



# QSA NEWSLETTER

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*Welcome to the new QSA Newsletter where you will meet new people, learn about our projects and join us in helping to change lives. We encourage you to let us know your thoughts and get involved. This month we visit the people and projects of **Bangladesh**. We hope you enjoy reading it.*



Bangladesh is located in South Asia, between the foothills of the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, and is a country surrounded on three sides by India. 80% of the country is low-lying fertile land, and it occupies territory formerly known as East Pakistan.

Three main rivers cross the land and meet at a delta area which is the largest in the world. Its climate is tropical monsoon, with high temperatures, extreme humidity, storm surges and very heavy rainfall. It is one of the most seismically active regions in the world (USAID March 2018). The most recent cyclone, Cyclone Fani, was expected to cause devastation to the southern part of the country. Mass evacuations were initiated but, as the cyclone entered West Bengal and to Bangladesh, it became weaker and was reduced to a normal storm, and fortunately damage was far less than expected.

When these frequent storms hit the region, there are frequent losses of crops, vegetables, fisheries, domestic animals, plants and mud houses.

The vast majority of the UNHCR identified persons of concern in Bangladesh are Rohingya from Northern Rakhine State, Myanmar (UNHCR, Dec 2017). The plight of the Rohingya reached a critical point in August 2017 when a brutal crackdown on their villages resulted in the death of at least 6,700 people and saw more than 700,000 refugees, mostly women and children, flee across the border into a place called Cox's Bazaar located to the south of the country near its border with Myanmar. They are now living there with their immediate or extended families in the camps, under impermanent shelters made of bamboo and UNHCR-issued tarpaulins. Many NGO agencies, both local and international, are actively working in the refugee camps. For the Bangladesh government, this is a concern and their response has been to tighten up on all bureaucracy in terms of forms, documents, funds and activities. QSA and its local partner were only able to secure a six month opportunity to work in the camps. We hear that the Bangladesh government doesn't want the Rohingya to learn the Bangla language nor wants the refugees to receive any education, which creates other issues outside of QSA's project.

Using QSA funds only, support is being given to a new project partner – Bangladesh Association for Sustainable Development (BASD). Working in Cox's Bazaar, BASD is helping to support some of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar who have been living in this area for the last eighteen months. BASD is not a new organisation, but was formed in July 1991. In its latest annual report, it describes its work as

‘improving social, educational, economic, environmental and ecological development and sustainable development of poor and vulnerable people from hardship, poverty and oppression.’ Among its many activities are skills and capacity development, permaculture, disaster management, and climate change adaptation and mitigation. They are being funded by a number of donors, including some Australian NGOs, so QSA could be assured of their skills, and form links with peer agencies to ensure that our support did not intrude into projects being supported by others.

QSA received a proposal from Rosemary (Rowe) Morrow to consider funding two training courses in permaculture in the area of Cox’s Bazaar, one inside the camp and the other with local communities in the surrounding area. After discussion, the QSA Management Committee agreed to fund the training but suggested it go further – to provide longer term support through BASD and peer educators for the trainees to enable greater sustainability and capacity in maintaining their food gardens created during the training courses.

The impacts of the Rohingyas’ migration on the local people have been varied. At first there was compassion and support, then some resentment that the land and its scarce resources were being destroyed by the refugees’ needs for firewood for cooking and warmth. It is certainly true that refugees receive considerable handouts in terms of food, buckets, water, and nets and although the locals sounded somewhat resentful when Rowe and others spoke with them, they are very aware that the same benefits will trickle down to them. There is much building and other economic activity among local villages with blue UN tarps, buckets, school bags and there is even a market for selling UN and other handouts. There is a new prosperity among formerly quiet bypassed villages. People are busy supplying materials for bamboo housing and preparing sites as people move from tents to bamboo and tarpaulin houses. People come to buy goods and take them back to sell. While it is true that local roads are being destroyed due to the increased volume of traffic and size of vehicles, jobs are being created for builders, drivers, small businesses and so on.

