

SECTION A: INTRODUCTION

At This Life, we aim to give agency to the communities we work with through our storytelling and communications content. We strive to empower and protect the people who share their stories with us. We are committed to consulting with people directly to respectfully depict them as they wish to be represented and depicting people and contexts authentically and truthfully. We value the importance of self-determination and are committed to working with all stakeholders in a way that upholds their dignity and respects their values, history, religion, language and culture.

Our vision is that children, families and communities are supported to access and create opportunities in this life. We bring this vision to life by carefully protecting those who share their stories with us, and amplifying the benefits of sharing stories with our supporters and the general public.

This Life is a not-for-profit entity that listens to, engages with and advocates side by side with children, families and communities as they define and act on their own solutions to complex social challenges. As part of our work, we share some important – yet difficult – stories. Sometimes our stories will show injustice and harsh realities. We, and the people we work with, know these are important stories for the world to hear. However, inherent in undertaking these activities is a level of risk in relation to sharing these stories. Mitigating this risk to protect the people we work with is an ensuring priority at This Life.

We acknowledge it can be difficult to put our values into practice when sharing stories – especially stories dealing with trauma and injustice. We can face conflicting demands when collecting and sharing stories, and we acknowledge it's sometimes challenging to know exactly what 'dignity' and 'empowerment' mean in different cultural contexts. Only the storytellers themselves can tell us what dignifies and empowers them. We also acknowledge that unconscious bias plays a huge part in decision making – however, by its very nature, it is difficult to address and mitigate the risks that it causes.

Misunderstanding cultural norms and mismanaging storytelling content can harm both the people we strive to support, as well as our organisation. For example, asylum seekers may be targeted for sharing stories about human rights abuses. Children may be targeted by people seeking to abuse them. The personal reputation and confidence of people who've shared their stories may be damaged if their stories are misused and they may face retribution from their community. Our organisation may suffer damage to our brand and reputation if we publish insensitive materials. These are just a few possible risks.

This EDMF is one element in a suite of tools to reduce these risks, as far as possible. We seek to prevent harm from occurring and this EDMF is a proactive means of mitigating those risks and supporting ethical decisions about our communications.

PURPOSE

This EDMF aims to ensure our communications content is of the highest ethical standard. This means all stakeholders are respected and protected, and trust in our organisation is maintained. The EDMF aims to ensure our organisation is using best-practice communications methods that minimise the risks related to storytelling and publishing.

SCOPE

This EDMF must be followed by everyone who collects and publishes stories at This Life, including all staff, volunteers, partner staff and governing body members. It includes our offices in Australia and in other countries managed by This Life. The EDMF applies to visitors to our programs, and contractors and consultants such as freelance writers, designers, multimedia producers, fundraising consultants, partner organisations and other external parties using our stories, images, name or logo.

VALUES

Everything our organisation does is built on our values. For our foundations to remain strong and for our actions to be ethical, we must continue to look to our values in our everyday work.

Ethical principles relating to the treatment of human beings are codified in a number of widely-accepted documents, such as the Nuremberg Code (1947), the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), the Belmont Report (1979), and the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) and Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (2007).

At their core, these policies include the fundamental rights of human dignity, autonomy, protection, safety, maximisation of benefits and minimisation of harms. While originally stemming from biomedical and human rights contexts, these principles have been adapted beyond these early contexts and rise above disciplines and methodologies. We accept them as basic to any endeavour relating to storytelling ethics and they are explored in our EDMF.

This Life's values underpin our approach to storytelling:

- **We Listen.** Listening is a foundational value, whether listening to the people we support in communities, or to each other, or to our supporters and partners. When recording stories, we will ask how we might use the stories and listen to our communities' response. We will respect their wishes and adapt our approach accordingly.
- **We Collaborate.** Our talents and abilities are multiplied when we work together, understanding each other's expertise, respecting each other's contribution and challenging each other to achieve more. We will ensure that any storytelling is collaborative in nature and is guided by the participant rather than led by us.
- **We Have Integrity.** We hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards and are open and accountable to each other, to authorities, to donors and to beneficiaries about what, when, why and how we do things. We will always ask ourselves the most difficult questions to ensure we are using the stories of the communities we serve in the most respectful manner.

Our values are aligned with the Australian Council for International Development's Code of Conduct and our EDMF is connected to other This Life policies, including:

- Communications Policy

- Image Policy
- Child Safeguarding Policy
- Privacy Policy
- Risk Policy
- Disability Policy
- Gender Equality Policy
- Staff Code of Conduct
- Staff Selection and Recruitment Policy

SECTION B: OUR ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK

MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS

Our Ethical Decision-Making Framework (EDMF) for Communications explains how to make ethical decisions when creating and publishing communications content. It uses a framework of structured discussions at ethically important moments during the storytelling process, with the aim of creating focused discussions that improve practice. It also aims to reduce risks associated with storytelling and protect contributors.

Ethical decisions can be very complex. When a situation has no clear ‘right and wrong’ answer, decision making can be difficult. Even more difficult is making ethical decisions when affected by unconscious biases. And everyone holds unconscious biases.

