



## IN-COUNTRY W.A.S.H. FIELD PROJECTS POLICIES & MEDIA ETHICS POLICIES (PREVENTING WHITE SAVIORISM)

### ***IN-COUNTRY W.A.S.H. FIELD PROJECTS POLICIES***

**HOW THIRST PROJECT ENSURES THE DIGNITY OF THE PEOPLE WE WORK WITH IN THE FIELD AND ACTIVELY WORK TO ENSURE THAT WHITE SAVIORISM DOES NOT PENETRATE THE WAY THAT WE ACTUALLY DO THE WORK THAT WE DO:**

**1.) WHY do we even do the work that we do WHERE we do it/with the PEOPLE we do it with?**

There are two (2) factors that determine WHY we work WHERE we do: **Waterborne Disease** and **Waterborne Mortality**. The *countries/geographic locations* that we work in themselves, the *racial composition of the communities* that we work with, or any other such variable have absolutely zero bearing on the determination as to whether we will or will not work in a particular place. In fact, one of, if not the most consistent questions we get from prospective donors or supporters in the United States is, "Why don't you help people "here"?" The reality is: THANKFULLY, an intelligent case cannot be made that human beings in the United States die from cholera, dysentery, diarrhea, or suffer in any significant measure from schistosomiasis (the "big four" primary diseases we work to combat) in communities where Thirst Project could prevent this from happening. It just does not happen at scale or in places in the United States that an NGO like Thirst Project could meaningfully impact. Even the population of people in the United States experiencing houselessness, even the under-resourced communities in Appalachia, even the most under-resourced Native American populations in the United States at any given time all have access to safe water for drinking and toilets. Some of these communities still rely on water to be trucked in, but, the reality is that while it is inconvenient not to have that water running directly into these communities' homes, the difference between having access to that SAFE, CLEAN water provided by trucks, public water fountains, sinks, or other facilities is very different than people living in communities where there is simply NO access to safe, clean drinking water. This is an important understanding and critical starting point of this conversation, particularly related to concerns about organizations or NGOs led by people based in the United States whose operations or impact take place in another country or continent. Concerns about these types of organizations and their work are often based in the worry that the decision for these organizations to work specifically in the locations that they work is motivated by the "exotification" of the country itself, or, is motivated by white guilt / predicated on the history of the



exploitation of the continent of Africa or South/Central America, etc. by Western or European nations, and is rooted in a need to “save” the “poor/helpless” peoples of a foreign country. Again, the reason that we work WHERE we work is waterborne disease rates and waterborne mortality rates; not because of any particular country, continent, geographic boundary, and is not in an attempt to serve any particular cultural people group, etc. Rather, the reason that we work where we work has its foundation in the absolute belief that access to safe, clean drinking water is a basic HUMAN right- regardless of who those human beings are or where they live. And, the reality is that there are still hundreds of millions of people in our world who do not have access to safe, clean drinking water, and, as a result of drinking from contaminated water sources, those people contract and often die from easily-preventable waterborne diseases.

## **2.) Comprehension** of HOW we build W.A.S.H. projects in the field:

People often have a misconception of HOW we implement our Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (W.A.S.H.) programs (without us giving them reason to have these misconceptions). In order to understand the safeguards that we take to ensure that we do not perpetuate White Saviorism in our actual field work, we must reiterate HOW we work in the field to ensure that people have an accurate comprehension of HOW we do this work. No one from The Thirst Project Team from the United States, “goes” to “build” water projects anywhere. Each country that we operate in is led by paid, full-time Thirst Project Staff that is composed of nationals from their own country who oversee and lead The Thirst Project’s impact within that country. The first interaction that a person living in a community that one of our field teams may work with has with “The Thirst Project” is not with a white Westerner from another country, but rather, is with someone from their own country who says, “Here’s who we are. Here’s what we do,” and asks, “Do you want this?” Rather than assuming the we or even our local field teams know what a community wants. If a community DOES want to work with us, our local field teams enter into an agreement with the leaders of these communities to partner together to design water, sanitation, and hygiene projects that measurably improve human rights standards of living centered around safe, clean water. Similarly, the for-profit drilling companies that we hire to actually drill & construct our projects are each based within their respective country that we work with them in (thus funding and supporting local economies rather than foreign or Western companies operating abroad). The work that we do in the field is not done by people from the United States. Our local, in-country field teams have purview over which communities we work with within their own country, what types of solutions we employ to meet the needs of the people in their respective country, etc. We are very clear about the fact that our in-country field teams do not need the unskilled labor of volunteers from abroad to do this work. If anything, candidly, as is the case with most foreign volunteer opportunities, the few times when we may allow donors, students or other volunteers from overseas to travel into the field to see and experience the work that we do, they are more in the way than they are helpful. Thus, that could not be any further from our operating model. Understanding this fact is also critical to understanding our relationship to the work that we do.



