

## 3rd<sup>1</sup> Permaculture Design Course for Refugees Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey

**Emece Inisiyatifi, Cesme, Turkey**

**February 9th– March 26th, 2019**

**Funding: \$AUD10,006** VRM Peace and Social Justice Committee, Quakers, Australia

**Local sponsor: Imece**

**Course delivery: Blue Mountains Permaculture Institute and P4R**

**Teachers: Rosemary Morrow, Francesca Simonetti, Marguerite Kahrl**

### Background



Syrians have been seeking asylum for the eight years since the war began. At first, they thought they would soon return home. Gradually that hope faded as international forces failed to find a fair and equitable peace. Many went to Europe, a million or so to Iraq, and about a million to Turkey where they were generally not interred in camps but live freely in the communities where they can find at least temporary safety and work.

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<sup>1</sup> Please read: [1<sup>st</sup> Permaculture for Refugees Design Course for Host community.](#)

This site of the permaculture course is on the western coast of Turkey and the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea on a refugee crossing point and Greece is within view over the sea. Refugees flood in, starting in spring and continue throughout summer.

### **This course**

A young Australian permaculturist, Bonnie Claire, introduced us to Imece and the Low-Tech Lab (LTL) in Lesvos. Both organisations expressed interested in permaculture for its messages of peace, earth restoration and potential value for refugees.

### **The Site**



We were hosted by Imece village. It sits on the eastern slope of a north-south valley where the wind blows 370 days a year and explains why we were situated in midst of a wind farm. The generators sang day and night. The wind was often unpleasant in this degraded and denuded landscape where the soil is now grey-white stony sub-soil and the number of species reduced to a mere handful with subsequent loss of wildlife and predators. The annual average rainfall is about 300 ml per year with a summer incidence and marginal for agriculture.

The result of damaging agricultural methods is evident in stony and steep patches which cannot be ploughed, and indigenous and nitrogen fixing species recolonizing with thorns and prickles. Under these a dark rich soil is developing – direct evidence that the degradation is due to poor practices.

### **The need for Imece**

In 2015, when the crisis was at its height a Turkish man, Ali Guray Yalvagli, moved by compassion, and already working for marginalized women and children rented five acres of land and started Imece Inisityatifi, a prototype village. He worked then with marginalized

people and from 2015 began refugee relief distributing food, money and clothes to refugees from donated funds and his own money. Gradually other people heard of his work and came to help.

Today, in addition to Ali, there is a core group of four local Turkish people who translate, drive, help with repairs, cook for workshops, and provide permanence. A young French woman is the program's manager and dealt with our arrangements. Two other people live here most of the time, one Turkish agriculturist, Mineh and one, Macedonian, Djanghul. Both became very interested in permaculture. And its potential.

Today Imece is a registered local NGO and works with government recognition. It is funded primarily by donations. This is preferred because relationships with the government and overseas organisations is immeasurably complicated and expensive.

The activities have moved from relief alone, although on weekends volunteers continue to deliver food and clothes to families, to development and running short residential courses for women whom they have identified as the most vulnerable. 80% refugees are women and children and, the men, have mostly gone to seek work in Europe.

Imece, **Solidarity**, in Turkish, is a semi-permanent settlement. As the land is rented and the lease is up next year, the buildings are all temporary and mainly plastic. By any standards it is not wealthy. People live in plastic containers with plastic doors and fittings, a polyhouse for the dining room, the classroom and the common room. It is badly ventilated and very hot and airless in the middle of the day, freezing when the sun drops and eyewatering polluted air from the coal stove when the fire is on. There is a lack of planned sanitation. There is solar hot water system

A bore and pump provide water from 120m deep and its quality is very bad, being both brackish and heavily calcified. There is no rain water harvesting. Continual re-use in the form of irrigation may results in sterile soil from accumulation of salts. Three fields are regularly ploughed and the soil is a cream-white clay with zero organic matter and no structure.

