



## Experience Abroad Report

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## Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action experience was working with troubled youth in Kisumu City, Kenya, namely those in conflict with the law and orphaned children. For six weeks I was able to teach these youth and establish a new partnership with the government thanks to the Laidlaw Scholarship and my host NGO, Better Me. For a more detailed explanation of my work in Kenya and the various partnerships I engaged with, please see my LIA report, *Social Development in Kenya*, on the Laidlaw Scholars Network. Whereas the aforementioned report focuses on the aims and outcomes of my work, this reflection will focus on my personal experiences and growth as a leader. Throughout my time in Kenya, the most significant demands of my role were to:

- Create and deliver multiple lessons per week; considerations in this process included:
  - What topic(s) are relevant, teachable, and engaging?
  - How to effectively build a clear and meaningful lesson around the given topic?
  - Can any novel or stimulating information or practices be brought to this lesson?
  - How will this lesson be delivered? What points do I want to emphasize? Where might I need help from the team?
  - In what ways can students and volunteers engage with it? (This point considers questions around equity, unique lived experiences, and biases).
- Reflect on what did and did not go as planned in the lesson, this was important because it determined:
  - Should I circle back to certain points or concepts at the next opportunity?
  - How will this lesson be condensed from the Remand Home to the St. Williams school?
  - What should I note for future volunteers who may want to repeat, modify, or learn from this lesson?
- Meet with various Better Me partners (and partners of partners) to gain an understanding of how our partners work and how we can best aid them.
  - Examples of meetings include those with the Department of Children Services; the Department of Social Program; the Office of the Attorney General; and Homeless of Kisumu.
- Facilitate a new partnership between Better Me and Kisumu City's Department of Social Program.
  - Identify areas of collaboration between Better Me and the Mama Ngina Children's Home (orphanage)
  - Work with the Better Me team to discuss feasible aid
  - Draft, review, and sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the two organizations
  - Begin regular assistance to Mama Ngina's'
- Collaborate and coordinate with Better Me staff and volunteers each day
  - Identify the week's tasks and any significant upcoming events
  - Figure out a division of labour for the week, considering partners, experience, and constraints
  - Plan logistics – mainly supplies and transport to and from various locations: how will we get there? When will we return? What does this exclude us from doing?
  - Collaborate with peers, or work independently, to accomplish assigned tasks and goals.

- Check-in with the team frequently to ensure immediate tasks are being completed and are ready to go whilst progress is made on larger initiatives.

My role was significant because, after my second week, I became the most senior volunteer, this means, amongst other things, that I taught the older students at the Remand home, was in charge of looking after the volunteer housing, and was in charge of training incoming volunteers. Further, as the primary part of my LIA, I alone worked on establishing the partnership between Mama Ngina Children's Home – with occasional check-in and consultation with my project supervisor, Thomas. In fulfilling my role and responsibilities, the most important leadership skills I had to draw upon were teamwork, adaptability, and time-management; this will be discussed further later on.

### **Challenges**

The two primary challenges I faced were the different environments Kenyan youth operated in and the timely execution of the Mama Ngina partnership. The norms, socioeconomic conditions, and institutions in Kenya shape an environment that is highly foreign for someone from a nation like Canada; that is to say, some of the pressures and practices facing youth are things I have never encountered in my life, or at least not to a highly comparable degree. As a result, teaching and working with some children was quite difficult as I found myself in situations where I lacked lived experience and/or extensive knowledge. The second challenge I encountered was the polychronic time approach, common in Kenya, where schedules are less rigid, days unfold more than they are planned and completed, and variability (thus uncertainty) can be quite high. On a personal note, I came to enjoy this cultural difference very much and perhaps to the detriment of myself have hung onto it since returning to Canada. In addition to polychronic time, summer break began in the third week I was there, meaning Better Me's operations were modified to their summer programming and some staff took holidays, such as my project supervisor Thomas and Hellen Apiyo, the centre manager at Mama Ngina's. As a result, the timeline I had in mind for establishing and starting the Better Me-Mama Ngina partnership proceeded slower than expected, with the majority of developments being finished in my final two weeks in Kenya.

