



University of
St Andrews

Making Impact Visible. Working with SOS Children's Villages Nepal.

Leadership in Action Report

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Introduction

Working as a professional videographer and content creator alongside my studies, I have produced dozens of media materials for commercial and creative pursuits, developing ideas from the initial brief towards final implementation and delivery to the audience. Usually, I have followed a similar pattern focused on a single media production, which could be analysed individually as a coherent product. The work was often executed within frameworks and topics familiar to me, where I could resonate more closely with the subject and build stronger solutions through my association with the audience, platforms of delivery, the team involved, and clients.

However, this summer I became involved in and built something different, focused on a completely different context and set of expectations. I challenged myself to develop new pathways for creating communicative campaigns within unfamiliar frameworks, while considering wider ethical and logistical issues when working with people and ideas that are not closely related to me. For my Leadership in Action project, I chose to work on the 'Making Impact Visible' project arranged by SOS Children's Villages Nepal, creating media campaigns to encourage further funding and donor interest in the initiatives of the organisation.

Even though I had worked with child development frameworks and projects before, my role in the programme was unique in terms of finding new ways and connections to contribute within an environment where my expectations were not always aligned with reality. It also allowed me to recognise the valuable potential of my past experience when applied to new realities unfolding in front of me.

Context

SOS Children's Villages Nepal is one of the largest non-governmental organisations within Nepal, with the primary aim of providing sustainable support and care for young children in need, while further supporting disadvantaged communities on the ground and contributing to systematic change. The organisation works through different clusters of initiatives, including boarding school programmes where students study and live within larger supported families with caregivers, as well as localised community programmes through which they provide funding for private initiatives and organise development and community mobilisation workshops, such as hygiene and nutrition education, youth leadership clubs and advocacy consultations.

I worked within a team alongside two other Laidlaw Scholars, Matteo from the EPFL University in Lausanne and Emma from the University of Hong Kong, both of whom had different skillsets and approaches to work than me. From the initial stage, we distributed roles and responsibilities while maintaining flexibility to cover and change them periodically.

I was primarily responsible for the videographic capture of interviews and live documentary content about the programmes of the organisation. The main focus of our project was creating promotional media awareness campaigns around the local community-strengthening programmes in and around Lahan area, travelling across various villages, observing the lifestyles of local communities, taking their testimonies and cooperating in capturing their day-to-day life, aspirations and needs.

Considering the new cultural environment, particularly its behavioural patterns, socio-economic background and my position as an outsider, it was initially unusual and challenging to begin working without a complete understanding of the specific expectations and responses of the people I was working with. My position as an outsider was frequently acknowledged and reflected upon, often driving me to consider the specific value of conducting this type of documentary work and the unique perspectives I could bring to the team as a foreigner. What was initially posed as a challenge became a fruitful opportunity to learn how to adapt, acknowledge and embrace otherness as a starting point for new and productive approaches.

Goal One: Understand the motifs and context of SOS Kinderdorf's development programmes, delving into their cultural, educational and political dimensions

A major part of my project work was dedicated to exploring the essence of the organisation's work, specifically in regard to development, its ethics, distribution of resources and the real impact on the communities being served. Beyond simple reportage work, it was important for me to get to know the contemporary structural issues within Nepal, explore the actual responses provided by the organisation and, most importantly, understand the ways and channels through which they are addressing them.

From the initial stage of the project, we had an introductory strategic meeting with the National Director, Dr Ganga Gurung, discussing the organisational structure as well as familiarising ourselves with its values, connections with local and international partners, and methodologies used to execute its initiatives in Nepal. In each programme location that we attended, we had the opportunity to meet locally based teams and understand the regional situation in greater detail. Taking a proactive position, I was always curious to ask and initiate additional questions related to the usage of funds from international donors in such disadvantaged parts of the world and the power imbalances this can create in general. I also tried to trace the connections of the organisation with smaller and larger-scale partners, including government bodies and smaller NGOs, and to understand the uniqueness of its productive force in comparison to other activist groups and initiatives.

In each location I visited, I tried to break the official barrier established between myself as an 'outsider' worker and local people. I asked additional questions about the history of the specific region, sought the impressions of local communities and always explained my role and presence within their community. I was surprised by how well the organisation

managed its own initiatives while relying on international cooperation and sustainable practices, responsibly managing finances, providing clear reports, and building strong links with on-the-ground engagement clubs and governmental bodies to ensure the long-term sustainability of activities established by the organisation.

Initially, I was concerned about my outsider position and questioned whether my perspective and work could be effective within a local context that I did not fully understand. I later realised that it is not primarily necessary to be familiar with every aspect of the context, but more important to have a systematic plan for how specific needs and actions can be addressed. I realised that my position as an outsider could be useful in bringing a new perspective and understanding of the development work being produced. Most importantly, I learned strategies and approaches applied within NGO work and the ways connections with others can be developed and used within my future career and projects, helping me to become a more responsible citizen who views initiatives more holistically while noticing structural gaps and opportunities for improving efficiency, communication and governing policies.

