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Leadership in Action: Peace and Social Resilience in Medellín, Colombia with  
make\_sense Americas

On confirming my 'Leadership in Action' placement in Medellín back in December, I told my parents that I would be spending six weeks of my summer in a city which, when they were young, was only known for its violence and dangers. I appreciated their concern and listened to their uncertainties, yet after learning more about the city's inspiring, transformative change and beautiful culture, I felt nothing except excitement and eagerness to arrive in Colombia. My LiA was with the 'make\_sense americas' organisation, where I worked with four fellow scholars on two different projects for the community-based organisation 'Picacho con Futuro' in Medellín. The overriding theme of the programme was 'Peace and Social Resilience', which carried into our projects, and our partnering impact tours and volunteering for another organisation, 'Mi Barrio, Mi Sueño'.

Project dissemination

For my primary project, I worked alongside two of my fellow Laidlaw scholars at the community-based organisation 'Picacho con Futuro'. Our focus was to raise awareness of recycling and sustainability within the community by promoting and facilitating alternative practices. To achieve this, we spent our initial weeks in Medellín immersing ourselves in the organisation's work through meeting local people, briefing with Adrián, the organisation's lead, and ideating potential outcomes. After further discussions and refinement, we identified four key deliverables to guide the upcoming weeks. These included:

1. Education – Brochures for the entire community on sustainability and the circular economy
2. Memory and Learning – Create a mural with the artwork created by the children in workshops, using recycled materials to create their neighbourhood
3. Awareness – Eco-bazaar to display the mural and brochures to engage people in sustainability, and encourage local food sources by providing locally sourced food hampers (to be won via a quiz on sustainability)
4. Reduce waste – Purchasing a water tank and clear roof tiles for the organisation to help reduce water and energy waste by using less electricity for lighting

Overall, these deliverables were successfully achieved during the facilitation of our project. Over the course of weeks two to five, we ideated and created multiple prototypes for the pamphlet online, and after feedback from our peers and Adrián, we ultimately elected and printed 500 copies of the final design, as it was the most accessible for the entire community, given its clear, concise information.



Alongside this, in week four, we ran two workshops at the 'ludoteca' at Picacho con Futuro, with children ages 3-13. At these two-hour workshops, our goal was to demonstrate how materials can be reused and recycled in different ways, for instance, in

artwork. The children created their homes using recycled cardboard, paper and plastic, as well as utilising art mediums such as paint, pencil, pen, tape and more. The workshops were largely successful; the children, even with the distraction of five strangers arriving from different parts of the world, created many beautiful pieces and my fellow scholars and I thoroughly enjoyed being creative and playing with them, even when the language barrier was difficult to navigate at times.

Given the success of the workshops, we felt confident about the production of the mural. After prototyping its design, we spent two days painting the selected background on one of the boards in the organisation's building. The aim was to depict the barrio of Picacho for the local people at the organisation to invoke a feeling of unity and pride for their home, as well as a sense of belonging amongst the children whose art would be part of the mural. Furthermore, personally, I found it fun to be creative again, after stopping my art education at the age of 18, and my fellow scholars and I all enjoyed spending more time within the organisation as we were able to converse with different people, build connections and grow our understanding of their lives and the organisation's purpose.



We finished the mural at the end of week 5 during our eco-bazaar at the organisation. Throughout the morning, we spent time with some of the children, where we helped them

create more houses for the display and other notable infrastructure that represented their perspective of Picacho's local area, such as the football pitch, shops, the church and more. After we completed this activity, my fellow scholars and I assembled the houses and finished our mural, with many people offering positive remarks, much to our gratification. Furthermore, throughout the morning, my fellow scholars and I were handing out the pamphlets as people came in, whilst a local group of women ran their weekly clothing bazaar of repurposed clothes. This simultaneous act worked well for numbers, as we were able to reach more people, and the talented women's repurposing and recycling of clothes aided in emphasising our key message of increasing sustainable practices. As the bazaar came to an end, one of my fellow scholars ran a quiz with the attendees about the content of the pamphlet. The five winners received a hamper comprised of local food to take home. This aimed to encourage purchasing from local food sources, build a community feel and heighten sustainability awareness and knowledge. Overall, it was a very successful bazaar that ran smoothly and engaged different people from across the area, allowing us to effectively disseminate our project's deliverables. Finally, during week six, we ordered the water tank and clear roof tiles, which were installed on delivery for the organisation's building.



