

## **Experience Abroad Reflection**

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### **Introduction**

For my Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project, I had the opportunity to work with Ecogenia, a youth-led non-profit organization based in Litchoro, Greece. As the first youth climate corps in the country, Ecogenia aims to empower young people with paid, skills-based training while mobilizing them to serve their country through climate action and environmental stewardship. Their flagship initiative, the Olympus Program, brings together a team of twelve Greek youth aged 18 to 30 for a full-time, three-month service term that combines trail restoration, public education, and community engagement on and around Mount Olympus.

As a Canadian Laidlaw Scholar interested in environmental law and policy, I joined the Olympus Program for six weeks, splitting my time between hands-on work with the Field Crew restoring trails and managing forest areas, and supporting the Community Engagement Crew at the local information kiosk. In parallel, I undertook an independent project: developing a proposal to bring a future cohort of Greek diaspora youth from Canada to participate in this same program.

While arriving in a new country without speaking the language and working with people I had never met was initially intimidating, the experience ended up being transformative. I developed strong bonds with my team members, gained valuable leadership insights, and immersed myself in a culture that deeply influenced my perspective. This reflection focuses on

three areas: the global dimensions of climate action, cultural learning through immersion in Greek society, and the personal growth I experienced through this journey.

### **Global Climate Action: Context Matters**

One of the most important takeaways from my time with Ecogenia was realizing how dramatically climate action differs by context and geography. As someone raised in Canada and exposed to activism through institutions that often respond—albeit slowly—to public pressure, I had assumed that youth around the world felt similarly empowered. In Greece, I encountered a different relationship between citizens and the state.

Many of the young people I worked with expressed deep frustration with government inaction, driven by years of political instability, economic crisis, and a general mistrust of institutions. This disillusionment has a tangible effect on civic engagement. While climate activism in Canada often relies on the hope of influencing policy through protest or advocacy, my Greek peers were less inclined to view such actions as worthwhile. This made Ecogenia's approach—offering tangible, paid opportunities for young people to serve their communities—especially powerful. It created a space where civic participation could still thrive, even in a context where political engagement felt futile.

I also learned that nations are at vastly different stages when it comes to institutional support for climate work. In British Columbia, the Youth Climate Corps (YCCBC) has received millions in government funding and directly contributes to decarbonization through retrofits and energy-efficiency projects. Ecogenia, on the other hand, receives minimal government support and focuses on environmental education, trail stewardship, and building civic capacity. While

these may seem less “direct” from an emissions-reduction standpoint, they play a crucial role in shaping long-term resilience, especially in a country like Greece, where wildfire risk and climate vulnerability are intensifying.

Understanding these different starting points helped me develop more nuanced expectations about what climate work looks like globally. It also reminded me that local knowledge, political history, and cultural attitudes must shape any approach to sustainability. Climate action is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor—it must be grounded in the needs, challenges, and opportunities of each place.

### **Immersion in Greek Culture: Living Differently**

One of the most enriching aspects of this experience was the opportunity to live and work in a different cultural context. From the very beginning, I was struck by how community-oriented Greek culture is. Meals are shared communally, snacks are brought for the whole group, and daily life is organized around connection. I learned this lesson quickly when I joined a hike on my first weekend. I had packed a solitary wrap and apple, but everyone else had brought food to share. After that day, I made sure to contribute to the communal table, and it became one of my favorite daily rituals.

This focus on community is reinforced by religion, which remains central in Greek life. While I am not religious myself, I gained an appreciation for how Orthodox Christianity shapes the rhythm of life in Greece, from festivals and holidays to interpersonal values like hospitality and generosity. Attending a village celebration on Saint Elias’ feast day helped me see how faith and identity are interwoven here in a way that is less common in secular Canadian society.

Equally striking was the Greek approach to work-life balance. Unlike in North America, where busyness is often glorified, Greek culture places a strong emphasis on joy, rest, and social connection. People prioritize time with friends and family, daily meals are unhurried, and there is a reverence for nature that permeates daily life—especially in a place as beautiful as Litochoro, nestled between the mountains and the sea. This slower pace and deeper connection to place challenged my own assumptions about productivity and made me reflect on what truly matters.

I left Greece with a desire to integrate more of this mindset into my own leadership and lifestyle—leading from a place of connection, balancing ambition with well-being, and honoring the communities that shape us.

### **Personal Growth**

My time in Greece challenged me to grow in tangible ways. Working in a new country without fluency in the language pushed me out of my comfort zone and taught me to be more adaptable. I learned to ask for help, to rely on body language and patience, and to build trust across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

This experience gave me newfound empathy for newcomers and immigrants. I now have a better understanding of what it means to be disoriented in a new system and the resilience it takes to build community in a place where you don't speak the dominant language. I also developed greater self-awareness around my own cultural assumptions. Things I once considered “normal” or “efficient” often had no place in this context—and that's okay. I realized that leadership doesn't always mean taking charge; sometimes it means slowing down, listening deeply, and allowing yourself to be led.

One specific leadership skill I strengthened was cultural humility. In many ways, I was not an expert in this environment. I had to check my impulse to suggest or “fix” things and instead defer to local knowledge and priorities. This was especially important in my work on the diaspora proposal, which I designed in consultation with local staff to ensure that it aligned with Ecogenia’s values and needs.

I also developed patience and flexibility, especially during the second half of my placement, which consisted largely of orientation sessions conducted in Greek. Though I understood very little, I chose to stay present, use the time to work independently on my proposal, and trust that the experience was still valuable.

Through these moments, I internalized a more grounded and relational form of leadership—one that centers empathy, cross-cultural learning, and mutual respect.

### **Looking Ahead**

This experience has significantly influenced my thinking about the future. First, I realized how much I enjoy living abroad. Immersing myself in a new place, building cross-cultural relationships, and contributing to a global cause felt deeply fulfilling. As a result, I am planning on taking a gap year after my undergraduate studies to work on a climate-related project internationally before deciding whether to pursue law school.

Second, I gained clarity on what kind of environment I want to live in long-term. Litochoro reminded me of Vancouver in many ways—access to both mountains and ocean—but with a stronger sense of community and belonging. I now know that I thrive in places where I

can be outdoors often and where relationships are prioritized. These insights will shape how I choose my future career and where I choose to live.

Finally, I feel even more committed to pursuing a career in climate justice. Whether through policy, law, or on-the-ground organizing, I want to help build systems that are equitable, community-driven, and globally informed. I hope to use what I've learned in Greece to support international collaboration, diaspora engagement, and local action in both Canada and abroad.

### **Conclusion**

My six weeks in Greece were more than just a work placement—they were a turning point. I learned to lead with humility, to live with intention, and to approach climate action with cultural and contextual awareness. I deepened my empathy, clarified my goals, and fell in love with a country that has so much to teach.

This experience reaffirmed the importance of community, the value of cross-cultural dialogue, and the urgent need for climate solutions that reflect local realities. I will carry these lessons with me throughout my life and leadership journey.