

Afghan refugees in Portugal Regenerating soil and soul



On a sunny winter morning, two young women fill their hands with twigs of strawberry tree, a Mediterranean species with a tortuous trunk that bears red berries. They gently plant the cuttings hoping they will grow roots in a field outside [Mertola](#), a small town of white houses and cobbled streets in southern [Portugal](#). The women fled [Afghanistan](#) in 2021, after [the fall of Kabul](#). For the past year, they have been collecting seeds, nursing seedlings, planting and harvesting an area surrounded by wooded hills near the banks of the Guadiana river in the semi-arid region of Alentejo.

"It's good to be with nature," says the youngest of the women, Norina. Before the [Taliban](#) took over her hometown, she was [a women's rights activist](#) studying to become a journalist. As she tucks cuttings into the bed of earth she explains that even the smallest twigs can grow into tall, sturdy trees.

Terra de Abrigo – 'land of shelter'

Norina is one of a group of eight young Afghans forced to flee Kabul because of their [human rights](#) activism. They moved to Portugal as part of the project [Terra de Abrigo](#) (literally "land of shelter") that hosts refugees and includes them in land regeneration efforts.

"Our programme is based on the idea that caring for people and caring for the planet should always be connected," says Eunice Neves, a landscape architect and permaculture designer who coordinates Terra de Abrigo in a partnership with [Terra Sintropica](#), a local association focusing on agroecology and land regeneration, and [Permaculture for Refugees](#), an international organisation. "To have a truly sustainable world, we need to have people working together with nature, and a fair and equitable distribution of resources," she continues.



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his human rights work, there are many connections between land and social regeneration. "When we use chemicals we are inflicting violence on the land. When we destroy forests, that's violence too"

The idea for the initiative came when Neves was working with permaculture – an approach to land management based on natural ecosystems that seeks to restore damage caused by human activity. She found a safe location with the aim of helping a group of young Afghans who had received permaculture training and needed to escape. A form of regenerative agriculture, permaculture has inspired Neves to design [a model of hosting refugees](#) that connects [ecology](#), agroforestry, social justice and solidarity.

For Mohammad Ali, a law and political science graduate who had to flee Afghanistan owing to his work defending human rights, there are many connections between land and social regeneration. "When we use chemicals we are inflicting violence on the land. When we destroy forests, that's violence too," he says. He dreams of a world without violence towards people or the environment.

"Working with nature can regenerate not just the soil, but also the soul," says Neves. For Mohammad, a pilot from Kabul who had to flee from the Taliban, interacting with plants has offered him comfort and solace. "It's a blessing to be on the ground and working with the land," he says.

"We found safety, peace and calm here," says Rahim, a student of agriculture who used to experiment permaculture techniques at the University of Kabul. He speaks proudly of his YouTube channel, where he posts videos in Dari about regenerative agriculture and agroforestry. "I want to share this knowledge with other people," he says.

Sharing is a key word in the programme. "We share a lot of meals together, and organise social and cultural events," says Laura Marques, who joined the project as a coordinator. "We want to create a sense of community that makes the group feel safe and supported," she says. Like permaculture, which works through a holistic framework integrating land, resources, people and the environment, Terra de Abrigo looks at well-being as a whole. "It's not just about housing, but also about financial, social and ecological well-being," Marques adds.

New ways of hosting refugees

Portugal has been generally welcoming of refugees. Those who come as part of a quota are entitled to 18 months of free housing, a monthly stipend of 150 euros and language classes provided by civil society organisations. But once this period ends, [refugees](#) are expected to become autonomous. For some, the support offered is insufficient. About half of the refugees in Portugal end up leaving for other European countries looking for better opportunities to find jobs and decent housing, or to join family members and more established communities.



Refugee hosting programmes a solution to rural de-population? "The idea is not that they will have to stay because the town needs young people. The idea is that this place has the right conditions for a phase of transition, of arrival, cure and regeneration. During this period of being hosted in a quiet, calm place, they have some time to think and plan what they would like to do, and decide if they would like to stay or move to cities to work and study," says project coordinator Laura Marques

"A year is not enough to learn a new language. Integration takes time," says Marques. With funding from various private donors and international organisations which was later complemented with state support, Terra de Abrigo has managed to

offer the Afghan group better conditions. For a year and a half, the group has all their expenses paid and receives a larger stipend to compensate for their part-time labour in agriculture and land regeneration more fairly. "Mertola is a good place to develop new initiatives and to experiment with new ways of hosting refugees," Marques adds. "The entire town mobilised to welcome the Afghan group."

In antiquity, Mertola was an important river port because of its strategic location on a hill over the Guadiana river. With a medieval castle and a church that was once a mosque, the town is famous for its Islamic archaeological remains. The land being used for regenerative practices was donated by Mertola's Archaeological Field.

The town's leading archaeologist, Claudio Torres, was once himself a refugee fleeing the Portuguese dictatorship and colonial war in the 1960s. When he returned to Portugal after the Carnation Revolution that brought down the authoritarian regime in 1974, he specialised in Islamic archaeology helping to [uncover Portugal's forgotten Islamic past](#).

Creating "mutually beneficial relations"

But like much of Portugal's rural interior, Mertola has suffered from desertification and de-population, with many moving from rural to urban areas in recent decades.

"[Refugee] hosting programmes connected to agriculture and land regeneration could be a way to address our problems with de-populated rural areas. The goal is to develop mutually beneficial relations for those who host and those who are hosted," says Neves.

"Rural areas offer the peace and tranquillity that a lot of people could benefit from. So we're trying to think of the rural interior as a place of rest and regeneration. Small towns and villages can also lead to more meaningful interaction with local communities," she says. But that doesn't mean refugees have to settle there.

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Gardening in times of war, conflict and displacement affirms perseverance and the possibility of healing and regeneration: Permaculture4Refugees founder Rosemary Morrow's experience working in different parts of the world has shown her it can be transformative, empowering displaced people with connections to the land and fostering hope, social cooperation and land rehabilitation. "It brings people something important to do, and that gives them some food, helps them connect with their neighbours and changes their situation"

'They tried to bury us. They forgot we were seeds'

For several years, the organisation [Permaculture for Refugees](#) (P4R), a partner of Terra de Abrigo, has been supporting refugees in transforming the places where they live. The initiative sees gardening as an important tool for responding to refugee crises and teaches displaced people permaculture design that can be used in refugee camps and also in receiving countries. The founder, Rosemary Morrow, describes P4R as a network of resources and shared information. "It's about cooperation rather than competition, about working on the margins and edges, working where it counts," she says.

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working in different parts of the world teaching permaculture has shown her it can be transformative, empowering displaced people with connections to the land and fostering hope, social cooperation and land rehabilitation. "It brings people something important to do, and that gives them some food, helps them connect with their neighbours and changes their situation. Anyone can do it," she says.

In Mertola, the fresh produce from Terra Sintropica's plot of land is used to prepare vegetarian meals served in a welcoming restaurant, cafe and grocery shop named PREC – Regenerative Process in Progress, which aims to promote food sovereignty and responsible production and consumption. At lunchtime, PREC fills with laughter and hopeful conversations in several languages. A guitar is passed around as the Afghan group shares stories and their plans for the future.

One sentence adorns the white wall: "They tried to bury us. They forgot we were seeds."

[Marta Vidal](#)

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