### **3.) Request:**

To clearly understand HOW we build our projects in the field, one must also first understand the Order of Operations that we go through in the process of working with any community. The majority of the new sites that are identified as candidates for partnership with us for our W.A.S.H. projects come to our in-country staff as requests for intervention FROM the communities that we work with. This is an important distinction because, in this, the dynamic is NOT one where “WE” “GO INTO” communities with the assumption that we know better than them about what they want or need, and the dynamic is not that we go to places to “give” people stuff. Similarly, for those communities where our team carries out independent Needs Assessments without external request from those communities, again the first conversation our team has with those communities’ leaders is: “This is who we are. This is what we do. Do you want this?” Again, rather than assuming we know what a community wants or needs. This first point of conversation is more than just ceremonial. A foundation of PARTNERSHIP, rather than one of “beneficiary/benefactor” dignifies the people we work with and establishes the autonomy and ownership of the communities that we work with. Again, because our field teams/in-country staff are all nationals FROM their own countries, the first experience with The Thirst Project that any community member we work with has is with someone who is from their own country.

### **4.) Relationship:**

Again, our positioning of our relationship as an organization TO the communities that we work with is one of partnership and collaboration. This relationship dynamic is critical to maintain the dignity and autonomy of the communities that we work in.

### **5.) Compensation:**

To further demonstrate the power dynamic we work very hard to establish whereby our in-country teams are positioned as the experts and authorities leading our work in their own home territories, regardless of local customary median household incomes, many of field teams/in-country staff are compensated significantly better (in USD) than our partner organizations’ domestic/U.S. full-time staffs.

**6.) Expertise:** While it is true that our U.S. team members can not be “experts” in any foreign community that they do not live, as many of the current industry conversations related to dismantling white saviorism point out, the people on our Water Project Technical Board, as well as the full-time staff members who lead our work in their own countries, as well as the local, for-profit drilling companies that we hire in the field, absolutely ARE experts in their fields of Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene. These team members of ours absolutely have expertise in hydrogeology, groundwater, and sustainability related to water projects that are absolutely critical to be integrated into the projects we co-labor on with the local communities we build in.



The power dynamics in a community that we work with should always be one where it is understood that local community leaders are regarded as the experts in their communities and their communities' needs, and, the exchange of and shared collaboration around building our W.A.S.H. programs in those communities is one of mutual learning between those two groups (local community leaders and our teams) in each of those two categories.

### **7.) Ownership**

The long history of colonialism and exploitation on the continent of Africa is significant. As such, it is critical that none of our work or processes create any experience or engage in any practice that could be construed as neo-colonial. This means that we do not place plaques or the names of donors or our organization's name on water wells or W.A.S.H. projects. These projects belong to the communities that they are in, not to The Thirst Project or our donors. It is important that community members feel ownership over their own projects.



## ***MEDIA ETHICS POLICIES***

### **DEPICTION / FIELD DOCUMENTING / STORYTELLING (HOW WE TELL THE STORY OF THE WORK WE DO):**

#### **1.) Commitment:**

Images are powerful. They have the potential to convey a story, create connection, illicit emotion and inspire change in many ways. As members of a humanitarian team, we are committed not to perpetuate the portrayal of children or people in vulnerable communities exclusively as helpless recipients desperate for handouts and the reinforcement of traditional hierarchies of power whereby INGOs are "saving" the desperate poor. Many fundraising campaigns across the internet and various social media platforms have historically depicted children or others crying, dirty, malnourished or in fear. These images are often accompanied by statements like, "starving orphans need your help" or "babies on the brink of starvation". Not only are these representations contrary to recognized global media and communications standards within the humanitarian field, but they also undermine the dignity, identity and sense of agency of the people we seek to build trust and partnership with through our humanitarian response and work. Most importantly, Thirst Project as an organization has an unshakeable commitment to the dignity of people. It is critical that we not only uphold our own organizational standards of integrity, but also align with broader standards within the INGO community of practice and the humanitarian sector. This includes our commitment to the core principles of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, the tenth principle of which is, "in our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects." Organizations such as Save the Children, World Vision, and Pact have acknowledged the ways that images perpetuate disempowerment and have committed to visual representations based on dignity, respect and consent. We must recommit to compliance with these values every year. Among the stated commitments include the following: "an organization's communications shall respect the dignity, values, history, religion, and culture of its staff and the people served by the programs." Additionally, with regard to images involving children, we have aligned ourselves with the global standards established by UNICEF, which call for the dignity of children to be upheld in all media portrayals and to avoid communicating about children in a way that promotes stigmatization. UNICEF also calls for "accurate" contextual information in the case of stories and images involving children. We never want Thirst Project's media and fundraising images to represent an outdated approach that does not abide by these industry standards to which we are committed. This would compromise our reputation as a value-driven ally in the eyes of those we aim to serve.



