

Leadership in Action Report

Hagamos Composta



Introduction

Writing this report over a month after finishing my leadership in action project has given me time to reflect, and time to yearn, for working in Mexico City was one of the best experiences of my life. As well as working with a small composting company called Hagamos Composta, which I will explain more about shortly, the LIA was complemented with cultural enrichment and learning about Mexico, its history, its cuisine, and its people. I got to see museums, sites, watch world cup matches in the fan zone including the final with all the Mexican fans (a real highlight). One of the most memorable experiences was taking the cable car, a means of transit across Mexico City, and stopping off at random stops to encounter life for ordinary people (I stayed in one of the wealthiest districts) and the markets that line the suburbs full of fresh produce and incredible butchers. All in all, the trip was incredible and the people I met were too.

For the project itself, I was part of a team of 4. The other three were Mila Bruce, Hannah Taylor, and Arthur Guillat. This project was organised by Laidlaw with Makesense and in total there were 17 of us, all Laidlaw Scholars from different universities around the world. Our team worked with a company called Hagamos Composta. Hagamos Composta is a community composting network founded in Mexico City. Collectors pick up households' organic waste by bicycle and take it to composting sites, where it becomes compost that is sold or donated. The network now has sites across Mexico, from Ensenada and Chihuahua in the north to Oaxaca and San Cristóbal in the south, plus San Pedro Sula in Honduras.

Its impact is already substantial. By its own count, it has diverted more than 2.5 million kilos of waste from landfill, avoided over 800,000 plastic bags and worked with more than 8,000 families. However, limited infrastructure, operational capacity and external funding currently restrict its ability to grow. These are some of the challenges we looked to address and find solutions to.

Full report presented to Hagamos Composta:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gBpsPEmVJrT4oMZpWlQQBYPYLnCqbPAP>.

Project aims and my role

Our overarching aim was to help professionalise and systematise Hagamos Composta's regenerative impact so that it can scale. It is important to note that the goals initially were fairly ambiguous. It was Hagamos Composta's first time working with Makesense, our partner organisation, and they were open to our work shifting. What we ended up doing were two workstreams, which became the two sections of our final report:

1. **Funding and corporate social responsibility (CSR):** Identify realistic grant, prize, finance and corporate partnership opportunities, and give the organisation tools to apply for them. This is vital for them. The reason they cannot grow is a lack of money to pay for equipment and land. They do not have a customer problem. They have a space problem.

2. Operational framework and business strategy: We sought to understand how the company runs, where communication breaks down, and ways to improve coordination, customer experience and growth.

I ended up working more on the operations side. This included a pricing and subsidy model, something common in other composting companies in other countries, a plan for an annual meeting to discuss company finances and future goals, a solution to their customer service communication inefficiencies, and an awards system to leverage their excellent social media to increase recognition for all those who work at the company.

What became quickly apparent and we mentioned in our whole group discussion in front of the other 13 Laidlaw Scholars in our cohort was the tension built into the brief. Hagamos Composta wanted us to leverage our outside perspective to look upon what they do with fresh eyes. However, we were conscious that we wanted to recommend things that did not conflict with their identity. Hagamos Composta is, at its core, a community built around a shared goal, run by people with very little spare time or money. A recurring aim for me was therefore to strengthen the organisation without changing what it is.

Approach and methodology

We used a mixture of online research, surveys, and direct observation through talking to different employees at the company at different levels.

Funding research: We searched the Terra Viva Grants Directory, a free directory focused on environmental grants, and the funding pages of Mexico's environment ministry (SEMARNAT). Terra Viva has weaker filtering than paid directories, so the search was slow. We noted that the Monterrey and Chihuahua branches might access paid Candid memberships through local university and training-centre libraries.

Corporate partner assessment: We scored potential corporate partners on three criteria: sustainability alignment, strategic fit and practicality. This covered each company's sustainability priorities, past environmental investment, the mutual value of a partnership and how feasible a first collaboration would be.

Surveys: We ran a branch survey across the network's sites and a customer survey, which gathered 74 responses through Hagamos Composta's Instagram account.

Observation and conversation: We visited the composting plant on the outskirts of Mexico City and spoke with the administrative team and members of the organisation including heads of regional branches, head of finance, head of welfare. Several of our most useful insights came from these conversations rather than from documents. We regretted actually not conducting these conversations sooner. We only did so on week 2 and week 3 having been slow to realise the utility of such conversations.

Key outputs and findings

We delivered a 28-page report in Spanish, supported by linked documents which can be found here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gBpsPEmVJrT4oMZpWlQQBYPYLnCqbPAp>.

Its main outputs are summarised below:

Funding: The most important finding was structural. Many of the most lucrative grants are open only to legally registered non-profits, so much of the long-term strategy depends on Hagamos Composta registering as an Asociación Civil (A.C.). Until then, prizes, corporate partners and fiscal sponsorship are the realistic routes. Only one branch of Hagamos Composta, Ensenada, had successfully won funding; most had never applied and did not know where to start. Funding is something we understood to be the most important and we offered a list of grant opportunities and 20 CSR partnerships that the company could apply for to gain funding and important client relationships for the future.

