

Laidlaw Programme Leadership in Action (LIA) Reflection

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Title of LIA Project:	Improving impact on addressing poverty and supporting sustainable development: Planning and financial reviews with Christians Against Poverty and Christian Aid

Christians Against Poverty

During my Laidlaw Leadership in Action internship, I had the privilege of spending four transformative weeks at Christians Against Poverty (CAP), an international faith-based charity headquartered in Bradford, UK.



Christians Against Poverty (CAP) is a dynamic and compassionate international faith-based charity with a clear and unwavering mission: to eradicate poverty in the United Kingdom. CAP achieves this ambitious goal through a multifaceted approach that combines practical support, financial expertise, and a network of partnering churches. Their work encompasses a wide range of services, including debt counselling and management, financial education, job training, and community engagement. CAP empowers individuals and families facing financial hardship, equipping them with the tools and knowledge to break free from the cycle of poverty. By collaborating with churches and volunteers, CAP extends its reach and impact, making a tangible difference in the lives of those struggling with poverty and financial insecurity. Through their holistic and inclusive approach, CAP not only addresses immediate financial challenges but also strives to create lasting, positive change for vulnerable communities across the UK.

During the 4 weeks, I gained valuable insights into leadership, strategy, and organizational dynamics. Being immersed in the daily operations of such a dynamic and impactful organization allowed me to witness first-hand the intricacies of effective leadership and strategic decision-making.

I was fortunate to have a rare opportunity to collaborate closely with the Director of Strategy and Insights during my internship. This direct reporting connection not only enabled me to integrate deeply into the organization but also granted me a panoramic view of CAP's intricate operations. My principal assignment throughout this period centred on conducting an extensive evaluation of CAP's planning procedures.

CAP had faced two challenging years due to the economic conditions and has been particularly hit as it relies on the goodwill of donations. This year it has decided to have an interim-strategy year due to changes throughout the organisation's resources, processes and projects. The review I undertook was therefore, particularly timely for the challenges CAP currently faces as it will aid in understanding how it can achieve its vision and impact, more efficiently.

To achieve this, I actively collaborated with teams across the Strategy and Insights department, interacting with professionals spanning from project managers to data analysts. This multifaceted engagement afforded me a comprehensive grasp of the varied roles and responsibilities that collectively propel the organization forward.

I felt immediately welcome and comfortable at CAP, which I found to be a truly remarkable experience. It was an environment where the warmth of the people and the organization's values come together seamlessly to create an atmosphere that feels like home. From day one, I sensed a genuine sense of belonging and support, which not only eased my transition but also allowed me to thrive in my work. The openness, support, and shared dedication to CAP's mission created a sense of unity that was both uplifting and motivating.



In particular, I noticed how people took the time to show curiosity to who you are as a person and always lift one another up. Furthermore, people were not shy to share a challenge or difficulty they were experiencing with the team, which was always met by support and encouragement.

Each week, the strategy and insight team have a '3Ps' session where any team member could volunteer to talk about their progress, plan and problems in a particular area. I found that having this dedicated space for each team member to talk about a current challenge, regardless of their seniority, was a way of building a team culture where everyone's ideas were valued. I came to understand the value of individuals being their authentic selves and the positive impact this can have on an organization.

This welcoming culture enabled me to contribute my best, knowing that my ideas and contributions were valued. It has instilled in me, the power of a positive work culture in fostering collaboration, personal growth, and a profound sense of fulfilment.

My review of planning processes was a multifaceted project that involved both understanding the current planning process throughout the organisation, identifying the challenges that at present and suggest practical improvements as well as presenting what the planning process has the potential to enable if improved. This involved reading and reviewing strategic documents, governance papers and organisational guidance, as well as speaking to both experts within the Strategy & Insights team, and managers throughout the organisation who undertake a planning process each year.

These efforts culminated in producing a comprehensive report containing a clear overview of the current planning process, its challenges, potential and tangible recommendations for improvements. Furthermore, I also presented in the report topics or questions for discussion amongst senior leaders.