## **2.) Consent:**

(The obligation to ensure that whoever's photo is taken in any community that Thirst Project works truly gives their consent to do so falls on us. It will be almost impossible to ever truly create a balance in the power dynamic in the communities that we work with or to create the sense or feeling that there is balanced/shared power. Nonetheless, we must try and try and try to do so again and again and again. Because of that acknowledged challenge, it will be difficult to ensure that any member of any community we work with feels they truly have the agency to say "no" to having their photo taken. In that, the burden of understanding this and acting on behalf of the people we work with falls to us. If, in the course of the conversation seeking consent, there is any hesitation in giving consent- even if it feels playful, even if the person later consents, our choice is to err on the side of caution and NOT to photograph that person. Minors CANNOT give consent. Ever. Remember that. Additionally, consent to take someone's image is different than consent to post or publish someone's image. It should go without saying that if you do not know the person's name, you certainly cannot have asked their permission to photograph them. Similarly, regarding nudity, it is never acceptable to take or publish photos of children who are naked. If we capture and share someone's image, particularly their face, we commit to gathering and maintaining on file written consent in signed photo/video release forms.

## **3.) Context (images):**

We can tell the story of the water crisis truthfully, honestly, and demonstrate the fullness of the very real, life-threatening dangers that it causes while still doing so in a way that maintains the dignity of the people or subjects' whose stories we tell as the vehicle to communicate this issue.

As for communicating the negative impact of the water crisis, this can be achieved in many ways without actually showing the people who suffer from it, or, without showing those people in undignified ways. We can showcase real images of the actual dirty water sources that people are forced to drink from before we work with communities to build safe water projects without showing any people using them. These dirty water sources can be shown in their honest and raw states (with cattle drinking or defecating in them), without showing images of people drinking from them. If people are using these sources and we do show them doing so, we can do so in a way that both protects the dignity and privacy of the people in the community by obscuring or omitting their faces, etc.

We must certainly never intentionally seek to photograph someone looking their worst. If a person in a community we are working with A person's body position, facial expressions, the condition of their clothing (ripped), and the timing in which we capture a moment must all be carried out in the ways that always seek first the dignity of the person whose story we are telling. (Does the person appear to look dirty because they have been working or playing? Does the person appear to look dirty because they are sick? Do they have a messy nose or are there literal flies or bugs on or around them that would be in a photograph? Ask them if they have time



or would like to wash up before you take their photograph? Does the person's clothing have rips or tears in it? Do not photograph them.

#### **4.) Captions/Text:**

When sharing stories of people in the communities that we work in, the written copy, captions, or text used in any written medium is as important as the integrity of the composition of the images we use. When speaking or writing about the people we work with in the field, always use humanizing pronouns (“**people** who lack access to clean drinking water,” “**women** without clean drinking water,” “**children** who lack access to clean drinking water,” etc.) BEFORE ever using pronouns that separate people groups (“they,” “them,” “their,” “they’re”).

Lean into communicating the truth/reality of the negative impact of the water crisis, without stripping a subject of their dignity. Remember that this is accomplished by writing/communicating that we work in partnership WITH communities, rather than as the “savior” of some “poor/helpless” group of people.

Disclosing private, sensitive health information or statuses must never be done. There are very real medical and health needs in every community around the world and those stories can and should be told in ways that educate and move donors to act, but, that information can be delivered in context of communities or regions to effectively and honestly tell a story without disclosing a person's private information.

#### **4.) White Saviorism in Media/Documenting/Storytelling:**

There are a few different categories in which white saviorism can penetrate our work (both the actual field work itself and how we document, report, and tell the story of that work), and we must do what we can to prevent it in each of them.

**-Relationship** & Positioning of us as an organization TO the communities we work with. (How we work to balance power, to co-labor WITH the people we work with in whose communities we build, deference to community and cultural expertise, insistence on local community members' agency, and maintaining a position of collaboration.)

This is a category that we can and do our best to control and prevent.

**-Storytelling** (both in IMAGERY AND in CAPTIONS/NARRATION/CONTENT used for Fundraising, Marketing, Social Posts, Videos, Presentations, etc.)

This is a category we can and do our best to control and prevent.

Using everything described above, and, ultimately, asking the question: Who does this content position as the “hero” of this story?



***-Internal Individual Motivation-*** The truth is we can never control whether someone external who raises awareness of the water crisis in support of our organization, fundraises for our organization, or travels on a documenting trip with our organization's motivation. Much of the conversation around dismantling white saviorism centers around whether or not it is even possible at all for altruism in this sector to exist. This is the place in the conversation where we personally as an organization DO believe that altruism exists and we do assert our confidence in the motivation behind why we do the work that we do and the way that we do that work. We can and do everything we can to control and ensure as ethical practice in media capture and storytelling as possible. Part of that is acknowledging that we ARE going to get it wrong. We ARE going to make mistakes. We can always do better. We remain open to growth and committed to protecting the dignity of the people we work with.