At the heart of these challenges, in my opinion, are the different cultural norms and economic realities in Kenya compared to Canada. For example, on August first I travelled to a school in a rural part of Kakamega County for the first session of Better Me's Youth Unleashed Mentorship Program (YUMP) at this school.<sup>1</sup> As part of the introductory session, Kelvin, Ruth, and I were to address the grade five to eight students and talk about the value and importance of education, particularly in regard to completing grade eight. It is quite common for children in this area not to graduate grade eight, as many stop attending school; boys often stop attending school to become field hands or work in the nearby gold mines, whereas girls commonly stop attending school because they are coerced into early marriages – I was told that within two years of these marriages occurring, these teenage girls are often pregnant. It goes without saying that this is heavy subject matter and a brutally unfortunate reality for children.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on YUMP see my LIA report, *Social Development in Kenya*, on the Laidlaw Scholars Network.

Faced with this, what can I say to these children that is meaningful, helpful, sufficient and authentic? When it came my time to speak, I discussed short-term appeal versus long-term implications, I asked the children about their values and framed the discussion accordingly, and I talked about the individual and collective benefits of education; Afterwards, I was told by my colleagues that my talk was very good – I was overwhelmed with relief. In my social development work, across Better Me's initiatives and the developing partnership with Mama Ngina's, I strove to always be authentic and have a meaningful, helpful, sufficient impact on the community. Regarding the time challenges, these transcended the Mama Ngina partnership and even my understanding of polychronic time, as days were not just fluid but entire calendars. Specifically speaking, I had asked if/when the school break would begin before I booked my flights to Kenya, I was told August eighteenth, as such I scheduled to fly out on August seventeenth only to find that the academic calendar had been shifted and school actually let out during the final week of July and beginning of August – I could never imagine something like this happening in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

While in Kenya, I hoped to have a positive impact on the various communities I interacted with and leave something bigger than myself that would perpetually benefit the community; towards these ends, I believe I was successful. From official Better Me programming, such as English lessons at the Remand home, to waking up at 6AM and teaching the children at Korando Okinawan Goju-Ryu Karate (at their request), I believe I taught good lessons and made a positive impact on many children. Moreover, I am incredibly proud and excited about the Mama Ngina partnership which will continue to aid the centre and the children it cares for after I have returned to Canada. Though there were challenges, some discussed above, and some not, I was able to overcome them and complete my work. To deal with the (time) coordination issues I found the best thing to do was simply have faith that everything will succeed, keep my schedule flexible to adapt to changing plans and the availability of others, and maximize opportunities. By maximizing opportunities I mean identifying opportunities and seizing them, for example, on my last day in Kenya (I had to be at the airport at 6PM), I spent the morning at the Mama Ngina Childrens Home, assisting with casework, and of course saying goodbye to the wonderful staff, volunteers, and children. I then used the afternoon to debrief the rest of the Better Me staff and volunteers and let them know what the next steps with the centre look like. Regarding the challenging cultural norms and economic realities, I wanted to ensure I was always being genuine and sympathetic in my advice and not simply saying what I think sounds right or unhelpful boilerplate things you could expect. I found that the way to do this was, though the orders of magnitude may be different, – in other words, the conditions are more severe in Kenya – the challenges faced are, at the fundamental level, the same as the ones I have experienced or witnessed here in Canada. Financial pressures that interfere with school are a cross-cultural and universal experience, being cognizant of that whilst aware of the local complexities creates a framework with which I believe I successfully engaged the children. Working through these challenges also provided me with a great deal of appreciation for the network of NGOs and fantastic individuals who work each day to enable the communities I had the honour of working with to meet their needs and make their aspirations a reality.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not a value judgement, simply an observation.

