

Fundación SORA: Leadership in Action Report

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A little story from the past

Back in Ukraine, during a school summer camp, we had an English-speaking volunteer from New York. It was my very first-time meeting someone from a different country and culture. Having never travelled abroad, the somewhere so far away felt like an almost impossible place to visit. Because he spoke only English, we had to practice with him. As kids, our vocabulary was limited, but whenever I managed to say a simple phrase and he understood me, I felt incredibly accomplished, even if I couldn't understand his response! Later, I won a quiz, and my prize was a "3 Musketeers" candy bar, which you couldn't buy in Ukraine. I saved it for weeks, waiting for a special day to share it with my family.

I was about 10 years old at the time, which is the exact same age as many of the children I worked with at Sora.

Recently, I brought some Ukrainian sweets (found in a Polish shop here in the UK) to share with the kids. When a few of them decided not to eat theirs right away and instead carefully saved them, I instantly recognized what they were doing.

I felt deeply grateful to be a meaningful and hopefully inspiring figure in their lives. When we first met, I saw genuine excitement in their eyes; many of them shared how much they wished to explore other countries. They were filled with curiosity, asking us to speak in our native languages, and later making a point to say "thank you" to us in English. Experiencing that full-circle moment reaffirmed my desire to do everything I can to support these children and their futures.

Introduction:

Following these initial personal reflections, this report provides a structured evaluation of my six-week Leadership in Action (LiA) central project with Fundación SORA in Medellín, Colombia through Makesense.

The report is organized into four core analytical sections mapping directly to the Laidlaw reflection framework:

1. SMART Goal Evaluation
2. Cross-Goal Reflection
3. Systemic Change Reflection
4. Character, Leadership & Global Mindset
5. Conclusion & Acknowledgments (¡Muchas Gracias!)



(Fundación Sora workers and Laidlaw Scholars Sora team)

1. SMART Goal Evaluation

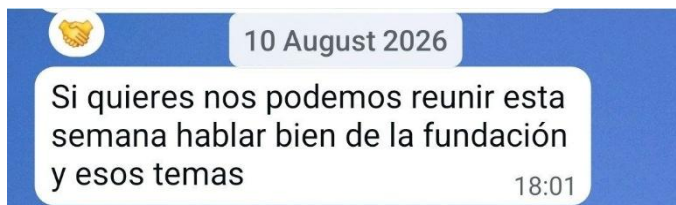
Initially, I defined a picture of success to aspire to in my personal notes as the “LiA Plan Maximum”. Within the LiA project with the organisation Fundación Sora, I wanted to feel proud to be part of the initiative and be more than satisfied with our collective work. In terms of measurable project goals, the deadline was the end of the Leadership in Action (LiA) period, with progress made simultaneously across all six weeks.

I defined my personal focus goals and key outcome experiences in coordination with the Laidlaw Scholar Sora team:

1. Media Lab Activation

1.1 Finding a long-term local volunteer for the role of Media Lab teacher

Achieved: I identified a potential volunteer who is a computer science student at the university.



(A message from the potential Media Lab volunteer, evidencing the agreement to meet with Sora)

At the end of August, I checked in with the organisation regarding this goal, and they confirmed they were actively in touch with each other.

1.2 Delivering 1 workshop on establishing Media Lab rules, with 10+ children

Partially Achieved: Documentation and materials prepared for other volunteers to implement

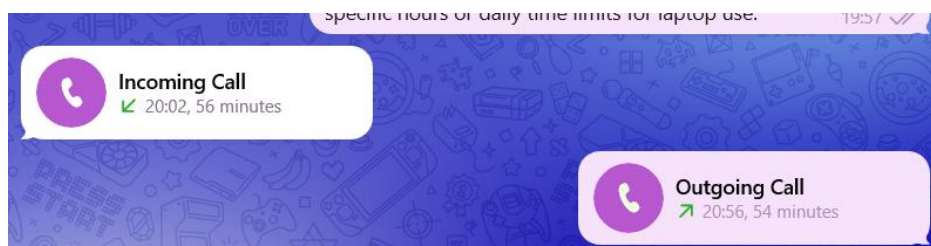


(Stickers for the rules poster to colour in with kids)

The workshop was fully prepared for delivery; however, our Spanish-speaking translator was absent due to illness, and an insufficient number of children arrived on time for the activity. Due to these uncontrollable situational factors and given that it was already Week 5, we decided to share the preparation materials with local volunteers and Sora rather than reschedule.

