

# Who is Owed Transparency?

## Conflicting Ethics Within Local Partnerships

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### Tags

Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Management and Operations; Non-Formal Education; Partnerships; Primary and Secondary Education; Program Design

### Setting

Voluntourism, participating in service projects in conjunction with traditional touristic travel, has grown to a \$2 billion a year industry<sup>1</sup> and is a significant source of income for organizations and individuals alike, particularly in the developing world. With an increasingly competitive market for voluntourism, each provider has tailored their offerings to a particular participant demographic. Some offer academic credit and involve long-term projects within the host community, while many projects last fewer than two weeks and center around construction, education, and public health.

World Treks is a competitive voluntourism provider hosting high school student groups across six continents. To accommodate their rapid growth, they rely on strong partnerships within their host countries and entrust the local tour operators they contract with to vet new collaborators. Each in-country tour operator will secure housing, transportation, cooks, service sites, and cultural activities, with oversight and guidelines from World Treks' office. Their program model consists of back-to-back programs throughout the summer, with each new student group participating in an identical short-term experience, facilitated by the same team of professionals. Staff are a mix of local and international educators and youth workers, some of whom have no relationship to the host country and no local contacts. Programs are marketed to youth as being an opportunity to positively

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<sup>1</sup>Hartman, E., Paris, C. M., & Blache-Cohen, B. (2014). Fair Trade Learning: Ethical standards for community-engaged international volunteer tourism. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 14(1–2), 108–116.

impact the world around them, contribute to meaningful development projects, and grow as global citizens. There is a set curriculum of reflection, leadership, and cultural awareness which unites all their programs, but the tone of the programming is largely left up to the facilitators and thus varies by location and staff.

Veronica is hired by World Treks to work for the summer in Ghana, where she arrives three days before the first student group. Her first several days on site are spent meeting local stakeholders, acquainting herself with a new host community, bonding with other support staff, and preparing for student arrivals. She visits some of the excursion sites with the local partner, Efua, though she does not speak the local language and does not have any relationship to the contacts herself. She knows Efua is well respected in the community, has strong connections, and has worked with World Treks for well over a decade, so she trusts her judgment.

## Case

The first student program runs smoothly and Veronica is able to experience much of the itinerary for the first time alongside the participants. The students volunteer at the local primary school where they rotate between teaching and performing maintenance on school grounds. In the final week of the program, Efua takes students on a visit to a local orphanage where crowded housing and a lack of funding make it hard to meet basic needs. In their afternoon with the Orphanage Director, they learn about the challenges faced by Ghanaian families and the economic circumstances that would lead to children being placed in a group home. The students are moved by this experience and were very affected by seeing the living quarters where thirty children slept together on a dirt floor. During evening reflection, the group announces that they would like to pool together their souvenir money and make a donation to the orphanage. Veronica, worried about making a cash donation to a partner with whom she is unfamiliar, encourages them to ask the Director what material items would be most useful to the orphanage. In speaking with him, it is agreed upon that the group will make a donation of 15 mattresses and deliver them personally on the last day of the program, which Efua organizes. It is an emotional day for World Treks students, who feel empowered by having made a difference in their host community and return to their home countries with a strong sense of purpose and attachment to Ghana.

When the second group of students is on program, they are likewise taken to the orphanage during their last week in the country. When receiving a tour of the facilities, the Director points to the room where the children sleep, thirty on the ground, and comments that the orphanage cannot even afford mattresses. Veronica is concerned that the previous mattresses were sold or otherwise hidden to encourage more donations. Efua does not appear to be worried or surprised. This second group of students is equally moved by the plight of the orphans and say, during reflection, that they would like to make a contribution to the home.

Veronica isn't sure how to navigate this discussion with students, as she doesn't want to threaten their trust in World Treks and Efua by sharing her concerns, but she does not feel comfortable with them making donations to an entity she no longer feels is ethical. She sees that this is a teachable moment for the challenges inherent to aid and could lead to a productive conversation about who determines what support is of value in international voluntourism, but she is worried that will they become apathetic towards their ability to make positive change in the world if they discuss corruption in this context. She doesn't want to tarnish their impression of Ghana by suggesting that the needs of the organizations they have met with have been overstated to encourage their monetary contributions. Veronica does not bring up the matter with Efua, because she does not want to imply that there is a quid pro quo to how Efua has selected who World Treks partners with, but any built trust has been damaged by this visit.

## Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How should Veronica navigate this conversation with her students?
- Are students owed complete transparency? Is Veronica? Are parents? What priority does transparency have in programming and to which stakeholders?
- What are circumstances in which opacity is a more appropriate strategy?
- Who is responsible for the integrity of local partnerships? Does this duty fall to World Treks or their subcontractors in the host community?
- What practices could World Treks be implementing to vet local sites and collaborators without having a permanent presence in the host community?
- How could World Treks determine what contributions to host communities are valued and welcomed? How could they assess their impact?
- What does it look like to run culturally-informed programs where students' expectations of morality differ from the host country's values and morals?