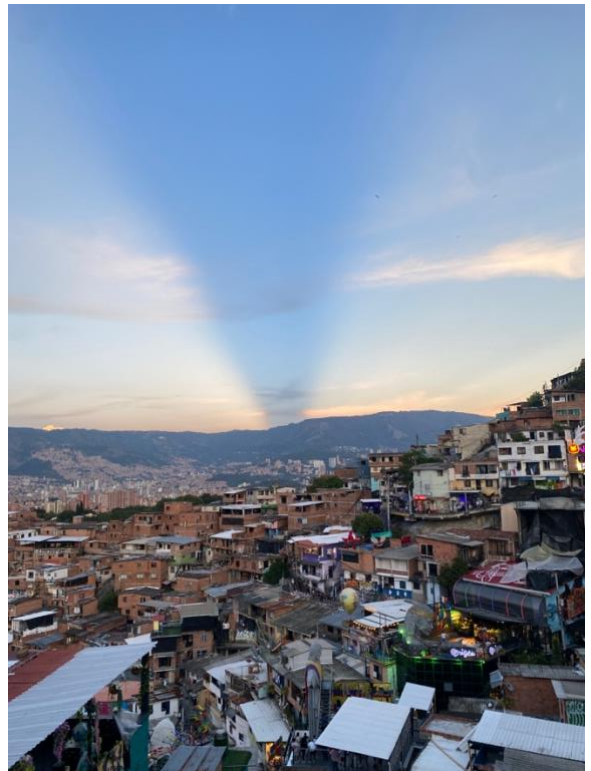


Our deliverables were an effective approach for our project as they engaged the multiple generations within the organisation and raised awareness about sustainability, thus encouraging a long-term call to action for sustainable practices and creating lasting impacts. The water tank and clear roof tiles will reduce water waste and electricity usage at the organisation, in turn exemplifying to others in the community ways in which they can save money and reduce consumption in their own homes. The mural acts as a symbol of unity and community belonging, reminding people to be proud of their home, whilst exemplifying creative mechanisms of reusing waste. The pamphlets will remain a point of reference in the long term for sustainable practices and education that is accessible to all, as inclusion was a key priority for us throughout the project dissemination. Finally, the eco-bazaar was an effective, unifying event that helped build community connections and spread awareness of local food sources in a fun, yet educational way. On reflection, this entire programme allowed me to grow my leadership and teamwork skills, demonstrate the importance of community and create impactful change; it was an outstanding experience that I hope will leave a lasting impact within the community.

## Cultural experiences

As much as I enjoyed working on the project throughout the six weeks, many of my highlights from the experience also came from learning about the city, its culture and its people. My fellow scholars and I, led by our fantastic coordinators Daniela and Samantha, experienced multiple impact tours around the city during the programme. In week one, we visited Comuna 13, a neighbourhood that has long been subject to displacement and violence, yet has transformed into a vibrant, strong community full of art and transformative adjustments, such as the outdoor escalators to improve accessibility. Furthermore, we had our initial visit to the barrio of Picacho, where our project was based. It began at 'Cristo del Picacho', a statue overlooking the city, to learn about the significance of Medellín's urban layout and the implications of living within the mountains, before walking down into the barrio to meet some of the local people and to learn of the organisation's key aims and initiatives thus far.

