determined that it was not possible to work with all six schools and chose Lukwir and Opit because of the unique perspective that each school offered—one school indigenous to the camp and one displaced school that had returned to its original location. We chose a third school, Loyajonga Primary, to get the perspective of a displaced school that remained in the camp. The head teacher at each school agreed to participate, allowing us to teach classes and work with a select group of P7 students a few hours each week.

Following several weeks of class-wide instruction, 12 students were selected to participate in the Photovoice project by a random lottery. Since we did not have the resources to work intensively with all 125 P7 students, we determined that a lottery was the best way to ensure equal opportunity. First, every student was provided with a numbered notebook and pen to keep and use during the initial creative writing and photography lessons involving *all* students. When each notebook was (temporarily) collected, the children's

names and unique IDs were recorded. This list (Loyajonga  $n=40$ ; Lukwir  $n=27$ ; Opit  $n=58$ ) was used to randomly select two boys and two girls from each school's gender cohort to participate in the Photovoice project. All 12 students, who ranged in age from 12 to 16, accepted the invitation to participate. While this sample is probably representative of all P7 students living in the camp, it does not include any youth not attending school.

### *Procedure*

*Preparation.* Prior to the start of the official Photovoice project, all students in each P7 class received instruction in English (an official language in Uganda that is incorporated into primary education), creative writing, and basic photography several times per week for four weeks. These lessons took place during the regular school day and were taught by a visiting 7th grade English teacher from the United States (7th grade in the United States education system is roughly the equivalent to P7). The purpose of these exercises was to build relationships with the schools and students, to get a sense of the children's writing and English abilities, to randomly select a smaller group for the official project, and to give something small to the students who would not be selected (i.e., notebooks, pen, instruction in new topics like photography). The head teachers appreciated these efforts and the participatory nature of the Photovoice project we were proposing.

*Culturally Anchored Research.* To facilitate our work, we hired a young, unemployed teacher from the community who was eager to join the project. While many people in the camp knew some English, we recognized that the language barrier hindered our ability to have in-depth conversations with the children about their work and with parents and teachers about their concerns. As a former teacher from the community, the facilitator was able to liaise with school officials, guide the students through assignments, and help us interact with all involved.

*Introductions and Informed Consent.* Our official programme began with an opening reception for students, teachers, and parents. Careful to avoid anything too elaborate, we printed paper invitations and asked local friends to prepare a small meal for our guests. We used this reception as an opportunity to inform participants about what they should and—more importantly—should not expect from this project; it was our informed consent process. In a setting where the majority of the population is illiterate, asking parents to sign a consent form would have been impractical and insensitive. The Institutional Review Board at our university accepted this necessary modification to normal procedure (for a review of ethical and design considerations for Photovoice, see Kenney 2009).

While this reception provided a venue for establishing informed consent and assent, an important aspect of research in its own right, it represented

something else for the participants. It was an opportunity for the parents and teachers to formally express support and thanks, a typical component of events large and small in Acholi and Lango societies. After finishing the meal and listening to our description of the project, various attendees, starting with one of the head teachers, offered unprepared remarks about why this project was important.

*Training.* In our first meeting with each group, we reviewed the basics of camera operation and care. We also discussed the nature of photographs and the need to be respectful of the subjects of their images. Questions from Kenney (2009) were very useful in facilitating this conversation, such as ‘How can a photograph lie?’ and ‘What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take his or her picture?’ The group also brainstormed ways to tell other children—and adults—that they could not lend out the cameras.

*Photo Assignments.* The fieldwork lasted for six weeks. At the beginning of each week, the students received a different open-ended assignment. The first assignment was to take photographs that told a story about what it was like to be a student in their school. No other structure was imposed on the students, allowing them to be free to interpret these assignments as they wished. The full list of open-ended assignments appears in Table 1.

Each group participated in two photo outings and one group discussion every week. The group of four students shared the two cameras. The facilitator alone accompanied the groups on their outings to avoid the distraction of having a Westerner walking through the camp with a camera. This arrangement also precluded any temptation on our part to nudge the students into telling any one particular story. Due to security concerns, the facilitator would return the cameras to the office at the end of each day. At this time the images were downloaded to a laptop computer and backed-up on an external hard drive that was stored separately from the laptop.