One of the most pivotal leadership skills I cultivated during my time at CAP was the confidence to ask pertinent questions to the right individuals. My innate curiosity was an asset as I integrated myself into a new community and organisation, having to gain a good grasp of a detailed process in a relatively short period. Balancing directness with respect was crucial when challenging or enquiring the current ways of working, and although at times I found this stressful to manage, I was extremely proud to have had this skill recognised as a big asset in my final feedback with my manager.

As I deepened my understanding of CAP's strategic planning processes, my confidence naturally grew, affording me the credibility to suggest ideas and offer my opinions.

On more than one occasion, I was able to put into practice the skills learned from my Circle coaching qualification. One memorable instance was when a conversation went off-track and I assisted a project manager in working through their decisioning to prioritise their project's scope amidst competing interests. This was a wonderful experience for me, as one of my goals is to be able to bring the best out of other people and support them in achieving their goals.

The culmination of my internship was the creation of a 15-page report on strategic planning processes. I shared this report with colleagues in the Strategy & Insight team, as well as presenting my findings to the Strategic Planning Board. This work aimed to lay the foundation for broader organizational changes, including improved resource management through enhanced planning and collaboration. The report summarised the primary challenges facing CAPs strategic planning process into 4 categories:

- Feedback loops and Cohesion
- Capturing BAU alongside transformative workstreams

- Strategic thinking in its culture
- Change management & Informed decisions

During my LIA with CAP, I was able to achieve all 3 SMART goals I set for this period. Through immersing myself in the organisations culture and speaking to international offices in Australia and New Zealand, I was able to develop my international cultural awareness.

For my second goal, I generated a well-structured and informative review of CAP's planning process which included areas for improvement, and practical recommendations. For instance, I highlighted inefficiencies in the planning of resource allocation and proposed ways to improve the capture of timely information, allowing CAP to more efficiently utilise its resources and therefore, maximize its impact on alleviating poverty.

Regarding the third goal, I designed and implemented an easy-to-use and efficient departmental OKR (Objectives and Key Results) template using Google Forms in the final week with CAP. This template enabled more information to be captured when departments submit their OKR's, while prompting managers to think collaboratively and cohesively. This streamlined approach facilitated the tracking and analysis of progress toward goals, making it easier for CAP to align its efforts with its mission. For instance, this template allowed the Strategy and Insights team to monitor the achievement of key objectives and adjust quarterly priorities, accordingly, ensuring the longer-term strategic thinking is maintained.

My experience at CAP was unique and had a personal impact to how I will work in the future. The organisation's strong faith-based culture, which included designated prayer times during the workweek, enriched my personal development by giving a clear space to reflect, think and try to let go of any anxieties or stresses. I intend to continue this practice as it provided moments of reflection and renewal.

My time with CAP also broadened my cultural awareness. During the 4 weeks, I spoke with managers in other offices including New Zealand and Scotland, to understand a single organisation is able to embed a culture in different countries. Through these conversations, I learned how vital the words that are used can be to be either subconsciously inclusive or exclusive, and the huge importance in contextualising inequalities. When speaking to a colleague in the New Zealand office about the work they're doing to develop understanding throughout the organisation of some of the contextualisation to poverty in New Zealand, which disproportionately impacts the indigenous Māori people, we could not help but both be moved realising the true meaning to a single person when someone takes the time to pronounce their name correctly, or doesn't negatively change their tone upon realising their heritage. This was both a saddening realisation, and something tangible I will always endeavour to put effort into in the future as peoples names are peoples identities and they so often do represent where a person has come from, their ethnicity, culture and heritage.



Christian Aid

Following my 4 weeks with CAP, based in the Bradford office, I undertook a project with Christian Aid for 2 weeks, based in the London head office and working remotely with a data analyst based in Kenya. During this time, I focused on analysing the accuracy of their international programme's budgets. The purpose of this work was to improve their understanding of how they can better predict costings, and formed part of a larger ongoing piece of work which looks to review their budgeting process.



