

Leadership in Action Reflective Report; Voluntario Global

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Introduction

At the end of summer in 2025, I flew across the Atlantic Ocean to Buenos Aires, Argentina, to embark on my Leadership In Action. My project collaborated with Voluntario Global and focused on disseminating skills of sustainable agricultural practice to local communities in the Tigre district. Throughout my time with Voluntario Global I too learned new agricultural practices for maintaining good land use and effective crop growth specific to Argentina; a vastly different landscape to my own knowledge of plant management in the United Kingdom. Additionally, I was involved in projects within other sister projects that Voluntario Global collaborates with; a technology session focused on teaching adolescents how to repair broken computers, a healthy eating and gardening workshop with elderly participants at the local CEPAN (Centro de Prevención y Asistencia en Nutrición) and networking with other Laidlaw scholars at the English School in Pablo Nogués.

Before embarking on this project, I had elected to take a course on “Creating Alternative Futures” within the University of Leeds which focused on learning from global perspectives on sustainable land management processes and envisioning how modern western European governments could implement such knowledge into their development. This developed not only my knowledge on specific techniques, but also piqued my excitement to get involved with hands-on experiential learning in Argentina. Hence, from my first day I was open to having my thought processes challenged and grateful to learn in ways that aren’t recognised as ‘mainstream pedagogy’ in the UK; leadership through listening and egalitarian relationships between ‘teacher’ and ‘student’. These thought processes echoed the pedagogy I had begun to explore in my Research Project previously under Anna Grimaldi, and implementing them to explore learning through a new medium allowed language and cultural barriers to be dissolved (where they might have remained concrete had traditional hierarchical leadership been attempted).

Background and Context

Voluntario Global is a NGO that operates throughout Buenos Aires, with multiple projects each focusing on social mobility through different schemes. They employ full time ‘volunteers’ to manage and run each site- denoted purposefully to reinforce their ideology that the volunteers they accept from abroad or other districts of Argentina are equal in skill and respect deserved to their project managers. This struck me when I first arrived, because despite my previous work with professor Grimaldi on creating reciprocal learning spaces with no hierarchy between session ‘co-ordinators’ and ‘participants’, we still used the diction and language of such hierarchical roles. Reconstructing these assumptions from details as precise as language use, highlights the diligence Voluntario Global has to its mission; promoting a “richness of diverse voices and experiences, allowing us to foster deep bonds of solidarity and cooperation”. Their projects range from their English school, pre-primary education, the environmental project at MILPA, a community soup kitchen, communications teams and their radio station.

My main project when volunteering, as aforementioned, was the environmental project at MILPA Comunidad agroecológica (MILPA agricultural centre). This center is situated in General Pacheco within the Tigre district in northern Buenos Aires, and endeavours to

empower local communities by teaching gardening and landscaping skills through agroecology, which combines science, social activism, and practical experience. Their goal is to build confidence, create job opportunities, and promote a sense of community for all participants ranging from a local scout group we hosted to mothers, adolescents and all interested in reconnecting to the natural world. This project is especially pertinent in the Pacheco district as access to green spaces is extremely limited, and requires public transport or personal transport for many hours to reach wild green spaces out of the city. MILPA gives local communities not only a possibility for technical employable skills but an emotional connection back to the land.

In an evolving globalised world, MILPA's practise of local degrowth is increasingly important as it deconstructs the western perceived nature-culture divide by connecting users to physical nature when working in the community garden. Hence, MILPA educates the participants and community on effective agricultural methods to encourage ecoliteracy and reconstruct relationships with food (understanding where the food consumers purchase comes from and the importance of localised food cycles).

My Role in Voluntario Global

Originally, I had planned to lead volunteer sessions for members of the Pacheco and wider Tigre community with very little knowledge on growing food, disseminating my own knowledge and learning niches on Argentinian crops. However, after my first week at MILPA and the sister projects it became evident that the people I was working with had much deeper knowledge than I expected- allowing us to collaborate as equals. Within MILPA the other Voluntario Global volunteers were the main group I interacted with, and as they had all been working in the greenhouses for many years they needed no instruction. My role here consisted of taking responsibility for regular watering of the plants, harvesting the winter vegetables as the season changed to spring, preparing meals from the food harvested, and thus planting and maintaining the new vegetables for the spring season. By taking leadership within the greenhouse, my participation allowed other long term volunteers to take more orders for food deliveries from the MILPA farm shop or have days of rest where previously they would be working every day.

