

Leadership in Action Report

In the summer of 2024, I embarked on my Leadership in Action (LIA) project in rural Nepal. My project aimed to promote and contribute to sustainable agriculture and its associated practices in rural communities. I integrated myself into the community, observed the practices used, participated in the day-to-day workings of a farm, and eventually hoped to give pointers on how certain methods could be altered to improve soil health and fertility.

As a prerequisite for my project, I undertook a course in soil health and fertility management with the United Nations in partnership with Wageningen University. This ensured that I began my project equipped with knowledge that could benefit the locals without disrupting age-old traditions. However, I soon realised at my placement that rural Nepal had been caring for its soil for generations. Upon reflecting on the notes, I had taken during my studies, I discovered that no aspect of soil fertility management had been overlooked in one way or another.

This triggered a change in the direction of my project, as I could no longer suggest improvements. Therefore, I decided the best course of action would be to learn rather than teach. I discovered how they had been managing the soil so that, upon my return to the UK, I could teach here instead. There were numerous lessons to be learned, not just for farmers but for homeowners in the UK, on how to utilise the land around you to your advantage.

Expanded Context and Background

Rural Nepal is a land deeply rooted in tradition, with agriculture forming the backbone of its communities. The village of Gatichina, where I was stationed, was no exception. Nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, Gatichina is a picturesque village with terraced fields, narrow winding paths, and homes made of local stone and mud. The landscape itself is a testament to human ingenuity, with generations of farmers carving out arable land from steep, rocky slopes.

The village is home to approximately 250 families, most of whom have lived there for generations. While agriculture is central to their lifestyle, very few residents identify solely as farmers by profession. Most people hold other jobs, such as teaching, shopkeeping, or driving buses. Despite their diverse professions, every household contributes to farming in some capacity, growing rice, corn, potatoes, and seasonal vegetables. This multi-faceted approach to livelihoods ensures a robust and interconnected community structure where everyone shares responsibilities and resources.

When I first arrived, I was struck by the community's deep respect for nature and their land. Every decision seemed calculated to sustain the soil and environment for future generations. I also noticed a stark contrast between the use of space in Gatichina and suburban areas in the UK. While much of the UK prioritizes decorative lawns and concrete patios, Gatichina's residents utilized every inch of land for productive purposes. This prompted me to think critically about how urban and suburban spaces in the UK could adopt similar practices to benefit individuals and communities.

Lessons Learned in Sustainable Agriculture

My initial goal of suggesting improvements to local farming practices quickly became unnecessary as I realized the sophistication of their methods. Instead, I shifted my focus to understanding their techniques and how they could be adapted for use in the UK. The practices I observed in Gatichina offer valuable lessons in sustainable living:

The villagers rotated crops such as rice, corn, and beans, ensuring that the soil remained nitrogen-rich and fertile year-round. Unlike Western practices that often leave fields bare during off-seasons, Gatichina farmers maximized land productivity while preventing soil degradation. They relied heavily on compost made from animal manure, food scraps, and plant residues, creating a closed-loop system that eliminated the need for chemical fertilizers and reduced waste.

To prevent soil erosion on the steep hillsides, the villagers built terraces that slowed water runoff and allowed for better water absorption. Their rudimentary but effective and inexpensive irrigation systems efficiently directed water to where it was needed most, while rainwater harvesting ensured a steady supply even during drier months. These techniques, honed over centuries, stood in stark contrast to the resource-intensive methods often employed in industrialized nations. Adopting even a fraction of these practices could revolutionize how suburban homeowners in the UK approach gardening and landscaping.

My Role in the Community

While I initially planned to teach, I soon realised my most valuable contribution would be to assist with daily tasks. In the village of Gatichina, very few people are farmers, but everyone farms. Most of the inhabitants had jobs outside of their land. Each home had its plot, used not for artificial lawns or massive soil-sealing patios, but for growing essential crops. My role involved helping families with planting, weeding, and harvesting.

The year-round production of food required villagers to labour after work each day. My presence meant that some families—not all, but a good few contributors—didn't need to do the work after their day jobs. This allowed them time for other activities, whether spending time with family or engaging in community events. While my contributions may have seemed small, they were part of a larger interconnected support system. The village operated like a giant cooperative, growing, sharing, and selling surplus produce. By assisting one or two families, I indirectly supported the entire community.



SMART Goals and Leadership Development

I believe I developed as a leader in more ways than one. My project required me to demonstrate initiative, adaptability, and resilience. One of the most significant challenges I faced was navigating language barriers. I often worked with an elderly woman who spoke no English, and my limited Nepali initially made communication difficult. Through hand gestures, suggestive noises, and body language, we eventually established a system of communication that worked remarkably well. By the end of my time in Gatchina, our efficiency as a team had improved tenfold.

This experience highlighted the importance of effective communication and teamwork. It also illustrated my ability to adapt to new circumstances and overcome adversity with logic and determination. These are qualities that align with the SMART framework. I set clear and specific goals to support the community and learn sustainable practices. My success was measurable through the relationships I built, the tasks I completed, and the skills I gained during the project. While my initial goal of teaching proved unattainable, I adapted to a new and achievable objective of learning and assisting the community instead. The project was highly relevant, as it directly aligned with my aspirations to promote environmental sustainability. Finally, I worked within a set timeframe, which required me to plan effectively and remain disciplined to maximize my impact.