## The participants

Women come here from Izmir for short residential courses and learn:

- Soap making – a very lovely product
- Candle making
- Solar charges for mobile phones
- A range of shoulder bags



Most of the women had participated in these courses. The speed and ease with which they settled in, showed how comfortable they are with the venue. These women who have been in Turkey for as long as eight years have settled to their status, even if they still grieve the war the losses have been, and still are, devastating.

Their children have sometimes gone to school, and sometimes not and most regret that their older children have not been able to finish school and attend higher education as they would have been able to do in Syria. Others feel the loss of their work as seamstresses and hairdressers. Some earn money from working piecemeal on farms carrying out routine seasonal tasks where they are known to be badly exploited. Otherwise there is extreme boredom from lack of stimulus and opportunities.

15 women were invited because that is the limit of the accommodation. However, within a few days we were down to 11.

A predictable feature of refugee life vulnerability expressed in the constant movement, variability and lack of predictability. Bureaucracy, family demands, illness, children and so on continue to make demands on them, and more for women than men. And we know that their life situations change from day-to-day.

Of the enrolled women, two did not actually appear, and one left after two days due to anxiety about her children. Managers of refugee projects always say, that getting a commitment and following through is extremely difficult.

The women live in the town of Izmir, about one hour's drive from Imece. As Turkey has no camps, they are in local housing throughout the town. Only one had significant land to implement permaculture and the others, like the Rohingya, only small spaces.

We were left with ten committed refugee women and five Imece 'volunteers'. In fact, everyone is a volunteer at Imece. All are committed to staying, or, continuing involvement in Imece. A young US couple will stay about six months.

As they will all be involved in implementing the overall plan their participation was important. Lucie, the present manager, also attended when she was able to. We had enough refugee women to allow them to feel free and confident to participate widely and often. And they did.

Everyone cleaned all the spaces equally e.g. washed dishes, bathrooms, dormitories. On the whole the food was acceptable and healthy and the women found it good.

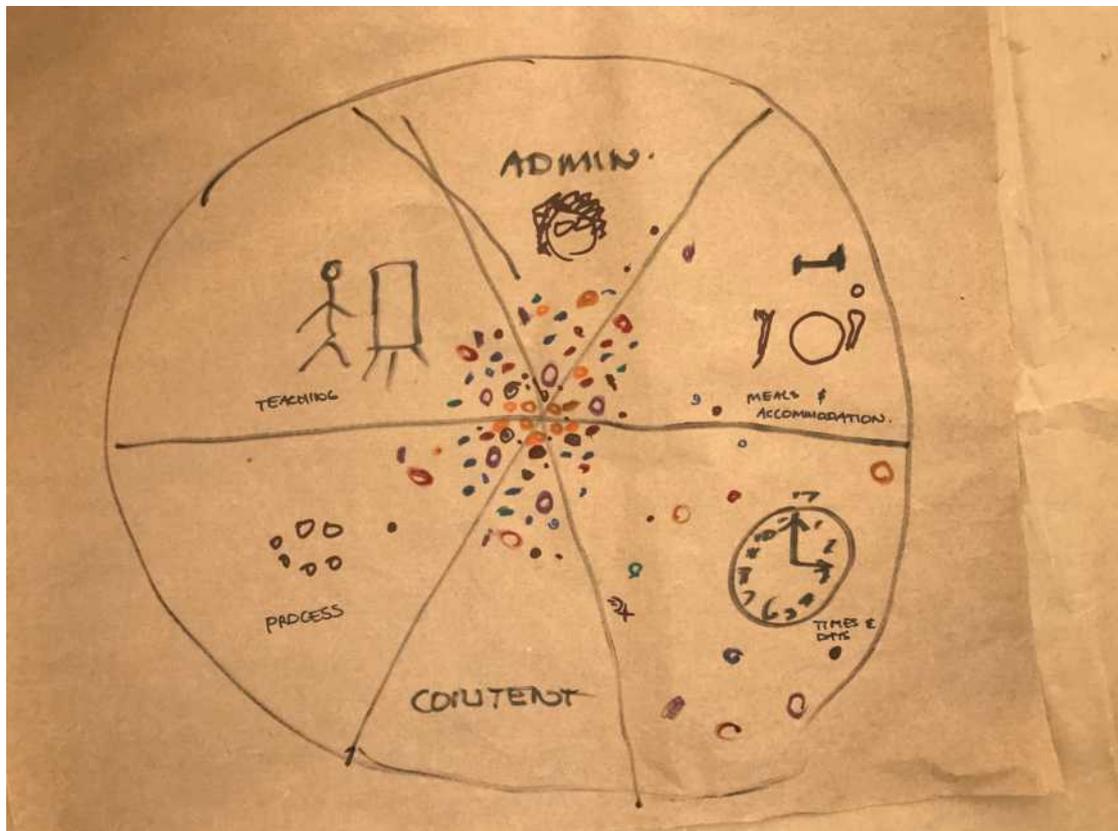
### **Turkish government response to refugees**