Table 1

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**Photovoice Weekly Assignments**

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Week	Assignment
1	Tell a story about what it is like to be a student at your school.
2	Experiment with the camera; try new angles, heights, distances.
3	Tell a story about what it is like to be a member of your [camp] community.
4	Tell a story about what it is like to be a member of your household.
5	What is your village like?
6	A new school term is starting. Tell a story about what it is like to go back to school. [The students from Loyajonga were taken on a field trip back to their school’s original location in the village to document the rehabilitation needs of the buildings and grounds.]

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While allowing the students to keep the cameras overnight would have created opportunities for the students to tell a more complete story about camp life, it would have put them at unnecessary risk.

We decided to use two point-and-shoot digital cameras for several reasons: (a) the digital format was less expensive than 35 mm film cameras (regular or disposable) because there was no processing cost; (b) processing options were very limited and would have delayed the time between the photo outings and the group discussions; (c) digital images were very easy to archive and present for discussion each week on a laptop computer; and (d) digital images could be easily sorted, annotated, and imported into other software for analysis (e.g., NVIVO) and shared with new audiences via the internet.

*Group Discussions.* At the end of each week, the first author, who lived in Opit IDP Camp for seven months beginning in March 2007, joined the facilitator to lead a discussion about the week's images with each group. The sessions were recorded with a digital audio recorder; audio excerpts, along with a slideshow of the corresponding images, are available online.<sup>3</sup>

Each conversation began with a slideshow of the digital images presented on a laptop computer using Google's free Picasa photo management software. Following the slideshow, we scrolled through the collection so that the students could select images to discuss. Typically, the first question posed to the group was, 'What is this a picture of?' The students would either respond directly in English or through the facilitator who interpreted. Follow-up questions attempted to elicit more information about the meaning of the photograph. As described in Kenney (2009), Freire suggests that each image becomes a trigger, a depiction of reality that can be annotated with participants' feelings, emotions, and cultural insights. The group typically discussed between 10 and 20 triggers each week. Through this process, we tried to advance the students' critical thinking abilities in the Freirian spirit while using these discussions as an opportunity to ask questions about community life, such as the experience of youth and gender roles.

*Individual Reflection.* In addition to the group discussions, we also asked the students to reflect on their collection of images at the conclusion of the fieldwork. Using the Picasa software, each student's images were printed in 'contact sheet' style (i.e., small thumbnail images arranged in a grid with the image numbers written below each picture) and distributed with a set of questions. They were asked to list and describe their favourite images, images that depicted school and community life, and images that showed what they did and did not like about the community. Time did not permit a group discussion of these writings.

*Advocacy.* As explained by Wang and Burris (1997), an important goal of Photovoice is to appeal to policymakers and other people of influence in the

interest of change. Though we did not involve policymakers from the start (Kenney 2009), a mistake that is revisited in the discussion, the project did explicitly include action-oriented activities.

## Results

These results focus on the three components of Photovoice: (a) the process of photographing daily life, (b) the group meaning-making discussions, and (c) the use of students' work to improve individual and community well-being. This is an analysis of process rather than content.

### *Photographing Daily Life*

*Seeing Things Differently.* Overall, the students quickly demonstrated proficiency in using the cameras, despite having had no previous experience with photography and no access to electronics other than mobile phones (owned by some community members). When the cameras were returned after the first few outings, however, we noticed that the initial images were very uniform. The students stood straight up and pointed the camera directly ahead. Therefore we asked the students to spend time experimenting with the cameras. We told them to try lying down, turning the camera's orientation—anything to see things differently. The images that came back showed progress. Figure 1 is a good example of the student photographer getting lower to the ground to change perspective.

*Participation in the Photographic Process.* Over the course of six weeks, the students captured 2,746 images (see the first online figure).<sup>4</sup> The median student took 222 photographs, though the number of photographs per student ranged from 78 to 592. These statistics are reported for two reasons. First, the overall total foreshadows the analytic and presentation challenges that are created by the decision to use a digital format with no restrictions on the quantity of images produced, other than time. Second, the range in individual production raises questions about student access to and interest in the project. Why was there such a large range in the number of photographs taken by each student? Is there any evidence to suggest that certain students had more or less access to the photographic process? Did males and females, for instance, have unequal opportunities to take photographs—which, if true, might colour the overall analysis and suggest hidden biases in our process?