Building Relationships and Cultural Understanding

Living and working in Gatchina taught me the value of community and cultural exchange. I made a conscious effort to immerse myself in the local culture, learning basic Nepali phrases and participating in traditional dances. While my dancing skills left much to be desired, these moments of cultural exchange deepened my connections with the villagers.

Over time, I was no longer seen as an outsider but as a member of the community. This trust allowed me to observe and participate in activities that provided invaluable insights into their way of life. For example, I joined the villagers in preparing for a celebration, learning how to cook traditional meals using produce we had grown together. These experiences reinforced the importance of empathy, respect, and open-mindedness in building strong relationships.



Challenges and Problem-Solving

Farming in rural Nepal is not without its challenges. The monsoon season brought heavy rains, which often disrupted plans and required flexibility in scheduling tasks. To adapt, I developed a regimented approach to work, prioritizing outdoor tasks in the early morning and shifting to indoor activities during rainstorms. This discipline ensured that we made the most of each day, regardless of the weather.

Another challenge was the physical labour involved. The steep terraces and heavy tools demanded strength and endurance. While the work was initially exhausting, I gradually built stamina and learned efficient techniques from the local farmers. This physical resilience mirrored the mental resilience I developed throughout the project.

Cultural Differences and Experiences Learnt From

Living and working in rural Nepal introduced me to a way of life that was profoundly different from my own. One of the most striking cultural differences I encountered was the collective mindset of the community. In Gaticina, individual needs were often secondary to those of the village as a whole. This manifested in how resources were shared, how tasks were divided, and how decisions were made. For example, surplus crops were not hoarded but distributed among families or sold collectively to benefit the entire community. This sense of unity challenged my Western perspective, which often prioritizes individual achievement and ownership.

Another cultural difference was the deep respect for nature and its cycles. Rituals and festivals revolved around the agricultural calendar, and even the smallest tasks, like collecting water or planting seeds, were imbued with a sense of reverence. This holistic approach to life underscored the interconnectedness of people, land, and community. I learned to adopt a more thoughtful and deliberate mindset in my daily activities, appreciating the importance of sustainability and mindfulness.

The language barrier was initially a challenge, but it became one of my most rewarding learning experiences. I quickly realized that communication is not solely about words; body language, facial expressions, and even shared laughter can bridge gaps. This adaptability enhanced my ability to connect with people on a deeper level and taught me the value of empathy and patience.

Ultimately, these cultural experiences reinforced the importance of humility and openness. By stepping out of my comfort zone, I gained a deeper understanding of the richness of human experience and the value of different perspectives. These lessons have left an indelible mark on me, shaping how I approach challenges and relationships in every aspect of my life.

Future Career Ambitions and Links to the Project

My goal is to become a medical physicist in the NHS, specializing in radiotherapy treatment planning. Although the field of medical physics might seem unrelated to sustainable agriculture, the lessons I learned during my Leadership in Action project have clear parallels to my future career.

One of the most significant connections lies in the problem-solving skills I developed. Observing how Gatichina's farmers adapted their techniques to suit the challenges of their environment reminded me of the importance of innovation and flexibility. Similarly, in radiotherapy treatment planning, tailoring solutions to the unique needs of each patient is crucial. Both fields require an analytical mindset, creativity, and the ability to think holistically about outcomes.

The project also reinforced the importance of collaboration. Just as the villagers of Gatichina worked together to ensure the well-being of their community, medical physics relies on interdisciplinary teamwork. Radiotherapy planning requires close coordination between physicists, oncologists, radiographers, and patients. My experiences in Nepal strengthened my ability to work in diverse teams and communicate effectively, skills that are essential in healthcare.

Additionally, my time in Gatichina deepened my appreciation for sustainability, a principle that is increasingly important in modern medicine. The efficient use of resources, waste reduction, and long-term planning are concepts that are equally applicable to environmental conservation and healthcare delivery. As a medical physicist, I aim to advocate for sustainable practices within the NHS, such as optimizing treatment protocols to reduce unnecessary radiation exposure and minimizing waste in equipment usage.

This project also reaffirmed my passion for helping others. Just as I sought to support the villagers in Nepal, I am driven to make a tangible difference in patients' lives. The sense of purpose I felt during my Leadership in Action project is something I hope to carry forward into my work, contributing to improved patient outcomes and advancing the field of radiotherapy.



Conclusion

My time in Gatchina was transformative, both personally and professionally. The lessons I learned about sustainable agriculture, community cooperation, and cultural exchange have left an indelible mark on me. I firmly believe that the UK can benefit from adopting some of the practices I observed in Nepal. Instead of sealing gardens with artificial coverings, we should embrace the idea of growing our food, conserving water, and building stronger connections with the land.

Projects like this underscore the importance of global understanding and collaboration. By learning from communities that have mastered sustainable living, we can address pressing environmental challenges while fostering mutual respect and appreciation. As I move forward, I am committed to sharing these lessons and advocating for a more sustainable and ethical approach to living.