Within the CEPAN workshop, some of the participants did not have much experience with cooking or gardening- but all were passionate about getting involved. My role here became less involved physically and together with Diana I guided as a participant-instructor, by demonstrating techniques on weed pulling, seed planting and soil turning. My leadership in this project was the most fluid and I grew used to seamlessly transitioning from leader instructing which foods were to be added to a recipe, and overseeing results of cooking stages to tutee being shown a new method for food storage or sheltering plants from invasive species by the participants. My participation and positive attitude in these workshops while perhaps seeming insignificant in the wider scale of education for Buenos Aires, was very impactful for the community in Tigre; elderly attendees of these classes are encouraged to come due their isolation and lack of access or knowledge to consume healthy foods. By leading these sessions I could personally connect with them, allowing members to talk to someone new which they may have not had the courage to do otherwise.

How SMART was I? Assessing my Goals and Leadership Development

Before departing on this journey I set out specific SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-based) goals that I hoped to achieve whilst on my Leadership in Action.

The first goal I hoped to achieve would be to “run a successful and well attended session...where I have both learnt from [participants] and given some of my own knowledge back”. Overall, although I did not ‘lead’ as many sessions as I anticipated I would in the traditional hierarchical perception of leadership- I certainly achieved this through many knowledge and cultural exchanges within the gardening session at MILPA. One of our weekends, we hosted a local scout group who had little experience interacting in the agroecological and natural world. I personally lead group activities such as weeding, ground tilling and planting fresh vegetables with the children of the scout group- with help from the MILPA volunteers to translate- and discussed why understanding the effort it takes to grow food is important; understanding the food we eat’s connection with the land it is grown in. Moreover, I also lead a cooking workshop in the CEPAN group- sharing my recipe for Lancashire hotpot with local elderly and vulnerable citizens. This exchange of one of my favourite meals with the community, helped to foster an equal relationship as they also taught me to make a traditional Argentinian recipe in return. Hence, both of these sessions together in conjunction have helped me achieve my intention of sharing knowledge through a fun and well attended workshop.

However, not all of my goals remained the same throughout my time with Voluntario Global. I had structured my time for volunteering to be spent 3 weeks on site at MILPA community center and my final week in the city networking with other Voluntario Global projects and with Milena Sapey [my primary co-ordinator contact], to “help broaden the organisations’ outreach for volunteers and funding opportunities”. However, after spending my three weeks within MILPA, it had become evident that- although my spanish skills were strong enough to communicate with MILPA volunteers- it would be more efficient if I aided Voluntario Global’s outreach not through applications for funding (which would require high level spanish skills) but in social media relations. Therefore, I adjusted my SMART goal to reflect the time I had to accomplish broadening their presence and helped film a short series of promotional content for their multiple online platforms, as well as writing an excerpt to be posted on their blog. Overall, I believe this adjustment of my goals was advantageous for both myself and the organisation as I was able to utilise my skills of social media management to help promote the MILPA center and allow the designated Social Media Volunteer focus on other long-term projects.

Winter is coming! And Other Challenges

Within my first week of arriving in Buenos Aires, I realised I had made a detrimental assumption; that the transition from Winter to Spring would be different to those we experience in the UK. Quite surprisingly for me, Argentina too is affected by ‘April showers’ however theirs falls in August. My first weekend on the project was affected by a storm that hit Buenos Aires causing significant flooding and damage in many communities across the city. Despite this, I met with my project co-ordinator Valaria and we rescheduled my timetable to adjust to this unforeseen circumstance. This meant that, over the time when the

storm hit I prioritised tasks indoors such as preparing the food parcels to be delivered from the Farm Shop, and working inside the greenhouse. Therefore, I made efficient use of my time and flexibly adjusted to organise my other tasks between my sessions later in the week.

Another challenging aspect of my volunteering was the adjustment to the currency system used in Argentina. Argentina has multiple exchange rates, both of which change daily, and this affected my ability to budget and predict future expenditure whilst on the project. To resolve this, I proactively researched ahead of the project and networked with a previous volunteer to understand the most financially effective method to structure my budget and withdraw money. This meant that, when arriving I already understood the exchange system and was well equipped to orient myself within the local town and manage my finances throughout the project.