The Turkish government's enlightened refugee policy encourages all refugee children to attend public primary schools and learn Turkish language, and offers the same health and other services to refugees that their own citizens enjoy. However in high school fees are introduced and this is when children drop out. And it appears some refugee

parents fear that if their children attend Turkish schools they will lose their language and culture, and so keep their children out of school.

### Participant hopes and expectations of the course

At first all participants were confused. They expected, as people do everywhere, that they would learn about gardening and even be employed in gardening. They gave us very limited hopes and expectations. We kept these expectations for a later evaluation of their learning. Everyone participated in a mid-course review and here are the results. It covers food, times, administration, teaching, content and process.



They had a great sense of fun and loved to dance and sing<sup>2</sup>. And they could argue long and hard, over each other and this was a special time because they felt safe to do it and at times nearly lifted our plastic roof.

<sup>2</sup> I am struck by how often people live through war and struggle through song and dance. The Vietnamese sang through the bombing of Ha Noi. The Albanians sang through their hard times. The Africans dance. The Khmer tell comic stories. The Rohingya had long ballad songs – some very tragic.

They were enthusiastic and responsive to all group activities. Each day we opened with an energizer/fun activity and then a group review of previous day, supplemented with a quiz, before embarking on content and practical activities for that day. Within a day it was evident we had some with special abilities and were natural students. They wrote notes and by halfway through the time, they had filled a workbook. They revised their notes at night, and added to them. They walked the local lane and looked for examples and plant samples.



We asked them to draw and design and it was evident they had little experience in this but many picked up the facility quickly.

We had long and involved discussions over class hours. This is the moment, about day two or three into the course when everyone has a chance to express their opinions. And it is a moment when the class is exerting its power of choice. It tests the teachers to see whether, when we say '*this is your course*'; the teachers really mean it and will accommodate the student's needs.

The class decided quickly and sensibly without too much discussion because <sup>3</sup> they were immensely co-operative and the hours worked well.

### Our classroom

Our classroom was plastic polyhouse used as a dining room, work room, sitting room and, was horribly hot when the sun was out and very cold at night. The cold was offset by a terrible asthma inducing coal stove that at times, despite the cold caused everyone to go outside and wait until the choking smoke subsided. Several consecutive days a fierce wind blew day and night and the polyhouse was so noisy we could barely hear each other.

### Course focus

While teaching the standard PDC we identified some special primary needs and concentrated on them:

1. Waste management from sewerage to plastic of all types
2. Grey water smelly sludge disposal
3. The badly depleted soils with salt scurf from the water
4. Heat, glare, dust and wind are serious problems.
5. Houses uncomfortably hot in summer, cold in winter and lack privacy
6. A need for small scale garden techniques for their present homes and larger scale techniques to take back to Syria when it is safe to do so.

The first practical sessions involved marking contours using an A frame then controlling water down the slope – slowing spreading sinking... and making hanging gardens with bottles followed a few days later by making keyhole garden, sack garden, compost and insect hotel. They also learned sheet mulching, composting, and several propagation methods including layering

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<sup>3</sup> This freedom to make decisions is very important in giving refugees a sense of control over learning and making their own decisions.