1.3 Establishing internet safety filters and user accounts for 8 computers

Not Achieved



(One of the phone call discussions with my dad about organising user accounts)

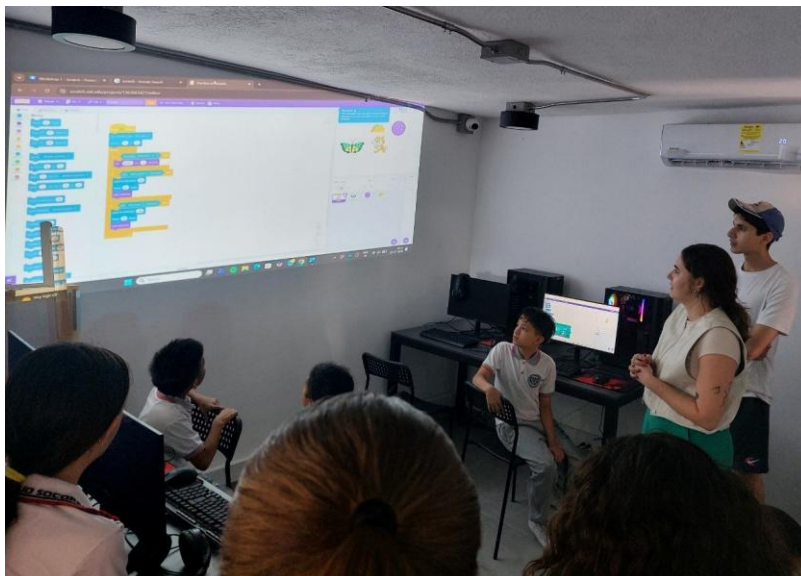
I originally introduced this goal because safety controls are essential for any computer classroom. The Sora staff (two teachers) agreed with me during our initial planning. However, this task proved far more complex than simply following online instructions. I consulted my father in Ukraine, who works as a system administrator, spending hours discussing technical solutions with him.

When I attempted to execute the changes (intending to record my steps and report back to Sora), I found the technical requirements overwhelming as a non-specialist. Upon further discussion with Sora, I learned that the technician who originally set up the computers was on vacation. It would have been more appropriate to consult him directly for context and approval rather than the staff on-site, who lacked technical IT skills. Unfortunately, reaching him was not possible.

In our final presentation, I highlighted this task as an essential next step for Sora's primary IT staff member to focus on after returning from vacation.

1.4 Contributing to the delivery of Media Lab workshops led by other Scholars

Achieved: I facilitated communication with Sora and Makesense when arranging team visits. I provided one-on-one assistance to approximately seven children across two Scratch workshops and one Canva workshop. Additionally, I researched ethics to support the discussion for an AI awareness workshop.



(Scratch workshop introduction)

Every session presented a distinct dynamic: different children attended each time, bringing varying energy levels, background knowledge, and interest in the workshops.

2. Partnership Development

2.1 Designing the Partnership Database

Achieved: I created an Excel database tracking development stages, key contacts, and relevant notes in a central location. I also designed supplementary sheets (e.g., a "Contactos" tab) to help multiple team members coordinate outreach and maintain institutional memory.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1	Última actualización de la tabla: 30.07, row 20									
2	Organisation name	Status	Partnership Stage	Link to website	Short description	Contact	Type of Partner	Focus Area	Geographic Scope	Responsible Staff member
3	Nombre de la organización	Estado	Etapas de asociación	Enlace al sitio web	Breve descripción	Contacto	Tipo de socio	Área de enfoque	Alcance geográfico	Miembro responsable de
4	Makesense	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://makesense.la			Socio impl.	Ayuda con la enseñanza de MediaLab y el sitio web	Medellín Internacional	
5	Ruta N	ProspectoPo...	Acuerdo de contacto	https://rutamedellin.org		gestion.documental@rutamedellin.org	Socio impl.		Medellín	
6	Maxitours	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://viagesmaxitours.com					Medellín	
7	La Megueria	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://www.lamigue.com			Donante		Medellín	
8	Compras Urbano	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://www.comprasurbano.com					Medellín	
9	Black and White 13	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://www.facebook.com/blackandwhite13	Se especializan en la		Socio impl.		Comuna 13	
10	Panadería Chipre	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://eltesoro.com.co			Donante		Medellín	
11	Visit Medellín Tours	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://www.facebook.com/visitmedellintours					Medellín	
12	Trova de la 13	Activo	Colaboración activa						Comuna 13	
13	Junta de Acción Comunal Independiente	Activo	Colaboración activa				Gobierno		Medellín	
14	Confarma	Activo	Colaboración activa	https://www.confarma.com					Medellín	
15	Women Techmakers	ProspectoPo...	Acuerdo de contacto	https://wtmmedellin.com		wtm@pionerasdev.co	Socio impl.	Ayuda con la enseñanza de MediaLab y el sitio web	Medellín	
16	Women Mba Code	ProspectoPo...	Acuerdo de contacto	https://www.womenmbacode.com		formulario en el sitio web, sección de asociaciones	Comunidad	Ayuda con la enseñanza de MediaLab y el sitio web	Medellín	