Goal Two: Produce several media campaigns that reflect the nature of such development programmes and successfully attract potential donors to invest resources in future opportunities created by the organisation.

While aiming to familiarise myself with the organisation's programme structure and observe all of its underlying motifs, I also got to explore the financial needs and programme outcomes that we needed to communicate, thinking about effective storytelling and visual approaches. Rather than focusing on an oversimplified narrative of pure financial benefit received by communities, or reinforcing an associative connection with "salvage" work, the team and I decided to choose a more human-centred approach based on depicting the direct lifestyles of communities and becoming collaborators in creating content that represented their lives.

As our primary base, we chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, allowing both us and the participants to become more comfortable with each other while providing a holistic background of their lives in connection to the organisation. Although in most cases the interviews were successful in depicting particular circumstances of people, I felt that the questions pre-made by the organisation's head European office were sometimes lacking cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the uniqueness of Nepal. At times, this created discomfort for participants when answering or understanding the specificities of certain questions. In addition, the language barrier provided further difficulties, preventing a more empathetic interaction from developing and sometimes creating discomfort when communicating thoughts through interpreters, who in some cases had their own pre-assumptions or vision of how the interview should look and what the final product might be.

Based on the recorded video interviews, we invited participants to showcase their daily routines and the practices surrounding their everyday values and beliefs. Through these cooperative engagements, we started shooting small documentary details of people's livelihoods in order to fulfill and elaborate on the interviews we had produced. While I am still involved in completing the editing process, the priority remains to combine such documentary materials with the main interview footage in a way that depicts individual trajectories, filled with their own unique lifestyles, ways of thinking about the world, aims and feelings.

In this way, I believe a greater connection can be made with the audience and potential donors watching such content, allowing them to understand each personality on a deeper level and create immediate connections through similarities they might share across an imagined "wall". The values and outcomes of development can therefore be communicated not simply through reciprocal benefit or salvage narratives, but through associative chains between different lives, depicting struggle in a more empathetic and powerful way. The photo and video materials produced will be used across a variety of the organisation's platforms, including social media, to encourage further donor funding and partnerships, communicate achievements made by the organisation and communities, and provide valuable memory and testimonial material for those involved.

<https://youtu.be/yuIr-WPPtKI>

An example of video campaign produced for a SOS Children's Villages Nepal Itihari Campus

Goal Three: Build collaborative interaction with the participants on the ground, observing the unique needs they aim to accomplish through such media engagement, as well as their culturally specific reactions provoked by these media processes

Thinking collaboratively became the main motto of my participation within the project and of my enactment of leadership in general. Rather than presenting myself as an experienced and intrusive filmmaker documenting external perspectives, I always attempted to reimagine my role and observe the context I was in from different perspectives. In any interaction with local people, I was trying to speak through their story, imagining its details and unfolding based on the framework they presented, while empathetically trying to connect my own past life experiences to each of these stories. This helped me to move away from simply observing people and towards understanding them as active participants in the process of creating the media that represented their lives.

Furthermore, it was always important to find a common way of working with local organisation's community mobilisers and other staff members. Rather than treating them as external to the documentary materials we were producing, we perceived them as an

integral part of the communities we were working with, trying to understand their backgrounds and the contribution they were making to their neighbouring communities. Local staff members were crucial in representing the particular histories and lenses through which we viewed each community, making an in-depth interaction with them and a longer-term perspective important in building trust within our relationships. Their knowledge complemented our external observations, and their involvement often shaped how we approached the people and environments we were documenting.

We were also trying to adapt our behavioural approach and visual style to each participant we were working with, considering their first impressions of our work, the extent to which they were willing to share, and the way they preferred to communicate information about themselves. Such adaptability ensured that we could understand individual responses in greater detail, particularly individualised needs, sensitive information and changes in mood or perspective that could appear unexpectedly. It was also about creativity in finding solutions to each story and developing the narrative best suited to depict the individual in front of us.

Through this process, I began to understand collaboration not simply as an ability to work with other people, but as an active form of leadership based on listening, adaptation and trust. The most effective decisions were not always those I could make independently, but those developed through recognising the knowledge and perspectives of others and allowing them to influence the final outcome.

Conclusion

Although my main focus was on documenting the experiences and outcomes of the SOS Children's Villages initiatives, I felt that I expanded my practice on a deeper level, both as a professional videographer and personally as a proactive leader. My involvement helped me to practise working on projects systematically and holistically, always considering the wide array of factors that influence the formation of a particular context, relationship dynamics and historical development. It also provoked me to think more about the ethics of my work, considering the ways I approach participants, the extent to which I understand their experiences and how my cultural predispositions influence such understanding.

The experience I gained in Nepal will forever remain close to me, and I will cherish everything that I gave and simultaneously received from the local people. Beyond the media materials produced and the practical experience developed, the project gave me a deeper understanding of the importance of listening, adapting and recognising perspectives beyond my own. It has changed the way I approach both my professional practice and my understanding of leadership, reminding me that meaningful contribution does not always come from having the most knowledge or control, but from being open to learning from the people and contexts in which I find myself.