

Leadership-in-Action Project Report

**European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)
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A six-week Leadership-in-Action placement supporting free legal assistance for people navigating the asylum process on Lesvos.

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1. Project Context and Purpose

My six-week Leadership-in-Action placement with European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL) was an opportunity to move from studying law, institutions and rights in university classrooms to seeing how those ideas operate when a person is actually trying to navigate a legal system. ELIL provides free and independent legal assistance to people seeking international protection in Greece. I joined the Lesvos team as a Legal Assistant and worked between the office and the Protection Legal Aid Hub, supporting lawyers and interpreters through client-facing work, detailed interview notes, case preparation, country-of-origin information (COI) research, procedural research and interpretation when my languages matched an applicant's needs.

The significance of the project was not that I arrived with an independent intervention that ELIL needed to adopt. In fact, the opposite became one of the most important features of the experience. I entered an existing legal-aid structure with its own expertise, procedures and relationships, and my task was to learn where I could add capacity without overstepping my role. That made the project a practical test of communication, judgment, cultural humility and ethical leadership rather than simply a six-week volunteering experience.

2. Project Objectives and SMART Goals

My first goal was to become a reliable and increasingly independent Legal Assistant within the six-week period. At the beginning, tasks were assigned with more context and I checked my approach frequently. By the later weeks, I was working fully independently once a role or research question had been assigned, while still escalating legal judgments to the lawyers. Progress was visible in my ability to prepare for repeat client meetings, structure notes, conduct targeted research and complete assigned work without needing step-by-step direction.

My second goal was to produce research and written records that were useful beyond the moment in which I created them. This meant learning to write interview notes and COI research for another professional to rely on, rather than for a university marker. I aimed to improve the precision, relevance and usability of my work through feedback from lawyers, including narrowing or expanding research when a case required it.

My third goal was to strengthen cross-cultural communication while leaving something practical for future team members. Because ELIL had not previously had Urdu interpretation capacity in the office, I created a working legal glossary for future Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi interpreters. It included recurring asylum and protection terminology that I had encountered during training and practice. This became a small but concrete way of turning my own learning curve into a resource that could remain useful after my placement ended.

3. How the Work Actually Operated

One of the biggest differences between this placement and academic work was that cases developed over time. Before a first meeting, I would read the information already available about an applicant so I understood the basic context. I would then take detailed notes during the first meeting and, where the same applicant returned for a second session, I could work much more effectively because I already understood the chronology, relevant people and unresolved issues. The lawyers could then identify gaps, request further research or documentation, and use my notes in subsequent case preparation. Research was therefore rarely a one-off product. Lawyers sometimes returned to ask me to verify a point, narrow the geographic scope, or investigate a new issue that had emerged from the next conversation.

My note-taking changed substantially during the six weeks. At first, my instinct as a court reporter was to capture almost everything. Accuracy remained essential, but I became better at producing a record that was both detailed and usable. I learned to notice dates, sequence, relationships, locations, inconsistencies that required clarification, and details likely to matter to the lawyer, without turning every note into an unreadable transcript. This was not about deciding what was legally important myself; it was about

understanding the purpose of the record and organising information so the lawyer could make that assessment efficiently.

4. Research as Applied Problem-Solving

COI research was where I most clearly had to unlearn an academic habit. My first instinct was often to understand a whole issue before answering the narrower question. In an Egyptian case involving a blood feud, I initially researched the phenomenon across Egypt too broadly. The lawyer's feedback was simple but important: the question was not whether blood feuds existed somewhere in Egypt, but what the evidence showed about the applicant's particular region and the availability of protection there. I went back and narrowed the research geographically, focusing much more closely on the relevant governorate, local patterns, state protection, customary reconciliation and internal relocation.

That correction changed the way I approached later assignments. COI rarely produced one perfect source answering the entire legal question. A government or institutional report might explain the formal system, an NGO report might document implementation problems, and credible reporting might provide recent examples. My job became one of triangulation: identifying what each source could establish, comparing sources, checking dates and distinguishing evidence from inference. Sometimes a useful conclusion was that I could not verify a proposition at all.

This was particularly relevant when I researched changing migration patterns involving Lesbos and Crete. I became curious about the politics of the Turkey-Greece border because arrivals did not appear as a smooth daily flow. There could be a period in which very few new applicants arrived and then a group would arrive within a short period. I wanted to understand what sat behind that pattern: routes, border policy, enforcement, domestic reception decisions and wider European policy. The exercise made migration policy feel less like a set of headlines and more like a system whose political decisions become visible in very concrete local patterns.

5. Where Law on Paper Met Reality

My Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies and Political Science background had trained me to ask whether rights exist, how institutions exercise power and how law structures relationships between individuals and the state. Lesbos forced me to add another question: what does a right look like when the person trying to exercise it has limited language access, incomplete documentation, procedural deadlines and little familiarity with the bureaucracy deciding their future?