Overall, the males took 45.4 per cent more photographs than the females, suggesting that females might have had less access to the cameras—or possibly less interest in the project or just a different approach to storytelling that was more carefully planned and efficient. But upon closer inspection, it appeared that individual students, rather than gender groups as a whole, accounted for this gap. That is, when the student who took the most photographs (a male) and the student who took the least photographs

*Figure 1*

**Image that shows the photographer's attempt to experiment with the camera by getting a new perspective low to the ground**



(a female)—the two largest ‘outliers’ in a manner of speaking—were temporarily set aside, the total number of photographs taken, the average, and standard deviation for males and females were nearly identical, suggesting that these two individuals from different schools—and not gender—accounted for this disparity (see Table 2). Males and females appear to have had equal access to the photographic process.

### *Group Discussions*

Group conversations about the images are the heart of the Photovoice method. The collection of images selected (mostly) by the student photographers and discussed following the School, Community, and Home assignments are shown in the online figures.<sup>5</sup>

*Images as Triggers.* The images were used as triggers (in the Freirian sense) for conversations about community life. One discussion in particular highlighted the emergent nature of knowledge created through group exchange.<sup>6</sup> The topic of this conversation was the image shown in Figure 2. This image depicts a man in the foreground walking down the main road that cuts

Table 2

Gender Analysis of the Total Number of Photographs Created					
Gender/School	<i>n</i>	Number of Photographs	Average	Standard Deviation	Range
<i>All Students</i>	12	2,746			508
Males	6	1,627	271.2	168.1	
Females	6	1,119	186.5	79.1	
<i>Outliers Removed</i>	10	2,076			6
Males	5	1,035	207.0	66.7	
Females	5	1,041	208.2	65.5	
<i>All Students</i>	12	2,746			752
Opit	4	538	134.5	78.7	
Loyajonga	4	918	229.5	40.1	
Lukwir	4	1,290	322.5	182.6	
<i>Outliers Removed</i>	9	1,897			279
Opit	3	460	153.3	84.6	
Loyajonga	3	739	246.3	26.6	
Lukwir	3	698	232.7	40.1	

through the camp. In the background appear to be groups of older youths and men standing on the veranda of a shop; some are standing and talking while others seem to be playing a game or huddling around something out of view. The focus of the image is on the man in the foreground, though the photograph is cropped (by the photographer) in such a way as to cut out his head and shoulders, making him anonymous. The men in the background are blurred, so that they too are unidentifiable.

In starting a discussion about this image with the students of Loyajonga, the first author (and co-facilitator) commented that the image was great because it depicted a typical scene in Opit. This is the conversation that unfolded:

*Co-facilitator (first author):* I like this one because everyone in the background is kind of blurry—you can't see them. And this person, you can't see his head. So it's just a general picture of life in Opit. You can't make out anything, but you can get a general sense of what life is like.

*(Facilitator interprets)*

*Co-facilitator:* Do you like this one?

*(laughter)*

*Students:* No.

*Co-facilitator:* No? Why not?

*(Facilitator interprets; students laugh and discuss)*

*Students:* So, look at the man there. He's moving. He's barefooted. *(laughter)*

Figure 2

**An image of a man walking down the main road with men standing in the background that led to an informative discussion about perception**



*Co-facilitator:* Barefooted? What does that mean?

*Students:* He's moving without the sandals.

*Co-facilitator:* So what does it mean to be moving without a shoe?

*Students:* He's poor. There is poverty... (*referring to the men in the background*)

They are redundant. They have nothing to do.

Although the students and the co-facilitator agreed that this image depicted a typical scene in Opit, it was not universally praised. The problem, according to the students, was that this scene represented pervasive poverty. The man's lack of shoes and the men's lack of productive activity were symbols of their community's struggle. This example is a reminder that photographs have multiple interpretations that may differ from—and misrepresent—the photographer's original intent.

*Challenges of Group Discussions.* This example notwithstanding, the group discussions were often superficial and lacking depth. The process of having the students select and discuss images was informative and helped to generate new questions about community life, but most conversations did not reveal students' emotional connection to community issues—emotional triggers in

the true Freirian sense. This is evident on the audio excerpt (online). One challenge was the cultural gap between the Western co-facilitator and the students. There was also a language gap, requiring the use of an interpreter. The nature of the task was also unfamiliar to the students. Unlike classroom instruction, this task was pulling for open-ended responses, reactions to peers' comments, and casual interaction with the first author—an 'authority figure'.

