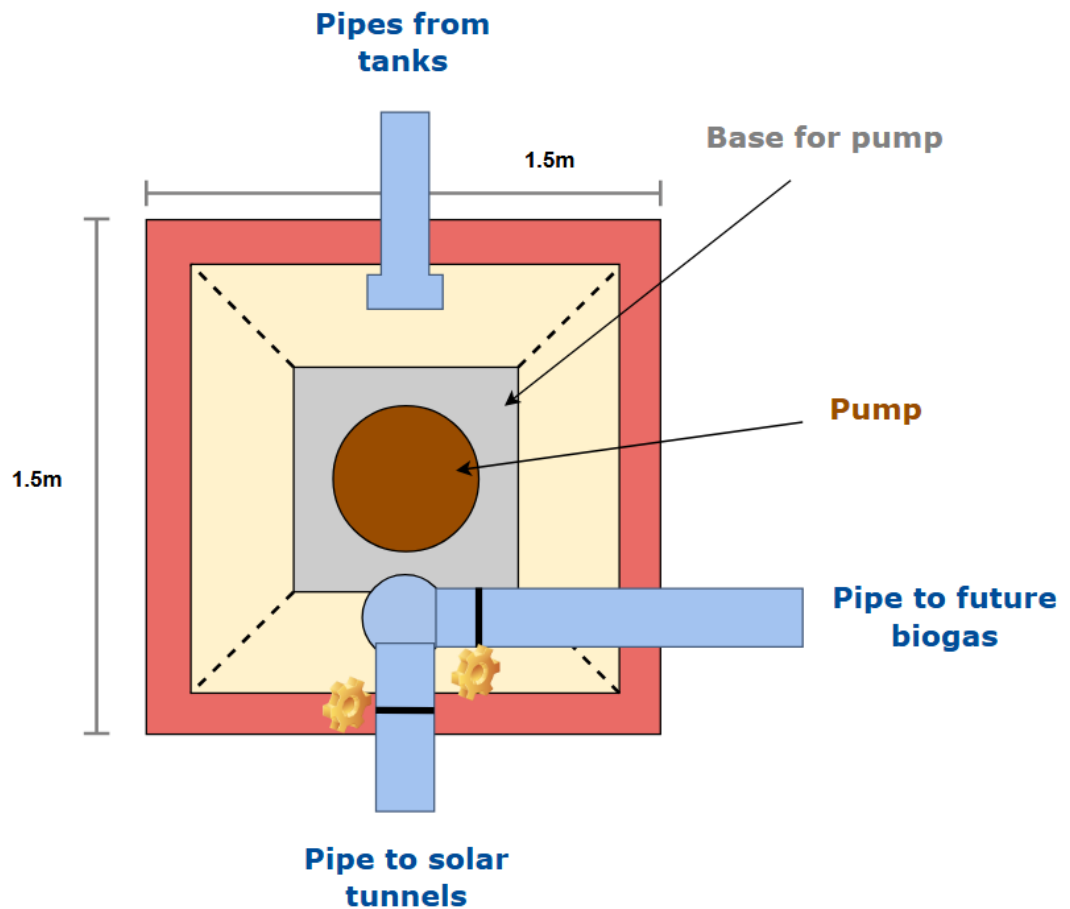




Designing a faecal sludge treatment plant in rural Nepal.

Report on Leadership-in-Action project.

Daan Vegter - September 2026

Introduction

To start this report, I thought it might be useful to illustrate where I was in my life when this LiA process began. It's February 2026 and I'm back at Leeds. A few weeks earlier, right after finishing my exams, I'd rushed to London for the fifth and final round of interviews at a management consultancy firm – the crème de la crème of my corporate ambition, and the furthest I'd gotten in my months-long pursuit of a grad job. Now I'm sitting at my desk going through my to-do list, where the "reach out to NGOs" deadline had only just been missed by about three months. I had originally applied to Laidlaw partly because I saw it as an exciting opportunity that I could balance alongside other stuff, but by this point my attention had become almost entirely focused elsewhere. Then a little Gmail notification came into my phone: "Update on your application". By now I knew exactly what that meant. Rejection. I felt awful. I was still unemployed, suddenly having to rethink my plans for the following year, and the neglected "reach out to NGOs" task was sitting there waiting for me.

