

Taking photos in international development

This is a basic guide to help you get started with your photos which will help tell your story and also help us to tell your story to the wider public.

A good photograph is worth a 1,000 words –please take them and encourage grant partners to take them. Your work is photogenic, and stories about grant-aided projects don't work without pictures.

What kind of pictures work best?

This section presents themes that were tested by [The Narrative Project](#) to explore which visual ideas make people more likely to support development. They are shown in order, from most persuasive to least persuasive.

Theme 1: Potential

“Everyone’s got the power then to change their situation. They can go far if they want to. They can study to become a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, and they can make the change in their own country if enough people get this opportunity”.



Photographs showing that development programmes help people reach their human potential were found to be persuasive with members of the Engaged Public. This type of image also supports the idea that

development helps people achieve independence over the long term.

Theme 2: Progress

“Seeing positive pictures of happy changes that can be made is more likely to make me give



than the same picture of starving kids we have been shown for 20 years”.

“Before and after” images showing tangible changes in local communities make it clear that development programmes make a real difference in the world.

Theme 3: Empower

“What you want aid to do is to pull a country or a community to a place where they aren’t reliant on aid anymore, to a point where they are self-sufficient and can produce enough food, healthcare, education for everyone’s needs”

Images showing that people in developing countries share our goals—such as earning an education or providing for their family—create human connections and



convey the idea that development helps people build the foundations of independence.

Theme 4: Pity

“I feel awful for these people but I have become sort of numb to it now due to overexposure on the news. Feels like there’s not much we can do to help”.



While images that invoke pity create emotional reactions in some people, they do not advance the idea that people in developing countries are active partners in development.

Theme 5: Hope

“We see these pictures all the time and they are intended to tug at our hearts but we become immune to them over time”.

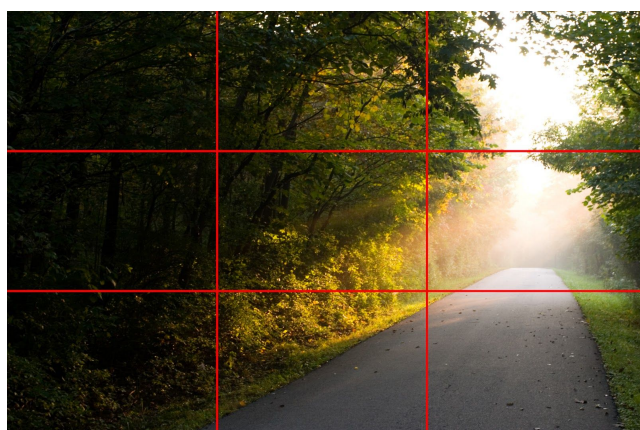
Images of people that do not show the context in which they live were least effective at building support for development. People feel good seeing pictures of happy children, but it doesn’t have the same impact as photos with the themes of the potential of progress.



What are the basic principles of taking photos?

Rule of Thirds

The most important elements (the horizon and the haystack) are placed on or around the lines and points of intersection.



Imagine that your image is divided into nine equal segments by two vertical and two horizontal lines.

Try to position the most important elements in your scene along these lines, or at the points where they intersect. Doing so will add balance and interest to your photo.

Some cameras even offer an option to

superimpose a rule of thirds grid over the LCD screen, making it even easier to use.

Balancing Elements

The mountain in this scene is balanced by the rocks in the foreground.

Placing your main subject (the mountain) off-centre, as with the rule of thirds, creates a more interesting photo, but it can leave a void in the scene which can make it feel empty. You should balance the 'weight' of your subject by including another object of lesser importance to fill the space.



Leading Lines



The line of the footpath leads the eye into the scene towards the mountain.

When we look at a photo our eye is naturally drawn along lines.

By thinking about how you place lines in your composition, you can affect the way we view the image, pulling us into the picture, towards the subject, or on a journey 'through' the scene.

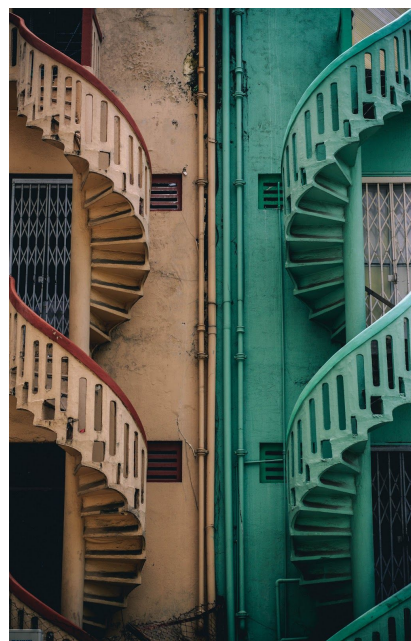
There are many different types of line - e.g. straight, diagonal, curvy, zigzag, radial and so on; each can be used to enhance our photo's composition.

