CASE STUDY: The importance of a school and garden as a community and learning centre in a Greek refugee camp

Camp governance and background
Greek military and IOM
The refugee camp in Oinofyta opened in March 2016, with Adventist Care medical clinic on site in tandem with DoYourPart camp coordination, supported by UNHCR, Save the Children and IamYou. It was decided to include only refugees from Afghanistan and Iran to minimize racial conflict.

Undesirability of the site
The refugee camp was established
- in an old and abandoned chemical factory site
- between a freeway and a main road
- directly under the RAF flight path.

The land was degraded and all large trees removed/pruned hard, leaving a desolate landscape with little natural shade or shelter.

Drinking water in Oinofyta had long been deemed toxic to drink, contaminated with high levels of the carcinogenic hexavalent chromium so all water had to be brought in from outside.

Initially all refugees at Oinofyta were housed in canvas tents in family groups, in rows on the east side of the land. At that time the central derelict factory building was being used as a warehouse, with plans to fit it out for accommodation; the refugee camp held about 150 refugees with an initial capacity for 300, though over the months that followed filled to a population of close to 700.
Community engagement

Early on, Adventist Care facilitated a process to elect refugee ‘leaders’, with particular sectors and roles, with the aim of empowering the refugee inhabitants in decisions related to the day-to-day running of the camp and related tasks, while DoYourPart’s role was to work directly with the refugees to coordinate the needs and wishes of the residents and oversee the building of camp infrastructure.

A community-run food distribution system was established with a warehouse for supplies, both purchased and donated and a kitchen coordinator elected to oversee the running of the community kitchen. This set-up gave the residents some sense of autonomy around meals.

Residents were encouraged to take responsibility for all the various roles and jobs of running the camp. Translators and medical assistants amongst the residents were identified to assist with the general running of the clinic. Other volunteers from Adventist care came to actively support general building and maintenance onsite.

School Mission

ArmandoAid, a small NGO based in London, was created to address education gaps in refugee camps in Greece. ArmandoAid had identified Oinofyta camp as suitable for a school and gained the confidence and agreement of other onsite NGOs. Applications made to the Greek Government were eventually approved by the Greek Ministry of Education. The camp coordinator agreed to the use of a small disused building in one corner of the site. The ArmandoAid school project began with one coordinator, one landscaper, an organic gardener and one Australian ESL teacher/permaculturist. The aim was to include refugee residents as much as possible as decision-makers, teachers and caretakers.

School Vision

ArmandoAid’s vision was to set up a school with a teaching garden, to provide literacy and numeracy education and developmental activities while resetting the culture and cultivating values of respect for each other and the environment. Using permaculture principles as much as possible, the intention was to create through the school, a community hub, a centre of communication, a place of learning and a sanctuary in the harsh environment of the camp.

Funding

ArmandoAid was funded by its own founders and their support networks, and supplemented with crowd funding and funding appeals linked back to its website.
First activities: 12 June 2016
The first week’s preparations for school included:

- Conducting a survey of all camp residents and data input into census grid
- Cleaning school building and painting inside and out
- Installing locks for external doors, and some internal sliding locks
- Purchasing and putting together lockup school cupboards
- Sorting of donated classroom materials (20 boxes)
- Installing recycled shelving, whiteboards (new and recycled) into classrooms
- Distributing backpacks and pencil cases
- Ordering new materials including dictionaries and readers
- Sourcing and buying school and garden equipment from Jumbo
- Promoting classes and consulting with refugees for class times and subjects
- Setting up of classes, and giving first lessons for children in mornings, and adults in afternoon
- Finding strategies to engage refugee adults due poor turnout by both teachers and students due to Ramadan
**Garden preparations included**