Luckily, my failed corporate pursuit had at least gotten me pretty damn good at applications. So I whipped up a new CV, a cover letter and (of course) an application tracker in Excel. Where did I want to go? Nepal. Why? I like hiking, and someone once told me the food and people were great there. I spammed out around fifteen emails and then briefly that same sense of excitement from the start of my grad applications. Unfortunately, the outcome was also the same: only one NGO actually got back to me. Pipal Tree. Stuck pretty optionless, I pursued my one and only option. The reason I'm telling you this is that, in that moment, the LiA didn't excite me. Instead it felt like another thing I'd failed at, and if I was right, I would have to be reminded about it for 6 weeks. In this report, I hope to show how wrong I was, and how this experience has enhanced my life and world view.

Project Overview

Pipal Tree is a UK-based charity that supports a range of projects in Nepal, both financially and strategically. Its founder, Philip Holmes, is a former army dentist who 25 years ago, following the death of his wife Esther, felt a calling to work in Nepal. Over the years, Philip's work has spanned child rescue, women's empowerment, community development and, more recently, climate-related projects – achievements recognised through Philip's award of an OBE.

The partner charity I worked most closely with was Mithila Wildlife Trust (MWT), based near Janakpur in Nepal's southern Terai plains. Its founder, Dev Mendell, left an accomplished job working for the Indian government after watching the natural environment he had grown up around being steadily eroded. MWT works from the recognition that wildlife conservation and human development are deeply connected, and has an impressive record on both fronts.

My main project was the development of a new faecal sludge treatment plant (FSTP). The core problem is that Janakpur, like much of Nepal, lacks proper treatment infrastructure: septic tanks are emptied by tanker and the sludge is frequently dumped into fields or rivers, with obvious risks to human health, water quality and local ecosystems. Pipal Tree had received a grant to run a one-year pilot: design and build a small treatment plant, process the first batches of sludge, sell to local farmers and analyse the results. I was to be involved in the first stage.

When I arrived, I quickly realised that being “involved” effectively meant helping to drive the process. Communication with engineers and specialists was inconsistent, and there was no fixed technical team working on the designs day-to-day. Drawing on reports from similar projects, academic and technical sources, AI tools and my own experience with digital drawing, I began producing designs for different sections of the plant every few days.

The treatment process itself is conceptually simple. Incoming sludge is screened to remove non-organic waste and held in storage before being transferred into solar drying tunnels, where water is removed partly through evaporation and partly through drainage into water-treatment ponds. What remains is a nitrogen-rich faecal “cake”, which is mixed with rice straw in a composting area. The heat generated by composting kills pathogens, and the resulting compost can be treated, tested and packaged for use by local farmers.

The wider potential went beyond reducing unsafe dumping. Fertiliser in Nepal is centrally distributed and often in short supply at the wrong times, with serious consequences for subsistence farmers; rice straw, meanwhile, is routinely burned, creating environmental and health problems of its own. The plant would turn two waste streams into one useful product, had the potential to employ workers from a caste traditionally regarded as “untouchable”, and, if successful, could provide a model that Dev hoped to eventually scale across the wider Janakpur area.

After the first three weeks, despite significant progress, I had probably done most of what I could without specialist input: the designs needed qualified engineers and technical experts to review, adapt and finalise them. With that process moving slowly, I refocused on understanding current fertiliser use in the area and what local farmers would actually need from a compost product. Over the final weeks I conducted qualitative interviews with farmers and the manager of a local fertiliser cooperative, combined the findings with secondary research on comparable projects, and produced a document of commercial recommendations for the compost side of the plant.

Beyond the sanitation project, I also supported Pipal Tree more directly: helping Philip build custom GPTs for funding applications, filming and editing a campaign video for a women’s community bank, and designing a prototype web app for a new “living forest” fundraising idea in Kathmandu. What began as support for a single project expanded into technical planning, commercial research, communications and digital tools.

SMART Goals Evaluation

I initially outlined three SMART goals:

1. Make progress on the sewage project.
2. Provide a serious approach to ensure its sustainability.
3. Integrate well into the community.

