My love for the world and for its people empowers me. I see this same kind of love reflected within providing a space for young people to explore their own creativity and learn about leadership, friendship, and community involvement. As a result, my project contributed to a generation of young leaders capable of making their community a peaceful environment. The goal of Peace Through Leadership Training (PTLT) was to provide a supporting foundation and network to a population of young, unemployed Senegalese, enabling them to start small-scale businesses to earn income. I aimed to host an entrepreneurship learning camp that would promote the uptake of small-scale businesses among the youth of Touba and offer hands-on, one-on-one coaching from experienced business people in Senegal.

Prior to the project, I received donations including food supplies, masks, hand sanitizers, and clothes for the participants.

The concept of this project originates from personal research, emphasizing the effectiveness of leadership training and community collaboration in combating unemployment. Growing up in one of the biggest cities of Senegal, Touba, I came to realize that most young people in my community are failing to continue their education because parents continue to believe that educational institutions have a tendency to change people’s minds and beliefs about Islam. The result is that many young people with very limited education drop out of the system in Touba. After my first year at the African Leadership Academy, I attempted to tackle this issue by organizing a Build in a Box camp, teaching high school students from Touba about leadership, and instilling them with the courage to pursue their dreams. During this camp, students spoke to me about how their experiences working with other participants inspired them to pursue leadership positions and start their own businesses. Moreover, it was clear to me that leadership training programs offered high school dropouts hope to reintegrate into society. However, Build in a Box programs are designed to last only for two days and do not allow the time necessary to offer a solid mentorship to these high school dropout students. The idea of the PTLP asserted itself in these circumstances.

In the summer of 2019, with my peers from Senegal, I designed and organized the aforementioned Build in a Box camp at Sokhna Diarra Institution in Touba. This institution has successfully designed a program to integrate high school dropouts into the workplace. As a continuation of these efforts, I decided to go back to this particular job training school to implement the PTLP. I also chose Sokhna Diarra Institution as the project site because they specifically admit young Senegalese students who are financially disadvantaged. These students tend to be exposed to issues of wealth discrimination and poverty. Because of their dedication to eradicating poverty through education, Sokhna Diarra Institution welcomed our program which aimed at the empowerment and emancipation of these vulnerable students. Since we were fortunate to partner with an organization that believed in our project’s goals and supported our initiatives, we did not have difficulty receiving the resources necessary for our program. They were eager to partner with us by providing necessary accommodation.

In the early stages, our main challenge in completing this program was caused by Covid-19 complications as the vaccine was not yet accessible in Senegal. While I initially planned to follow
the guidelines of the Ministry of Health, it became clear once I arrived in Senegal that this would not be an easy task given the rampant start of the Covid-19 Delta variant. As a result, I ended up spending much of my time negotiating the Covid-19 situation in Senegal and changing plans whenever necessary. On the same day I received approval from the Ministry of Education to host the camp, we started our activities, met the students, and officially started the camp. We knew we would be obliged to shift online as Covid-19 cases were increasing in Senegal, and it would make sense to focus on training the students in online learnings. Fortunately, many of the participants were already comfortable accessing classes online as Sokhna Diarra Institution had to shift to online learning during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, we were affected a lot by poor internet connectivity. Many students were distracted during the online classes, and later on in the week, a majority of them claimed to be running out of internet. This excessively increased our spendings and did not assist the development of our training program. As a result, I focused on the basic leadership skill acceleration during the camp and implemented the curriculum I had intended to teach with my team for four weeks into just one week. This meant we had to host the participants in a place where they could sleep and work for a total of six days. Little did we know it was going to be burdensome to find an adequate site to host 45 people. I was lucky to have one of my former teachers as director of Privee Cheikh Abdoul Ahad Mbacke who rented us the facilities at his school at a very affordable price.

The project had a tremendous impact on the prospect of peace in Touba. My six day residential leadership program served as a platform for breaking ethnic barriers among young natives of Touba. The camp targeted youths from almost every ethnic group in Touba, allowing them to interact and inspire each other, and to create lifelong friendships. I personally think of peace as a state of societal friendship and lack of violence between different individuals and parties no matter their ethnic groups. In a peaceful society, members recognize and appreciate the shared attributes they have as humans. A peaceful society is able to celebrate its diversity irrespective of the differences that may exist in terms of race, language, gender, sex, ethnicities, or tribes. A peaceful society and community recognize that to prosper, every person should be empowered, valued, and not left behind. Training these high school dropouts and equipping them with skills to support themselves financially was a way of showing them they matter as valuable members of this society. The hope is that these students will keep pursuing opportunities that will help them excel in life.

Through this project, I learned that I will constantly devote myself to promoting peace by empowering youth, especially those with meager or no education. This will ensure the growth of society as they contribute positively to their environment by creating long-lasting friendships and opportunities for future generations. This mindset is what led to the creation of Empower Africa (EmA). The goal of EmA is to support young people to design and implement community service projects in their communities. EmA was launched at the end of the PTLT camp with the sum of $600. These funds were donated to the winning project proposal from a group of participants, who designed an innovative project targeting waste management in Touba. The EmA group will function as a support, seeking funds and donating them to youth-designed community service projects in Senegal, and hopefully to the rest of the African continent in the future. I am currently designing fundraising strategies to implement at Bennington College, with the hope of collecting funds that will be invested in youth-designed projects in Senegal during the summer. I will eventually follow up on these projects and support them until completion. I hope that after showcasing the results of these projects, the government, private business companies, and generous donors in Senegal and
beyond will view the EmA initiative as another viable option in the developmental efforts in the country.

"My devotion to serving humanity in its multiformity gives me purpose and direction in life. Designing and actualizing a space for young people in which they can reach their full potential – be it in expressing their creativity, acquiring leadership skills, forging meaningful friendships, or contributing to their community – was an invaluable opportunity for me to articulate my allegiance and faith in them. It is with great honour and optimism that I envision my endeavours empowering and supporting a rising generation of young leaders who recognize the true value of peace and choose to promote it within their community, every single day."

-- Ahmed Khadim Amar, Senegal, Bennington College' 24
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