

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHING PERMACULTURE IN REFUGEE CAMPS

BY ROSEMARY MORROW

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REARRANGED FOR *PERMACULTURE FOR REFUGEES* BY ANTONIO SCOTTI



BACKGROUND

The Permaculture for Refugees (P4R) project derives from a solid conviction that permaculture provides humane, integrated solutions to the degraded and difficult conditions in refugee camps and settlements – and we need to remember Internally Displaced People (IDPs) - are part of these.

By the end of June, 2019 there will have been 10 or 11 PDCs in refugee camps or, with refugee settlements – that we know of. These are already starting to yield significant data to enable (P4R) to scale up and widely extend the results to provide concrete examples of what works and what doesn't and to make recommendations.

Permaculture is especially valuable in dealing with the specific problems of camps and settlements such as:

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Camp life difficulties:	Permaculture offers:
Little or no agency in making decisions, and instigating projects.	Agency – to make decisions to grow, plant, work with grey water, build soil, decide what needs to be done even see ways to create livelihoods.
Appalling inactivity – often sitting for hours each day and each day the same.	Various permaculture skills offer people, physical activity which many had had in their formers lives.
No new ideas to discuss many people go over and over their traumas and embed them.	New ideas, or builds on old ones, to enable people to be more present and see how they could be applied in a future life and give meaning to their present one.
Can be isolating or create friction.	Co-operative activities over fairly neutral ideas/skills which build community.
Few people can take projects to camp managers.	Small or large scale projects to take to camp managers such as need for windbreaks, community gardens and even a camp economy.
Few resources Low resource input.	Seeds, cuttings, working with grey water require few materials and give tangible results.
Age and gender can be isolating in some camps.	Permaculture includes all ages and gender – suitable for everyone and co-operative work.
Harsh environments.	Means to ameliorate difficult environmental conditions.
People can focus on the past.	People live more in the present.
Conversation topics can be difficult or affect trauma.	The topics of permaculture are usually emotionally neutral and evoke no distress.

It is sometimes claimed that refugees cant/wont manage the whole design course, however we have evidence that teaching design skills, as well as other skills, reaches more people and gives a bigger overview, and camp projects for men and women

One weakness with teaching permaculture only as gardening is that people grow a few lettuces, pumpkin and tomatoes and then, for many reasons, their efforts lapse. Most refugees will spend 12 years in camps and less than 1% will be resettled to another country. Vegetable gardens don't provide long-term solutions to camp environments such as shade trees, windbreaks, and social areas where people can meet and work. They do not restore degraded land.

At first I referred only to the present camp but then found that almost everyone referred to 'home' and that was the site they were analysing or designing. In future, we will build on this desire to work with the very familiar i.e. 'home' even if people never return there then bring the skills into the present.

The PDC

Due to complications with camp managers, NGOs, other camp officials, people's need to secure their

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WFP rations and internal relationships among refugees and often, poor translation, the courses can be chaotic. Many refugees, although literate, have schooling equivalent to primary school in western countries and often concepts such as global warming, photosynthesis and evaporation have to be taught from scratch.

Participants find it unusual to be asked to participate during class and it can end up in shouting matches. It takes some days to establish a class culture which enables learning.

Role plays work very well. They are not so reliant on interpreters and only key words are required. I've found that almost everything can be roleplayed. Drawings and demonstrations are also valuable and I am grateful for my work in Lesotho years ago to understand what partially literate people can read and understand. It was evident in Iraq and Afghanistan that many drawings simply reflect western situations and finding drawings with global appeal can be difficult. E.g. people did not recognize drawings of houses with gabled roofs – because theirs are flat. And such situations seem endless. They don't recognize plan view when drawn on a board.

The PDC – what's relevant

- **Design skills** which begin immediately on day 1 or 2 are the most important for refugees because they are local, transferable, can be taken in to any environment and provide long term engagement with a range of sites and situations. So starting participants right from the beginning where they are; in tents or cement block houses, is important and invariably some people see the importance of the principles to a range of situations.



- **Designing their own present environment/house** is critical because every topic and idea can be tested against their realities i.e. the roof size and water capture, where the grey water goes, the place that gets winter sun, the place that needs shade and so on. From the home, we go to the

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street and the whole site.