That distinction made me more attentive to implementation. A procedure can appear accessible on paper while still being extremely difficult to navigate in practice. Interpretation, documentation, the ability to explain a chronology clearly, access to reliable legal information and simply knowing which question to ask can all affect how a person experiences a formal right. I had followed migration through news and academic material before, but being on the ground gave those systems a scale and texture that I do not think I could have learned from reporting alone.

6. Ethical Boundaries: The Case I Could Not Help

The most difficult ethical lesson came not from a case in which we found a solution, but from one in which the limits of our role were clear. I interpreted for an applicant from Nepal who had already received two negative decisions. From what was communicated in the meeting, he was not describing a fear of persecution or a safety threat in Nepal; his concern was a very large debt and the insecurity that came with returning to that financial situation. ELIL concluded that it could not assist him further through the refugee-protection process.

Professionally, I understood why. A legal-aid organisation has a mandate, and international protection cannot become a substitute for every form of hardship or migration need. Personally, the interaction was difficult because I found myself thinking about whether there might be completely different immigration or work-related avenues he could explore. I wanted to say more to him as a person. But I was there as an

interpreter and Legal Assistant, not as an immigration lawyer, and giving informal advice outside my competence could have been misleading or harmful.

That moment made ethical leadership much less abstract. Empathy didn't give me permission to exceed my role. Sometimes acting responsibly meant accepting that I couldn't solve the problem in front of me. It also showed me a structural limitation of specialised NGOs: an applicant's needs may be real and urgent even when they fall outside the organisation's legal mandate or capacity. The experience left me wanting to understand immigration law broadly, like the lawful pathways that exist outside refugee protection.

7. Collaboration, Feedback and Independence

The team structure made feedback part of the work rather than a judgment at the end of it. After interviews, there were often conversations about what remained unclear, what required evidence and what needed further research. Lawyers might send me back to a question with a narrower scope or ask for another source. Interpreters brought linguistic and cultural knowledge that neither a lawyer nor a Legal Assistant could replace. My supervisor Vicky provided the structure that allowed me to become independent without confusing independence with isolation.

By the later weeks, I did not need somebody to tell me how to execute each stage of an assigned task. That independence was one of the clearest measures of my development. At the same time, I became more willing, not less willing, to ask a targeted question when legal judgment or missing context required it. I came to understand that strong teamwork is not everyone doing everything; it is people knowing their own responsibility well enough to make the handover to the next person reliable.

8. Cultural Humility and Communication

Cultural humility mattered because almost every part of the project crossed languages, nationalities or professional perspectives. I had arrived expecting my Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi to be central to my role, yet most of the cases I encountered required other languages. Rather than forcing my original plan onto the placement, I had to respond to what the team actually needed. The glossary I created for future Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi interpreters was therefore useful precisely because it did not depend on me personally remaining at ELIL.

The project also challenged the assumption that good communication means simply asking a question and receiving a complete answer. In legal meetings, people may hesitate, return to earlier events, struggle with dates or disclose sensitive information gradually. Working through interpreters added another layer of responsibility. I became more patient with silence and repetition and more conscious that my own expectation of how a coherent story 'should' be told was itself a cultural and professional assumption that needed to be checked.

9. Impact and Sustainability

I do not think the most credible way to describe my impact is to claim that a six-week placement transformed the asylum system. My contribution was capacity. I supported recurring legal-aid shifts, prepared records that could be used in later meetings, completed research that fed into ongoing case preparation, and became sufficiently independent that assigned work did not require continuous supervision. Because many applicants returned for more than one meeting, the value of accurate preparation accumulated: I could enter a later session already understanding the background rather than treating every interaction as a new case.

Sustainability also shaped the way I think about what a short international placement should leave behind. My work sat inside ELIL's existing systems rather than creating a parallel project dependent on me. Notes and research remained with the team. The Hindi-Urdu-Punjabi legal glossary was designed specifically for future interpreters. If I were extending the project, I would take that idea further by developing a concise Legal Assistant onboarding and reference guide based on recurring questions, and a searchable internal COI resource bank organised by jurisdiction and recurring issue. These would not replace

case-specific research, but they could reduce duplicated work and help new short-term team members become useful more quickly.

This matters because six weeks is both meaningful and limited. I became most confident just as the placement was ending. That made me wary of international service models in which a short-term participant arrives intending to build something that the community must then maintain. For me, the more ethical model was the one I experienced: enter a structure guided by the host organisation, learn its needs, add useful capacity, leave resources that fit its workflow, and avoid making the project dependent on your continued presence.

10. Capacity, Scope and Measuring Sustainability

A further challenge was learning that legal need and organisational capacity aren't the same thing. People could arrive with problems that were serious in their lives but outside ELIL's mandate, or with questions that required expertise the team couldn't responsibly provide. Even where a matter fell within refugee law, time and staff capacity affected what could be done immediately. Seeing those limits helped me understand NGOs less romantically. Commitment doesn't remove constraints. Responsible organisations have to prioritise, define scope and sometimes say no, even when the human problem remains.