(Main page of the Partnership Database)

2.2 Creating additional outreach materials (brochure redesign, partnership agreement template, email templates)

Partially Achieved: I drafted a reusable email template incorporating local feedback, which was formally approved by Sora's leadership. However, other planned deliverables were adapted: the updated brochure was considered irrelevant when our team developed a new website for Sora, and cultural research into Colombian partnership practices revealed that a formal partnership agreement template was less relevant in this context.

Plantilla para propuestas de colaboración entre MediaLab y sitios web

Asunto del correo:

Propuesta de alianza – Fundación SORA (Comuna 13, Medellín)

Texto:

Estimados/as [Nombre de la Organización / Nombre del Contacto],

Espero que se encuentren muy bien. Mi nombre es [Nombre], y les escribo como voluntario/a de la Fundación SORA, una organización comunitaria ubicada en la Comuna 13, Medellín.

Como seguramente sabrán, la Comuna 13 se ha convertido en un ejemplo poderoso de transformación: de un lugar marcado por el conflicto, a uno reconocido hoy por su innovación comunitaria, cultura y resiliencia. SORA hace parte de esa historia en curso: creamos espacios donde la promoción de hábitos saludables y nuevas habilidades impulsan un cambio positivo en las familias de la comunidad (en su mayoría, hogares liderados por madres cabeza de familia).

Uno de nuestros proyectos actuales enseña habilidades básicas de computación a niños y niñas entre 6 y 14 años a través de nuestro MediaLab. Para darle continuidad a este proyecto, estamos buscando a una persona voluntaria que pueda acompañarnos presencialmente una vez por semana o cada dos semanas, liderando talleres de programación y diseño con herramientas como Scratch. También esperamos mejorar nuestra página web. Actualmente contamos con una versión prototipo hecha en Google Sites, y nos encantaría recibir asesoría o apoyo práctico para desarrollarla en una versión más completa y profesional.

(A part of the email template, reusable for other requests)

2.3 Outreach to 8 tech NGOs in Colombia to request assistance with Media Lab teaching and website updates

Achieved: All target organisations were contacted via email. By 2–3 weeks post-LiA, only one organisation sent a formal rejection, while the others remained unresponsive.

Recognising that email outreach was less effective, I diversified my approach by leveraging local connections in Colombia to ask for direct personal introductions.

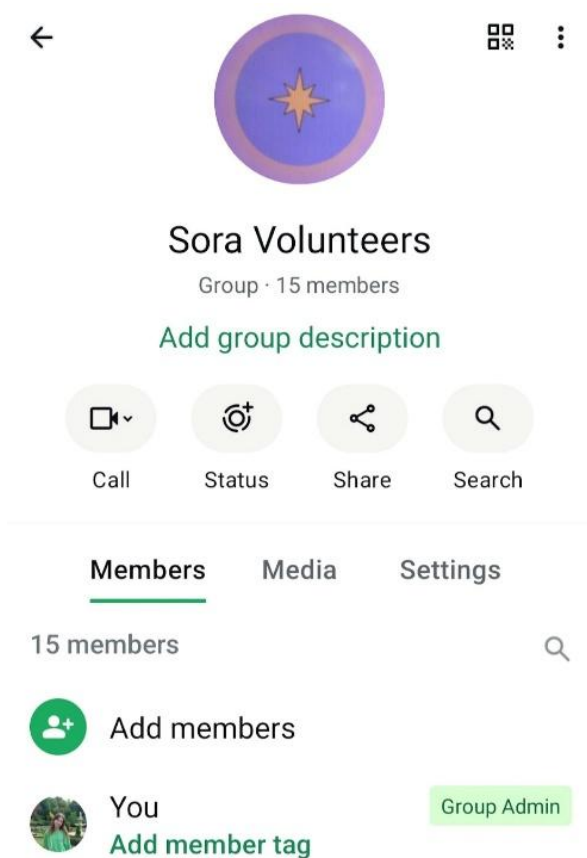
3. Volunteer Management

3.1 Recruiting Volunteers

Achieved: As a team, we designed a recruitment poster distributed through university channels via Makesense. We also hosted a campus stand during lunch hours, engaging directly with students. Through these efforts, I registered and added 10 students to our volunteer group chat.



