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# Leadership-in-Action Report

Six-Week Internship in Social Innovation: Engaging in Projects on Education, Employment, and Entrepreneurship



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## 1 Introduction

The motto of the Laidlaw Foundation, "*Because education changes lives*", resonated with me the first time I encountered it while learning about the program. From that moment, I knew that if I had the honor of becoming a scholar, I would dedicate my Leadership-In-Action to this cause. Thus, it was only natural that I chose the Social Innovation Lab at the UM6P campus in Morocco for my six-week internship.

The SIL is indeed a start-up of University Mohammed VI Polytechnic which is focused on finding innovative solutions to social issues on almost all domains, should it be agriculture, entrepreneurship or education. With more than 26 ongoing projects, SIL works directly with local partners and populations to meet specific socio-economic needs, and ensures that the actions implemented are sustainable and long-lasting.

I chose the same project as Jordane Provin-Corre (*la gazelle*), another EPFL Laidlaw scholar who quickly became my friend after I met her through the program a year ago. Had I been traveling alone, my first journey outside Europe would have been scarier, but being accompanied did not lessen the discoveries or uncertainties that are part of traveling.

I quickly had the pleasure of realizing that some stereotypes about Moroccans are true; they are in fact the most welcoming and sympathetic people I have ever met, which ensured that our arrival on campus was under optimal conditions.

Over the 6-weeks, Jordane and I worked as an independent team on various projects aimed at supporting emerging local cooperatives, educational excellence, improving the employability and mental health of young people. Therefore, we decided to write this report collaboratively, with the exception of the personal reflections on our individual experiences.



## 2 Massarates Cooperative Program

The Massarates program is an ambitious and innovative initiative targeting cooperative groups consisting of at least five people from the Rhamna province. It is intended for individuals with project ideas (autonomous associations) or cooperatives that have already been established within the past year.

The program Massarates Cooperatives aims at promoting economic development and entrepreneurship. By supporting the formation and growth of cooperatives, the program seeks to empower local communities, especially women, by providing them with the necessary skills and resources (i.e legal recognition) to succeed.

The program runs over 18 months, during which participants undergo various stages, including candidature, on-boarding, pre-creation, creation of the cooperative and post-creation support. Once selected, participants attend workshops that include themes such as integration, initiation to the cooperative model, profiling and diagnostic sessions.

Jordane and I were present with one group at “*la Plateforme des Jeunes*” where participants received thematic training and engaged in prototyping of their cooperative creation. During the various stages of the process, they benefit from personalized coaching and technical assistance.

Indeed, we supported the candidates in identifying and addressing the specific needs of each cooperative. The creation stage then focused on the legal aspects and formal establishment, ensuring that the cooperatives operate within the legal framework.



Contributing to the Massarates Cooperatives Program was really rewarding, as our efforts had visible impacts in the field. However, this experience was also demanding due to the participants' diverse age groups and educational backgrounds. The main challenge was thus making the training accessible to everyone.

The most difficult aspect of the project was overcoming the language barrier, as most participants did not speak French. Nevertheless, I managed to communicate effectively by engaging in open discussions about cooperative creation and their various goals.



### 3 Educational Xcellence

We were then given the opportunity to work on an entire project independently, even selecting its name: Educational Xcellence. EX aims at providing support and educational programs to students at four different Moroccan universities, helping them achieve excellence in teaching.

Based on the needs they provided, we focused our program on four main objectives:

1. **Social, psychological and academic support tools for students:** We established “*cellules d’écoute*” in each of the four universities, where students can meet with social professionals, such as psychologists and therapists, both in-person and through confidential online consultations. Monthly conferences will also be organized to raise awareness about mental health, covering topics like recognizing signs of depression and managing anxiety. Additionally, first-year students will benefit from coaching groups led by older students who will organize social events and campus tours. A mentorship system will also provide academic support and guidance.
2. **Promotion & monitoring of entrepreneurial projects:** Competitions in computer science, agriculture, and architecture will encourage innovative projects. The most promising ones will receive both financial and academic support through entrepreneurial guidance and subsequent training from professionals to aid their development and implementation.
3. **Enhancement of student employability:** Internship opportunities with both industries and laboratories will be listed in a system to facilitate the application process for students. In parallel, company visits will be arranged to broaden students’ perspectives and provide insights into various fields of work.
4. **Sustainability & durability of projects implemented:** To ensure the continuity and durability of the projects, EX will train professors and educational staff to enable them to take part in and maintain the initiatives, thus ensuring long-term impact.

For each goal, we designed workshops and infrastructures that can be sustainably implemented in host universities, detailing the necessary resources and providing a comprehensive step-by-step implementation plan for swift enactment.

As mentioned earlier, we were entirely responsible for this project. While it was thrilling to be entrusted with such a significant task, I often felt unprepared and regretted the lack of oversight we experienced. Despite my pride in the outcomes, I believe our project could have greatly benefited from the insights of more experienced professionals.

However, this experience underscored that stepping out of our comfort zone is crucial for learning. I was able to develop my management skills, and learned how to implement social innovation effectively, ultimately realizing how to make a genuine impact.

## 4 Impact Academy

The Impact Academy project initially aimed at enhancing the employability of youth, women, and people with disabilities across eight communes. It was structured with several formations providing training in soft skills and collective intelligence to support the professional integration of beneficiaries. The goal was to achieve a 15% employability rate by the end of September.

However, the project faced significant challenges, including a very low participation rate, with only 1 to 5 people attending out of 25 registered. This resulted in no measurable impact on youth employability, demotivation among the trainers, and losses in financial, human, and catering resources.

