
ecofriends_ly: A Social Media Campaign to Promote Sustainable Practices in Quito, Ecuador

Raquel Serrano

Laidlaw Scholar 2020

University of Toronto

Index

1. Overview
2. Experience
 - a. Research & training
 - b. Building the programme & training
 - c. Communicating & recruiting
 - d. re_acting & evaluating
 - e. Takeways from trainings
 - f. Inspiration sessions
3. Reflection
4. Recommendations
5. Acknowledgments

1. Overview

Re_action for climate, an initiative launched by the international organization *makesense*, was a Leadership in Action opportunity for interns to take concrete actions to challenge an urgent issue such as climate change and to improve our leadership skills. As re_action interns, we guided a group of volunteers to take concrete action in response to the climate crisis. I spent this past summer in my hometown, Quito, Ecuador and took advantage of my location to design a project that will meet the city's situation regarding climate action and sustainable practices. In particular, I wanted these practices to be shared accordingly to the city's existing programming, rules and regulations, and the social context. This was a unique opportunity to connect with different stakeholders involved in climate action work in Quito. During the first four weeks of the program, my responsibilities included attending and actively taking part in training sessions and designing a re_action project. During the last two weeks of the programme, I led a group of twelve volunteers, and together we worked on a social media campaign (ecofriends_ly) to promote sustainable practices in the city. Ecofriends_ly was borne out of the lack of tailored information on the existing regulations and programming surrounding sustainable practices.

To promote greener practices, we focused our work on four areas: recycling, conservation, education, and politics & economics. Volunteers researched their assigned topic to comprehend its progress in Quito and to look for areas of development. The volunteers designed an extensive social media campaign to relay their research findings to the broader population.

2. Experience

This phase of the programme was categorized into research & training, building the programme & training, communicating & recruiting, and re_acting & evaluating. Below is a description of my learning process in each of the phases mentioned.

Research & training

During this phase of the programme, I learned about *makesense* and re_action and the methodology “design thinking”. This training was invaluable when developing my re_action project to align my ideas and plans with the organization's principles and working strategies.

Beyond the benefits of the training for my re_action project, the workshops also helped me understand the ways in which NGOs do community work. This was an invaluable experience as I'm interested in engaging in this type of work in the future. Learning about makesense and the projects they conduct around the world helped me get a better understanding of the multiples ways in which organizations operate.

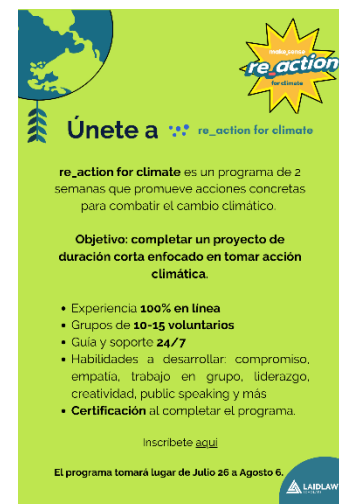
Building the programme & training

During this phase of the programme, I learned about organizations that focused on sustainability and environmental issues in Quito for potential partnership opportunities. This was a constant learning process as it required effective communication skills and organizational strategies when reaching out to NGOs to express my interests and goals. Initially, I felt overwhelmed about this task as I considered that good communication would successfully lead to a positive response from the NGO. As days went by and had no response, I started to question my skills. This experience served me as a reminder that as I should not qualify and quantify my abilities on the outcome of the activities I do.

Communicating & recruiting

During this phase of the program, I learned about recruitment strategies and how to conduct online sessions with volunteers. The training on “virtual facilitation techniques” helped me to identify key points when hosting virtual sessions. For example, strategies to create a safe and welcoming environment for participants to engage with the topics. This training made me think about the previous virtual sessions I have hosted, and this retrospective analysis helped me understand - with real examples - the ways in which moderators can influence the experience that all participants have and to acknowledge areas that need to be improved.

In addition, these weeks' training gave me the skills to design my recruitment posters and communication materials. I was very excited to finally start working on a recruitment campaign. While doing this, I had conversations with my friends and acquaintances on the topic of sustainable practices and how we can engage with them. This allowed me to see that there is much interested in learning about changes we can make in our lifestyles to support climate action work. As I was sharing about re_action for climate online, I had to design



Example of recruitment poster

posters that were concise, attractive, and engaging. I enjoyed doing this as I learned different tools and strategies for effective social media activism and education – skills I consider having much relevance in our technological realities.

re_acting & evaluating

During this phase of the programme, I learned about community action and project management. The evaluation component of this phase was necessary for the improvement of the program. To obtain feedback, I allocated a set time during team meetings for comments and suggestions. This exchange of ideas served us to improve team communication and provided me with the chance to



Team picture

learn from the volunteers. One of the things I have been trying to work on as a leader in the past few months is to trust in the work that my team can do by themselves – which also means to trust in the work that I do as a leader. The re_acting & evaluating phase of the programme allowed me to move away from trying to take on more responsibilities and to transition to a place in which I let my team grow on their individual and collective fullest potential.