These impactful tours continued into the later weeks of the programme. Comuna 3 was home to our secondary partnering organisation, 'Mi Barrio, Mi Sueño', which we visited twice throughout our time in Medellín. In week two, we explored the area, learnt about the objectives and listened to local people's stories, before returning the week after to assist in the construction of a playground, intending to help in providing a communal, safe space for children to enjoy and connect with their neighbours. In addition, our visit to the Museo Casa de la Memoria was incredibly powerful. The museum is dedicated to the city's history of violence and armed conflict, and serves as a space for education, reflection and the fostering of peace, whilst preserving the memory of local people, victims and survivors. The importance of such a place is transferred into active community spaces, such as La Casa de Cultura de Las Estancias, which we visited during week five. This 'cultural house', one of many across the city, serves as a place for a community to connect and learn, and has been fought for by the local people over the past few decades, demonstrating their inspiring resilience and unity.



Overall, when reflecting on these experiences, I feel fortunate to have learnt such valuable lessons and met such incredible people during my time in Medellín. The strength of community is one I have not encountered before, and I find it inspiring to hear how such transformative change can happen after the dark and violent times that affected their homes and city. It became increasingly clear that the local people were the force and are the force for the changes that occurred and continue to occur within Medellín, and I hope to return soon and continue to learn and be inspired by the welcoming, strong communities that I met throughout the programme.

### Reflecting on my SMART goals

Before arriving in Medellín, I outlined three SMART goals to achieve whilst participating in the programme. However, before arriving in Colombia, I knew few details about the project's aims and structure; therefore, my SMART goals ended up largely unapplicable whilst disseminating the project.

The first goal was to assess the awareness of teenagers in Picacho regarding sustainability, whereby we would measure their current level of understanding of sustainability and the circular economy by the end of week two. This goal was made on the assumption that I would be required only to tailor the project outcomes to teenagers and that I should complete a baseline assessment before ideating potential outputs. This was not the case; therefore, my first SMART goal was not achieved, as we ultimately focused on multiple generations' knowledge and did not perform an official baseline assessment. Instead, my fellow scholars and I used guidance from Adrián and our new understandings of the lived experience of the local people after communicating with them to facilitate effective outputs from the project. Whilst a formal assessment may have provided a clearer foundation for future activities, on reflection, I feel confident in our design strategy and final resolution, particularly after we received positive feedback from both Adrián and the local people in Picacho.

My other two SMART goals were largely achieved, but by utilising different methods than I initially predicted. The second goal was to co-design and deliver an educational strategy

through workshops and feedback sessions about sustainability and the circular economy. Whilst we still held two workshops during the programme, their priority was to engage and be creative with the children, with sustainability education serving as an underlying theme. Our broader educational strategy for the organisation was through the production of our printed pamphlets, which we elected for their accessibility and longevity. My final SMART goal for the programme was to develop a sustainable continuation plan, whereby my fellow scholars and I, in collaboration with the organisation, present a clear plan that will encourage the long-term continuity of the strategy beyond the six weeks. We achieved this in certain aspects, for instance, purchasing the water tanks and clear roof tiles for the organisation's building sets an example of ways to reduce water and electricity usage in someone's homes. Furthermore, the pamphlets are a long-term initiative for easily accessible information, encouraging a future call to action, as well as the eco-bazaar, as its objective was to promote purchasing from local food sources and grow awareness of sustainability and the circular economy within the local community. Overall, despite deviating from my initial goals, the outcomes my fellow scholars and I achieved are consistent with the objectives of the programme and were highly successful whilst disseminating them at Picacho con Futuro.

### Self-reflection

One of the most valuable aspects of the six-week programme was the chance to grow as a leader in a practical environment. On reflection, the skills I have developed most significantly were communication, confidence, leadership, teamwork and determination.

The language barrier with the local community was one of the greatest challenges I had to navigate throughout the six weeks. Spoken communication was often limited to online translation tools or occasional bilingual support, neither of which was always available. Therefore, this required me to adapt quickly and find alternative ways of engaging, such as written communication, gestures and interpretation. It also motivated me to learn as much Spanish as possible, a process that was at times difficult and even humbling but

ultimately rewarding. However, by the end of the programme, I felt far more confident in my ability to connect with people despite linguistic obstacles, and this growth strengthened both my communication and my resilience.