For the first goal, I ended up taking far more responsibility than expected. I had assumed I would be supporting a more experienced technical team; in practice, I was driving much of the early design work myself. By the end of the placement I had completed roughly three quarters of the original design work, alongside supporting documents and operations manuals – tangible

evidence of progress, even though slow engineer feedback meant none of the designs had been formally finalised by the time I left. I was also very conscious that I am not a trained engineer. I became well read on the topic, but repeatedly encountered issues that I knew required specialist review. It was a good lesson in balancing ownership with humility: taking responsibility where I could, while recognising where my competence ended.

The second goal developed into a broader commercial assessment than I had initially planned. As the engineering side slowed, I researched how similar plants approach commercial viability, then used interviews with local farmers and the cooperative manager to explore purchasing behaviour, supply problems, attitudes towards alternative fertilisers and barriers to compost uptake, combining it all with secondary research into a final document of commercial recommendations and scaling opportunities. I consider this goal achieved because I left behind something concrete and potentially useful. Its eventual impact, however, depends on whether the organisation chooses to use it – which is partly a question of whether I communicated and presented it well enough to be worth adopting.

The third goal, community integration, was probably the most personally important. Before arriving, I was worried that I would remain a temporary foreign volunteer who people were polite to because they felt they had to be. In practice, I built close relationships with colleagues, staff around the cultural village, and people I met at the gym. By the end, people seemed genuinely comfortable with me. There was a small goodbye before I left, colleagues spent time with me exploring Janakpur, and people at the gym insisted on a long photoshoot when they found out I was leaving. My biggest takeaways: the Nepalese people are indeed exceedingly lovely and hospitable. But also, being friendly makes life significantly easier. Reflecting on what I did well, I can't think of much more than just asking questions, having a chat, adapting my language a bit, learning a few words from theirs and just being positive. This isn't some kind of magic combination – in fact it is the stuff my mum told me to do whenever I joined a new school. But doing this consistently had untold upsides: social engagement, fewer awkward moments, feeling comfortable in your environment, being able to resolve daily issues, and invitations for outings and events which were remarkably novel for me.

Looking across all three goals, the ambition was broadly appropriate even though the exact outcomes changed. I overestimated how far the physical sewage project would progress, but the underlying goals remained useful precisely because they did not rest on too many assumptions – a good goal is one that survives the context changing. I feel that I achieved all three, even if that looks different to how I expected when I set out.

There are things I would do differently. I found it difficult to press people around me to work at my desired pace, because I felt I lacked both the authority and the understanding of how best to get things done in that context. That awareness was good. Ignoring cultural differences could easily have made me come across as rude or condescending. At the same time, I increasingly recognise that my work was valued, and that the slower pace meant I was no longer there when some of it could actually have been implemented. In a similar position again, I would still approach the context with humility, but I would push harder for momentum once I felt it was needed and I had the credibility. A different way of working needn't be rude – merging new perspectives is in fact a brilliant means of driving success.

Systemic Change Reflection

I have given systemic change its own section because my project sat within several wider systems, and the areas where we did and did not make progress were revealing.

The first was the system of public projects and governance. Nepal's status as a developing country creates both opportunities and constraints. Costs are comparatively low, so modest investment achieves a great deal, particularly in rural areas where even small projects have visible impact. There is also a growing cohort of educated workers, while many rural farmers have little formal education – which means awareness campaigns can be effective where strong pre-existing views have not yet formed. At the same time, structural hurdles are real: political instability and governance concerns shape the environment in which projects operate. I also noticed a more hierarchical working culture than I was used to: people were often more comfortable waiting for clear instructions from someone senior than taking independent ownership of a problem. My colleagues were intelligent and hard-working, but initiative was not always encouraged – Dev, extremely entrepreneurial and visionary, was a striking exception. Many highly capable Nepalis also seek opportunities abroad, thinning the pool of experienced people available locally.

Both sides were visible in our own project. Dev secured land quickly, the funding required for the pilot was modest, graduates were available to support the work, and engineers and microbiologists could be found. Yet communication was often slow, responsibilities were not always clearly owned, and progress repeatedly stalled. We did not personally encounter corruption, but the experience showed me that having all the individual ingredients for a project is not enough if they do not function together. I viewed the development almost as building with blocks: the foundations may exist, but if the blocks are uneven, building upwards becomes much harder. Systemic change requires assessment of all factors needed for it and whether they are on equal levels.