(Volunteer recruitment on campus)

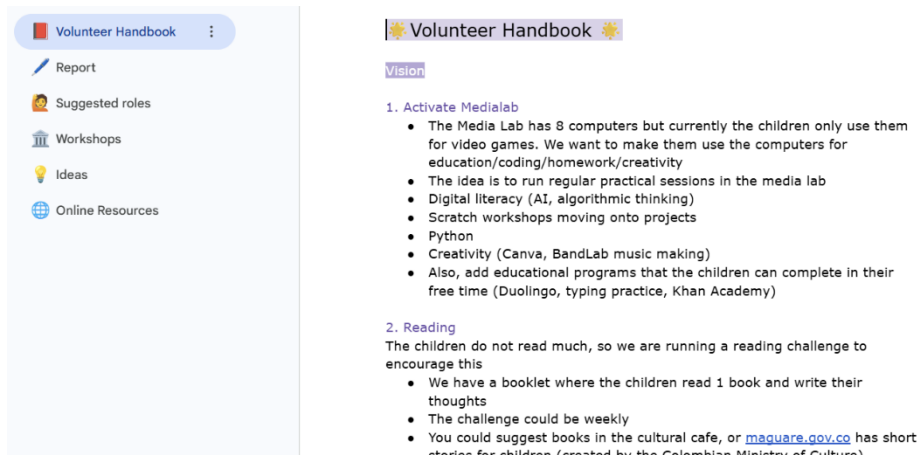


(Screenshot of the group chat)

Initially, my group messages received minimal responses. I proactively followed up via direct messages (in both English and Spanish), which successfully engaged three volunteers.

3.2 Volunteer Handbook

Achieved: I drafted descriptions for suggested volunteer roles, documented past projects, and compiled future activity ideas. While this remains a useful long-term resource for future cohorts, I acknowledge the risk that some details may become outdated over time.



(Screenshot of the main page of the volunteer handbook)

3.3 Volunteer Integration in Coordination with the Organisation

Achieved: I conducted in-person meetings with volunteers to discuss their personal interests and align them with Sora's needs. Two volunteers accompanied us on site visits to assist with translation and meet the staff directly. One volunteer subsequently brought two additional friends to join our visits. Ultimately, contact details for five volunteers were passed to Sora, with staff meeting four of them in person.



(University volunteers meeting with us on campus)

4. Well-being Activities

Achieved: I assisted in two reading challenge sessions, a health session, origami and a movie screening designed by fellow Scholars. I co-designed a dance session with Sophie and attended a graffiti class.



(Reading challenge session)

Although these activities were supplementary and not part of my initial SMART goals, they provided vital opportunities for deep immersion, personal growth, and observational learning.

Real-World Context Leadership Lessons

Proactive Follow-Up:

Regarding volunteer recruitment and involvement, I realised that following up after recruitment is the key determinant of relationship building. When I added 10 registered volunteers to the group chat, my messages got ignored by almost everyone. By following up in person and through direct messages, 3 people replied and met with us, and 2 of them visited the organisation more than once. Leadership in this context meant being proactive, reaching out individually, and making sure volunteers felt supported and directly connected with Sora.



(Me and Sahara, one of the volunteers)

Recognising Communication as Core Work:

Communication takes time, and communicating is a major task in itself. Within the Laidlaw Sora team, I was responsible for communicating about our organisational visits, Makesense (Sam or Dani), and the volunteers. On some mornings at the university (UPB), my teammates could focus on getting their project tasks completed, while I would spend the entire morning managing communication.

Using a translator for nearly every message added extra time. Even though I know some Spanish, I needed to double-check my wording to minimise confusion, though minor misunderstandings were still not completely avoidable. While I was happy to be proactive, I felt slightly behind on my own project deliverables because this operational responsibility was not officially listed as a task on my focus list.

Coordination and stakeholder communication are essential leadership responsibilities, not just "extra work." Moving forward, I learned that I need to officially recognise communication as a task, acknowledge the time and effort it requires, and plan my schedule better to balance communication with my other goals.

2. Cross-Goal Reflection

The level of ambition

Overall, my goals were likely too ambitious for a six-week project. For example, if I had managed to fully set up the safety filters (Goal 1.3), it would have required a significant amount of additional time that I would have had to sacrifice somewhere else.

However, the goals that were not achieved or only partially achieved were influenced by valid, situational factors rather than a lack of effort. I do not regret planning slightly more than I eventually got done, because I knew from the beginning this was likely to happen, and it taught me how to prioritise effectively when time was limited.