- Building hoop house nursery with shade cloth, furnishing with potting tables.
- Installing fence to enable lock-up of hoop house after vandalism of small plants.
- Sourcing and dismantling 80 wooden pallets to make 6 garden boxes.
- Protecting and watering anything that might grow, such as existing sprouting trees such as fruiting figs and shade trees.
- Cleaning toilet/storerooms, removing old plumbing, lining ceiling for classroom storage and tool storage.
- Sourcing soil and compost for delivery.
- Building garden beds from wooden pallets, lining with recycled plastic. They were then filling with organic matter and soil with the enthusiastic participation of the children with limited tools (a small barrow, a shovel and a hoe).
- Sourcing pots and plants and seeds, hand tools and shovel, gloves and barrow etc.
- Installing hoop shade for two main garden beds.
- Daily watering and maintenance of hoop house.
- Designing and ordering pergola.
- Sourcing and picking up 40 used car tyres.
- Distributing tyres and assisting refugees to install micro gardens beside their own tents.
- Distributing seedlings from hoop house users and, for immediate impact, small flowering plants from local nursery. Mint, sage, chillies, succulents.

**The School: first teaching weeks**

- First lessons were in Dari, Greek and English in basic speaking and listening, reading and writing and mathematics.
- Teaching classes of enthusiastic children with little to no classroom discipline, and with only two ArmandoAid teachers and, little to no support from refugee teachers was extremely chaotic. For the entire 21 days of Ramadan the camp energy was very low - in the heat of the day adults barely emerged from their tents until the cool relief of the evening.
- With mixed age groups, language levels and attention spans, settling some children
into a school routine required considerable trial and error.

- The need for a Childcare centre was recognized, an adjacent room negotiated for, unlocked, cleaned and painted with refugees’ participation.
- Weekly meetings were held with Save the Children, UNHCR, I Am You, ArmandoAid and teachers from the refugee population to collaborate on needs and purpose of the school. Despite clear differences in agenda and perspective, it was agreed to draw up a trial timetable and to open the school formally after Ramadan and Eid celebrations.
- ArmandoAid established itself as the coordinators of education and training of refugees in the camp, with positive connections with refugees. One interested resident undertook the role of “caretaker principal” which was very helpful as it also set a security measure to the project under his watchful eye. A few others showed interest and offered physical help for jobs around the school, and one become a key handyman builder extraordinaire. For these two it was their way to be responsible leaders and find useful roles wherever they were, and it gave great stability to the project.

July
The official opening ceremony of Oinofyta Community School took place on Sunday 10 July with a celebration of open classrooms, children activities, a gazebo in the garden, an abundance of iced water and fruit.

Oinofyta Community School continued to expand and grow, with regular classes and volunteer teachers. Classes outgrew the small building, so unused military tents were converted into classrooms by removing stifling canvas covers and covering with shade cloth and bamboo. Classroom materials continued to be sorted, and various approaches to bringing about the best learning were discussed and employed, with consideration for the mixed levels of language and age groups. Ways of managing behavioural problems were addressed with workshops and teacher meetings.

Security: Theft of school items and destructive behaviours such as trashing of the site had to be addressed and overcome. It was clear that the school had to be locked and secured at this stage, as people were hungry for stuff - even stuff they didn’t need. One practical solution was to build a fence from material recycled from the demolition of parts
of the central factory building, which was being refurbished to make individual apartments for the next influx of refugees. The other was to set a code of behaviour at the school with the keyword of Respect for the school facilities and each other.

**Water:** The problem of the lack of drinking water at the school for basic hydration was finally solved with the installation of a 1000 litre water tank funded by an online campaign for the purpose. It was set on a base of a truck tyre filled with concrete and rubble aggregate. This was a team effort by the ArmandoAid teacher/gardener and one Afghan refugee who was an engineer, with the generous cooperation of a Pakistani hardware supplier. The tank was painted to add colour and life to the schoolyard.

There was still a need for water for hygiene and garden use, which soon after the camp management supplied soon after by connecting the school to non-potable town water, and the installing of two flush toilets. Finally we could wash hands and paint brushes, water the garden, and save ourselves carting bottles from the other side of the camp.