## **Leadership Skills Applied and Developed**<sup>3</sup>

My Leadership-in-Action experience in Kenya provided a unique platform for applying and enhancing essential leadership skills, particularly teamwork, adaptability, and time management. Throughout their six-week engagement with troubled youth and partnerships with local organizations, I faced challenges that necessitated teamwork, adaptability, and time-management. By navigating the complexities of a new cultural environment and working closely with diverse stakeholders, I not only contributed to meaningful social development initiatives but also fostered personal growth that strengthened my leadership capabilities. This reflection explores how these skills were utilized in practice and further developed through real-world experiences in Kenya.

### **Teamwork:**

Teamwork was an integral skill; I collaborated closely with the Better Me staff and volunteers to accomplish daily and weekly tasks, ensuring the expectations of all Better Me's partners were met. Further, I collaborated one-on-one with Thomas, my project supervisor and the Better Me Program Coordinator to ensure the Mama Ngina partnership was developed effectively and per Better Me's capacities. Our team-wide meetings on Monday, in addition to smaller issue-specific meetings and check-ins, ensured everyone's responsibilities and objectives were clear. This collaborative environment required me to communicate effectively and foster a supportive atmosphere in order to accommodate different perspectives, schedules, and priorities. One lesson I learned was that people are not always looking for suggestions on how to complete a task, sometimes they are very set in how they wish to execute something and instead of trying to persuade them that there is a better way to accomplish the given task it can be easier, more effective, and better for the team dynamics to simply let them go about things their way. The experience deepened my understanding of teamwork through active participation in a collaborative environment and with a multitude of stakeholders. Engaging with local partners, government officials, and fellow volunteers highlighted the importance of valuing different perspectives and expertise, ultimately enhancing my ability to work in diverse teams back in Canada.

### **Adaptability:**

Adaptability was crucial as I navigated the cultural differences and fluid schedules in Kenya. The unexpected shift in the school calendar and the varying operational dynamics during the programming required me to adjust lesson plans and partnership timelines on the fly. Overcoming the initial confusion and stress caused by the polychronic time that I initially resented, allowed for flexibility and efficiency which helped me manage changing circumstances while remaining focused on the core objectives. The challenges presented by a new cultural context forced me to hone my adaptability. Learning to function within a less structured environment fostered resilience and creative problem-solving, as I had to find new ways to accomplish daily and weekly tasks despite logistical setbacks. This growth in adaptability will translate into a more versatile approach to challenges faced in future leadership roles.

### **Time-management:**

The quantity of tasks and distractions proved to be a larger challenge than the dynamic schedules, necessitating effective time-management skills, including work-life balance skills. The ability

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<sup>3</sup> Portions of the text in this section was generated by ChatGPT, September 23, 2023, OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com>

to manage time effectively while remaining open to spontaneous opportunities was critical to successfully completing lesson planning, reports, activities, the Mama Ngina partnership, and Laidlaw work. A significant challenge was staying focused and working when I had tasks and other volunteers did not. I am a social person so it was difficult to hear the other volunteers enjoying the afternoon while I had to finish up computer work. Further, the excitement of being in a foreign country makes it even harder to remain disciplined and write reports when you want to go out and explore. These factors created significant setbacks in some weeks but were effectively managed in other weeks. Overall I believe the experience significantly improved my time-management skills.

#### Cultural Humility:

During my six weeks in Kenya, I was confronted by several cultural biases I hold that are not shared, as a result, I had to show cultural humility by engaging with new perspectives and cultures, showing respect, openness, and an eagerness to learn. A specific bias of mine that was challenged was my secularism and aversion to religion. I live life secularly, further, as an individual I am averse to religion, actively avoiding it and (internally) holding what could even be considered a hostile or dismissive attitude. That said, I respect everyone's faith and freedom to associate and do not try to disrespect their religion. After arriving in Kisumu, I quickly took note of the deeply Christian society I was now immersed in. Unlike Canada, secularism at school and work was not widely practiced there, quite the opposite. Instead of remaining closed off to this, I embraced it, acknowledging that as a foreigner it is incumbent upon me, out of respect, to conform. In practice, this meant incorporating Christianity into my lessons whenever possible – either through bible quotes, explanations, or by appealing to shared values. Beyond the classroom, I engaged in active listening with my colleagues and showed a willingness to learn – even visiting the kids' church ceremony. My time in Kenya served as an exercise of my life and let live philosophy; I believe practicing one's philosophy is important because anyone can say they subscribe to something, however, actions speak louder than words. The impact of this experience goes beyond the surface as explained above, serving as an exercise of empathy and open-mindedness that is applicable across various experiences.