Training

The training sessions provided key insights that were useful throughout the programme. For instance, I centred my project on the learnings from “Training #1: re_action methodology & community mobilizing” and “Training #2: Community Mobilization”. These workshops trained me on design thinking and its effectiveness when conducting community work.

My main takeaways from the training, listed below, are insights that I can take with me and put into practice in my academic and extracurricular activities.

Main takeaways:

1. The user is the center of the design. Co-design with the user. Don’t assume their needs.
2. There is more than one solution to a problem. There are many ways to make an impact.
3. Community empowerment comes from within not the outside to act collectively to make social and political changes.

Inspiration sessions

The inspiration sessions offered the chance to learn from experts that have been part of the climate action movement in different ways. Some of my main takeaways include:

1. We all have a responsibility to the environment.
2. The youth have a lot of potential in climate action work.
3. Both local and regional/international work is necessary to tackle the different factors that contribute to climate change.

3. Reflection

I have always been a hands-on project type of person. I enjoy and prefer working with communities directly. As opposed to working on an already designed project, through the re_action programme I designed and executed a project of my own. Having the freedom to choose the topic also allowed me to choose the communities I wanted to work with. Overall, this experience has been significant to further develop my skills, explore my interests, and contribute to climate action work.

As the largest demographic of the population, youth can be the catalyst for change. The re_action for climate programme supported youth engagement in climate advocacy by promoting work between leaders and volunteers. This was an incredible opportunity for volunteers to take action by learning about the city's situation regarding sustainable practices and working alongside others that share similar interests. This experience also allowed me to successfully lead a group of volunteers by providing me with the knowledge and strategies needed to guide our team. While I was not able to finalize partnership with a local NGO, I consider this aspect of the programme to be of importance as it fosters partnerships, grassroots initiatives, and community-based activities.

While the youth can lead social change in our small and large communities, there is still much uncertainty as to how exactly we can achieve this. While community work is necessary, we should also hold accountable those who have contributed to climate change (multinationals, corporations, the Global North). It should not be just on the younger generations and marginalized communities to carry out initiatives to address the



Examples of social media posts

many problems that our societies face. While these groups can take action, other stakeholders need to actively do the work too. For this reason, an important element of this programme should be to partner with other local stakeholders (NGOs, social groups, unions, private sector, public sector) to involve other important actors than solely the civil society. During this internship, I would have liked to partner with a local NGO to 1) support the work they are doing, 2) contribute to their projects, 3) use their networks to reach out to a wider audience. This type of partnership balances the involvement of the individual at that of other stakeholders. In turn, collaborations can create a system of change that meets the needs and demands of all parts.

Designing a re_action project also meant that I needed to be critical of my ideas to avoid perpetuating environmental/racial/gender inequality and injustices. This experience also served as a chance to look beyond *what I can do* to think about *how I do things and with whom*. Participating in the re_action for climate programme has been an incredible learning opportunity that has given me a lot of knowledge and has let me practice and further develop my skills. As a whole, the programme has been a unique chance to explore my passions, learn from others, and challenge myself to do better.

Although the programme has officially ended, I am excited and proud that a group of volunteers are interested in extending the duration of our social media campaign. As a leader, this has reinforced my desire to continue working on climate action and community work. I look forward to working with them and furthering our campaign.

4. Recommendations

The programme can be improved by extending its duration to 8 weeks. As the planning part of the project requires several steps (training workshops, researching, networking, among others), having more time to complete them would be ideal. Especially, to find a partner NGO as this process takes more time to finalize and can make the re_action project more impactful. The second part of the programme, reacting & evaluating, could be highly benefitted by this extension as each group would have more time for training sessions and execution of their concrete actions.

Even though working in pairs may be beneficial when working on projects that will take place in the same location, it might also limit a scholar's plans as they would need to match the other scholar's ideas too. For the first 2 weeks of the programme, I was matched with a fellow scholar, and it was challenging for us to work on a project together as we were located in different contexts. For this reason, I decided to work by myself, and this allowed me to make more progress in terms of daily and weekly tasks while adhering to the unique needs of Quito. As such, I recommend letting the scholars choose if they want to co-develop a project or work on it by themselves.

5. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation and maksense, and in particular Deborah Moreno and Ailed Ortiz, for organizing this Leadership in Action opportunity. Thank you to Shraddha Prasad, the University of Toronto Laidlaw Supervisor, for her support throughout the summer. Thank you to all the volunteers for being so enthusiastic and ready to make an impact.