**High temperatures:** Shade-cloth stretched over the schoolyard, between the factory fence and the school roof there provided a marked drop in temperatures, and made it possible to have outside activities. The garden area was becoming relatively green and cool oasis in this baking landscape and brought a turning point to the school, by doubling the usable reading and recreational space.

It took months but finally electricity was connected to the school building, and air-conditioning installed bringing great relief to stifling classrooms, with every day in the high 30s.

**Garden:** Keeping the plants alive in the extreme dry heat remained a constant task. Watermelon and rockmelons seedlings struggled even in the shade. Even the hardiest plants had to be protected from the fierce midday sun by covering with pots. The lifeless soil was in great need of organic material for mulch and compost. This had to be gathered off site as there was nothing at the camp except prunings from weed trees sprouting on the perimeters of the factory block. Household compost, rinsed sea grass gathered from the Evian gulf, grass cuttings, hay and prunings were all added to the compost box.

**August**
Refugees began to move into the refitted internal space of the old factory, as the cubicles sectioned with hallways were ready. The closure of Pireaus Camp brought bus-loads of new arrivals who unloaded and filled up spaces: for a week or so the camp was quite unsettled. Many original families reacted to this influx and left for the border. Some residents tried to make their cubicles homey, but many moved back into tents because of the noise and heat and lack of privacy.
Children’s class numbers swelled to around 100 children attending in the mornings, and adult classes in the afternoons growing fast, with the big tents and the garden space providing great alternative teaching spaces.

Additionally there was a flow of visitors from all over the world, always impressed at what has been created here, a “real school”, a creative community space and a relatively desirable place to be, and a good alternative to the crowded living quarters.

Consolidation
We moved the garden boxes for our raised vegetable gardens up to the school from the original site in the lower camp site, as there was no interest in a community garden there, especially without easy access to water. It made a lot more sense to include the food garden in the school in any case, as it could be integrated into curriculum that way, and linked to school water and to consolidate energy use. The main workers for all jobs were the children, whether it was carting water, barrowing soil, moving rocks. They were surprisingly strong, and their enthusiasm knew no bounds when it came to a ride in the work car with a huge bag of soil to be dragged out as a team.

Twelve tyre gardens in a circle were painted in colours of the spectrum, with a view to teaching colours and time hours and months.

First garden lessons to upper primary kids began with planting tomato seeds in pots. The need to invest in a closed composting system became obvious when the open wooden box was attracting rats.
Ideally the school garden would link in with a sustainability design for the whole camp, which created a huge amount of waste, which overflowing from the six large bins. The hard part is convincing the refugees to care about this desolate wasteland, which they see as being on the way to somewhere else. Rootless and directionless, they remain in survival mode reliant on input from the outside world. Creating a place of learning and gathering was the beginning of a cultural shift.

**Progress**

Now children and adults come at their designated class times and they are learning. They come regularly, and they come with books and expectations. The school is meeting a real need for purposeful social/intellectual activity and a sense of belonging.

The childcare centre set up by ArmandoAid in the other end of the building occupies under-fives and this allows older children with younger siblings to attend class when they couldn’t before. Extra volunteers from the international community would always be needed, to be occasionally joined by resident mothers, while providing much needed respite for others.
Ongoing care
The school garden needs ongoing care, just to maintain it as a living environment. This includes rubbish collection, composting and mulching. Organic scraps are collected into wheelbarrow from morning break, to add to compost, which needs daily turning, and is covered by tarp for extra heat. Grass cuttings and dry leaf matter are easily gathered to be added to the surface of the garden bed as mulch.
Along the fence near the northwest corner, a mound of compost and soil can be planted with pumpkins, melons and other rambling vines. With water and microbial activity it could be brought to life. Mulching will also keep it from drying out. It can also be seen as a stockpile for soil, or be spread on floor of school or added to garden beds.

