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*LiA Organization: The British Red Cross*

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## **Leadership in Action (LiA) Report – The Missing Maps Project**

For my second summer as a Laidlaw Scholar, I had the privilege of going to London and working with the British Red Cross on one of their lesser-known but immensely significant and relevant projects, Missing Maps. To give a brief summary, this project is an ongoing collaborative effort that seeks to create maps for vulnerable areas in the world that have outdated or no maps. Utilizing satellite imagery, Missing Maps volunteers produce detailed maps with structures such as buildings, roads, residential areas, etc. Once these maps are completed and validated, they are passed on to relevant local organizations in the mapped area, who use them for emergency planning.

My role in this project was that of a mapper and mapping validator. That is, I helped with the initial creation of maps and reviewed the work of other volunteers by fixing errors and validating that the maps were accurate, detailed, and complete. During my LiA journey, three main leadership themes emerged: independence, collaboration, and problem-solving. I will elaborate on these themes in the rest of my report.

### **Challenges Faced**

Being in a leadership position at a new organization in a different country, one challenge I experienced was striking the perfect balance between independence and reliance on the people at Missing Maps. Unlike the position of a group member or similar roles that involve more equal collaboration, I was a validator who directly

reviewed and provided feedback on other mappers' work. Due to the leadership nature of this position, I felt the need to be more independent and limit asking for assistance. I tried my best to figure out issues on my own instead of directing questions to Rabi, my supervisor. I also wanted to ensure I did not slow down other people's progress, as they would have to put a hold on their tasks to assist me.

However, as one might imagine, this slowed down my own progress since it takes time to understand the problem I was experiencing and troubleshoot it. I was not able to handle this challenge effectively until my first LiA check-in meeting with Tyler. Tyler provided insight that being in a leadership position did not mean I was expected to figure everything out on my own. Tyler also pointed out that this would limit my opportunities to connect with and get to know the people involved in the Missing Maps project.

As a result, I became more open to asking questions and felt less uncomfortable doing so. I also realized that, as the days went on, I naturally became more acquainted with things and encountered fewer issues that I could not solve. This helped me learn that there is always a natural learning curve when starting a new job or task. Even in a leadership position, one will have many questions in the beginning, as it is their first time in that role. A leader should not place the expectation of complete independence on themselves.

That being said, using the knowledge given to me by others, as well as the skills and knowledge I developed along the way as a mapper and validator, I hope that the

projects I worked on and completed in various communities will be utilized in the best way possible by their communities and organizations. Specifically, I mapped and validated in the following countries and regions:

- South Sudan, Jonglei State
- Afghanistan, Baghlan District
- Niger, Goure
- Colombia, Nariño

Although this may not seem like a lot, each country and region had a vast area that needed to be mapped and validated. Moreover, congested areas such as villages and residential areas are filled with many structures, which take a long time to map and review.

### **Leadership Skills Applied and Developed**

Some leadership skills that I applied as a mapper and validator were collaboration and problem-solving. As a collaborator, I would pick up a mapping task that another volunteer had stopped working on and continue the task. This collaboration can be facilitated by note exchanges between the volunteers. The mapping program used has the ability to leave notes attached to specific sections of the mapping task. Through this feature, I was able to read what the person before me (and the volunteers even before them) had written about the project. For example, these notes might point out areas that need to be re-mapped, areas that are done, and others that need to be completed. This saves future volunteers time from having to look over the map

themselves. Similarly, I also left notes for future mappers to streamline passing on the task to them.

This experience has helped further develop my collaboration skills, as I have gained experience in my written communications to share information with other volunteers. Moreover, much of my correspondence has happened remotely due to the nature of the task and the fact that there are volunteers working on the same project in different parts of the world. This is a stark difference from my previous collaboration experiences, as I mainly worked face-to-face with team members in the past. As a result, I have gained experience in collaborating remotely.

Problem-solving is another leadership skill I applied and gained more experience in. As with using any program, I ran into technical difficulties and issues where I could not identify the cause. I approached these issues by bouncing ideas back and forth between my supervisor and me. For example, once, when I picked up a task from a previous mapper, I noticed all their mapping was shifted and did not align with the provided satellite imagery. With my supervisor's help, I realized that I was using the wrong satellite imagery and that using the correct one would resolve the issue. This helped develop my problem-solving skills even more, as I am now more perceptive to the idea that the issue may be occurring from my end. That is, I should thoroughly check within my own workspace to see if a feature there is causing the problem.

### **Collaboration Reflection**

Over the past six weeks of working with other Missing Maps volunteers, these experiences taught me that clear communication can facilitate a project, while vague or unclear messages left for other volunteers can hinder it. I am thankful that the other volunteers clearly communicated important information about the mapping task with me, and similarly, I took inspiration from them to communicate with other volunteers in the same manner.

### **Conclusion**

The lessons I learned are mainly the ones I have highlighted in this report, such as striking a good balance between independence and reliance, having clear communication to facilitate project completion, and discussing issues with someone else to problem-solve. In addition to these, I learned that even if you do not see the result of your efforts right away, it does not mean that your efforts are going to waste. Sometimes, mapping and validating was a tedious task due to its repetitive nature. It also sometimes made me feel like I was getting nowhere, as there were always more projects to do. However, now that my LiA is over, I can look back and feel accomplished about the work I have done. Below is a breakdown of the types of projects I was involved in. It appears that I mainly worked on disaster response and disaster preparedness-related mapping, and I feel content knowing that my work will be used to help individuals in the communities for which I mapped.



- disaster response
- disaster preparedness
- water & sanitation