More than one set of cultural norms and organisational values can equally apply to an issue, even if those norms and values are conflicting. This makes decisions difficult, as individuals and teams are forced to choose.

This EDMF sets out important questions and explains when these questions ought to be asked throughout the storytelling process. It also explains who is responsible for having these discussions and what to do if a decision can’t be made.

Ambiguity and uncertainty are part of any ethical decision-making framework, and we encourage exploration of ethically grey areas. Indeed, this exploration is the most important part of the process. Our discussions help us to reach further outward, toward a fuller understanding of our contributors’ lives and contexts – and also of our own unconscious biases, norms and ways of working.

RISK ASSESSMENT

In developing this EDMF, This Life has considered the risks associated with all its communications activities and how they might impact on:

- Contributors and the communities in which we work
- Staff and volunteers across the organisation
- Governing body
- Our partners and contractors
- Supporters and the general public

- Overall activities of This Life
- The reputation of This Life and other ACFID members
- The following on-going risks have been identified:
 - Images of children and domestic violence victims, where the subject is identifiable, can put the subject at increased risk.
 - Once images are published by This Life on digital platforms such as its website and on social media, we cannot control their use by a third party.

This EDMF will be used to guide decision making across the organisation to help mitigate some of the risks mentioned above. It will be shared with partners who are involved in sourcing content for our communications materials, and training will be supplied where appropriate.

WHO'S TALKING TO WHOM?

While all staff, volunteers and members are responsible for ensuring our communications are ethical, lawful and protect contributors, some staff members will need to be involved in specific conversations as part of our EDMF. The staff involved in EDMF discussions are [list those positions as relevant to your organisation]:

Communications team: Including communications specialists, multimedia producers, writers and media relations staff, marketing staff, and their managers.

Program team: Including program staff and their managers.

ETHICALLY IMPORTANT MOMENTS

While all ethical issues should be considered throughout the storytelling process, there are times when certain issues are more important. Below are five 'ethically important' moments during the storytelling and publishing process, accompanied by key issues to discuss at those times and who's responsible for the discussions.

When scoping a story

- Develop a storytelling concept - communications and program teams
- Consider issues of consent - communications and program teams

While gathering content

- Ensure that informed consent has been granted - communications and / or program teams
- Ensure that content is ethical - communications and / or program teams
- Ensure that records of consent are retained - communications team

While creating the storytelling content

- Discuss authorship and ownership - communications and / or program teams

When publishing a story

- Ensure that issues of privacy are considered - communications and program teams

After publishing a story

- Ensure issues of privacy are maintained - communications and program teams

KEY ETHICAL ISSUES

There are six key ethical issues that are relevant for our storytelling and publishing process. Below are some questions to help us reflect on and discuss these issues as part of the decision-making process. Some of these questions may be easy to answer. Others might not have a clear answer and are best considered in conversations with others, as outlined above.

Connection to values

This Life's values

1. Are we listening to the people in the communities we support?
2. Are we collaborating with our beneficiaries to tell their stories more authentically?
3. Are we honest and accountable in our actions?
4. Are we open about our intentions?

Human rights

1. Have we put the best interests of the contributor first?
2. Have we ensured we 'do no harm' to the contributor during the storytelling process?
3. Have we treated the contributor with dignity and fairness?
4. Have we respected the personal freedom and privacy of the contributor?
5. Have we encouraged the contributor to freely express their thoughts and feelings?
6. Have we given the contributor control over how their identity and thoughts are portrayed in their story?
7. Have we ensured the content is accurate?

Children's rights

1. Have we ensured the best interest of children have been put before the interests of adults and our organisation?
2. Have we adequately protected children?
3. Have we respected children's rights to dignity and fairness?

4. Have we attempted to reduce stereotyping of children?
5. Have we treated all children equally?

Women's rights

1. Have we carefully considered how women are portrayed?
2. Have we considered how sex-role stereotyping is portrayed?
3. Have we given voice to women?
4. Are we empowering girls and women through this story?
5. Have we considered the unique protection needs of women in this story?

Disability rights

1. Have we given people with disabilities the opportunity to contribute to this story?
2. Have we considered how ableism has affected this story?
3. Have we carefully considered how people with a disability are portrayed?
4. When published, will this story be accessible to people with disabilities?

Indigenous rights

1. Have we respected indigenous people's rights to dignity and fairness?
2. Have we given indigenous people the ability to freely express themselves, through their own culture and language?
3. Have we considered how racism has affected this story?
4. Have we carefully considered how indigenous people are portrayed?
5. Have we given indigenous people control over how their identity and thoughts are portrayed in their story?

PROTECTION

This Life puts the wellbeing of its stakeholders first. We explain how we protect our stakeholders in our Child Safeguarding Policy, Communications Policy, Privacy Policy and Risk Policy. All staff and stakeholders must uphold these policies. There are no exceptions. However, there are also context-related issues that arise in relation to protection. Our discussions should ask:

Protection of life

- Could the contributor's life be put at risk by sharing their story?
- Do we know enough about the contributor's history to make a confident assessment of their safety?

