

Leadership-in-Action Project Reflection: Paving the Way for Youth Empowerment in Bangladesh with JA Worldwide

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Laidlaw Scholars Program's Leadership-in-Action component provides an unparalleled opportunity for scholars to immerse themselves in projects that demand the application of leadership attributes while addressing pressing societal needs. My LiA project centered on **facilitating the foundational visit of a JA Worldwide (Junior Achievement Worldwide) and JA Asia Pacific delegation to Dhaka, Bangladesh, in June 2025**. This critical mission aimed to explore partnerships and attract supporters for the ambitious goal of launching JA programs in Bangladesh. In this initial phase, my role was pivotal as a key organizer and facilitator, tasked with ensuring the seamless execution of the delegation's itinerary and fostering crucial connections within the Bangladeshi landscape. This reflection will detail the project's focus on serving an underserved community, outline my specific contributions framed by SMART goals, share the profound perspectives gained through this challenging immersion, and elaborate on the immediate impact and long-term sustainability measures for JA's future in Bangladesh.

Project Context: Addressing a Community in Need

The decision to launch JA Worldwide in Bangladesh is rooted in a compelling need to empower its vast youth population, who currently face significant socio-economic challenges. Bangladesh, while experiencing economic growth, grapples with a paradoxical situation: despite official aggregated unemployment not being high, youth unemployment is notably elevated. This is further exacerbated by an oversupply of university graduates who are often deemed unfit for the local workforce due to a fundamental mismatch between their skills and industry demands. The expectation from the workforce is that graduates should be able to "hit the ground running," a stark contrast to the reality of insufficient on-the-job training. This creates a skills gap, making employability a major concern.

Culturally, university education remains highly aspirational. Many Bangladeshi foreign laborers send remittances home with the specific aim of ensuring their children receive a better future through education, inadvertently fueling this dynamic of an oversupply of graduates ill-equipped for local job markets. Furthermore, despite girls being statistically well-educated, there is a "huge drop-off when it comes to workforce employment" due to a variety of cultural and other reasons, highlighting a critical gender disparity in economic participation.

It is against this backdrop that the "three zeroes" vision articulated by Dr. Yunus—zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions—serves as a powerful and unifying theme. This vision underscores the urgency of equipping young people with the tools necessary to drive economic growth and foster sustainable innovation. JA Worldwide's proven programs in **entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and work readiness** are a "natural fit" to address these specific needs within this underserved community. By providing practical skills and fostering an entrepreneurial mindset, JA aims to bridge the existing skills gap, enhance youth employability, and empower the next generation to contribute meaningfully to Bangladesh's sustainable development, thereby directly working for a community in dire need of such interventions. The delegation's meetings confirmed this widespread desire among various stakeholders, from "entrepreneurs and educators to corporate executives and government officials," to invest in youth empowerment. Organizations like BRAC University, IUB, BRAC Bank, and Sunbeams School all acknowledged the skills-gap reality and expressed keen interest in programs that offer differentiated skills training, micro-credentials, and stronger industry connections. This collective recognition validates the critical importance of JA's mission in Bangladesh and the profound positive impact it can have on its youth.

My Role and Specific Contributions

As a key member supporting the JA Worldwide and JA Asia Pacific delegation, my responsibilities were multifaceted, primarily focusing on **meticulous logistical coordination and strategic stakeholder engagement**. This project demanded a proactive and adaptable leadership approach, operating in a new and challenging environment. My contributions were instrumental in ensuring the efficiency and productivity of the delegation's initial visit, laying a solid groundwork for future operations. My specific work can be effectively structured around three SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals:

SMART Goal 1: To successfully coordinate and execute all logistical arrangements for the JA Worldwide delegation's visit to Dhaka from June 17-19, 2025, ensuring seamless travel, accommodation, and meeting schedules for all delegates.

- **Specific:** This goal involved managing every detail of the delegation's presence in Dhaka. My responsibilities included arranging transportation, ensuring airport pick-up, and meticulously scheduling a dense itinerary of meetings.

- **Measurable:** Success was measured by the smooth execution of the planned itinerary, with no significant logistical disruptions affecting the delegation's schedule or comfort. The detailed "Meeting Itinerary" and internal session notes detailing logistical checks served as my blueprint.

- **Achievable:** Drawing on prior organizational skills and a proactive approach, this goal was achievable through careful planning and continuous communication with local contacts and the delegation.

- **Relevant:** Efficient logistics were fundamental to the delegation's ability to maximize their time in Dhaka, focus on core discussions, and build critical partnerships, directly contributing to the project's overall success.

- **Time-bound:** The entirety of this goal was confined to the delegation's visit period, specifically June 17-19, 2025.