(The view from my hotel in Medellin)

Patterns across my outcomes

A clear pattern across the deliverables we completed is that we focused on what the Sora staff members we interacted with most wanted us to do. Because these workers were primarily teachers, their priorities and perceived needs were directly related to the children, rather than structural or administrative tasks. Meanwhile, staff members involved in administrative roles were generally unavailable.

I initially wanted to focus my ideas on long-term, structural interventions. However, due to this asymmetry of information, I had to shift my focus more toward workshop delivery than I had originally anticipated. Without the opportunity to speak directly in person with the founder/director (who handles partnerships and financial management), I faced a constant dilemma: *Is my impact greater if I keep expanding the Partnership Database, even if it might end up unused, or is it better to directly help a child figure out Scratch functions using my limited Spanish?*

Setting goals in the complex goals in the future

Despite this dilemma, what I would definitely do differently in the future is be more conscious when setting goals that involve tasks I have never done before, as well as the limitations of the help available to me (relating back to Goal 1.3).

Next time, if the people on-site say they don't know the answer to a problem, I will recognise earlier that there must be another specific person who does. I would be more proactive in trying to reach that person directly. If getting in touch with them isn't possible, I would frame the task as a researched proposal or idea for them to implement later, rather than spending hours trying to solve complex technical issues externally (such as consulting my dad) without full local context.

3. Systemic Change Reflection

Understanding the System

Larger system

I was operating at the intersection of a local community-based NGO (Fundación Sora), the socio-economic ecosystem of Comuna 13 in Medellín, and the international development sector represented by Makesense and the Laidlaw Foundation.

Visible barriers

The primary barrier was a misalignment of priorities between different operational levels. The initial project brief was co-created by Makesense and Sora's high-level leadership, it included initiatives like developing a community café. However, in practice, the on-site teachers we worked with daily did not share or fully understand this vision. As a result, the café project was not a part of our focus when we arrived.

System functioning surprises

I was surprised by how much daily operations depend on informal, flexible structures rather than rigid administrative plans. Additionally, the asymmetry of information between off-site leadership (who manage funding, strategy, and partnerships) and on-site educators (who manage daily child engagement) significantly dictated what could realistically be achieved on any given day.



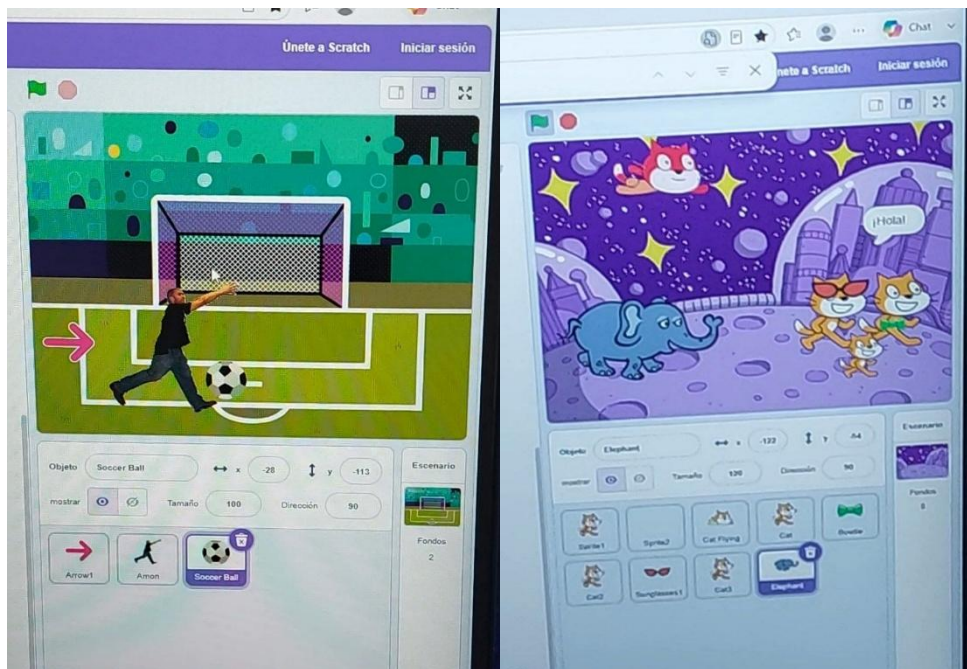
(Comuna 13 view)

Leverage & Constraint

Small actions made a meaningful difference

Small, relational actions yielded disproportionately positive outcomes. Consistent, individual follow-ups with volunteers such as checking in on their feelings and impressions, ensured active participation.