Protection of health

- Could the contributor's health be put at risk by sharing their story?
- Could the contributor risk being cut off from important services by sharing their story?

Protection of dignity

- Could we be putting the contributor or their community at risk of vilification or retribution by sharing their story?
- Have we considered how the contributor's family, friends and community might feel about the storytelling project?

Informed consent

This Life's informed consent process is clearly defined in the Communications Policy. All staff and stakeholders must follow this process. There are no exceptions. However, there are also context-specific issues that arise in relation to informed consent. Our discussions should ask:

Correct information

- Have we provided all the necessary information to the contributor so they can decide whether to consent to participate?
- Have we shown the contributor appropriate examples of how their story might be used (including where it may be published and who will see it)?
- Have we explained different ways the contributor's identity can be revealed and concealed?
- Have we consulted with the right people (including children's guardians and community elders)?
- Have we informed the subject how long the material will be used for?

Clear comprehension

- Does the contributor fully understand the risks and opportunities associated with sharing and publishing their image and story with our organisation?
- Have we given the contributor enough advance notice about the project so they have time to consider the risks and opportunities?
- Have we explained the storytelling process in a way the contributor fully understands (including children), using the best-possible language?
- Is there a single point of contact for the contributor to discuss the project and any consent issues? Is it easy for the contributor to discuss the project with us?

Voluntary consent

- Is there a power imbalance between the contributor and the organisation?
- If there is a power imbalance, can you describe it?
- If there is a power imbalance, how can we reduce it?
- Is there an element of duress in the contributor's consent?
- If there is an element of duress, how can we address it?
- How can we ensure the contributor can say 'no' to being involved in the storytelling project?

- How can we ensure the contributor can withdraw their consent at any time?

PRIVACY

This Life values and upholds the privacy of its contributors. All staff, governing body members, partners and volunteers must abide by our Privacy Policy. However, there are also context-related issues that arise in relation to privacy. Our discussions should ask:

Protection

- Have we adequately protected the privacy of the contributor?
- Have we discussed how the contributor's story may expose them to the public?
- If appropriate, have we adequately concealed the name, location and visual identity of the contributor?

Information storage

- Have we safely and securely stored the contributor's personal information?
- Does the contributor understand how their personal information is stored and used?

Access to information

- Who has access to the contributor's information and are they aware of who can access it?
- Have we explained how the contributor can access their personal information, make amendments to their story and withdraw consent?

AUTHORSHIP AND OWNERSHIP

We respect the right of contributors to control their stories. We respect the right of contracted writers and photographers to moral ownership of their works. And we acknowledge that ownership and 'control' of stories can raise difficult ethical questions. While we always abide by our Privacy Policy, there are some discussions that can help us understand our responsibilities regarding authorship. Our discussions should ask:

Authorship

- How will contributors and content creators be acknowledged when publishing their stories?
- Does acknowledgement of authorship have implications for the privacy, anonymity or confidentiality assurances given to contributors?
- What ethical obligations do contributors and content creators have to the truthful representation of stories and data?

Copyright

- Who owns the copyright of our storytelling content?
- Are there any conflicting copyright claims for storytelling materials we've published (or seek to publish)?

- How do we ensure contributors and content creators understand their legal rights?

FUZZY BOUNDARIES

We understand the storytelling process is built on relationships, and sometimes the network of relationships is complex. We acknowledge that relational boundaries between contributors, content collectors, program staff and others can become blurred. In addition, the stories they create may be used to serve multiple purposes, such as fundraising, advocacy, and community engagement. This blurring of roles and purposes is referred to as ‘fuzzy boundaries’.

We acknowledge there is the potential for the content-collector role to become blurred in storytelling processes that involve building rapport with contributors. We also acknowledge that this potential is intensified in storytelling projects where content collectors spend significant periods of time engaged in fieldwork. Our discussions should ask:

Content-creator responsibilities

- How should we develop a relationship with the contributor?
- Should we explore how our unconscious biases affect this project? How might we change the storytelling process as a result of exploring our unconscious biases?
- What are the moral responsibilities that fall directly on the content collector?

Other people's responsibilities

- What are the different roles of those involved in the storytelling project?
- Does everyone in the project understand their role and others’ expectations of them?
- How do different people involved in the project see the purpose of the storytelling project? If there are different perspectives, how do we manage any conflicts?

Blurred boundaries

- How do we respect the personal relationships (and possible friendships) developed during the project?
- How do we respond to any blurred roles and relationships during the course of the project?
- What impacts do blurred roles have on the ethical conduct of the project?
- Can content collectors, contributors or others become personally over-invested?

A FEW GOLDEN RULES

During the entire storytelling and publishing process, keep these three questions in mind:

1. If I share this story, will this person be safe?
2. If I share this story, will this person be empowered?
3. If I share this story, will this person feel respected – by themselves and others?