9,000+ people live here. Camps are usually sited on the worst land.

- Among these design skills are the ability to carry out analytic **audits** for water, soils, plant and of course, sector analysis. Then **students** take principles to repair or restore. Students can easily calculate roof capture and rainfall, and soil building for different zones. They know their sites and the best places for community gardens or grey water treatment. Sometimes I feel permaculture is bringing to consciousness what people know intuitively.
- One very important issue for all refugees is **livelihood and good professional standards**. Whether the camp is closed or people are in community, the need for income and income substitution is critical. All NGOs request it. In a PDC we can often only offer a brief introduction to techniques which will later lead to valuable and needed livelihoods. Livelihoods are difficult because local residents are often competing for the same work, however the main problem is to teach to good professional standards. For example, to teach nursery skills so there is 80% or higher survival from propagation takes longer than the time we have in the course. Yet it is necessary to get results, use resources well and earn money. This is so with all we offer in a PDC. There must be follow-up.
- **Less relevant** are some strategies and they can be related to climate such as insulation, or advocating activities not remotely possible. For example, in Kurdistan and Afghanistan there are no easily accessible forests so using them as a key reference for sustainable, permanent cultures was a challenge. Some people have never seen a forest. In Kurdistan we visited a park where there were five species of trees and someone asked “Is this a forest?” In Kabul the nearest ‘forest’ a monoculture of firs, was 80 km away and too dangerous to visit. Pictures of forests seldom compensate.



No trees, 50° C in summer -15° C in winter, and duststorms.

Missing from the PDC is a solid unit on how to manage credit and money. Many people from Afghanistan and Iraq have no bank accounts and interest is a mystery. Local money lenders are avaricious. And, when they arrive in camps the swindles and scams are dreadful and people, requiring money for children's schooling or health can end up in terrible debt. Not to teach about credit is negligent I now believe. 80% of refugees from the bombing of Mosul were in serious debt after the first months of fleeing their homes.

- Also most refugees respond strongly to **the unit on disaster** and say how they wish they had had this knowledge before – both when they lived in peace and when disaster struck. Two said “*This should be the first things we learn.*”

Applications

The wonder of the PDC is that there are so many different topics and skills that it is satisfying to teach. Some love the design processes, others the implementation, some focus on specifics such as propagation.

Others like to work on trying to create more harmonious societies with a greater range of skills and goods to offer – internal markets.

Ultimately I believe it is the transformation of entire degraded sites, water, food and protection that offers most people the greatest benefits. Without these life is very arduous.

After the courses

This is a particularly difficult time. Without monitoring and a second course, permaculture is not really embedded in the new community.

This is because peoples' lives are so uncertain and demands are unrelenting. And of great importance is teaching skills to a professional standard. Refugees need more than a summer vegetable garden. They

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need to be able to grow all year, and a wide range of crops for food security, as well as potential incomes – and the opportunities are them for income generation.

A strong program with refugees would entail two PDCs, as a minimum, regular monitoring assistance to help with problems and then follow-up bootcamp activities and a teacher training to scale the impact in the camp. The project in Bangladesh has all these components and will be evaluated against others where they are not in place. Ideally the camp would then start a 'perma-school' for teaching all children, women, youth and other groups in the camp. We hope this can happen in one or two places where we are working. It would be wonderful if it were routine in the future.



Excellent camp design made by one group on UNHCR tent fabric.

Summary

PDCs with refugees, and IDPs tend to be chaotic, exciting and finally hopeful. They are chaotic because camps are chaotic, peoples' expectations are often quite wild, camp managers and NGOs can have different objectives, interpreters can be incompetence and difficult.

Conditions often don't lend themselves to good teaching i.e. no land to set up a community garden, or make compost, or the usual activities common to most courses.

Despite this, it feels one of the most important things that we can do. This is because people say:

"Why didn't we learn this back in my village?"

"How can I learn more?"

"I can talk to people about this"

"This is really useful for us"

"I went home and fixed the grey water near my tent."

"This makes such good sense."

"I can really use this."

And, whether people can have had art lessons, or are literate, or illiterate, everyone can design to restore land and lives when guided through a process and PDC content.

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