Reflective Evaluation: Volunteering in San José, Costa Rica

Societal impact, ethical leadership and research connection

Introduction

Over six weeks in San José, Costa Rica, I volunteered with three partner organisations: Fundación La Cabaña Feliz, a childcare and pre-school organisation that also supports local mothers; Fundación Mujer, which works to increase employment opportunities and encourage entrepreneurship, particularly among women; and Proyecto Bethany, which supports single mothers and their children living in vulnerable conditions. I lived with a Costa Rican host family and worked almost entirely in Spanish. I arrived intending to work with and for women, and the placement did not unfold in a straight line: I began with children and mothers, and only later moved into the organisational work I had expected. This evaluation assesses what I concretely contributed, how I handled friction, ambiguity and cultural difference, and how the experience relates to my academic work.

1. Societal Impact

Context and relevant goals. San José is not the Costa Rica that most people know of. It lacks the jungles, waterfalls and beaches that draw tourists, and as a result almost nobody I worked with spoke English. That shaped the kind of impact that was possible. My work connects most directly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals on quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), with a secondary link to reduced inequalities (SDG 10) through the focus on women with limited access to formal employment pathways.

Weeks one and two: childcare, digital skills and English. In my first weeks I worked primarily with local mothers and women who wanted to improve their employment prospects by learning to use Word and Excel, and by practising English. When the mothers could not attend, I spent time with the children, helping them practise English, supporting general childcare, helping with the upkeep of the centre and, memorably, playing 'Zombies'. In an organisation running on limited resources, an extra pair of hands in the classroom was appreciated. I watched women look after children with very little funding but a great deal of care, and I learnt far more from them than I could have taught. The children receive a home-made free breakfast and lunch each day, which in Costa Rica is treated as a right rather than a privilege. Seeing every child leave Fundación La Cabaña Feliz with a full tummy, regardless of a family's circumstances, was very impactful.

Designing something that would outlast me. By the end of my first week I had begun to ask a harder question than 'how can I be useful?': how could I leave a lasting but sustainable impact in a placement of only a few weeks? Volunteering can easily become something that benefits the volunteer more than the host, and short placements are especially vulnerable to that. I decided that the best use of my time was to build something that did not depend on my presence. Drawing on digital skills I had developed during a summer internship, I created an interactive HTML 'skills assessor' for the women attending

the centre. It is written entirely in Spanish and tests users on their ability to use Word, Excel and other employability skills. At the end it recommends resources to help them improve in their weakest areas. The tool was designed to be self-directed and free to use, so that a woman could return to it on her own, track her progress and choose what to learn next without needing a volunteer who speaks English or has time to spare.

Weeks three and four: Fundación Mujer. Moving to Fundación Mujer brought me closer to what I had originally come to do. The office was filled with women who welcomed me warmly every morning, and the work was different in kind from the childcare centre: strategic rather than hands-on. My main contribution was in funding. Using Fundación Mujer's mission and goals, I searched for funds and grants the organisation could apply to, and compiled a master document that captured the key information for each opportunity, including deadlines and themes. I then began a second master document containing the core information about Fundación Mujer, written so that it could be repurposed across many applications. The reasoning was practical. Small organisations lose a great deal of time rewriting the same material for each funder, and a reusable base document reduces that duplication of effort.

Language was central to the value of this work. None of the staff speak English at a level sufficient to submit a competitive funding application in English, and many international funders require it. I therefore produced both documents in Spanish and English. This will hopefully widen the pool of funders the organisation can realistically approach. It also means the organisation keeps the materials and can update and adapt them without me. The funding search directly supports SDG 5 and SDG 8, since its purpose is to sustain an organisation whose whole mission is to create employment opportunities and support entrepreneurship, especially for women.

