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## Help in Change

Over the second summer of the Laidlaw programme I partnered with two organisations, Help in Change and Arbetslösas Röst. I will discuss my drastically different but equally rewarding experiences with both organisations in this reflection as well as explore the leadership themes of adaptability and humility.

Help in Change's She Unet is a programme organised through multiple NGOs in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Italy, to promote the economic and social integration of Ukrainian women through empowerment-focused workshops. Leading up to the programme, I met with the Help in Change team, where we workshopped the content and planned the practical aspects of the sessions. There were 5 sessions, built around topics such as positive thinking, reconnecting with one's identity, finding community, and turning challenges into strengths. Each session was led by one of the leaders of the organisation, with Svetlana (a Ukrainian Psychologist) heading the entire She Unet programme. I had the privilege to attend and help facilitate each session, learning how they were structured and led. I then had the opportunity to lead session 5, on language anxiety.

I designed and led a workshop on language anxiety (språkångest) in Swedish with translation support. The session first unpacked sources of language anxiety and how to navigate stress in high-pressure moments (ready-made Swedish phrases to use in moments of language anxiety). Given their varying comfort levels in Swedish and varying stages of their integration journey, it was imperative that I focused solely on managing language anxiety, spoke humbly about my own experiences as they informed the tools I presented to them, but did not pretend to understand their experience.

The most challenging practical aspect of the session was that the women had varying levels of understanding of Swedish but I luckily had a translator that could translate the session into Ukrainian in real time. The most challenging emotional aspect of the session was to be an effective leader despite not having all the answers, being much younger than participants, and navigating language anxiety in entirely different circumstances. When one woman asked me: "how do I balance putting myself out of my comfort zone with the absolute dread of being embarrassed by saying the wrong thing", I told her the truth: I don't have all the answers. I still feel those feelings, and it's important to know they are not alone

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in them. They were moreover receptive to my lesson because I did not try to force my own narrative or give them a 'quick fix'. I related to their struggles, shared honest tactics that worked for me, and I made sure to let them know that I was still learning as well, and that making mistakes and feeling those moments of embarrassment and frustration are actually moments where we grow and learn in a new language. I also wanted to validate the frustrating disconnect between your true identity and the limitations of expressions in a new language and that it does not define them as a whole. This session was therefore the perfect opportunity to develop my leadership skills of cultural humility and communication.

My last exercise in the lesson was to hand out the cards the women anonymously filled out in the beginning about their language anxieties, where each woman would read the card of another woman out loud and offer them support or advice. Even though we had been teaching and practising in Swedish the whole day. The content of all my materials was in both Swedish and Ukrainian, but I encouraged this last exercise to be taught solely in Ukrainian. Even though I had designed the lesson, I did not need to hear what they had learned from it (for my own personal validation) this was for them and for each other, and it was not my moment to understand. They found it much easier to express themselves this way, and to have that connection and understanding with each other was invaluable to know they were not alone in their language struggles, and even though I couldn't understand what they were saying, it was clear from their expressions that they found this exercise meaningful and empowering.

The impact I hoped to have within the community I engaged with was empowerment. I wanted to not only build their confidence in their practical Swedish-speaking skills, but to gain an inner confidence in their abilities and to know that understanding is the goal, not fluency.

My project goal was specific for Help in Change: successfully lead a workshop. The success was measured through engagement levels during the lesson and the connection seen in the group sharing exercises I facilitated at the end. My lesson was also attainable, with the support of the Help in Change team in terms of sourcing participants and an advanced understanding of the on-the-ground attitudes and circumstances Ukrainian refugees are

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facing in their language/integration journeys. My project was moreover relevant, through leading empowerment workshops for young Ukrainian women is both highly relevant to today's pressing issues of immigrant integration as well as my own personal academic pursuits. Lastly, my project was time-bound as I met for several weeks with Help in Change before and during my 6-weeks to familiarize myself with their team and participants. The key lesson I learned that will influence my future leadership practice is to lead through listening and remaining humble in moments of leadership.

## **Arbetslösas Röst**

The awareness campaign with Arbetslösas Röst (The voice of the unemployed) was designed with the intention to tell the stories behind the statistics of unemployment and reduce the stigma of unemployment through a unified voice. The context of this awareness campaign is framed around the September election in Sweden, where systems such as A-kassan (unemployment insurance) are at risk to be exponentially decreased. We designed impactful interview questions and interviewed a handful of unemployed Swedes (both native and first-generation immigrants) on their experiences of unemployment. We created multiple videos, one for each person's individual stories, and one where we cut all the stories together. We published this across Arbetslösas' Röst social media, website, and even reached out to journalists who would be interested in amplifying these voices.