Similarly, adopting a humble, relational approach with the children made a noticeable difference. Following advice from Makesense and a local student volunteer, I asked the kids to help me: *"Can you please help me learn Spanish and read this page for me?"* or *"Wow, how did you do that? Can you show me?"* Positioning the children as teachers built immediate trust, increased their engagement, and created an encouraging learning space despite language barriers.



(Scratch workshop outcomes)

Slower progress

Progress felt constrained when trying to advance long-term administrative goals due to the temporary absence of key decision-makers. Fundación Sora employs around eight workers alongside regular volunteers. During our placement, key staff members relevant to my structural goals were on vacation, most notably the organizational leader responsible for

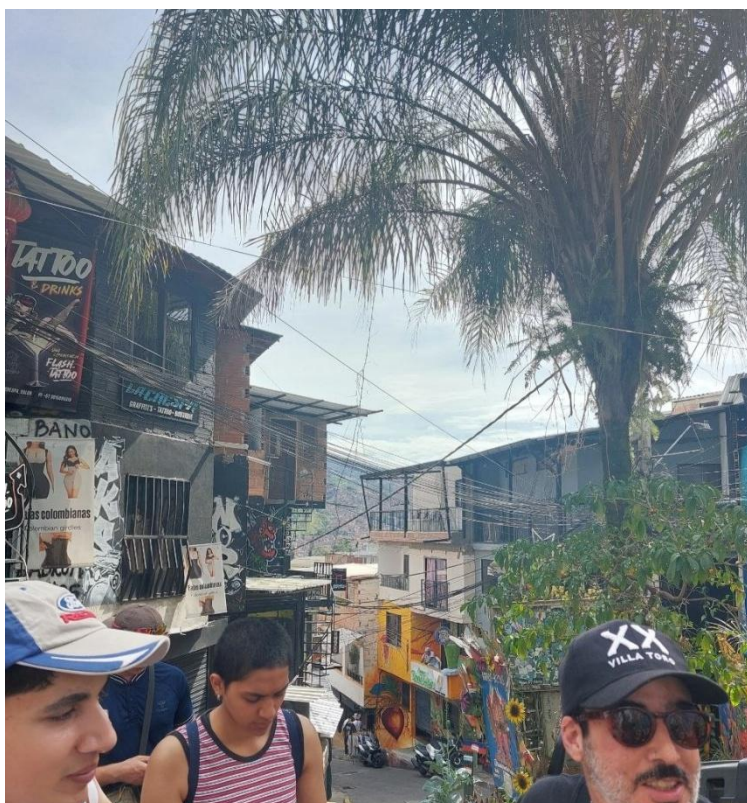
partnerships and financial administration. Because direct communication was delayed (messages were sometimes answered a week later), I had to operate on assumptions. For example, I built the Partnership Database with detailed user instructions and links to Spanish Excel tutorials, assuming the end-user might need basic technical support. I later learned that the organizational leader already manages complex financial documentation and Excel proficiently. This highlighted how lack of direct access to leadership can lead to mismatched assumptions.

Structural factors

unpredictability in scheduling heavily constrained our planning. Public holidays, shifting organisational visit dates (often confirmed only 1–2 days prior or on the morning of), and fluctuating child attendance meant structured multi-week workshop plans were difficult to execute as imagined. When my Media Lab Rules workshop could not be delivered live due to translator illness and timing constraints, I adapted by handing over the prepared materials and session outlines to local volunteers and Sora staff for future use.

Realistic deeper change, if work continues for several years

If future Laidlaw cohorts continue this work over several years, systemic change could occur across generations in Comuna 13. Sustained digital literacy workshops in the Media Lab could enable the ~40 children at Sora to build advanced computer skills. Over time, this knowledge could inspire young people to pursue higher education or technical careers. This directly aligns with the Medellín government's broader vision of transforming the city into a digital and innovation hub. Increasing local technical capacity would allow community members to secure higher-paying jobs or launch independent enterprises. Ultimately, this would help diversify Comuna 13's economy away from exclusive reliance on tourism, reinvesting financial and social capital directly back into the neighborhood.



(Comuna 13 tour)

Contribution in Context

Significance in the broader system

My contribution was strengthening existing organisational capacity while introducing structured tools for future sustainability.