### *Pursuing Change for Individuals and Schools*

*Individuals.* While a formal outcome evaluation of this project was not conducted, a former senior writer for *The Wall Street Journal* visited the students in Opit to learn about the project and reported on his experience (Zachary 2008). Commenting on the power of photography, Zachary wrote that Catherine, a student from the Opit Primary group, characterized photographs as 'factual', adding, 'We can use pictures to fight deceit.' Peter, from Loyajonga Primary, in describing his favourite image of a man selling maize, said that photos 'give clues to other people about how we live.' Zachary also highlighted the potential for digital photography to change one's self-image:

Putting digital cameras in the hands of poor African youth, while a modest initiative, highlights the way that information technologies alter the self-image of those who use them, especially in the developing world. 'I felt special with a camera,' [Catherine] says. When other children, and even adults, followed her around while she snapped photos, 'I felt important,' she recalls.

*Schools.* In this project we sought to spur change at multiple levels, including the community. For instance, for the last assignment, 'Back to School', we took the students of Loyajonga—whose school remained displaced to Opit—back to their school's village location approximately 14 km outside of Opit. The purpose of this outing was to document the facility repairs that were needed to reopen the school since camp residents were starting to return home (see Figure 3). For most of the students, it was their first time on the school grounds. The head teacher joined us on this outing because he thought it was an opportunity to highlight the school's needs. A brief advocacy document with the students' images was created for this purpose and distributed to a development agency that specializes in education (Green 2008b).

*Students' Work in Action.* In addition to promoting community change, this project also sought to bring direct benefits to the participating schools and students. A website was created ([www.displacedcommunities.org](http://www.displacedcommunities.org)) to display the students' work and raise awareness about their stories. Photo exhibits were held in four small cafes in North Carolina and South Carolina (USA), home to the authors. Thus far, funds raised have been used to purchase two

*Figure 3*

**Image of a Photovoice student standing in front of Loyajonga Primary School's abandoned village campus**



XO laptops for the schools from the One Laptop Per Child project and to pay secondary school fees for all of the students.

We consider the photographs to be the students' property, and therefore only use them for educational purposes or to raise support for the students or their schools. All students received a photo album of a selected group of their prints and several enlarged prints to present to friends or family members. Each school also received a framed poster of the students and a featured image of one of the student photographers.

### **Discussion**

This paper demonstrates that it is possible and beneficial to facilitate youth participation in a setting of mass internal displacement. Too often children and youths living in complex environments of conflict, disaster, and disease are not consulted and do not have a role in decision-making that affects their lives (Boyden 2001). One reason is that these young people are typically viewed as 'vulnerable' and 'traumatized', regardless of their actual needs (Annan *et al.* 2006). It is also the case that stakeholders do not know how to facilitate young people's participation. In a report conducted as part of the

10-year Strategic Review of the landmark ‘Machel Study’ on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (Machel 1996), the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2007) found that youth participation in northern Uganda is more rhetoric than reality. While many individuals and organizations have expressed a desire to incorporate young people in decision-making and knowledge generation, methods of facilitating their participation are not well understood. The current study attempted to close this gap by developing and testing innovations for conducting a Photovoice project with young people living in a situation of mass internal displacement.

### *Photovoice Innovations*

Many of the existing Photovoice projects described in the literature used film cameras rather than a digital format. In this project, we determined that digital cameras were necessary since rapid (i.e., weekly) processing options were limited and expensive. We also recognized the potential to improve photo capture, review, analysis, and dissemination with a digital format. For instance, with the availability of low-cost, high-storage capacity memory for digital cameras, we essentially removed all limits on the number of photographs that can be captured by project participants. While this reduces the overall cost of the project and removes disincentives to allowing participants to practise or experiment with the cameras, the potential volume of images can present a challenge for discussion and analysis.

