

Summer 2 Report (Leadership in Action)
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Word Count: 2226

Introduction

For my Leadership in Action Project, I volunteered with Shri Vardhman Gruh Udhog Mahila Mandal, a nonprofit non governmental organization based out of Wadhwan City in the Indian state of Gujarat. My project involved 4 weeks of in-person work and documentation with the NGO, and then 2 weeks of remote work spent primarily working with editing photos/videos. The final week of the Leadership in Action is being carried out as I write this report, as my original timeline had to be pushed back due to family health reasons.

An overall theme of this Leadership in Action (and, from what I gather, many Leadership in Action experiences) was adaptability, which led me to rely heavily on and develop my Oxford Character Traits of Humility, Development, and Judgment. Two weeks before arriving in India, my host (a member of the NGO) broke their leg, which for a few days put the entire project in jeopardy. However, they thankfully decided that I could still come, and would primarily instead work with a different member of the NGO. Arriving at the NGO itself, I also found that their needs were in some ways very different from what I predicted/had discussed when planning my Leadership in Action project. This led me to have to change what my goals were to better suit the organization.

An Overview of SVGUMM

Shri Vardhman Gruh Udhog Mahila Mandal (hereafter referred to as SVGUMM) is a specific kind of NGO that is common in India: a mandal. Mandals are organizations or associations, usually local, that form for a specific, often civic purpose. “Mahila” is a respectful Sanskrit term for women. As such, the Mahila Mandal is a women’s association, and is a social institution that has helped bring about women’s empowerment and social development throughout India.

Meanwhile, “Gruh Udhog” roughly means home or cottage industry. Shri Vardhman is a Sanskrit honorific referring to the bringing of prosperity. Taken together, SVGUMM’s name spells out its purpose: it is an organization that provides the means for women to use home/cottage industry to gain prosperity.

Founded in 1985, “by women and for women,”¹ SVGUMM’s primary focus is supporting women’s empowerment by making women financially independent. They do this in two primary ways.

The first is by providing direct employment through their central kitchen and 4 canteens. The central kitchen, housed in the same building as their office, has about 10-15 women working day-to-day who make *nasto*, or snacks, to be sold at two locations. This provides the women with income (400-500 rupees a day) for work which they already know how to do. Crucially, because they are working with other women, and have some control over their schedules, the work is also more socially acceptable. The canteens employ anywhere from 5-25 women each, and provide affordable food for lower-middle income workers in Wadhwan and the broader Surendranagar district (which the Wadhwan township is a part of). There is a canteen near the headquarters, on the main Surendranagar road, at the district courts, and near a local administrative building.

The second way is by providing vocational training for women in a variety of fields: computer skills, textile dying and sewing, nursing, entrepreneurship, and more. This allows the women to go into a variety of work that can either supplement their household income or, in the case of women whose husbands cannot work or who have left abusive marriages, become the breadwinner for their family. Women from SVGUMM are routinely hired as local nurses, and some successfully created a local dairy processing plant.

SVGUMM also provides legal and relationship counseling services for women at one of their canteen sites. However, though I visited a local dairy collection point and the nurse training site, my focus during the Leadership in Action Project was on food production.



Storefront below main SVGUMM office



Benna working in the SVGUMM kitchen

¹ “About Us.” *Shri Vardhman Gruh Udhog Mahila Mandal*, vardhmangruhudhyogmahilamandal.org/index.html. Accessed 7 Sept. 2026.

Initial SMART Goals and Changes

Prior to arriving in Wadhwan, I had listed 3 SMART goals for myself, which are as follows (in brief):

1. Revamp their website and social media presence
2. Increase their partnerships with other NGOs, and even possibly to setup a Laidlaw Partnership for future Leadership in Action projects
3. Setup a curriculum and carry out classes to teach English, primarily directed at the children of the women working at the NGO

On arriving, I found that Goal 3 was immediately largely untenable, as the English classes that usually take place (which I would have built off of) were not carried out in that time of the year, due to a combination of it being monsoon season and a holy month in Hinduism. There was also a cultural reticence to have children come, after school, to a place that wasn't home.

SVGUMM leadership gave me significant latitude with the work I set out for myself. However, this could be a challenge in its own way; having only 6 weeks to contribute to the organization, I was hoping to rely on existing knowledge of its operation. However, despite being open to and requesting work my first week as I met different component projects of SVGUMM, I wasn't receiving any projects/requests for help.

As such, I decided to go ahead with focusing on SMART Goals 1 and 2, and to try to diagnose any other problems that I could. One that came up was that, despite being locally-focused, SVGUMM often ships its products to other parts of Gujarat and even internationally. However, they do not have a product list on their website, or the capacity to receive international payments by credit card or to even receive international donations. As such I decided to make my 3rd SMART Goal be the improvement of their international financial infrastructure. This also worked with the fact that I worked extensively with the organization accountant.

Challenges/Barriers

There were a variety of cultural, institutional, and even linguistic barriers throughout my Leadership in Action.

Though I speak Gujarati serviceably, my Gujarati is nowhere close to perfect. While this was enough for most of my communication, it was more difficult to ask/answer more technical questions. It also made dealing with more emotionally delicate matters difficult. This was particularly relevant when I carried out my interviews with the women (*bhenna* - "sisters" in Gujarati), many of whom had started working at SVGUMM for emotionally sensitive reasons:

health issues in the family, abusive marriages, etc. I also then had to contend with the cultural taboo about talking about conflicts within the house outside of it.