Impact of Goal 1: By effectively managing the logistical backbone of the trip, I enabled the delegation to focus entirely on their strategic objectives, ensuring they could meet with a wide array of stakeholders without being hindered by operational challenges. This created a professional and welcoming environment, which was essential for the "fruitful" nature of the meetings.

SMART Goal 2: To facilitate productive meetings with a minimum of 5 key local stakeholders (e.g., lawyers, business leaders, NGOs) during the delegation's visit, contributing to a deeper understanding of the Bangladeshi context for JA's launch.

- **Specific:** This involved leveraging my existing network and actively reaching out to influential individuals and organizations that could provide crucial insights and potential partnership opportunities for JA Worldwide. I sourced several critical meetings, including with Azima Chowdhury (lawyer for entity setup), Osman Dhali (COO of YY Ventures), and Anita Ghazi Rahman (Legal Circle, lawyer connected with BYLC and youth entrepreneurship). I was tasked with reaching out to many other key individuals.

- **Measurable:** Success was measured by the number of high-value meetings facilitated through my direct efforts and connections. The itinerary confirms meetings with Azima Chowdhury, Osman Dhali, and Anita Ghazi Rahman, among others.

- **Achievable:** This was achievable by drawing upon my established relationships and understanding of the local landscape, particularly concerning legal and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

- **Relevant:** Gaining diverse perspectives from legal experts, entrepreneurial hubs, and educational institutions was paramount to understanding the intricacies of launching an NGO in Bangladesh, from legal structures to operational dynamics and identifying suitable local partners. These interactions were crucial for building a comprehensive strategy.

- **Time-bound:** These meetings were specifically scheduled and conducted during the delegation's visit from June 17-19, 2025.

Impact of Goal 2: My direct engagement in identifying and connecting the delegation with key local figures proved invaluable. These meetings provided essential information on legal frameworks, potential funding avenues, and the operational realities of NGOs in Bangladesh. For instance, discussions with Legal Circle provided three entity options and critical insights into foreign funding dynamics like Advanced Income Tax (AIT). These insights were fundamental for shaping the "Launch Plan" and understanding the "dynamics of launching and operating an NGO in Bangladesh at a deeper level".

SMART Goal 3: To compile and organize comprehensive contact information and key discussion points from all meetings held during the visit by June 30, 2025, providing a structured foundation for post-visit follow-up actions and partnership development.

- **Specific:** Following the intense schedule of meetings, a critical task was to consolidate all gathered information. My explicit responsibility was to record contact information, title, etc. for each person we met during the visit. This also included ensuring key notes from discussions were

documented, which informed the "Session Notes" that served as a core resource for the delegation.

- **Measurable:** Success was measured by the creation of a complete and organized database of contacts and a summary of discussion outcomes from all engagements during the visit. The comprehensive nature of the provided "Session Notes" exemplifies the successful achievement of this goal.

- **Achievable:** This task was assigned specifically to me and was achievable through diligent record-keeping during and immediately after each meeting.

- **Relevant:** This information served as the bedrock for all subsequent follow-up actions, including sending thank-you letters, initiating MOUs, and developing specific launch plans, thus ensuring continuity and momentum. Without this organized data, the insights gained would have been fragmented and difficult to act upon.

- **Time-bound:** This post-visit consolidation was targeted for completion by June 30, 2025.

Impact of Goal 3: By meticulously compiling contact details and meeting notes, I ensured that the valuable insights and connections forged during the visit were not lost. This organized data became a critical resource for the delegation, enabling the development of the "Priorities Now" and "Launch Plan" with specific next steps to "Follow up on launch steps". It directly facilitated the transition from exploratory discussions to concrete action points, guaranteeing that the project's momentum could be sustained.

These leadership-in-action tasks required not only meticulous organization but also adaptability, cross-cultural communication skills, and the ability to proactively solve problems in real-time. My role ensured that the delegation's time was utilized effectively, leading to a productive and insightful initial foray into Bangladesh.

Insights and Different Perspectives Gained

Being immersed in the Bangladeshi environment for this LiA project provided a wealth of insights and challenged preconceived notions, offering truly different perspectives on development, education, and social enterprise. The experience went beyond logistical coordination, becoming a profound learning journey in cross-cultural understanding and navigating complex socio-economic landscapes.

One of the most striking insights was the pervasive skills-gap reality that plagues Bangladesh's higher education system and workforce. Multiple stakeholders, from Daffodil to IUB and BDJOBS, emphasized that there is a "fixation in Bangladesh higher education around

credentials, at the expense of skills training". This leads to graduates who, despite holding degrees, lack the practical skills and work readiness demanded by employers. The cultural dynamic where "youth are often coddled in Bangladesh," making the transition to university "jarring," further compounds this issue, as graduates are not prepared for the "hit the ground running" expectation of the workforce. This disconnect highlights a critical area where JA's practical, skills-based programs can provide immense value.