This also changed how I would measure sustainability. I would not measure the success of my placement by whether ELIL continued using something with my name attached to it. A better measure is whether the work reduced friction for the people who came after me. For the glossary, that could mean whether a future Hindi, Urdu or Punjabi interpreter can prepare more quickly and use terminology consistently. For an onboarding guide, it could mean whether a new Legal Assistant needs fewer repetitive explanations during the first week. For a COI bank, it could mean whether staff can locate reliable starting sources faster while still carrying out fresh, case-specific research.

If these resources were developed further, I would also build in a review process rather than treating them as finished products. Immigration procedures, country conditions and institutional guidance change. A resource bank that is not dated and periodically reviewed can become more dangerous than having no resource at all. Sustainability therefore requires maintenance, ownership and a clear understanding of what must be updated. This was another useful shift in my thinking: leaving something behind is not automatically sustainable simply because it is reusable.

11. What I Would Change and Carry Forward

If I repeated the project, I would begin with a more disciplined research method from the first week: define the exact legal/factual question, geographic scope and relevant time period before opening sources. The Egypt assignment taught me how much time broad research can consume before it becomes useful. I would also build the onboarding guide and COI resource bank while working, rather than identifying them only at the end, so that colleagues could test and improve them during the placement.

Professionally, the experience made me more certain that I want to pursue law. It did not do so because every part of the work was easy or because I left convinced I already understood the field. It did the opposite. I enjoyed the process of taking a complicated human situation, identifying the legal and factual questions within it, researching carefully, communicating across professional roles and seeing how good legal assistance depends on both technical precision and trust.

It also changed how I want to learn about the world. I'll continue reading cases, policy and news, but Lesvos showed me the limits of understanding institutions only from a distance. Being physically present didn't make me an expert on migration or refugee law. What it gave me was a more disciplined awareness of how much context can disappear when an issue is reduced to a headline. I want future legal and international experiences to keep testing what I think I know against how institutions actually operate on the ground.

12. Additional Value Created: Building Institutional Memory

A short-term Legal Assistant inevitably spends part of the placement learning systems that longer-term staff already understand. I began to notice how much useful knowledge existed informally: how to prepare for a first client meeting, what a lawyer expected from interview notes, which questions should be clarified before beginning COI research, and which asylum terms repeatedly caused difficulty in interpretation. Once I became comfortable with the work, I started thinking not only about completing my own assignments but also about how that learning curve could be shortened for the next person.

The multilingual glossary was my first response to that problem. I developed it because Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi interpretation had not previously been a regular part of the Lesvos office's language capacity. Rather than leaving the terminology I had learned in my personal notes, I organised recurring legal and procedural terms so that a future interpreter with those languages would have a starting point. The value of the glossary is deliberately modest: it cannot replace interpreter training, contextual judgment or checking terminology with a speaker. Its purpose is to reduce avoidable preparation time and preserve learning that would otherwise leave with the volunteer.

The same principle could be applied to Legal Assistant onboarding. A concise internal guide could explain the practical workflow of preparing for a meeting, reading existing case information, structuring notes, handling follow-up assignments, defining a COI question and knowing when to return to a supervising lawyer. I would keep such a guide procedural rather than legal so that it supports, rather than substitutes for, supervision. It could also include a checklist reminding assistants to define geography, time period and the precise proposition being researched before beginning a COI task - exactly the lesson I learned from researching the Egyptian case too broadly.

A searchable COI resource bank could add another layer of institutional memory. During the placement, I repeatedly encountered the problem of finding reliable starting points across government material, international organisations, NGO reports and recent reporting. A bank organised by country and recurring issue could record useful source repositories, publication dates and the kinds of propositions each source is capable of supporting. Importantly, it should not store conclusions as if they were permanently true. Country conditions change, so every entry would need a date and a clear instruction to verify current information before using it in a case.

Thinking in this way helped me connect sustainability to knowledge transfer. For a six-week placement, sustainable impact does not have to mean launching a new programme. It can mean making the existing organisation slightly easier for the next person to enter, reducing duplicated effort and preserving useful learning without creating a system that requires the original volunteer to maintain it. That is a form of impact I now find more credible than trying to attach a large claim to a short placement.

13. Conclusion

The strongest outcome of my Leadership-in-Action project was not a single memo or interaction. It was the change in how I understand useful professional contribution. At the beginning, I associated usefulness with having answers and leadership with taking initiative. By the end, I understood that initiative without context can create extra work, confidence without evidence can be dangerous, and empathy without professional boundaries can lead someone beyond their competence.

The project taught me to define the question before researching it, understand a case before documenting its next stage, use feedback without becoming dependent on it, and recognise when another professional's expertise should take over. Those are practical habits I will carry into law. They are also the leadership lessons I value most from Lesvos: be useful rather than visible, be precise rather than performatively certain, and enter a community ready to learn how it already works before deciding what it needs.