

# Leadership in Action Reflection: Lessons from Latin America



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*

Rebekah Caulfield

University of York

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and thank those who have made this experience possible: the Laidlaw Foundation for making this entire project possible through their generosity, the University of York for supporting myself and other scholars throughout this experience, and their commitment to widening participation. Finally, I would like to thank our project hosts Make Sense, for demonstrating the value of empathy driven leadership.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> July I left the UK to embark upon a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Latin America, working with organisations to empower minority communities in Mexico City. The richness of this experience is too great to distil into several hundred words. Instead, I will describe a few experiences and lessons which shaped my time in Mexico City. These come under two key themes, the intersectionality of socio-environmental issues, and achieving change. Before I begin, there are a few important things to note:

Firstly, six weeks of cultural immersion does not make me an expert on the needs of the communities I worked with, and I do not intend to speak on their behalf. Instead, I reflect only upon the snapshot of what I have listened and learnt directly from individuals from disadvantaged groups, and organisations who work tirelessly to provide solutions to the challenges faced by these communities.

Secondly, I am aware that we cannot change the world in six weeks. It is important to avoid oversimplifying complex social issues to something that can be 'solved' in a short timescale, a common assumption of short-term global projects. Equally, we must hold optimism and belief that change is happening, and we can contribute to this through both empowering and facilitating the empowerment of others.



*Urban neighbourhood in Mexico City*

## **Intersectionality of Socio-Environmental Issues**

On beginning the project with my teams' organisation IRRI, I expected the focus to be solely on community empowerment. I was both surprised and inspired by IRRI's focus on environmental solutions to social problems. These highlighted to me the strong intersectionality between social issues e.g., poverty and discrimination, and environmental issues, with marginalised communities often being those most impacted by climate change.

Through preliminary research of the organisation and discussions with IRRI, it was clear they were committed to creating both practical and sustainable solutions to rural and indigenous groups across Mexico. Typically, interactions between social and environmental issues are negative, however IRRI's creative approach demonstrates that environmentally sustainable solutions can help to reduce social issues. Examples include utilising biodigestors to create clean energy in rural homes. Women of these households consequently have free time (previously used to gather fuel) to gain entrepreneurial skills facilitated by IRRI, both cutting carbon emissions and creating financial autonomy amongst these women.

This experience has given me a newfound optimism towards the possibility of creating change in both local and global contexts. Although the issues we face today are complex, taking the time to deeply understand their interactions (e.g., discrimination and climate change) can inspire intersecting solutions which change across numerous challenges.

### **Achieving Change**

Prior to my arrival in Mexico- I had lots of ideas and opinions about what I wanted to do, filled with excitement at the thought of empowering a local community. My mind raced with questions of how I could help make a difference. Working with IRRI taught me the power of rephrasing the statement: 'what can I do to achieve change', to, 'what can we do to achieve change'?

The 'we' in question referred to various stakeholders: the disadvantaged groups, who are experts on the issues they face, IRRI, who have years of experience creating solutions to these issues, and crucially, the local volunteers, who cared, but did not have access to the rural groups in question. These volunteers were the key to allowing our actions towards community empowerment to be sustained after our time in Latin America ended.



*Volunteers working alongside rural farmers in Mexico City*

Through the conceptual shift from 'I' to 'we', the goal of community empowerment was achieved in a far richer way than my team could have achieved alone. Collaboration between the stakeholders mentioned, we were able to go beyond only empower the beneficiaries of IRRI by documenting their experiences and sharing these with a wider online platform. Together, we facilitated a sustained change by giving volunteers the opportunity to learn directly from rural farmers who face social issues such as water insecurity.



*Collaborating with local NGOs and volunteers to learn from and document the stories of rural farmers in Mexico City.*

By supporting volunteers to visit and interviewed rural farmers, and running reflective sessions with them, we equipped volunteers to come face to face with issues faced by people in their local community, to reflect on these issues, and to do something about it through spreading awareness of IRRI with other local individuals at the community event. During this time, we facilitated independent connections between local people and IRRI.

We understand the solutions to social problems, some of which the global north must take responsibility for, are held by local people who care about their communities. Instead through empowering local people, we were able to leave behind a positive impact outlasting our stay in Latin America.



*My team and volunteers creating awareness of IRRI and its benefactors in a stall aimed to engage residents of the urban central of Mexico City in the issues tackled by IRRI.*

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I left Mexico with a deeper understanding of the complexity scale of the challenges faced by today's global community, and an optimistic outlook on the solutions to these issues. My team was able to support others to confront the realities of individuals in their communities, tell the stories, and inspire change from within a community. What a privilege to do so. Change created independently is limited in impact as it relies upon you, but by inspiring and facilitating others, change becomes sustainable.

Beyond the experience of making change in Mexico City, I end my reflection with what my time in Mexico City has given me: a love for the culture, hospitality and kindness of the Mexican people.