Symmetry and Patterns

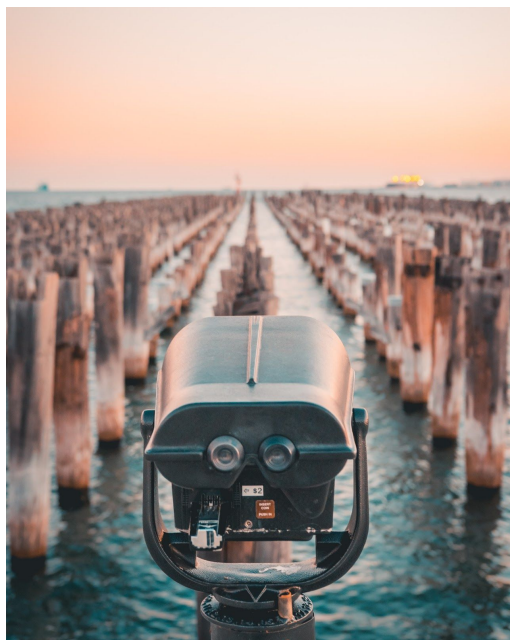
The symmetry of this scene is broken by the different colours the building and staircases are painted in, but this increases the dynamism of the image, making it eye-catching, interesting and pleasing to the viewer.

We are surrounded by symmetry and patterns, both natural and man-made, and they can make for very eye-catching compositions, particularly in situations where they are not expected.

Another great way to use them is to break the symmetry or pattern in some way, introducing tension and a focal point to the scene.



Viewpoint



The unusual viewpoint of this photo makes for an interesting composition.

Before photographing your subject, take time to think about where you will shoot it from. Our viewpoint has a massive impact on the composition of our photo, and as a result, it can greatly affect the message that the shot conveys.

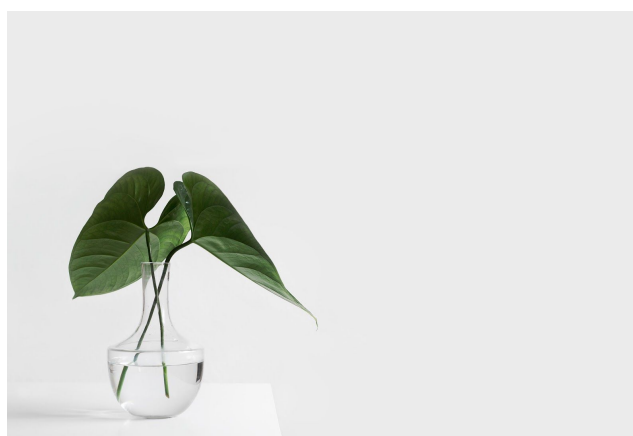
Rather than just shooting from eye level, consider photographing from high above, down at ground level, from the side, from the back, from a long way away, from very close up, and so on.

Background

The plain background in this composition ensures nothing distracts from the plant.

How many times have you taken what you thought would be a great shot, only to find that the final image lacks impact because the subject blends into a busy background?

The human eye is excellent at distinguishing between different elements in a scene, whereas a camera has a tendency to flatten the foreground and background, and this can often ruin an otherwise great photo.



Thankfully this problem is usually easy to overcome at the time of shooting - look around for a plain and unobtrusive background and compose your shot so that it doesn't distract or detract from the subject.

Create Depth

The orange leaves in the foreground add depth to what might otherwise be a flat scene.



Because photography is a two-dimensional medium, we have to choose our composition carefully to convey the sense of depth that was present in the actual scene. You can create depth in a photo by including objects in the foreground, middle ground and background.

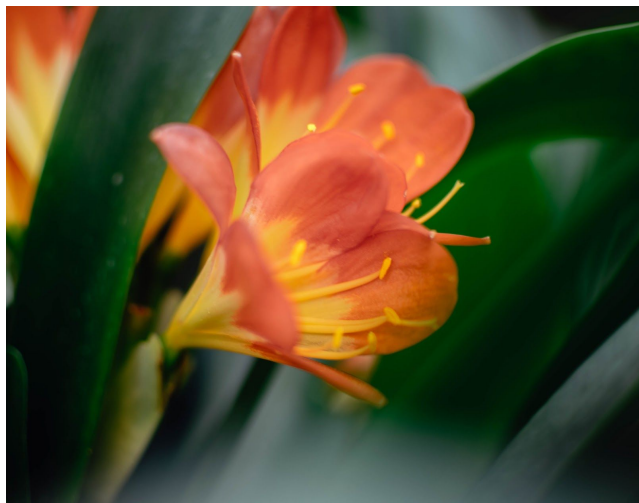
Another useful composition technique is overlapping, where you deliberately partially obscure one object with another. The human eye naturally recognises these layers and mentally separates them out, creating an image with more depth.

Framing

The archway in this scene provides a natural frame for the building in the background. The world is full of objects which make perfect natural frames, such as trees, archways and holes. By placing these around the edge of the composition you help to isolate the main subject from the outside world. The result is a more focused image which draws your eye naturally to the main point of interest.



Cropping



By cropping in tightly on the flower, the viewer's attention is focused fully on it.

Often a photo will lack impact because the main subject is so small it becomes lost among the clutter of its surroundings.

By cropping tight around the subject you eliminate the background 'noise', ensuring the subject gets the viewer's undivided attention.

Experimentation

Using photography we no longer have to worry about film processing costs or running out of shots. As a result, experimenting with our photos' composition has become a real possibility; we can fire off tons of shots and delete the unwanted ones later at absolutely no extra cost. Take advantage of this fact and experiment with your composition -you never know whether an idea will work until you try it.

Composition in photography is far from a science, and as a result, all of the 'rules' above should be taken with a pinch of salt. If they don't work in your scene, ignore them; if you find a great composition that contradicts them, then go ahead and shoot it anyway. But they can often prove to be spot-on and are worth at least considering whenever you are out and about with your camera.