Week five: Proyecto Bethany. I spent my final week at Proyecto Bethany, which works with single mothers and their children living in vulnerable conditions, with the aim of breaking cycles of poverty. Its approach is deliberately holistic. It combines safe housing, childcare, support for higher education, counselling, psychology and social work, delivered through two models: Residencia Bethany, which offers temporary housing, food, utilities and full on-site support, and Extensión Bethany, which accompanies mothers who are living in their own homes. After two organisations that each addressed one part of the picture, children's care in the first and employment in the second, Bethany showed me how those threads connect in a single household. A mother cannot realistically pursue training or work without safe housing and reliable childcare, and she cannot sustain either without support for her wellbeing. It also directly supports SDG 1 (no poverty) alongside SDGs 4, 5 and 10.

Assessing my own contribution. Looking back, the clearest pattern is that the contributions I am proudest of were those that transferred a capability rather than delivered a service. Playing with the children and supporting the carers had immediate value, but the skills assessor and the funding documents were designed to continue working after I left. I also learnt that my time with the children was not a detour. It gave me context for everything that followed, and it gave me a more grounded

understanding of the communities that Fundación Mujer serves. During my time at Proyecto Bethany, I met 1-1 with some of the young mothers living there, primarily supporting them with their English skills. This took the form of informal chats about what our lives are like, exchanging cultural quirks and traditions, and assisting them with presentations as part of their university work. It was very special to get to work with these women directly, and it made the biggest impact on me. I was struck by how quickly we connected, despite our differences. By this point, my Spanish had improved to the point that I could make jokes, express gratitude and affection, and show how much I cared without resorting to 'no lo sé…'. This contributed to making my contribution more lasting, as I now consider the girls I worked with to be my friends, and we have remained in contact.

2. Ethical Leadership Application

Ambiguity and listening. My placement was ambiguous from the start. I arrived with an idea of what I would be doing, but the reality was different. I spent my first two weeks with young children, which was not what I had planned. My instinct could have been to treat that as a disappointment and focus on getting to the 'real' work. Instead I tried to treat the ambiguity as information and building local knowledge. Part of ethical leadership in an unfamiliar setting is accepting that the host organisation, not the volunteer, defines what is needed. I did not choose where I was most useful. I responded to where I was needed, and I learnt from it.

Confidence, humility and language. The most immediate challenge was my Spanish. I initially found it hard to form connections with the women and the children because I had little confidence in my ability. Nobody at the centre spoke English, so avoiding the issue was not an option. What changed things was a shift in mindset: I accepted that I would make many mistakes and that this was acceptable. Once I did, I progressed far more quickly and began to have a real impact. I think this is a leadership lesson as much as a language one. Perfectionism would have kept me quiet, and silence would have made me useless to the people I was there to support. It also reversed the usual power dynamic. For the first time I was the person who could not express herself fluently, and the women I worked with were patient with me. That experience made me more conscious of how many of the women at the centre must feel when they are asked to use English or unfamiliar software in front of others, and it influenced how I designed the skills assessor: private, self-paced and non-judgemental, in their own language.

Avoiding the 'saviour' trap. I thought carefully about why I was there and what it meant to leave a sustainable impact. International volunteering carries risks, including the temptation to impose solutions, to create dependency and to treat a community as a backdrop for personal growth. I do not think I avoided these entirely. I was a visitor on a short placement, and I benefited enormously from the experience. But I tried to reduce the risks in practical ways: building tools in Spanish for the women who would use them, producing reusable documents the organisation could own, and working on the priorities of Fundación Mujer rather than inventing my own. I was also conscious of working with limited local context, and I tried to ask questions rather than assume answers.

Cultural nuance and being visible. I was obviously a foreigner. As a very visible 'gringa' with light, curly hair, I was stared at constantly, and strangers would, unprompted, touch and admire my hair. Most of this came from curiosity, since there are few people in San José who look like me, and I tried to read it that way. Other experiences were less comfortable. I was catcalled in Costa Rica more than I have been in my whole life in the UK and Ireland. This sits alongside a striking set of facts about the country: it abolished its army and invested in healthcare and education, it was the first Central American country to recognise and perform same-sex marriages, and as of the 2026 elections it has more women in its national assembly than men. Yet 'machismo' remains evident. I learnt to hold both truths at once. Respecting a culture does not require me to pretend that its contradictions do not exist, and criticising an aspect of it does not mean I am entitled to judge the whole. I tried to be an observer first, and to avoid framing what I saw in terms of how things are 'better' at home.