**Some of you might be thinking – why permaculture, isn’t gardening enough?** Actually no, because a permaculture design course provides much more than simply food production - skills such as water management, shelter and how to improve people’s immediate living conditions , sustainability of resources, all in the context of the local area. So the questions become where to create shade, how to block strong winds, how to collect water and where and so on. Trainees learn a different way of looking at the land and its resources. As Rowe has said *‘Permaculture gives people something to think about and skills they can all do, and they feel like people again with skills, purpose, hope and a future.’* Their time in Bangladesh is likely to be longer term than most would like and even though many would like to return to Myanmar, they are aware of the need to continue living where they are.



During a workshop. Photo credit BASD

**So how is permaculture training in a refugee camp different from a similar course in a community?** This for Rowe and her two colleagues was quite marked, and easy to identify. People in a refugee camp have days of inactivity, so the chance for some meaningful physical activity is very welcome. Most of what they have in their possession is something they have queued up for, such as cooking utensils, food and water, and the opportunity *to create something* for their family is very significant, especially if it means additional food to eat, or trade. There is also the potential to ameliorate their difficult environmental conditions. They are therefore so very keen to learn. Also permaculture encourages a different approach to planning what to grow, it's more than short term vegetable production, and involves approaches to work towards year round food security as much as is possible.

The training course in the community around the camp provided opportunities for them to directly benefit from an initiative, and helped reduce the sense of always being overlooked. They already have some land on which to farm, though this is not always productive land, whereas in the camps, there is little land available as the priority is for shelters, with only a small area around each house to use. This means that the food crops outside of the camps can be quite different as more space is available, whereas in the camps, the use of space is at a premium so gardens that can be created vertically, such as sack gardens (especially where sacks are in such plentiful supply), ladder gardens and gardens over the roof (which has the added advantage of providing a little more shade from the fierce sun on a tarpaulin roof) are required.



Learning how to create gardens in small spaces, such as sack gardens, ladder gardens and climbing plants over the roof for added shade, and some already well established. Photo credit BASD

Learning how to use permaculture skills is something which is open to all ages, and abilities, so can be very inclusive of anyone. However the main difference encountered by Rowe and her colleagues was one of culture and educational opportunities. Being a UNHCR managed camp, decision making is strongly top down (compounded by the fact that the number of refugees is huge), but refugees do receive workshops, knowledge and resources about human rights, such as gender, domestic violence, child protection, and sanitation. Waste management in the camp is better than in the local villages and markets. This background was an enormous help, in contrast to the course with the local community who found it very difficult and took longer to build the learning culture that is a feature of these courses. The refugees took easily to co-operative and learner-centred classes, and although the women were initially hesitant to



become involved in group activities, they too soon joined in while maintaining their cultural norms.

Rowe commented on the refugee group that *'From the start, the participants 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 the participants were a smart group with considerable experience and intellectual capacity. They drank up new techniques and knowledge.'*



Learning new practical skills and cooperative group work. Photo credit BASD

It was evident that the course popular and effective: students enjoyed the course and the content, and every person could draw even if they could not read or write. Group work was co-operative and animated, with the students moving easily into groups to provide information and solve problems. Their local knowledge was profound and fascinating about plants and animals, and they co-operated and listened to each other once they grew used to the group process. At the end of each course, the participants received a certificate in recognition of their achievements, and they were delighted at this, as the photo shows.



Certificates awarded at the end of the course. Rowe (left) and Ruth (right) seated in the centre.  
Photo credit BASD

If you would like to know more about this project, please contact Jackie in the QSA office on [administration@qsa.org.au](mailto:administration@qsa.org.au). Your contact details are not disclosed to 3<sup>rd</sup> parties unless required to do so by law. If however you have received this emailed newsletter from the QSA office and you no longer wish to receive it, please send an email to Jackie with 'unsubscribe' in the subject line, and your name in the body of the email.

Thank you  
Jackie Perkins



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