- **Strengthening Existing Efforts:** We reactivated the physical Media Lab space and supported ongoing educational routines.
- **Testing New Ideas:** We introduced interactive learning tools like Scratch and Canva, alongside the Reading Challenge. While staff initially warned us that the children disliked reading, the interactive booklet format successfully engaged them in reading small books.
- **Exposing Systemic Gaps:** Our presence revealed technical gaps in IT administration and safety filters, a community-wide gap regarding AI risk awareness, and an internal organizational gap in aligning strategic goals between off-site leadership and on-site staff. It also highlighted Comuna 13's heavy reliance on local tourism funding versus broader regional partnerships across Medellín.

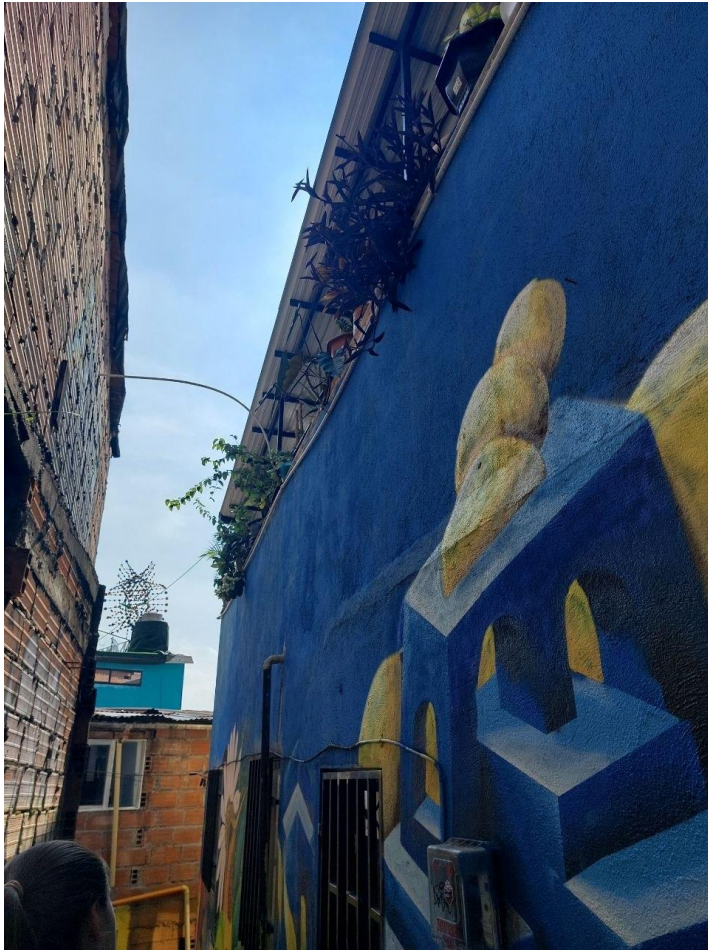


(Exploring what is inside the coffee bean berry)

Realistic level of change of my LiA

Individual Level: We fostered meaningful cultural exchange. One-on-one interactions during computer workshops ensured the children experienced learning as enjoyable rather than intimidating. Finding a dedicated local computer science volunteer ensured ongoing individual mentorship for the kids.

Organisational Level: The Partnership Database provided a centralized system to streamline communication, manage external outreach, and preserve institutional memory so future collaborations don't have to start from scratch.



(Sora's building)

Community Level: We altered the typical dynamic between foreign visitors and locals. Rather than interacting as passive tourists, we engaged in active, collaborative partnership. Being from Ukraine—a background rarely represented among visitors in Comuna 13—added a unique layer of cross-cultural dialogue.

Narrative Level: Sora's initial request included "teaching kids AI." However, observing the heavy presence of commercial AI-generated art across Comuna 13 (on souvenir t-shirts, cafe menus, and event posters), I recognized a critical ethical issue.



(AI posters in Comuna 13, photographed by James D)

Aligning with UN recommendations that advise against unrestricted AI tool usage for children under 13, our team discussed how to approach this responsibly. Rather than ignoring the request, I researched AI ethics frameworks and age-appropriate guidelines to help design an AI Awareness and Ethics Workshop. We communicated open-heartedly with Sora's teachers about why we shifted the focus toward critical awareness and safety rather than basic generation. This introduced a new, responsible narrative surrounding digital technology within the organization.

Continuity & Sustainability

Power/responsibility for long-term change

The ultimate responsibility lies with Sora's internal leadership and local university partners. The computer science volunteer I recruited offers a strong continuation of workshops for the immediate future, but Sora's core team holds the operational authority to keep the Media Lab active, maintain volunteer relationships, and integrate the partnership tools into their routine workflow.