Humility about my own assumptions. Comparing Ireland and Costa Rica taught me to question my own defaults. On the surface they could hardly be more different: the language, the food, the climate and the wildlife. But the underlying warmth felt familiar, from the old lady who stops you in the street in one language or the other. Costa Ricans' pride in their country and their anger about the destruction of its environment also made me reflect on how readily people at home underappreciate what they have. Being 'tico', as my host family and colleagues expressed it, combines pride in country, culture and family. I tried to approach that with respect rather than curiosity alone, including taking part in the Independence Day celebrations and the parades with the children in their traditional dress.

Working within a faith-based setting. Costa Rica is a predominantly Catholic country, with strong traditional values. The organisations that I worked with were all connected to the church in some way, and expressed that in their buildings and in their language. Entering organisations whose ethos is shaped by beliefs I may not share was another test of the principle I had been trying to follow throughout: that the host defines the work and the volunteer adapts. I tried to be respectful of the organisation's identity and to focus on what the families and staff needed rather than on my own views. I was also conscious that I was a visitor in a service where mothers were sharing difficult circumstances, which made discretion and a light touch especially important.

Presence and attention. One of the most valuable ethical lessons came on a weekend trip to Tortuguero. Visitors watching the turtles nest were required to wear dark clothing and leave their phones behind, because white light disturbs the turtles, and the authorities did not want an essential natural process to become an influencer event. When lightning lit up the sea in violet, I wished I could photograph it, and then realised I was thinking about an Instagram story rather than what was in front of me. Without a phone, I knelt in the sand with only a touch of red light and was fully present. It was a small moment, but it crystallised something relevant to the whole placement: ethical engagement means attending to people and places for their own sake, not for what they can add to my account of the experience. I tried to carry that attitude back into my work.

3. The Research Connection

The placement was driven by the immediate needs of two organisations, and my practical contributions drew on digital skills from an internship, my Spanish, and research and writing skills more generally, rather than on the specific findings of the volunteering research that we conducted last summer.

That said, the placement did connect to my wider academic interests, particularly in gender and in the study of how societies structure identity and power. I arrived interested in working with and for women, and I watched how gender stereotypes are formed from the earliest ages. At La Cabaña Feliz I observed children as young as eighteen months already being shaped by expectations about what is appropriate for boys and girls. At home, my host ‘abuelita’, who is nearly eighty, still cooks, cares and cleans for her family from five in the morning, as she has since she married at nineteen, and her adult children, aged fifty and forty-eight, both still live with her. These were not abstract case studies. They were daily illustrations of how gendered expectations are reproduced across generations, and how they can coexist with progressive legal and political institutions. Costa Rica's high female political representation and its record on same-sex marriage did not erase 'machismo' in everyday life. That sharpened for me a distinction that is easy to lose in academic writing: formal equality and lived equality are not the same thing.

The field experience also challenged how I think about evidence. Reading about gender, development or inequality gives you categories and arguments. Working in Fundación Mujer showed me that the women I was trying to support were not easily categorised. They were colleagues with their own priorities, humour and expertise, who ran a community soda, an office, and a long list of responsibilities that no policy document can easily capture.

Conclusion

This placement did not go as I expected, and it was better for that. My most concrete contributions were the bilingual funding resources for Fundación Mujer and the Spanish-language skills assessor for the women at the centre. Both were designed to be used without me, which I came to see as the most meaningful measure of sustainable impact available in five weeks. My most important development was less visible: learning to be confident enough to make mistakes in another language, to let the host organisation define the need, to hold cultural contradictions without resolving them too quickly, and to be present rather than documenting. I leave with a clearer sense of what ethical leadership requires in an unfamiliar setting: humility about what I do not know, honesty about the limits of what I did, and a commitment to leaving behind capability rather than dependency. I am grateful to the women of Fundación Mujer, La Cabaña Feliz, Proyecto Bethany, and to my host family, for their patience and generosity. Pura vida!