The children are slowly learning to take responsibility for caring for their garden and school as understanding of natural systems is cultivated and built into the curriculum. The idea is to set up a gardening and sustainability system that becomes part of the school routine.

After two and a half very busy months, many changes, and many dramas, volunteers coming and going, the school has brought to some sense of community to the camp, though the teaching garden will need some dedicated care to get up and running in that extreme and depleted physical landscape.

The school has established a curriculum tailored to the needs of the children. Children are learning not only to read and write but also complex maths such as fractions. They have also started to teach science and have three teachers from the community teaching Farsi to each group an hour twice per week.

A library is on its way, a playground being built, and a surface volleyball court planned. Two key players continue this work, Layhing Siu Munro and Faiz Mohammad Khanzai.

Ruth Harvey   September 2016
The hardest things about this project

Establishing lines of communication and protocols between all the different stakeholders:

- The refugee residents themselves who were not a united and functioning community
- The Greek Government Ministries of Defence and Ministry of Education, which were largely off-site.
- The NGOs who were authorised to manage and coordinate the camps
- The subsidiary NGOs
- The volunteer groups who came in to support them.

Although at this camp there were regular meetings between all active groups, the protocols were not clear, and groups were not always equally represented, e.g. school issues were always addressed at the end then cut short to finish the meeting.

The constant need for unbiased translation, power struggles for ground among NGOs, differing ideologies, bureaucratic delays, the ever-changing nature of the situation in terms of numbers and daily dramas, perceived logistical priorities, distorted communications, the need to make on-the-spot decisions, all added to the complexity of creating an effective communication system.

Addressing priorities and roles

- Prioritising events, and setting up infrastructure
- Operating with unclear roles and relationships of support organisations UNHCR, SCF, IOM.
- Managing budgets with their variable sources of funding

Coping with extreme heat with limited shade and water

The best things about the project

- The children responded enthusiastically to every activity and it was through them that the adults in the community connected with the school and gained its cohesion.
- The school became a sanctuary and a place for building a learning community
- The school was a safe place to come at times of stress where the jobs of watering and general care were grounding activities for everyone.
• The school also gave a space for creativity, making and painting.
• For some residents in the camp, the school provided meaningful work and play in an otherwise directionless life. Small teams of workers set themselves projects, such as building a sliding gate, putting insect screens on windows.
• There was a growing sense of pride and community spirit. The school has become a place to relax, a bit separate from the living quarters, where people can make music, play games, sit and talk in the evenings.
• The school provides a sense of normality and routine to a day-by-day existence.

What would you do differently?
• Establish positive connections on all levels to gain insight into power relationships within the camp
• Visit other camps to learn more about their problems and solutions.
• Take time to talk more to the residents about their stories and how they visualise their stay in these camps and what their immediate needs are.
• Introduce my immediate colleagues to the notion of permaculture through films and encourage talking more about what we each envision, and agree to work through our ideas together.

Lunchtime meetings
Recommendations
No one size fits all
Every refugee camp is different in scale, landscape features and climate. Governance varies from minimal management to high security military style, and each presents different cultural issues, so there can be no formula or fixed model for a school or any project within a camp.
Against this background:

1. **Establish schools because they are great starting points for growing community.**
   The children are a dynamic force, their needs are immediate, they respond to positive inputs because they are not distracted by daily chores or trying to plan their future elsewhere. Parents want their children to go to school.
2. **Identify key workers** amongst the residents; those who identify with the vision and become part of the project.
3. **Consult the camp network widely** - all stakeholders, residents and agencies.
4. **Work with smaller NGOs who can implement changes more effectively** than big organisations which by their nature move very slowly.
5. **Establish clarity for volunteer’s roles.**
6. **Develop proven communication systems** and processes to reduce stress and unnecessary conflict
7. **Supply an abundance of** materials for use by refugees when sourcing recycled building materials such as palettes and tyres, which can be picked up for minimal cost and have multiple uses.
Formal and informal classes