Yo or Sho? Cultural Lessons

On top of learning that Argentinian Spanish is quite different to European Spanish- “yo tengo” is pronounced “sho tengo”- living in at MILPA developed my appreciation for community and how building communities that function to support each other is much like building the greenhouses we worked in; taking a lot of effort to set up a solid structure and support network first, but also taking the time to constantly re-assess what crops needed more attention to flourish. I spent time connected with my fellow Voluntario Global volunteers learning as much of the language as I could master and learning about their family histories; something that is deeply significant to many people in Argentina. As volunteers in the community came from a mix of cultural heritage from Spain, Italy, England and original peoples, their knowledge and pride in their bloodlines was inspirational and something I reflected that is not typically celebrated in the UK. Spending time on weekends together sharing food and traveling to local sights allowed me to find genuine friendship which in turn gave way to a mutual cultural exchange- celebrating Danny’s birthday will be something I will always remember.

After spending time at the other workshops, like the CEPAN health and gardening session and the Technology Class, I also became accepted as part of these smaller communities. Being able to talk to the adolescents about their daily lives and share stories of my own from home created mutual pools of experiences; breaking down barriers of alienation and highlighting to the volunteers the misrepresentation of the “western divide” between the global north and the global south. The UK indeed encounters its own political, environmental and economic problems and by discussing the reality of the UK’s position I was able to empathise and share frustrations and messages of hope with volunteers. This was an important lesson for me to learn- showing vulnerability and exposing weakness can often lead to more impactful and helpful improvements to be constructed.

Future Ambitions- What Happens Now?

My ambition after completing university is to pursue a career in corporate law specialising in environmental planning and sustainable energy projects. This is becoming an increasingly important field of law, as the UK aims to decarbonise and reach net zero by 2050 with many of its industries instructed to do so before 2030. Although the coordination of environmental planning with clients from a legal standpoint is materially different from my work with

Voluntario Global, the skills I enhanced whilst volunteering have direct implications on my future career.

Primarily, by working in a variety of local communities with a host of different ages and personalities my communication skills were thoroughly developed. Clear communication between myself and other project leaders was important for the implementation of effective sessions, planning strategies for future sessions and receiving feedback from participants. Effective communication fosters collaboration, accuracy, and trust, all of which are crucial for achieving successful client work in my future.

By working in multiple different workstreams I also enhanced my time management skills and delivery of results- being able to take on responsibilities and leadership roles in collaboration with others or alone, without sacrificing the quality of the work I was producing. I self-managed my own timetable, in between set session times, which allowed me to assess the urgency and hence dictate what time I allocated to different tasks. In law, effective time management is critical to meet deadlines, prepare materials thoroughly, and ensure that procedures are complied with promptly- all important to achieve exceptional results.

Moreover, my time spent within the Pacheco community reinforced my personal connection to the land and my understanding of the importance of sustainability. Although I have always been a deeply environmentally conscious individual, and implemented this into my personal, professional and university career- my time on the MILPA project strengthened my emotional connection to natural spaces. The intellectual divide Beery's 'wheel of disconnect' denotes within western society between nature and humans is problematised as societal as much as personal. Therefore, I will take my learning forward to reconnect communities in the UK with natural spaces- through environmental planning and sustainable real estate developments that encompass ecologically diverse and natural areas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would reiterate the immense emotional journey that I undertook when volunteering with Voluntario Global. Although volunteering away from home, in a country where I do not speak fluently in a common language was at times lonely or intimidating- I never let such fears prevent me from meeting new people and experiencing such a rich and inspiring culture. My technical knowledge on land maintenance has vastly improved after my work in MILPA, as well as my appreciation for the impact on mental health that localised effort can have after my work in the CEPAN.

My development was both personal and professional however, and I am determined to take my lessons on the importance of eco-literacy into my future career after university. For many people in the UK, they too struggle to find the resources to access green spaces and the protection of the rights of nature is an increasingly relevant discussion in the legal sphere. Hence, as aforementioned, I am driven to pursue projects where I can be involved in sustainable practices and eco-education.

Voluntario Global's work in Argentina is paramount to supporting a future of sustainable economic and environmental health; giving jobs to those who struggle to support themselves and encouraging the implementation of local food cycles. Moreover, projects like MILPA are equally important in an increasingly globalised world as they encourage cultural exchange of ideas and networks. By bringing young people together their friendship inspires empathy, understanding and respect for a variety of ideologies and opinions- celebrating difference instead of antagonising it.