To address these issues, after a brainstorming session, the project manager asked us to implement an urgent action plan. We designed a new project proposal under the project manager's supervision. The revised plan included conducting three consecutive days of training sessions each month for each group from the eight communes directly at the UM6P campus. Each training session, consisting of six modules (two per day), would last a total of three months, with accommodation, meals, and evening cultural activities fully covered.

The new approach ensured guaranteed attendance and follow-up for each participant by providing an attractive training environment, passive publicity through returning beneficiaries, a concrete increase in employability, and quick project implementation with easily accessible facilities.

Following the success of this proposal, which received positive feedback, we were asked to create various forms to collect feedback from the participants and propose individual assignments to be completed during the training. These were organized into a comprehensive drive with explanations, content, and templates that provide instructors with useful resources for designing and teaching the modules.

The project provided valuable experiences in project management, proposal defense, and the development and participation in the training content, leading to a successful and impactful outcome.

## 5 Project proposal: Mental health in Morocco

During our stay in Morocco, we took the opportunity to travel outside of Ben Guerir on weekends. During these trips, we engaged in conversations with Moroccans from diverse backgrounds. One recurring topic in these discussions was the handling of mental health in the country.

I discovered that mental health remains a taboo subject in Morocco, both publicly and privately. Friends shared how individuals with mental illnesses are often labeled as crazy and not taken seriously when they seek help. This lack of psychological and medical support leads to their exclusion from society and a worsening of their symptoms.

After hearing multiple similar personal experiences, I decided to delve deeper into the issue, as mental health is a cause close to my heart. I experienced burnout during my first year at EPFL, along with daily anxiety attacks for two years. Since then, I have committed to advocating for the recognition and de-stigmatization of mental health, especially among young people.

Thus, we decided to conduct a case study on mental health in Morocco. We gathered information on relevant statistics, national research, existing action plans and current challenges.

With an understanding of the situation, we designed a project proposal to promote mental health in secondary schools (middle and high schools). This involved health professionals leading interactive awareness and communication workshops. The main objectives of our campaign, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, are to define good practices in mental health, de-stigmatize mental disorders, encourage teenagers to seek help, recognize when they need support, and inform them about available resources.

To ensure our project's sustainability, we planned to train teachers and educators on mental health. This would enable them to provide continuous support and quickly identify and assist teenagers experiencing difficult family situations or those who are victims of violence or harassment.

This project has been incredibly special to me. When I first conceived the idea, I was so excited and eager to implement it that I could not fall asleep. While I still have much to learn in this field, working on mental health has felt like discovering a vocation in public health. It has allowed me to uncover a new part of myself, where I am confident in defending my values and ideas.

## 6 Personal outcomes and leadership development

My time in Morocco was both rewarding and challenging. I had the privilege of contributing to the Massarates Cooperatives program and engaging in initiatives like Educational Excellence and Impact Academy. Additionally, I worked on designing our own project focused on mental health advocacy. These experiences not only made a tangible difference in education and employment but also allowed me to further develop my leadership abilities, including communication, problem-solving, and project management.

One of the key lessons I learned was the importance of taking initiative, recognizing community needs, and offering support proactively. Taking on major responsibilities without constant supervision was challenging but ultimately helped me grow and learn.

These projects underscored the importance of fluid communication and the necessity of fostering a collaborative team dynamic. Through these experiences, I developed a better grasp of the challenges associated with social innovation and realized how crucial effective teamwork is for success.

Immersing myself in a new environment also gave me a greater appreciation for diverse perspectives and underscored the importance of respecting and valuing different cultures and viewpoints.

I did face challenges, particularly with language barriers, which sometimes led to communication issues. However, Moroccans are incredibly welcoming and warm, and our interactions with team members were very positive. We were even fortunate enough to participate in a three-day team-building event a week after our arrival in Ben Guerir.



## 7 Acknowledgements

I cannot stress enough how grateful I am for my friend Aïda and her family who have welcomed us during a week-end in their home and made us feel as if we were a part of Morocco. We spent an unforgettable weekend immersed in Moroccan culture, from visiting a luxurious hostel and the animated Jemaa el Fna square at night to exploring the Atlas Mountains and their local Amlou (almond butter with argan oil) productions. I am deeply grateful for this hospitality, which filled our stay with moments of joy, discovery, and profound sharing.



I would also like to thank Nisrine Lmariouh and Ismail Bellakridi, two colleagues from SIL who became friends and showed us Marrakech and Rabat most beautiful places that are off the tourist trails. The moments we shared together immersed us completely into Moroccan culture which represents an inestimable gift.



I would also like to express my gratitude to Jordane, with whom I have forged a strong bond over the last 6 weeks. She has been a colleague, a travel and sports partner, but above all a great friend on whom I have been able to rely and without whom I would not have got as much out of this internship. I am already looking forward to planning our next trips together ;)



Finally, I would like to thank the SIL and more particularly Pr. Bouchra Ramouni, Hanane Driouich, Soumia Kassou, Hiba Sedouane and Safae Assimi, for these amazing and enriching weeks.

Last but not least, I would like to sincerely thank the Laidlaw Foundation which has made this learning journey possible.

I applied to the Laidlaw Foundation to find a part of me brave enough to advocate for my values through impactful projects, and that is exactly what happened. The experience was formative and enriching, and I return home after these six weeks truly grown, with a newfound purpose that extends beyond myself.

Even though I do not know what the future will bring, I am determined to focus my career on public health and thus continue what our project on mental health began.