I found these 2 weeks an incredibly challenging, yet incredibly rewarding experience. My primary task involved reviewing 14 international programs, meticulously analysing their budgets and comparing these to actual expenditures of this year. Initially, my role was data-centric, but I recognized the opportunity to provide more substantial value by going beyond mere data processing. Consequently, I embarked on developing a RAG rating for the predictability of each country budgeting with a short rationale. This project culminated in a delivering a 1-hour presentation, followed by a 1 hour workshop/discussion with senior leaders. This included the Chief Operations Officer, Chief of Finance, and Director of International Programs.

Throughout my project, I reported to both the Head of Finance and the Director of Strategy and Global Changes. I found this to be a seamless continuation in the development of my confidence working with senior leaders that I had gained at Christians Against Poverty. As

well as, affording me an opportunity to understand Christian Aids global reach, and some of the diverse organisational challenges it confronts worldwide.

During these 2 weeks, the SMART goals I set had to be adapted to accommodate the limitations of the data available, and a shift in focus from the organisation's leadership. Therefore, instead of focusing on fundraising, my project focused on costs as part of a wider aim to best try predicting Christian Aids income and costs, to enable efficient allocation. What I was able to achieve was a clear overview of the costings and areas of variability in costs, throughout the international programmes.

Furthermore, I was able to produce a standardised decisioning methodology which enables international programmes budget predictability to be categorised. And, the variation analysis I undertook can be repeated in other specific areas of interest.

While the SMART goals I set were not directly achieved, I maintained focus on creating understandable and accessible analysis which will aid in effective planning and empower managers to make informed decisions.

One of the pivotal leadership skills I honed was scope and expectation management. Given the tight timeline of just 2 weeks, and the depth of analysis required, prioritizing tasks based on impact and necessity proved essential to achieving meaningful outcomes within constraints. I didn't necessarily put this at the forefront of my work from day 1, and by the end of the first week had to really focus what outputs I wanted to achieve and work to extremely tight deadlines. The reason I pushed myself to get this work finished was although I could complete the analysis in time, in order for it to be meaningful and to inform decisions, I wanted to ensure it was clear and accessible for people from a variety of backgrounds. The trend and variance analysis I conducted provided a high-level overview of the performance of Christian Aid's 14 international programs' budgets, enabling the organization to categorize and understand cost implications more effectively.



One of my most profound takeaways from my experience with Christian Aid was the importance of flexibility and adaptability. Being open to adjusting my goals and setting realistic targets has been highlighted.



Conclusion

Reflecting on both my experiences at CAP and Christian Aid, I've grown more comfortable engaging with diverse stakeholders and integrating into different cultural environments. Overall, these experiences have fortified my confidence in my ability to effect positive change and drive meaningful impact within organizations, solve problems and enable leaders to make data-driven decisions.

During this experience, I learned about fostering collaboration, inspiring change, and navigating complex challenges with respect and curiosity. Moreover, delving into the strategic planning processes of CAP provided me with a deep appreciation for the importance of aligning an organization's goals with its resources and capabilities. This experience not only expanded my knowledge but also instilled in me a heightened sense of purpose in contributing to meaningful and sustainable change within organizations. My Leadership in Action was a transformative journey that has equipped me with invaluable skills and perspectives to carry forward in my future endeavours.

Following my Leadership in Action, my career aspirations have solidified, and I am now more confident than ever that I can forge a career centred around change management. I have gained hands-on experience in finding and presenting solutions to complex challenges for large organisations and demonstrated my capacity to influence and collaborate with senior leaders from diverse backgrounds and across cultural boundaries. This experience has set me on a path to drive meaningful change in the organizations I engage with in the future.

During this LIA, I believe I have shown the following skills:

- Learns continually
- Able to listen with understanding
- Strong intellectual ability
- Builds relationships and networks

In both of my projects, I had to quickly gain a good understanding of the specific challenge and current organisational landscape. This was done through asking insightful questions and using my intellectual curiosity to identify challenges and define tangible recommendations for improvement. Furthermore, I adapted throughout my LIA to new information, particularly during my 2 weeks with Christian Aid, when new priorities arose. Lastly, through seeking out and arranging unique LIA projects with international, UK-based charities, I have been able to use both my personal and professional network to find the opportunity with both CAP and Christian Aid.