Alongside this, my leadership qualities also developed throughout the programme. As my communication skills improved, I felt more confident in my ability to take initiative and guide others, both independently and within a team. For example, I co-led a group of volunteers from one of Medellín's universities who supported the dissemination of our outcomes. I was responsible for helping to recruit and organise them, as well as directing their contributions during workshops and the creation of our educational pamphlets. Within my own team, I also took the lead in designing and creating our mural, an experience that allowed me to practice leadership among peers while maintaining collaboration and balance within the group. Before entering the programme, I had some reservations about working with an entirely new group, as establishing an effective dynamic often takes time, especially whilst also building friendships. However, through determination, mutual respect, and the ease with which we connected, I found the teamwork both enjoyable and productive, and I am confident that we achieved meaningful outcomes for our shared goal. These experiences offered me invaluable, hands-on practice in leadership that I am eager to carry forward into future challenges.

Looking ahead, there are many lessons I will carry forward from this experience. While I have always thoroughly enjoyed my geography degree and its environmental science focus, participating in this project broadened my interest in the social dimensions of the subject and the interdependence between the two. For instance, when observing the cityscape of Medellín, it became clear how its physical geography has shaped the city's structure, offering insights into patterns such as its wealth distribution. This was just one instance of the interplay between human and physical geography that the project revealed, and it has sparked a fascination I am eager to continue exploring throughout my future career.

During the dissemination of the project, I particularly valued the educational aspect and the sharing of knowledge between my fellow scholars, our leaders and coordinators and

the local people of Medellín. I learnt many things from the people I met, and I hope I was able to share some degree of knowledge in return that might inspire future action around sustainable practices. These exchanges were deeply inspiring, and, having never imagined myself enjoying an 'educator' role, I am grateful for the chance this experience gave me to step outside my comfort zone, with rewarding outcomes both personally and, I hope, for the community.

Many of these reflections were discoveries I made during my time in Colombia, but others reaffirmed long-standing interests. Sustainability and sustainable development have always been central to my career aspirations, though I previously saw myself remaining solely in environmental science rather than engaging with socio-economic perspectives. However, this programme has broadened my horizons, and I am now motivated to explore all areas of the field in the future. Furthermore, I hope to continue travelling, discovering new places, meeting diverse people and working in dynamic, challenging environments. I have always had a passion for travel, but visiting a new continent, engaging in a new language, with a different culture and a wide range of people for an entire summer has reignited this love, and I am excited to see where I can go in the future. I will always be grateful for this opportunity and for the multiple lessons I gained, and I am proud of the work my fellow scholars and I completed during the experience.

I am enormously thankful to the Leeds Laidlaw and make\_sense teams for coordinating such a fantastic experience, and to the members at Picacho con Futuro, who welcomed us with open arms and taught me and my peers so much. I have made true connections and friendships this past summer, and I wish I could do it all over again!

## **Project Leader**

Comments on Francesca Lainé's Participation in the 2025 LIA.

Francesca arrived at her LIA with curiosity and an open mind as she experienced a new city, gastronomy, language, team and project. She demonstrated social and cultural intelligence by approaching differences with comprehension and exploration.

She was constructive, proactive, and committed to finding and testing new ideas. Her initiative to co-create a mural with Picacho con Futuro was both meaningful and lasting. She inspired the community to design small-scale elements for the mural, which helped others visualize the idea and engage with the project.

Additionally, Francesca showed clarity about the tasks she enjoyed and wanted to take on while ensuring collaboration with her peers. She was consistently present, took responsibility for her tasks and was accountable to the team.

Through her leadership, Francesca inspired both her community and colleagues to think creatively and to turn ideas into action. I encourage her to continue working on causes and missions she feels passionate about. Her leadership will continue to grow and make a difference.

Daniela Garavito C.

Signature of Project Leader



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