Furthermore, I gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of operating an NGO in Bangladesh. Discussions with legal experts like Anita Ghazi Rahman and Azima Chowdhury illuminated the various entity options, from a Limited Company to a Trust or Society, each with its own advantages, disadvantages, and bureaucratic hurdles. The "administrative processes are very burdensome," requiring "dedicated staff paying certain taxes (VAT etc)". A key financial insight was the "Advanced Income Tax (AIT) dynamic, wherein banks automatically deduct tax upon receipt of foreign funds". This necessitates strategic planning for funding and partnerships, emphasizing the preference for working with registered local NGO partners rather than commercial entities for organizations like Standard Chartered Bank. These legal and financial intricacies underscore the challenging environment for establishing new organizations and the crucial role of local expertise.

Beyond the challenges, the delegation was profoundly "energized by the warmth of the people, the entrepreneurial spirit of the leaders, and the compelling vision of Nobel Laureate Dr. Yunus". This "shared desire to equip young people with the tools to drive growth and sustainable innovation" across various sectors was palpable. Dr. Yunus's call for "three zeroes" served as a powerful "unifying theme and galvanizing force". This vision resonated deeply, demonstrating that despite the hurdles, there is a strong local appetite for impactful change and a collaborative spirit among entrepreneurs, educators, and government officials. My immersion also revealed the aspirational nature of university education for many Bangladeshi families, driven by foreign laborers sending remittances home for a "better future" for their children. This cultural context explains the oversupply of graduates and the need for interventions like JA to redirect talent towards skill development and local job creation.

Finally, observing the discussions around gender disparities was particularly insightful. While "girls are statistically well-educated," there's a "huge drop-off when it comes to workforce employment" due to various cultural and other reasons. This highlighted the need for targeted programs like those Phulki focuses on (women empowerment) or BRAC Bank's "Uddokta 101 exclusively for women", reinforcing the importance of JA's potential to empower young women

with financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills. These diverse perspectives, spanning educational systems, legal frameworks, cultural nuances, and gender dynamics, were invaluable in understanding the multi-layered context in which JA Worldwide seeks to make an impact in Bangladesh.

Project Impact and Future Sustainability

The initial visit to Dhaka marked a significant milestone in JA Worldwide's journey to establish a presence in Bangladesh. The immediate impact of the delegation's trip, for which I played a crucial organizational role, was the successful completion of an "inspiring" series of meetings that deepened understanding and generated a "starter list of ideas" for future collaboration. This paved the way for the "journey to bring JA to Bangladesh has begun".

Immediate Impact:

- **Deepened Understanding:** The discussions helped the delegation "understand the dynamics of launching and operating an NGO in Bangladesh at a deeper level", covering everything from legal entity options to funding mechanisms and cultural nuances.
- **Strong Stakeholder Engagement:** Meetings with a wide array of figures, including corporate executives, educators and legal professionals, revealed a "shared desire to equip young people with the tools to drive growth and sustainable innovation".
- **Concrete "Priorities Now" and "Launch Plan":** The visit culminated in the development of actionable steps, including creating an MOU with BRAC University around project-based work (micro-credentials, teacher training), and planning to launch the Company Program at Sunbeams and Sir John Wilson School in January or August 2026.
- **Identification of Potential Partners:** Several local NGOs like Daffodil and YY Ventures were identified as potentially capable of managing local operations and becoming brand licensees. Educational institutions like BRAC University, IUB, Sunbeams, and Sir John Wilson School expressed strong interest in JA's programs.
- **Funding Opportunities:** Standard Chartered Bank Bangladesh (SCB) expressed interest in funding projects related to entrepreneurship, work readiness, and financial literacy, while emphasizing the necessity of JA having a local entity and clear "end-use monitoring". BRAC Bank also indicated interest in supporting programs, particularly those impacting women.

Sustainability Measures:

The long-term sustainability of JA Worldwide's presence and impact in Bangladesh will be measured through a multi-pronged approach, focusing on local ownership, diversified funding, robust program implementation, and measurable outcomes.

1. Establishing a Sustainable Local Entity: The "Launch Plan" outlines a phased approach.

- **Phase 1: Project Collaboration:** Starting with collaborative projects with local NGOs. This allows JA to establish a foothold and demonstrate impact before committing to full-scale operations.

- **Phase 2: Brand Licensee Identification:** As projects launch, JA will "get a sense of which NGO can be a potential brand licensee of JA Worldwide," ensuring local management and operational capability. Daffodil and YY Ventures are currently considered capable.

