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An interview with Lead Europe Fellow Leonardo Martins Dias

CREATED ON FRIDAY, 25 JULY 2014 11:45



We were delighted that Lead volunteer Ibrahim Maiga had the opportunity to meet and interview influential Lead Europe and Brazilian Fellow Leonardo Martins Dias this week. In this exclusive interview Leonardo chats about what Brazil can learn from Europe, social inequality, and his personal insights into the reality of working in sustainability.

Lead: Tell me about Brazil. The good stuff and stuff that's more difficult.

Leonardo: Brazil is an amazing country with beautiful nature, very welcoming people. It's a really interesting place to know with lots of culture. On the other hand in Brazil you have a big deficit in social development. 12 million people, more than the population of Portugal, are living in favelas in very bad conditions. One of the biggest issues in Brazil is the social development, the favelas. With the economic development in the last [few] years, people in the favelas are consuming \$68bn per year. So we have a big rise in consumption power and due to that many companies are looking to do business at the base of pyramid and we are working together.

But the main point is that to develop this business they have to develop a new business model, more social. They have to leave a concrete and true legacy to the favelas and it's very important that they people of the favelas are engaged and defining what they need as a legacy.

Lead: How are these business models different from business models used everywhere else?

Leonardo: I'll give you an example. We did a project for a telecoms company in Brazil. They want to position their brand to sell their product. Why not, that's their business. But to develop the business inside the communities, we created a call centre inside the communities where just people from the community work. They received a training programme, they raised their knowledge, they generated income and they enhanced their life conditions. This is a new business model.

Lead: So essentially employing people inside the community you want to sell to so that you support the community as well as benefit from them.

Leonardo: Employ as well as enhance the skills, the knowledge, facilitate their income generation – it can be through an internship for example – and empowering the local leaders is very important to do as well.

Lead: Let's talk a little about your career. You started in CSR and sustainability for some large corporate firms. Then you moved into sustainability (consulting). What is it you learnt in the large corporates?

Leonardo: I developed my career in private companies. I worked in KPMG, Telefonica and O2. I learnt a lot about business, about process, about the importance in having an impact on your results, your economic results and also I learnt that you can do good things at the same time as doing business.

I began to work for myself as an independent advisor as I think that we have to work across many sectors to have real impact. But the main point is to empower the local people who are suffering the needs, because they are the ones who know what they need and how we have to do it.

Lead: So what's the difference between real impact and fluffy nice looking things that disappear?

Leonardo: I think that the main real impact is when the people of the community are the protagonists of their change and they change the way they want to change. I'll give you an example. In Amazonas, I worked in favelas where the [indigenous] Indians live when they go to Manaus looking for jobs. But they don't have knowledge so they become unemployed. The change is when they get a job. We do a training programme oriented at the companies that are demanding workers and when they get a job and the keep this job over time, that's the impact.

Lead: Do you prefer working for yourself rather than inside a company? What is it about Leonardo that prefers to be self employed and deciding what he does himself?

Leonardo: I prefer to work with all the sectors. I prefer to work together with different sectors – the government, the companies and the NGOs – and the whole society. I think we need to work together to go further because alone we won't get anywhere.

Lead: As you are driving your own business, developing projects on your own, a large part of this is to be a leader and a person who is able to do these things. How do you develop yourself as a leader? How do you learn?

Leonardo: I think the main points are always to read a lot, to be curious and look for information and trends and to work together. It's very important! To work together, with different sectors, with different people. The more different the people when you are thinking about solutions, the better solutions you will have. **Lead:** Are you an introvert or extrovert?

Leonardo: I am an introvert [laughs].

Lead: In terms of the things you've read, what are the things that have most impacted you?

Leonardo: I really like Erich Fromm, a German psychoanalyst who wrote 'To Have or to Be?', 'The Art of Loving'. I'm reading [Thomas] Picketty and James Robinson. They both write about inequality, they are the main two lines now discussing inequality. I try to always be connected and understanding of the frameworks of what's happening in the world. I think it's very important.

Lead: On the Lead programme there is a lot about experiential learning, Systems Thinking, the 'U' model, etc... how have these things impacted on the way you approach things in your sustainability practice?

Leonardo: It has an impact because we live in a system, everything is a system, the brain is a system. When we take a decision the brain is working as a system putting together many different parts of our brain; the emotional parts, the rational parts. The emotional parts are very important in the decision making process. Systems Thinking is kind of like that. When you think about creating impact it's like a wave. You impact a whole system, so it's a very interesting approach. The 'U' process is also helpful when you are analyzing issues, thinking about how to get a solution on the other side.

Lead: In terms of sustainability what do you think Brazil can learn from the rest of the world? What can it learn from London for example – we're in London right now. What can it learn from Berlin? You've just come from Berlin.

Leonardo: One of the main things I really like in Berlin and you can feel it in London as well is that you have many different types of people living together peacefully. Life is more valued in European countries, developed countries, than countries like Brazil.

Lead: How is life valued more here than in places like Brazil?

Leonardo: People respect life more here than not only Brazil but all the developing countries (I don't like this expression 'developing countries' but let me excuse myself). Life is valued less in developing countries. You have more murders, people conduct [themselves] in a more aggressive way than in developing countries, so you see more accidents, more guns, more people not going to school.

Lead: How can this be changed?

Leonardo: Countries like Germany and the UK also have this gap between politicians and the society...it's a global phenomenon. But this could be changed if we really listen to each other, work together in diverse groups, because society is composed of different people so we all have to think together about the solutions.

Lead: To turn this around, what can we learn from Brazil?

Leonardo: In the last few years a strong movement is happening in Brazil in the favelas. I know that in Berlin and London diversity is a value. The East part of London for example or the peripheries of Berlin. You have diversity, you have artists working together and in Brazil in the favelas, the people who live in the favelas are coming from different places in Brazil so a new culture is built inside the favela. It's very diverse and it's new. And this is something I think the world can learn from Brazil when you are talking about social development.

Lead: What do you feel is your most important achievement in your career so far?

Leonardo: To be able to do work on what I like and do things I'm passionate about.

Lead: How would you like to develop as a sustainability practitioner?

Leonardo: I would like to always be in contact with the people in society, the poor people, at the same time, let's say the rich people – people who have access to the decision making process so that I can contribute to putting them together. I myself being a part of this group can work together [with everyone] to bring better solutions.

Lead: A lot of people are passionate about sustainability but for different reasons they are finding it difficult to take it as a job, but you've done it. How would you advise people to make the move into being a sustainability practitioner?

Leonardo: First of all never give up. You need to be very tenacious. Believe in yourself. Look for the information you need to enhance your skills. You have training programmes. Lead has an excellent training programme that can help you to position yourself in the sustainability field. Go for it!

Lead: One last question. Lead International is a Fellow network. What challenges are you facing that you would love Lead Fellow to get in touch with you and help you with?

Leonardo: A big challenge of working independently is that you have to do many things alone. I have to communicate, create projects, co-create projects, when I have a problem with my computer I have to fix it myself. So you have to do the whole process. You have to write proposals. You have to do the financial part. For example, it would be very helpful to have support.

I really think that if you [really want] a more sustainable world people who are working in sustainability have to be paid because a lot of organizations are trying to work and take value from people who are working in sustainability but for free. So it's not sustainable. If people in sustainability cannot afford their lives then we will stop working in sustainability.

Discover more about Cohort 16 Fellow Leonardo Martins Dias helping Lead Canada deliver Leading for sustainability in Brazil [here](#).

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