The second system was fertiliser distribution. Around 65% of Nepal's population depends on agriculture for its livelihood. Yet due to a lack of a domestic manufacturer, the country relies heavily on imported fertiliser. To keep prices affordable, distribution is highly centralised: the government imports fertiliser, fixes prices, and distributes it through several layers until it reaches local cooperatives. The recurring weakness is that supply falls short of demand – nationally through shortages, locally when fertiliser arrives after the key planting period, by which point farmers no longer need it. An informal market has developed in response, including fertiliser brought across the Indian border, often more expensive and of uncertain quality.

This is where the FSTP could be genuinely valuable. It does not need to replace Nepal's fertiliser system, which would require far larger industrial and agricultural reforms; locally produced compost could instead close the margins where the existing system performs worst, responding to local demand and reducing reliance on informal alternatives. One of my main systemic-change lessons was that large national problems do not always require equally large solutions – targeted local interventions can address specific gaps in a wider system.

The third system was the relationship between conservation and human development. Much conservation understandably focuses on protecting nature from human interference through

parks and protected areas. However, many ecosystems are proving adaptable to humans, we just need to give them a helping hand. Another of MWT's work is a good example: Dev is developing strategically placed forest corridors between protected areas so that animals can move safely through landscapes that are also farmed – reducing conflict rather than removing people. The sanitation project follows the same logic. Untreated sewage damages aquatic ecosystems and contaminates water used by local communities; the FSTP reduces that risk, recovers useful organic material through composting, and treats wastewater before it returns to the environment. My strongest lesson from the conservation side: sustainable development depends less on separating humans from nature than on finding practical ways for the two to coexist.

Finally, where does my own contribution sit within all of this? Realistically, at the organisational level: I strengthened an existing effort rather than changed a system. The designs, manuals and commercial research gave the pilot momentum and left MWT with concrete material to build on, but the pilot's fate now rests with others: Dev and his team, the engineers who must finalise the designs, and Pipal Tree's continued funding. I can already spot some incoming issues: the plant needs to be completed asap, the compost process needs to be optimised and proven safe, and local farmers – and eventually the municipality – need to buy into the model. I don't see these as fatal issues, but for future volunteers and scholars, it could offer an exciting opportunity for hands-on problem solving.

Character and Capabilities

The character dimensions that mattered most were judgment, humility, accountability and determination. Judgment, because I constantly had to decide what I could responsibly take forward myself and what needed specialist review. Humility, for the same reason: I had to keep recognising the limits of my own expertise, and the fact that local staff and community members often understood the context far better than I did. Accountability showed up in finishing work properly, handing things over clearly and continuing to contribute even when communication was slow or the project changed direction. Determination was the constant throughout: when work stalled, I responded by finding another useful way to contribute rather than disengaging.

Of the values and capacities, Fast, Curious, Good and Determined guided me most. I learned quickly, kept asking questions, tried to finish things properly, and stayed productive when the original plan slowed down. The main tension was between Fast and Good: technical work needed review, local input and patience, and moving quickly without those would have been irresponsible. My process and performance capacities strengthened most – especially research, problem-solving, project management and strategic thinking – while the area that stretched me most was people: communicating across different working styles, language barriers and expectations. That was probably the clearest reminder that leadership is not just about producing good work yourself, but about getting useful work done with and through other people.

Leadership Development and Global Mindset

I have already outlined many of the leadership lessons that came out of the placement. I was particularly fortunate to be given so much responsibility over the project. I learned to recognise

differences in working culture, to think carefully about how to adapt to them, and to experiment with when I should impose my own way of working and when I should adjust to somebody else's. I learned that friendliness goes an extraordinarily long way. That understanding the system around a problem helps reveal its bottlenecks. That hard work usually pays off. That when something stalls and there is genuinely nothing you can do about it, the answer is not to sit idle but to look for another way to contribute. I learned to communicate my ideas properly – your work does not necessarily speak for itself.