### Translators and support team

Translation was a problem. Our original scheduled translator was unable to attend and we had her younger sister who had left high school in Syria years ago and little or no practice in English. However she had Turkish-Arabic. A professional translator, Gjunghul arrived as a student but became the translator for English to Turkish and Turkish to English. It was serious that we missed out on hearing back from the students from Arabic to English. With the three languages and new concepts the whole process was enormously slow and often quite tedious. We worked on roleplays (dramas) and visual materials to support the translation. It was very difficult despite the goodwill and unfailing efforts of both the translators. They showed patience and stamina.

### Challenges

- Translation improved by the end of the second half of the course however we were still unable to get feedback from Arabic to Turkish to English to monitor and evaluate learning. And the translation through the three languages was very slow

- The classroom was multipurpose and often had other activities happening simultaneously.
- The wind was wild and very noisy over the last few days
- It never became clear that the Imece management wanted and supported permaculture and there was a high level of negative responses to possibilities and suggestions
- Lack of printed materials in Arabic – the budget wasn't enough

### The joys

- All the participants, particularly the refugees who said it several times, appreciated and valued the course content and three teachers having come as volunteers to offer them permaculture
- The Syrian women are highly motivated to take knowledge and skills back to Syria when/if peace is restored. We tended to focus on what would be useful for them in post-war recovery.
- All the Syrian students were attentive and focused and good students. All participated in a range of activities
- Lucie, from Imece, has selected an area on the site where she intends to do water harvesting, soil improvement and plant diversity.
- Katie and Owen, a young couple are committed to stay until September and work on retrofitting the buildings and working on the kitchen garden.
- The teachers were able to get some translation of major headings in Arabic and subjects to take forward to Lesvos
- Together the non-Syrians students intend to maintain contact and interest in the project.

### Home designs

The home designs from the refugee women were marked by a tendency to design

- a. Their former homes in Syria, or,
- b. Their ideal home

About half the students, despite our instructions to design exactly where you live now, actually did this. This also happened in Iraq, where the home country is the chief reference for design, not the host country. Rohingya students also wanted to design their former homes in Myanmar.



## Challenges

- Translation improved in the end of the second half of the course however we were still unable to get feedback from Arabic to Turkish to English enable us to monitor and evaluate learning. And the translation through the three languages was very slow
- Contact with the Syrian women was very hard because only one person had Arabic/Turkish and no one Arabic/English. This would be essential in follow-up.
- The classroom was multipurpose and often had other activities happening simultaneously.
- The wind was wild and very noisy over the last few days
- Lack of printed materials in Arabic – the budget was said to be insufficient.
- It never became clear that the Imece management wanted and supported permaculture and there was a level of negative responses to possibilities and suggestions. See recommendations.

## The joys and outcomes

- The Syrian women are highly motivated to take knowledge and skills back to Syria when/if peace is restored. We tended to focus on what would be useful for them in post-war recovery.
- All the Syrian students were attentive and focused and good students. All participated in a range of activities
- All the participants, particularly the refugees who said it several times, appreciated and valued the course content and three teachers having come as volunteers to offer them permaculture and the people in Australia who made it happen.

## Future projects at Imece

**Lucie** has selected an area on the site where she intends to do water harvesting, soil improvement and increase plant diversity.

**Katie and Owen**, a young couple committed to stay until September will work on retrofitting the buildings and working on the kitchen garden.

**Mineh** will work with the kitchen garden and other agricultural projects

**Djanghul** wants to teach children and others, permaculture

- The non-Syrians students intend to maintain contact and interest in the project at Imece.

- Imece now has plans and designs to enable them to implement projects with the influx of summer volunteers.
- The teachers were able to get some translation of major headings and subjects headings in Arabic to take forward to Lesvos and Lauro camps in Greece.