During my LIA I have developed the following skills:

- Able to lead without authority – Despite being a volunteer with no ‘authority’, I was working on projects which required the buy-in and acceptance from senior leaders, in order to achieve a clear impact. Therefore, during my LIA, I was able to become more comfortable leading without authority and leading in a room with far more senior people.
- Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy – In both of my projects, I had the privilege of working with culturally rich and diverse organisations. In addition, I was able to have focused conversations with leaders from international offices who were able to recognise both the differences and similarities within an organisation, around the world.
- Knows own limitations and acts accordingly and Prioritises activities and manages own time – During the time-constrained project with Christian Aid, I developed my awareness of what is realistic in a short-timeframe. Particularly, when this includes familiarising myself with a new organisation. In order to overcome this, I had to prioritise activities and in particular, decide questions which could not be answered in the time-frame.
- Speaks and writes clearly and confidently – A huge development in my presentation skills was leading a 1-hour presentation of the work I had undertaken at Christian Aid, to senior leaders and management. Being able to do this to a multi-disciplinary audience and receive positive feedback throughout has propelled my confidence.
- Capitalises on the power of diversity – Throughout my project with CAP, I tried to ensure that I consulted with a wide variety of people to gather a range of perspectives. It was particularly interesting to identify both commonalities and differences in the challenges that were identified.
- Able to navigate new and foreign situations – When working with both charities, I needed to gain a grasp of the organisation in an accelerated timescale. I found I was able to effectively do this through respectful curiosity and quickly building trust with the team and manager I was working with.
- Able to analyse data and interpret results – This skill was the core of my work for Christian Aid which required the application of a wide range of data analysis skills from my undergraduate degree.

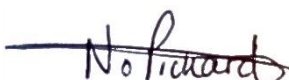
Project Leader – Rebecca Bayliss – Director of Strategy & Insights CAP

Natasha worked alongside me to review our organisation's strategic and planning processes. She was thorough, insightful and sensitive throughout. Natasha was quick to understand the task and to get to grips with the processes we have and how they are used. Right from the first day of her placement Natasha brought a high level of discernment and asked perceptive questions. She was comfortable to challenge me about our existing ways of working and did so with great maturity and skill in order to bring real value to the insights she was sharing. She exhibited a high level of intellectual curiosity and paired this well with emotional intelligence. At the end of her placement, Natasha gave a confident presentation to senior leaders (including a Director and a Trustee), this was well planned, clearly articulated and she handled questions with confidence in her insights and a real awareness of business decision making at the highest level. Throughout the placement, I have been impressed with the value of what Natasha has provided for us. Natasha was a great addition to the team, and fully contributed towards team culture during her placement. I enjoyed that she shared her perspectives and understanding to the benefit of other team members work packages. I would encourage Natasha to continue to develop and lean into the wider relational parts of leadership, those cross organisational relationships. We saw less of this in her placement, in part because the task required it less, but I also suspect there is a bit of a pull towards what is comfortable.

Natasha, your business and in particular strategic understanding is well grounded, and you naturally see opportunity to apply this to bring real value. Trust in that and stretch yourself! Thank you very much for all your work with us at CAP.

Rebecca Baylis
Head of Strategy and Insight, CAP
24.8.23

Signature of Scholar:



Date: 23/09/2023

Leadership Attributes

Able to lead without authority

Able to convey purpose and build coalitions

Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy

Honestly assess own knowledge/leadership style/preferences

Knows own limitations and acts accordingly

Learns continually

Speaks and writes clearly and confidently

Able to listen with understanding

Uses digital connectivity

Makes effective decisions in complex environments

Seeks out and fosters innovation and creativity

Strong intellectual ability

Turns ideas into action

Builds relationships and networks

Works collaboratively and across boundaries

Uses emotional intelligence to achieve this

Capitalises on the power of diversity

Able to navigate new and foreign situations

Uses this to build relationships and networks

Has energy and impact

Makes things happen

Able to analyse data and interpret results

Able to work and think independently

Prioritises activities and manages own time