The placement also gave real content to the phrase “global mindset”. Before going, I would have defined it as being comfortable working across cultures. I now think it is just as much about seeing how local realities plug into larger systems: Janakpur's fertiliser shortages trace back to import dependence and national policy; its thin pool of experienced professionals partly reflects the global migration of skilled workers; and the pilot itself only existed because of international charitable funding. Several of my assumptions were challenged along the way – about how quickly things “should” move, and about initiative being universally valued. I was also shown how challenging NGO work can be, why large organisations can end up wasting so much money on regional partnerships, and how critical direct communication with local partners is.

There is, however, one part of the experience that I gave relatively little attention to in my weekly reflections, but which has become much more apparent since returning home: I rediscovered how much I enjoy learning.

My daily life in Nepal was remarkably simple. I would wake up early, never hungover because I had effectively stopped drinking, eat some delicious food and chat to the staff for a while. Then I would spend the day doing work that was genuinely new to me. Sometimes I was trying to understand engineering, sometimes I was conducting applied economic research with farmers. Other days I was helping a charity think through fundraising, digital tools or how it could grow. Lunch would often mean conversations with my colleagues, trying to understand the contrasts and similarities between how we looked at our lives and the world around us. After work, I would usually get a tuk-tuk to the gym. On the journey I started reading again. The healthier routine and the space in my day somehow restored an old habit I had allowed to slip, particularly reading non-fiction, which has always had the ability to send me down endless paths of curiosity. By the time I left the gym I would be re-energised, both from the exercise and from more conversations with fantastic people whose lives looked very different from mine. At dinner I would often listen to Dev and Philip tell stories from decades of extraordinary work. On other days we would visit projects, join wildlife rescues or travel somewhere completely new. One week took us to Chitwan National Park, where I saw around thirteen rhinos, watched vultures feeding in the wild and, thanks to Dev's connections, spoke to people at the forefront of wildlife conservation.

None of this is to romanticise the experience. At times I was exhausted. I was sometimes lonely. I occasionally felt a deep frustration with the pace of work and with communication. There were days when very little happened and I desperately wanted to be somewhere more familiar. But through all of this, the novelty of everything around me made it difficult not to be curious.

That curiosity slowly began spilling into the rest of my life. I would return from a tuk-tuk ride with some idea stuck in my head and spend the evening reading about it. Sometimes I would end up writing an article simply because I wanted to understand the subject better. My Laidlaw blog

posts gradually stopped feeling like mandatory reflections and became attempts to synthesise the different things I was seeing, reading and thinking about. The distinction between “work” and “learning” became much less clear because I was doing both almost constantly.

Since returning home, that feeling has remained. Not to quite the same extent, and I am glad of that. The return of university, friends and a normal social life has brought some needed balance. But I feel as though I have returned with a renewed appetite for understanding the world and the people within it. I look back at the person I described at the beginning of this report, and I think I had allowed some of that curiosity to disappear. University had become a balancing act of social life, degree requirements and job applications. The scholarship itself had become another line on a CV rather than something truly meaningful. Nepal disrupted that.