Thinking about systemic change

The main change in my understanding of systemic change is realising that I don't have to be fully inside a system to help create change. In my previous experiences, my volunteering and projects were strictly centered on Ukraine (since I am from Ukraine) or directly tied to my career and interest in economics. Prior to arriving, the briefing suggested we would assist on the business and administrative side, which aligned well with my background. However, once on the ground, that proved unfeasible.



(The plant I have never seen before)

My Role Going Forward

Initially, being in Colombia, which is a context I didn't feel directly connected to, and being asked to introduce interventions like computer literacy felt outside my core expertise and interests. I didn't feel part of the local system at first. It required deep immersion, continuous research, curiosity, and asking questions until local perspectives began piecing together like a puzzle. Ultimately, feeling welcomed to propose ideas and given the freedom to execute them showed me that outsiders can still meaningfully contribute to addressing systemic issues.

I could certainly see myself volunteering with similar organizations or community spaces like Sora in the future, even if the specific mission or daily tasks differ. It was a positive environment to be part of, and seeing kids have access to a safe space to play and build life

skills outside of formal schooling was deeply rewarding. Going forward, I would love to contribute in roles where I can combine this type of community support with strategic, organizational, or economic insights.

I will carry the core learnings from this experience, especially around adaptability, open-minded research before intervening, and cross-cultural collaboration into future teamwork and leadership roles throughout my career.



(One of the daily team meetings)

4. Character, Leadership & Global Mindset

The leader I am becoming

In theory, leadership often looks like setting a strategy and delegating tasks. In practice during my LiA, leadership meant adaptability, active communication, and humility. It meant spending time translating messages to keep everyone aligned, stepping up when plans shifted unexpectedly, and being willing to learn alongside the children rather than acting as an outside expert.

I felt most challenged by the language barrier, which initially limited my ability to express myself accurately and clearly. Communicating solely in Spanish required immense patience, both from me and from those I spoke with, as I formulated sentences or relied on a translator. At times, particularly during the Bazar festival (week 1), I found myself wishing I could understand more and wondering if I could have reached a broader group of people.

However, leading in complexity taught me that even a significant barrier can become a catalyst for growth. This challenge motivated me to find more student volunteers with English skills, to assist us with organisational visits. Involving them not only helped bridge the communication gap, but also fostered deeper engagement and connection. Ultimately, I learned that difficult obstacles should serve as motivation rather than roadblocks. By weeks 4 and 5, I was actively initiating simple conversations in Spanish, a step that reflected both my growing confidence and my commitment to continuous learning.

Character & Personal Growth

I have always preferred to not have expectations or many assumptions before something, but to come as clear-minded as possible. I had done as much research as needed beforehand, but the actual experience gave me the privilege of traveling, visiting, and interacting with places, spaces, and people that I would not be able to access at this point in time otherwise.

It was unusual for many people I introduced myself to that I am from Ukraine, because it is very rare for people from my country to have this kind of opportunity right now. This

experience made me realize how much these interactions and the people I met changed me as a person.

Change Maker Values

Extra-ordinary: I used the Extra-ordinary value during collaboration with other Laidlaw Scholars who had different interests, skills, and views. We used the best combination of those abilities when working with each other to not settle for “good enough,” but to go beyond that and deliver outcomes as much and as good as we could.

Curiosity: I always asked a lot of questions, not only to SORA workers, but to everyone around me who could understand me. Beyond that, I was immersing myself into the Colombian context, history, culture, and doing internet research. This made me feel closer and more understanding of "paisas" and locals.



(Me feeling paisa in Colombian t-shirt at Cars exhibition during the Flower Festival)

Developing a Global Mindset

The limit on learning or integrating does not exist. I have been exposed to many different cultures and have been to many countries before the LiA, but the LiA made me more globally and culturally aware in a different, deeper way.

5. ¡Muchas Gracias!

Coming back to the meaningful candy story from the beginning: the kids at Fundación SORA were sharing sweets with me, too (what well-mannered children!). It might seem like I'm promoting some "sweet diplomacy" here (which I definitely am!), but it was also about how much they changed me.



(Candy one of the kids gave me)

¡Muchas gracias a Fundación SORA! Thank you to everyone I met along the way, to the kids for being the wonderful little humans they are; to the SORA team, especially Leidy, Marisol and Natalia; Sam, and Dani from Makesense; to Sahara, Laura, and Valentina as UPB volunteers; to Laura, Sophie, Risha, and James on our Laidlaw SORA team; and to all the other Laidlaw Scholars in Colombia.

My journey wouldn't have been the same without you, and I am forever changed by each and every one of you!

Дякую!



(Final Presentation to Sora)