**PRIT** has been established for ten years and has considerable experience in running PDCs and short courses. They have two short courses scheduled for the next few months. And they also offer permaculture teacher training. Their office is close to Izmir where the Syrian women live. They can find teachers who can teach in Arabic and Turkish. They have three staff and a large network across Turkey. They are gaining increasing recognition from the government and are proposing to them a permaculture education project for refugees to cater for some of the young ones and avoid a crisis of unemployment and disengaged youth. (Turkey has five million refugees and 80% are under 20 years old).

**PRIT** would be able to monitor the women from this course and also use the results to feed into their larger project.

They are situated closer to Izmir than Imece and, travelling is a concern for the women.

**PRIT** indicated that they do hold some funds for assisting potential students. This should not be necessary.

**PRIT** is keen to engage with refugees and permaculture.

### **Outcomes for Imece**

1. Imece is on rented land and the contract comes up for review next year. They are reluctant to undertake projects requiring financial outlay and permanence.
2. Imece's source of assistance is variable as volunteers come and go and funding is not always secured.
3. Imece's first commitment is for courses for refugees and not to the land.
4. Management appeared somewhat negative, despite wanting permaculture, about implement permaculture policies and projects eg. waste management, ethical purchasing, grey water treatment, soil nutrition etc despite adopting these would give them a permaculture profile to add to their reputation.

5. With the Imece staff and volunteers presently over-committed and lacking permaculture experienced staff monitoring the for the Syrian women became problematic.

**As agreed in return for hosting the course**, Imece now has the three designs to develop in planning their time and work. These will assist them considerably in working with volunteers. It can now start to work towards a permaculture status should it wish to do so. At the present time, to declare Imece a permaculture village would be premature.

### **Outcomes for the Syrian women**

1. About half the women are very committed and know the areas in which they want further expertise.
2. Several want to become permaculture teachers and two of the younger ones, want to teach their peers.
3. 80% want follow-up courses in water, soil nutrition, teaching and to keep contact with each other.

### **Risks**

The future of this project lies with the immediate monitoring and management.

Imece has asked to use the balance of the funds from this project for their other projects such as the solar chargers which do support refugee women.

### **Recommendations: Imece That:**

Imece be encouraged to continue to implement permaculture and ethical policies to be able to be seen and accepted as a permaculture community. It is suggested they do this over a year or so and then join the Turkish and International permaculture community.

The Imece volunteers join with the Syrian women in follow-up courses to strengthen their knowledge and skills.

It was evident that Imece runs on an extremely tight funds as there is no evidence of surplus spending. Volunteers pay a fee to stay there. Imece kept immaculate records but lacked experience in working with a budget, and sending invoices and receipts. They were interested in learning this.

There was no money left for copying books in Arabic for the women nor for their materials to continue permaculture at home. They will depend partly on follow up and consolidation. The link and connection with PRIT is basic to achieve this and for Imece permaculturists.

**Recommendations: Monitoring and follow-up for the women That:**

The balance of the money be used to support the women with follow-up courses run by PRIT who can identify permaculturists with Arabic/Turkish language. This be done within the project period. PRIT be asked to develop a small project for the use of the remaining funds to enable the permaculture course work to be consolidated. Also, funds permitting, that Imece participants be included in these courses.

**Recommendations: Permaculture for Refugees (P4R) That:**

The co-teachers, Marguerite and Francesca, follow up this project and all the students.

They be responsible for co-ordination with PRIT, Imece and final reporting. Rowe Morrow will be in regular contact with them.

**Recommendations for permaculturists working with refugees**

**Summary for funders**

This has been a valuable course for women and the effects are likely to be both short term and long term. They appreciated learning how to manage their money and to grow food and repair land and valued the knowledge They learned practical and intellectual skills to use where they are now, and to take into the future.

**Again, gratitude to the funders from all organisers and participants**

*Rowe Morrow*

*Input from Marguerite Karhl, Francesca Simonetti*

*Photos: Marguerite Kahrl*

*[www.bmpi.com](http://www.bmpi.com). Karhl Permaculture for Refugees (P4R)*

*Imece April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019*