- **Phase 3: Board Recruitment:** The recruitment of a local, qualified board, with individuals like Fahim Mashroor and Pushpo Rahman identified as potential members, is crucial for governance, local relevance, and resource mobilization. Legal discussions confirmed the necessity of a local entity structure (e.g., nonprofit company, society) for long-term operations and foreign funding receipt.

2. Diversified Funding and Partnerships:

- **Local Corporate Funding:** Engaging banks like Standard Chartered Bangladesh, which is committed to "financial literacy and inclusion" and "work-readiness," and BRAC Bank, which focuses on SMEs and women, is key. SCB's requirement for a local NGO partner to fund work ensures that financial support will flow through a sustainable local structure.

- **Educational Partnerships:** MOUs with institutions like BRAC University for micro-credentials and teacher training will embed JA programs within the existing educational framework, ensuring program reach and institutional buy-in. Programs like the Company Program at Sunbeams and Sir John Wilson School will provide direct youth engagement.

- **NGO Collaborations:** Partnering with established local NGOs, such as Phulki (potential program partner) or BYLC (potential implementation partner), can leverage existing infrastructure and local expertise, making the expansion more efficient and effective.

3. Robust Program Implementation and Scalability:

- **Curriculum Integration:** Converting social impact curriculum into co-branded credentials with universities (e.g., BRAC University, IUB) will increase the value proposition and institutional adoption of JA programs.

- **Teacher Training:** Investing in teacher training, particularly with schools like Sunbeams, ensures that programs can be delivered consistently and effectively by local educators, building local capacity.

- **Innovation Camps:** Hosting innovation camps, possibly with Sunbeams bringing in other schools, will broaden the reach and introduce JA's experiential learning approach to more youth.

4. Measurable Impact and Evaluation Frameworks:

- **"End-Use Monitoring":** Standard Chartered Bank explicitly emphasized the necessity of an "evaluation framework" or "end-use monitoring" for any collaboration. This indicates that detailed metrics for program effectiveness will be required.

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Discussions with BYLC mentioned their experience with "longitudinal and RCT studies" as part of foreign funding requirements. This suggests a precedent for rigorous impact assessment in Bangladesh, which JA can adopt.

- **Tracking Key Metrics:** Sustainability will be measured by tracking metrics aligned with JA's mission and Dr. Yunus's "three zeroes" vision. This will include:

- **Youth Success:** Number of youth engaged, skills acquired (entrepreneurship, financial literacy, work readiness).

- **Employability:** Post-program employment rates, job placement, and transition to higher education or entrepreneurship.

- **Entrepreneurial Activity:** Number of student-led businesses created, their longevity, and economic contribution.

- **Financial Literacy:** Improved financial decision-making among participants.

- **Social Impact:** Contribution to community development and sustainable innovation, particularly concerning environmental (net carbon emissions) and social (poverty reduction) goals.

By focusing on these strategic areas, JA Worldwide aims to build a resilient and impactful presence in Bangladesh, ensuring that its mission to empower young people contributes tangibly and sustainably to the nation's future and the vision of "three zeroes."

Conclusion

The Leadership-in-Action project, centered on the foundational visit of JA Worldwide to Dhaka, Bangladesh, has been a profoundly enriching and demanding experience. My role in organizing and facilitating this crucial initial foray allowed me to apply theoretical leadership attributes in a tangible, high-stakes environment. From meticulously coordinating logistics to strategically

leveraging personal networks for critical stakeholder engagement, every task contributed directly to understanding the complex dynamics of launching a youth empowerment initiative in a new context.

This project underscored the vital importance of proactive planning, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive problem-solving. The immersion provided invaluable insights into Bangladesh's unique socio-economic landscape, revealing both significant challenges, such as the pervasive skills gap and youth unemployment, and immense opportunities, driven by a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit and a shared national vision for sustainable development. The "three zeroes" framework championed by Dr. Yunus served as a powerful reminder of the profound purpose underlying JA's mission.

The immediate impact of the visit, marked by deepened understanding and the formulation of a clear "Launch Plan" and "Priorities Now," has laid a solid foundation for JA's future. Looking ahead, the sustainability of this endeavor will hinge on forging strong local partnerships, securing diversified funding, implementing robust, skills-based programs, and committing to rigorous impact measurement. This experience has not only broadened my global perspective but has also significantly honed my leadership capabilities, preparing me to tackle future challenges with greater insight and determination. I am deeply committed to the continued success of JA Worldwide's mission in Bangladesh, believing firmly in its potential to transform the lives of countless young people and contribute to a more equitable and prosperous world.