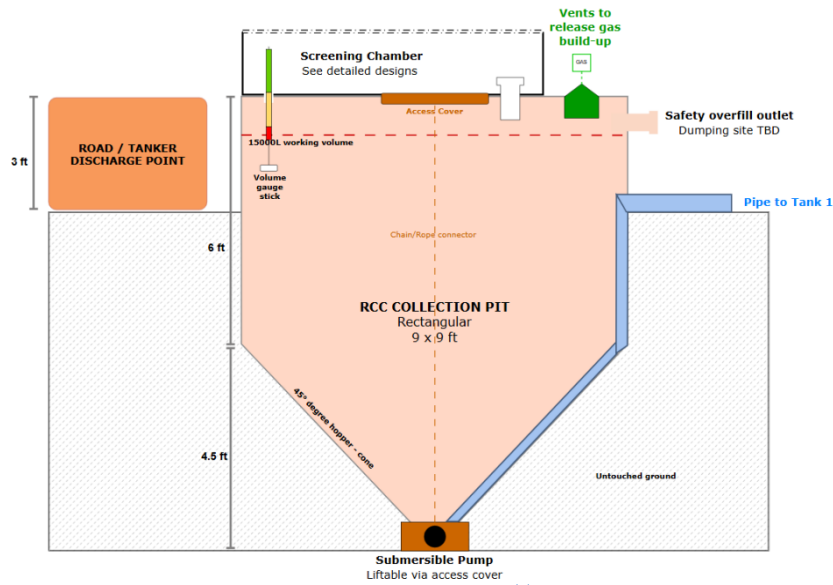
Conclusion

I have no doubt that the leadership lessons I learned, the skills I developed and the experiences I had during the LiA will influence whatever I do later in life. I learned that I can take ownership of unfamiliar work, teach myself quickly, operate through uncertainty, build relationships across significant cultural and linguistic barriers, and continue finding ways to contribute when the original plan falls apart. I got to meet some truly remarkable people, and some just unbelievably lovely ones too. I got to see the natural world in all her beauty. Oh, and the food! Those are lessons and experiences I will carry with me regardless of where my career goes.

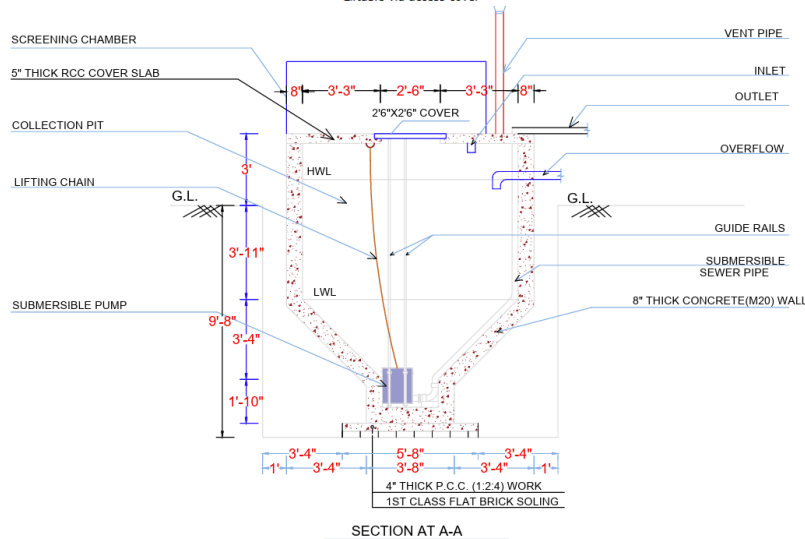
But when I think back to where I was at the beginning of this process, those are not actually the things I feel most grateful for right now. Six weeks in Nepal did not suddenly change my career ambitions. I am not sure whether I will work in international development, and in many ways I remain on the same path I was on before. My passion for environmental work was reaffirmed rather than newly discovered. I still care about my career, still have ambitions, and will undoubtedly return to applications and interviews.

What changed was the significance I attach to all of that. For six weeks, I was surrounded by people, problems, wildlife, ideas and ways of living that I knew almost nothing about. Every day offered something to understand. Somewhere in that experience, I recovered a part of myself that had been crowded out by the pursuit I described at the beginning of this report: the part that simply enjoys learning because the world is interesting. That allows me to wake up with more energy – with all the benefits that brings for whatever I find important that day.

Photo Gallery



An example of the designs I was making – in this case the first stage collection tank.



The same collection tank turned into professional drawings by the engineers. Construction should be starting soon



The construction site, first pillars for the fencing just arriving on the make shift road.



Aloo Paratha – the greatest breakfast to ever grace the human palette.



A final outing with my colleagues to visit the Janaki Temple – a sacred place where the gods Ram and Sita were said to be married.



On occasion I would join the snake rescue team. This was my only ever catch: a non-venomous rat snake



First fish I caught – using only a stick, some string and a small piece of bamboo as a float.



A mother rhino and her new baby. We were in Chitwan during mating season. Usually access to the parks is restricted by Dev's contacts allowed us to see countless mothers and their new offspring, including peacocks, deer, rhinos, wild boars.



Dev is a highly competent cameraman. We got extremely lucky to see a Gharial, right along the river banks.



During our live feeding of the vultures, a very brave wildboar stormed through the hoard of over 100 vultures, grabbed the carcass and bolted for his life.