

## ***"Street-Smart" – Summary of Leadership-in-Action project in Romania***

My six weeks in Romania were **ICE**: insightful, challenging, and enlightening. They were transparent and open, solid with knowledge, and passed quickly under the hot August sun, just like ice. During this time, I had the privilege of mentoring a group of six teenagers who had been under the care of the NGO since infancy. These young individuals came from diverse backgrounds, each with their unique stories, interests, hobbies, passions, and dreams. Working with them proved to be a profoundly transformative experience that shaped both my personal and professional self.



The project, "Street-Smart," had two distinct components. The **academic** side involved combining classroom-based learning with skill-building and hands-on experiences. This approach aimed to explore sensitive topics in a relaxed and open environment, providing these teenagers with the opportunity to acquire knowledge and real-life skills to unlock their full potential. The **personal** side of the project focused on developing interpersonal abilities and self-growth. It involved working with the children to shape their mindsets, behaviours, and relationships within the project.

I had outlined **three major objectives** for the project:

1. Promoting healthy responsible behaviours and lifestyles.
2. Improving knowledge and attitudes regarding sexual and reproductive health.
3. Create a relaxed and non-judgmental environment where teenagers can explore interests.

Did I achieve all of them? Yes! I can confidently affirm that my efforts have paid off, and all proposed objectives were met. Moreover, I had the opportunity to guide them as while they navigated the challenges they had faced since arriving at the center. I was able to identify some personal issues that require more careful consideration. Now, it is crucial to observe whether they will take my feedback into account and strive to become better versions of themselves.

However, like all projects, there were both **highs and lows**. In terms of challenges, as a highly focused project leader, I felt that I may have rushed through the academic part without giving



enough attention to the personal side in the initial stages of the project. This resulted in a somewhat distant and colder relationship with the teenagers than I had initially intended. In retrospect, I wish I had invested more time in getting to know each individual personally, rather than focusing solely on group dynamics. Building one-on-one relationships with the children could have encouraged them to open more than they did. Nonetheless, given the short time, I prioritized preparing them for the real world through education. In the future, I might opt for a different approach and method of action.

**Leadership** played a crucial role in my experience, leading to valuable reflections. Firstly, effective communication was vital in a new setting where taking the lead was necessary. Always being open and willing to collaborate was key. Secondly, an effective leader should also function as a team player, acting more as a member rather than an authority figure. This fosters better group dynamics and enhances overall performance. Emphasizing friendship and camaraderie within the team is more valuable, as it creates a safe and inclusive space for individuals to express themselves. It exudes warmth and understanding, making people more receptive to feedback, even constructive criticism.

My **mantra** throughout this journey has been "Aspire to inspire." In summary, this experience has been incredibly rewarding. Making small yet impactful contributions to this group of young people, I also gained a deeper understanding of myself. Among my most significant achievements were discovering my flexibility, my ability to be inclusive, and my empathetic nature when dealing with sensitive individuals. I surprised myself with my patience and understanding, particularly in challenging situations. However, I also realized that I can sometimes be overly indulgent, leading people to attempt to manipulate my kindness. For the future, I plan to work on better filtering my judgments of others' characters and behaviours, finding a balance between acknowledging their backgrounds without allowing that to unduly influence my decisions.