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Experience Abroad Reflection

This reflection focuses on the key takeaways and the cultural competencies I believe I developed during the six weeks I spent abroad on my Leadership in Action (LiA) project. To elaborate, some key takeaways I learned in the global context are the importance of diverse inputs, adaptability and flexibility, and the value of cultural inclusivity. In terms of cultural competencies, I developed curiosity, meaning an interest in learning about different cultures, and cultural humility.

Regarding the importance of diverse inputs, almost halfway through my LiA experience, I encountered an issue with a new task I had started. Specifically, all the mapped structures did not align with the satellite imagery of the area. Since all the structures seemed to be shifted and some structures were mapped even though they did not exist on the imagery, I realized that this was more than just a simple error made by a volunteer mapper. I decided to troubleshoot to see if anyone else had experienced the same issue. I found a forum where another volunteer was discussing how the quality of mapping had dropped and become inaccurate because some people were using AI to map instead of doing it manually. This led me to believe that the previous volunteer might have tried to use an AI program to map.

However, just to be sure, I reached out to my supervisor and showed him the map I was working on. He suggested that I might be using outdated imagery, which

could explain why the mapped buildings by the previous mapper were shifted, as the satellite might not have taken the image from the exact same aerial perspective. As it turned out, the issue I was experiencing was indeed due to the selected imagery.

This incident truly highlighted the value of getting different inputs from people. Although the information shared by the person on the forum was relevant, it just happened not to be the cause of the issue I was facing. Had I not taken the initiative to seek more insights and information, I would have continued mapping using the outdated imagery, which would have resulted in incorrect mapping that would have required significant time for other volunteers to fix.

Moreover, another takeaway I learned is the importance of adaptability and flexibility, as one cannot always control their circumstances. Because of this, being able to accommodate and work through new situations becomes mandatory. For example, during my fourth week of the LiA, I was hit with a massive migraine that lasted an entire week. As a result, my productivity declined, and I was physically unable to work for many of those days, causing me to miss my weekly goals for mapping and validation. However, to make up for some of the tasks I missed, I planned to work a bit on the upcoming weekends and also did some work after I returned to Canada. By doing this, I was able to successfully account for my unplanned break. Additionally, this experience taught me that some things, such as one's health, are the top priority and cannot be neglected. Even though it made me uncomfortable not to work on some days, I acknowledged that taking a break was the best thing I could do.

The last takeaway I gained from this experience is the value of cultural inclusivity. In this context, I am specifically referring to one aspect of cultural inclusivity, which is being open to the unique contributions of those from other cultures. This is relevant because, when it comes to mapping, there are different mapping rules for different countries, and the mapping experience itself can vary greatly depending on the physical environment of a given region, which may be completely different from what a volunteer is used to. For example, while working on a mapping project in a country in Africa, I initially thought the section I received had no buildings and only trees until another volunteer pointed out that what I assumed were trees were, in fact, huts. Thus, the area was a residential area, and the huts needed to be mapped as buildings. Considering that the imagery provided was grainy and not of the best resolution, it was difficult to discern details and distinguish structures. Because of this, I had thought the circular structures were trees. This event also highlighted the importance of diversity within a group, as each person's unique experiences and knowledge contribute to the group's understanding in a beneficial way.

Furthermore, this instance allowed me to demonstrate and utilize the cultural competency of cultural humility. Coming from Canada, where buildings, houses, and similar structures typically appear rectangular from an aerial perspective, I realized that such forms of structures might not be used in different countries in Africa. As such, I remained open to input from other volunteers and gave them my full attention as they shared information with the group.

Due to the nature of my project, which involved working with various countries and regions, the opportunity to demonstrate and develop cultural humility consistently arose as I progressed through different projects. I believe that an important aspect of cultural humility is recognizing that one can never completely understand another culture or an aspect of that culture, even after spending considerable time working with that country or culture. Since there is always new knowledge to gain, believing that one has learned enough makes them less receptive to continuing to listen and learn from others.

Another cultural competency that I developed and demonstrated was curiosity about learning more about different cultures and understanding how their communities function and look. This interest arose from the fact that when I was mapping and validating, I could see how the communities in these different places were set up, often contrasting with how Canadian residential areas and land planning look. This also allowed me to develop an appreciation for these cultural areas. For example, homes in Canada are often set up in a specific and repetitive way, with houses aligned with each other and each house having its separate backyard. However, in some developing countries, houses may be built less uniformly, with structures not all aligned and sporadically spread over a specific area, leading to more shared outdoor spaces. I appreciate residential areas like these because they foster a sense of community where people come together and get to know their neighbors. The shared green spaces allow for opportunities such as community gardens, group recreational activities, and gatherings. I also realize that had I not worked on the Missing Maps project for my LiA, I

would not have been exposed to the various ways communities around the world are physically designed and would have been less appreciative of different cultures and their ways of doing things.

Overall, I believe that my experience abroad with the British Red Cross on their Missing Maps project has greatly contributed to my growth, not only in terms of my professional and skill development but also personally and in my view of the world. To reiterate, seeking advice from others on mapping problems helped me realize the significance of diverse inputs. I also came to understand the necessity of being flexible and adaptable in replanning work due to health issues. Moreover, I discovered how essential cultural inclusivity and diversity are for a group's success, as one member may bring ideas or perspectives that others lack. Additionally, in terms of cultural competencies, cultural inclusivity and diversity allowed me to further develop and demonstrate cultural humility by being open-minded and receptive to others. Lastly, the nature of my project—viewing and creating maps of villages, countries, and towns in developing regions—allowed me to become acquainted with the design of these areas, leading me to recognize and appreciate the benefits of such residential designs.