A specific example of this was when I asked a question to one of the women about what they enjoyed about working at SVGUMM. While other women had understood my intent and had talked about how SVGUMM was comparatively a good place for women to work, one woman responded that she didn't enjoy working, and was forced to do so by her situation. When she said this, I felt a sense of shame and defensiveness about her situation, and I felt bad about having put her in that situation, even if completely unintentionally.

Another challenge was understanding and then complying with Indian government regulations. The 2010 Foreign Contribution Regulations ACT (FCRA) created strict rules on how foreign money could enter and leave India. These rules were tightened this year with an amendment, with the goal of better preventing the movement of terrorist money through India. Some sites, such as Give.do, were created to help Indian NGOs get donations, but, after going through the onboarding process with them, they ended up sharing that they had shut down their ability to receive foreign contributions because of this.

While SVGUMM was FCRA compliant and has previously received foreign donations, it also was registered as an NGO. This made getting it registered with sites that supported international transactions more difficult. Sites such as Razorpay, Payoneer, and PayPal supported international business transactions - however, they often would automatically reject NGOs from registering for these transactions, out of fear that they would be accepting non FCRA compliant donations through their site. The issue was made particularly complicated for SVGUMM by the fact that they did accept international donations, but also carried out international transactions when selling snack goods. While donations had to be FCRA compliant, sales did not. However, this nuance was not accounted for in any of the international payment gateways.

Successes

Despite these challenges, I think I was able to make significant progress on my SMART goals.

For SMART Goal 1, I was able to create an Instagram account and collect a significant amount of footage and pictures to post. For this, I carried out some research on how to edit footage in Instagram-friendly ways, and researched trends that could help bring more visibility to the NGO. The editing of interviews took particularly long, as I wanted there to be captions in English so that an international audience could understand them. This meant that I had to hand transcribe and create the captions. As of writing, there have been 7 posts on the Instagram, with multiple continued posts scheduled for the next few months, so that

there is a continuous 1-2 posts for the instagram each week. I also have footage/pictures that I am still editing in the final week of my Leadership in Action.

For SMART Goal 2, I was able to partner with an organization called Milaap, which allowed me to setup an online gateway specifically for international donations. Prior to this, donating to SVGUMM required a direct bank transfer, which would necessitate communication with the SVGUMM accountant. This made donations from around the world essentially untenable. By registering SVGUMM with Milaap, almost anybody in the world can now donate to SVGUMM in their home currency.

SMART Goal 3 was partially accomplished by the partnership with Milaap. However, I also took pictures of and collected the ingredient and pricing information for SVGUMM's year-round food offerings, and am in the process of getting them uploaded onto a project section of the SVGUMM website, along with the contact information for payment. This will allow anybody in India to see what SVGUMM offers on their website - prior to this, they had to reach out to SVGUMM by phone to make any inquiry, and there were no images or centralized list of products anywhere on the internet.

Work Still to Do

The main work I have to do is to continue with editing and uploading videos to Instagram, and to finish the setup of the product list. I also have some remaining work to do with the Milaap donation site, as further emails with the site administration asked that we provide some more bank details.

Going forward, I have discussed continuing to work with SVGUMM as their voluntary social media manager. This would entail just uploading pictures to Instagram whenever they send them to me; doing so would be easier than trying to upload them to the website, as that would require contacting (and often chasing down) a tech support team based out of the United States. By being their social media manager, I can keep their online presence more current in a simpler way.

Reflection/Conclusion

On reflection, I think my SMART goals were largely achievable and well-formed, based on the fact that I made significant progress on each of them (outside of the adjusted 3rd Goal). I think in general it is better to make a more ambitious goal and to achieve 80% of it rather than to make a less ambitious goal and fully achieve it, and I think that my work played out in this way.

In retrospect, I would have focused more time on outreach and partnerships to other NGOs, as I think that that is an avenue that can be used to grow the presence and impact of SVGUMM that hasn't been pursued otherwise. Much of my time was spent working with financial regulations and hitting dead ends in attempts to create international payment gateways/online shops. I think this was time that could have gone towards partnerships, as some of the online payment work just didn't pan out because of bureaucracy and regulations.

In relation to my Personal Development Plan, I think that my Leadership in Action worked to improve every single one of my personal development goals:

1. Getting better at meeting people
2. Improving Organization/Time Management
3. Limiting Overthinking

By being in an unfamiliar environment that relied on a language I wasn't as confident in, I was forced to become better at talking to people despite barriers and overthinking about how I came across less. In carrying out work that was largely self-assigned, I improved my time/project management. I learned to try different avenues to solve an issue, as well as to be more comfortable just reaching out to people for help.

Lastly, the opportunity to do this work in a place where I am ancestrally from was particularly meaningful, as the work carried an extra personal dimension. Outside of the development of my abilities in leadership and productivity, I felt that I gained connection to my culture in a way that I had not been able to before, as I'd never spent an extended time in India.

To conclude, I would like to thank both the leadership of SVGUMM and the Laidlaw Foundation for providing me with the opportunity to carry out this project and grow from it.