We overcame the challenge of presenting a large volume of images for discussion by using Google’s Picasa software, one of many freely available digital photo organizers, to present images in a brief laptop slideshow which allowed participants to easily scroll through the collection. This programme also made it easy to tag the photos by author and category for recordkeeping and analysis purposes. By storing the photos digitally, we were able to easily import the images into other programmes such as Microsoft Word and NVIVO. Digital audio recordings of the group discussions can also be linked to the analysis or paired in real-time with the digital images with note-taking software such as Microsoft OneNote. Finally, digital images can be used in a wide variety of online applications to raise awareness and support for the project and participants. All of these activities can be accomplished with film prints, but the effort required to scan the pictures greatly increases the workload if a scanner is not available.

### *Epistemological Implications of Photovoice*

Similar to qualitative researchers in the social and behavioral sciences who have studied personal narratives to better understand the lived experience of forced migrants (e.g., Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery 2006; Berman *et al.* 2006; Pavlish 2007), we used the Photovoice technique of pairing documentary photography and group discussions to gain new insight into these



displaced communities—insight that would not have been possible with images alone.

A picture may ‘tell a thousand words’, but it is the observer that arranges those words into a coherent narrative. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a Category 3 storm that devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005, two newswires, the Associated Press (AP) and Agence France Press (AFP), published similar images of people wading through the flooded streets of New Orleans with food (Jardin 2005). The only apparent difference in content was that the AP photograph depicted an African American man while the AFP photograph showed a white man and woman. Yet the captions assigned different meanings. In the AP photograph, the African American man was said to have ‘looted’ a grocery store while in the AFP photograph, the white man and woman were said to have ‘found’ bread and soda from a grocery store.

Similarly, the students and the first author initially created different captions for the image from this study of the shoeless man walking in the foreground with a collection of boys and men standing on a veranda in the background (Figure 2). Through the collaborative process of group discussion, a collective narrative of poverty and idleness was ultimately constructed. It is this collaborative process that sets Photovoice apart from earlier uses of photography as only a tool for representing human experience. Photovoice takes ‘data’ collected by individual participants and submits (or introduces) it to a process of group meaning-making. Thus, epistemologically, the Photovoice method is grounded in a participatory process of collaborative knowledge construction. Further, it provides a framework for social action that can be more appropriate than humanitarian or development interventions that may be driven by donor priorities rather than local needs and understanding, one rationale for the recent emphasis on the need to employ ‘participatory methods’ in work with forced migrants.

As Pink (2001) noted, however, social scientists using such methods of visual collaboration are faced with the challenge of understanding and reflecting the practices and culture of the informants. In our case, we pursued a culturally-anchored (Hughes and Seidman 2002) process by recruiting a local facilitator and embedding the first author in the life of the community as a resident participant-observer. Still, we presented the students with a technology with which they had no previous experience and asked them to participate in individual and group exercises that did not reflect the pedagogical style of their homes or classrooms. As we found, however, the students excelled at both the technical and creative levels in terms of camera operation and storytelling with only minimal instruction. This suggests to us that digital photography is a medium that fit with the age, experience, and context of the participants. Yet as we describe in the next section on limitations of this study, the format of our group discussions did not reflect the practices and culture of the participants, which limited the ultimate success of the project.

These findings suggest that, with appropriate consideration of the context and age of the participants, Photovoice can be a useful method for collaboratively constructing knowledge about the lived experience of forced migration, generating a framework for intervention, and monitoring results—all with communities and participants at the centre of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Based on the experience of this study, it is also likely that use of this method would allow agencies working with beneficiaries to learn about a new reality of forced migration that moves beyond deficits to consider the broader context of internal displacement and refugee experiences.

### *Moving Beyond Deficits*

Mindful of the tendency for violent conflict to destabilize multiple levels of the social ecology (Wessells and Monteiro 2006), we asked students to depict their home, school, and community environments. The images and group discussions that emerged from these assignments pointed to many of the same challenges facing camp residents that are commonly articulated in reports about northern Uganda. Alcoholism, poverty, and a lack of educational materials were depicted throughout the collection.

While some images concurred with these negative depictions of camp life, the full body of the students' images also depicted many strengths and assets in their lives. Scenes of busy markets, livestock, agriculture, youth entrepreneurs growing and selling sugarcane, students learning, families enjoying time together, and children at play can be found in every student's album. Although pervasive in the lives of these students, these scenes are not commonly described by agencies, journalists, and researchers (like us on occasion) who are in a better position to pursue funding or raise awareness about truly important needs with a deficit-only model.