Relevant stakeholders in this project are the interviewees, as they shared deeply vulnerable and personal details of their unemployment journey. We have taken proper precaution with this, had thorough consent forms, and sent the videos to interviewees for their consent before publishing. We conducted these interviews over the course of two weeks in person at a local office in central Stockholm, for a couple hours each session.

I had the privilege of speaking first-hand to people struggling with long-term unemployment, some spanning decades of precarious work. Beyond amplifying their own voices, I felt that what was most fulfilling for both parties was sitting down and having someone listen without judgement to their practical hardships as well as their struggles with their self-image and navigating the relationships in their life following the life-altering event of long-term unemployment. The impact I hoped to have within the community was more to offer them my silence than any words of comfort: a platform for them to share their story and truly be heard.

At Arbetslösas Röst, I created and led their awareness campaign. As such, I was in charge of the entire project, from pitching the idea to the team and facilitating its publication. I made multiple recruitment videos, researched thorough interview questions (and consulted Economic Policy professors in Sweden on our interview questions), wrote up a thorough consent form, screened participants, and created an incentive to apply: a guide on how to navigate their job search in Sweden as well as an ATS-compatible CV template. I then

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organised the interview venue, handled the staging logistics, and conducted and filmed interviews. After which, I edited and published the interviews on Arbetslösas Rösts' social media. Beyond giving them a space to articulate years of frustration and neglect, we highlighted the overarching patterns of weakness in the systems, which failed nearly every participant. It moreover gave insight 'behind the statistics' for politicians to see first-hand what works and what doesn't work within employment policy, hopefully paving a clear path for reform within unemployment policy.

The most challenging aspect of Arbetslösas Röst was the recruiting process, both in people's shame around their situation and thus unwillingness to be on camera as well as negative comments online as we were promoting the campaign. We faced these challenges through a rigorous recruitment process, filming multiple promotion videos in both Swedish and English (posting on multiple platforms), making incentives (Job search guide and ATS-compatible CV template), and screening participants over the phone. Moreover, the negative comments only further motivated the awareness campaign: so many unemployed people feel too ashamed to share their story because of these hate comments that perpetuate the false narrative that unemployed people are lazy and a drain to the welfare system.

Another challenge was one I had to confront within myself: the rhetoric I heard about unemployed people in Sweden as I was growing up as Swedish culture is so heavily built upon collective responsibility. I often heard from my friends and family the same things we saw from hate comments online and I had to actively check myself on these internalised biases I had during this experience and gained a more nuanced understanding of the unemployment process in Sweden through these interviews.

I applied leadership skills of being able to listen with understanding and utilizing emotional intelligence to establish a connection and trust. It was imperative, given the vulnerable subject matter, to be someone they could trust with their story. I began each interview by assuring them that I wanted to understand their reality, not any official story, affirmed they were in control of their narrative (that there wasn't any pressure to have a good answer straight away and that we can reshoot and clip around pauses). I moreover reassured them that they will get to see the interviews before publishing to get their approval and I thanked

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them for their time and generosity in sharing their experiences. During the interviews I gave them space to talk, listened with an engaged manner, and asked personal follow-up questions.

My project with Arbetslösas Röst was designed with a very specific framework: to interview willing participants about their experience with unemployment and produce a series of videos about the 'stories behind the statistics'. The success was measured through how many participants we interviewed, the valuable footage we were able to extract, and the engagement with the awareness campaign following its publication. My project was achievable through thoroughly researching unemployment policies ahead of time and vetting my interview questions through two Economic Policy professors at SSE. I additionally booked the venue well in advance and assembled all necessary interview equipment (camera, microphone, editing software etc).

The project is incredibly relevant as it is a situation within the context of the upcoming September election, where many parties in Sweden seek to alter unemployment policies (such as cutting funding to A-kassa, the Swedish version of JPRB). The half a million unemployed people in Sweden would suffer drastically as a result, hence the importance of spreading awareness regarding the unemployment experience ahead of the election. My project was also time-bound as I sorted the interview details (venue, questions, and awareness campaign setup) prior to the 6-weeks, in collaboration with Arbetslösas, and I allotted 1.5 weeks to gather and vet participants.