Operations: The operations section was broader than the funding section. It included friction maps which showed bottlenecks and inefficiencies in the business. A map of all the branches categorised by their local environment and needs (equipment, financing, customers) which we thought would be useful to Hagamos Composta. One of the most important aspects I worked on was to solve B2C communication challenges. Customers were confused by three separate WhatsApp numbers when it came to delivery collection. Customers did not know who to contact about collections, and responses were slow: what I dubbed 'the three-number problem'. We sought to solve this problem through recommending the use of slack and linking multiple slack channels to a single WhatsApp interface easing the user experience and recognising the importance of WhatsApp which is ubiquitous in Mexico for business and personal use.

We also learnt about the fragmented nature of the company: sites without dedicated bank accounts, siloed branch budgets, informal expansion through personal contacts, and loyalty rewards that were not always delivered. Across sites, water access was the most common need, followed by roofing and storage, transport, processing equipment and space. We costed small sites at roughly 50k–160k pesos (DIY) or 180k–460k (standard), and medium sites at 600k–1.4M or 1.4M–3.2M. We sought to address this by replicating their existing annual company get together which focuses on welfare with a dedicated annual meeting to discuss finances and future goals to improve cohesion within the company. This came with its challenges including worries about sharing financial data due to security concerns. We sought to work around these concerns by proposing a percentages-not-pesos approach for the meetings where progress can be communicated but specific financial data can be kept withheld.

I built a sticker. Yes, I designed a no plastic sticker to solve the challenge they face in filtering out plastic from the waste they receive, This is a costly excersie and so introducing a no plastic sticker on buckets is a way of reducing this and solving this problem.

Additionally, on the operations side I looked at formulating a pricing and subsidy model for Hagamos Composta emulating what other composting companies in other countries have. These models involve giving an option for those who can afford to pay more which subsidises collection for lower-income households.

Customer Survey findings: A big part of what we did were our surveys. Hagamos Composta lacked knowledge about their customer base and for that matter their branches. In these surveys, respondents were highly environmentally engaged: 81% recycled and 68% composted. Most rated Mexico City prices as reasonable or very accessible, though about a quarter found them at least somewhat expensive. Their main complaints were inconsistent schedules, missed pickups and slow communication. Among non-customers, 88% were definitely or potentially interested in an organic waste collection service.

Challenges and limitations

We faced several challenges, the first involving time scarcity. The organisation's team has very little spare time, which shaped every recommendation. Many good ideas, like a full annual meeting or a formal awards process, would demand hours they do not have. We responded by offering lighter versions of each proposal, such as a branch survey and open Q&A instead of a full meeting. Even during our project, we experienced this scarcity of time. Some of those we wanted to speak to we couldn't like their lawyer who was busy during our time there as were others. This was not helped by the fact that we started the interviews late. I am not sure we appreciated the value of them until we did our first one in week 2, and then hurriedly worked towards talking to more people and learning more things from different perspectives about Hagamos Composta.

Another challenge we faced, and the company continues to face is their legal status. Without A.C. registration, many funders were out of reach. We could map the route but not remove the barrier, which limited how much immediate funding we could unlock. This process to become an actual charity is a long one and one they have already begun.

We also faced data limitations. The customer survey reached an already engaged, mostly female, middle- and higher-income audience through Instagram. It tells us about current supporters, not the wider Mexican public. Moreover, company-wide financial data was only organised for 2026, which limited financial analysis. This was a real issue arguably the biggest limitation which really hampered our options in terms of deliverables.

Recommendations and next steps for Hagamos Composta

Short term (low cost, low time):

1. Contact the high-priority corporate partners and start preparing materials for the recurring prizes.
2. Explore receiving grants through Huerto Roma Verde as a fiscal sponsor.

3. Add the plastics sticker to buckets and consolidate the three WhatsApp numbers into one.
4. Build LinkedIn into a channel for CSR, partnerships and funders.

Medium term:

1. Prioritise basic infrastructure across sites: water, shade, hand tools, storage, washing and a manual sieve.
2. Hire a dedicated customer service person, possibly before a fundraiser, since reliability drives satisfaction.
3. Run a branch survey and an open Q&A as a first step towards an annual meeting.

Long term:

1. Register as an A.C. and keep more detailed financial records at branch and central level, to unlock grant funding.
2. Introduce subsidised pricing and multi-bin discounts to reach lower-income households.
3. Create a systematic channel for expansion and some redistribution between branch budgets.

Conclusion and further thoughts

Hagamos Composta has already built something remarkable with very little. Our job was not to reinvent it but to help it grow while staying true to what it is. Access to funding is its biggest obstacle and much depends on A.C. registration. In the meantime, the short-term routes we identified, along with low-cost operational fixes, can build momentum.

For me, the project changed how I understand leadership. I now see it less as having the best vision and more as listening first, designing for other people's constraints and being honest about trade-offs.

Something that was most memorable to me of this whole experience was their other business, Hagamos Composta, where they run a service that turns pet animals into compost for their owners. Customers bring their pet; there is a short farewell ceremony and then they lie under straw to break down into compost which the customers then return to the ground. Those at the company also speak passionately of these techniques being used for human beings. That aside this was an extremely emotional moment in the trip and the relationship this company has with its customers is something very unique.

I miss the people of Mexico and funnily enough in a weird way I miss the predictability of the rain each day which came down at about 17:30 every single day like clockwork. I also miss all the time spent with fellow scholars on the trip, the football, the trip to Las Estacas, an incredible retreat, and those at Hagamos Composta who were so forthcoming and so generous with the little time they could give us. This was a great experience, and I would highly recommend a trip to Mexico for future scholars!