Sometimes this concentration on the worst aspects of a community is a result of the nature of the inquiry. For instance, many studies of forced migrants do not directly inquire about what participants value and appreciate in their community. In contrast, we conceived this Photovoice project with a well-being framework (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2005), and therefore made explicit the investigation of potential community strengths and assets. However, situational demand characteristics hindered the fulfilment of this objective early in the project.

For instance, in the beginning, students did not seem to make a distinction between the Western researcher and the many expatriate aid workers who are associated with the provision of material and financial support to camp residents. As most agencies, researchers, and journalists are only interested in deficits, the students responded accordingly. It was therefore necessary for us to create a new set of expectations by explicitly inquiring about and expressing interest in community strengths and positive aspects of life. Future research and action in similar situations must continue this attempt to move beyond participants' deficit expectations. We must pursue a research

agenda that seeks to understand and describe important challenges while also taking a resilience and empowerment-oriented outlook in order to transcend the inherently limited view of pathology.

### *Limitations*

As previously mentioned, it was a mistake not to invite policy-makers to participate in the project from the beginning. While the students' images have thus far been used to advocate for important school renovations, bring awareness to northern Uganda through the project website, and solicit donations used to enrol the students in secondary school, we missed an opportunity to create natural channels for the students to pursue social change. More generally, our sequential approach—photography and discussion *then* action—prevented true praxis (Freire 1970). As Kenney (2009) describes, separating these two processes stifles creativity. A better approach would have been to create opportunities for the students to engage policy-makers as the project was unfolding. If possible, this would have allowed the students to reflect on the process of advocating for social change and adapt their fieldwork accordingly.

The process of reflection would have also been improved by a more intensive effort at the beginning of the project to model for the students how to discuss the images as a group. As documented in the group discussion audio excerpts (online), we struggled as a group to move from the concrete to the abstract. Images became triggers for discussions about community life and issues, but our discussions did not reach an emotional level. This was likely due in part to the fact that we were asking the students to think and respond in novel ways to a figure of power in a classroom-like setting; most classroom instruction appears to be very formal and based more on memorization and repetition than open discussion intended to promote critical thinking. The other—and possibly more important—cause of our inability to transcend the concrete in our discussions was a lack of cultural competence on the part of the co-facilitator (the first author). Not being able to speak the language was a significant hurdle, even with the presence of an excellent interpreter and facilitator. That said, with more training on the front end, we could have better prepared our facilitator to compensate for the language and cultural gaps and to lead the discussions more independently.

Additionally, it would have been instructive to include a group of youths who were not attending school. The process of working with youths outside of a school environment might have suggested the need for further innovation or adaptation. Furthermore, non-enrolled youths would have likely contributed some different perceptions of community strengths and weaknesses than our randomly selected sample of P7 students.

### **Conclusion**

The use of Photovoice with youths living in communities in transition was demonstrated to be viable. The digital medium in particular facilitates new

opportunities for data collection and knowledge generation, and may be a resource for social action. The number of images generated, however, can overwhelm conventional modes of analysis and discussion. We present several techniques for addressing this challenge and presenting images. Discussion in the field will refine and establish conventions to address these challenges. Furthermore, approaches like Photovoice allow for greater participation of young people. This method not only gives a role of 'speaker' and 'expert' to participants, but can also instruct service providers on how they might listen to the voices of those they are serving in creative, yet systematic ways.

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1. 'Resettlement' in this article refers to the Government of Uganda's programme of reintegrating IDPs in their home communities.
2. The use of the word 'Photovoice' in this article refers to the method, not the organization. This project was not affiliated with the PhotoVoice organization.
3. <http://www.displacedcommunities.org/photovoice/jrs/22-4.html>.
4. <http://www.displacedcommunities.org/photovoice/jrs/figure2.html>.
5. <http://www.displacedcommunities.org/photovoice/jrs/figure3.html>,  
<http://www.displacedcommunities.org/photovoice/jrs/figure4.html>,  
<http://www.displacedcommunities.org/photovoice/jrs/figure5.html>.
6. <http://www.displacedcommunities.org/photovoice/jrs/22-4.html>.

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