#### Ethical dilemmas and considerations:

Two ethical dilemmas that were ever-present in my mind before and during my trip to Kenya were white saviorism and voluntourism. Starting with white saviorism, a number of my Laidlaw peers had raised this as a concern prior to our L.I.A. departures, initially, I was behind the curve on this, simply being grateful for such a fantastic opportunity (to go abroad). However, as the plan for my L.I.A. developed I found the concern of white saviorism uncomfortably arising – this stemmed not only from the fact that I was pushing to do more (which eventually turned into facilitating the Mama Ngina partnership) but also from the reality that once on the ground I found myself feeling a pressure to take a leading role. Put simply, pressing to add something to Better Me (the new partnership) and lead could appear that I was assuming I knew what the local community needed to a degree beyond Better Me's operations. However, I strongly believe this interpretation of my time abroad would be inaccurate. When developing my L.I.A. I worked collaboratively with Thomas to land on the Mama Ngina partnership and though taking a leading role wherever possible, I was cognizant to always let the local voices lead and their perspectives and insights guide our work, only contributing where appropriate and objective. My

second concern was voluntourism. World Vision Canada defines voluntourism as “Voluntourism is a form of tourism in which travellers participate in voluntary work, typically for a charity.” Common critiques of voluntourism include the draining of local resources; inexperienced volunteers; short-term volunteering; disrupting the local economy; and poor supervision.<sup>4</sup> However, having completed my time in Kenya I am proud to say that the work I did was not voluntourism and was in accordance with Laidlaw’s note on Ethical Community Engagement. I consider these two ethical concerns as part of a natural (or expected) anxiety when going abroad to try and help a community in need. Further, I believe this is a good concern to have, as it means you are cognizant of the risks and consequences of your behaviour. Thankfully, I can comfortably refute accusations of voluntourism and white saviorism as specific behaviour and the nature of the work I had the privilege of doing runs contrary to any optics. More generally, these two concerns taught me about self-awareness, responsibility, and integrity, all of which are essential skills for ethical leadership.

## **Conclusion**<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, my Leadership-in-Action experience in Kisumu, Kenya, has been transformative, imparting invaluable insights into teamwork, adaptability, time-management, and cultural humility. Engaging with in-need youth and facilitating a partnership with the Mama Ngina Children’s Home challenged me to navigate complex social dynamics and apply the leadership skills I have been developing over the last two years. I learned the importance of maintaining flexibility in the face of uncertainty, listening to local voices, and the ethical considerations of international engagement. These lessons will profoundly influence my future leadership practice, as I strive to approach challenges with empathy and a commitment to collaborative solutions.

I am deeply grateful to the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation for making this incredible experience possible. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the University of Toronto Laidlaw Scholars Program for their unwavering support and guidance in developing my leadership skills. Finally, I am immensely thankful to Better Me for welcoming me into their community and allowing me to apply what I learned in meaningful ways, ultimately contributing to the welfare of those in need. This experience has not only shaped my perspective but has also strengthened my resolve to lead with integrity and purpose in the future.

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<sup>4</sup> Alicia Dubay, “Voluntourism: The Good and the Bad,” World Vision Canada, July 26, 2023, <https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/voluntourism-the-good-and-the-bad>.

<sup>5</sup> Portions of the text in this section was generated by ChatGPT, September 23, 2023, OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com>

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