

Central Galilee Survey of Environmental Hazards in Jewish and Arab Municipalities

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Background

For the last several years, The Abraham Fund Initiatives has worked to promote public discourse and policy on mixed cities and regions in Israel. It is our position that regional planning policy is necessary to meet the needs of both Jewish and Arab communities, based on equality, partnership, and coexistence, in view of the growing proximity of residential areas, increased competition over resources, and the overall climate of the Jewish-Arab conflict.

Based on this position and keeping in mind the violent events of October 2000, The Abraham Fund developed the "Mirkam in the Galilee" Initiative, a project which operates in the Beit Hakerem Valley, encompassing 12 Jewish and Arab local and regional municipalities, where over 70,000 Jews and 110,000 Arabs live.

Mirkam in the Galilee strives to form a regional model of coexistence; establish an ongoing, institutionalized relationship between Jewish and Arab municipalities, institutions, and citizens; promote equality between Jewish and Arab residents; put in place an active regional leadership; identify common interests; and manage joint processes of change to promote and execute regional solutions that meet the population's needs.

The Central Galilee Survey of Environmental Hazards is the product of the efforts of the Environmental Justice Forum, which operates as part of the Mirkam in the Galilee Initiative. The survey presents a comprehensive current status report of the various environmental hazards located in the jurisdictions of the municipalities participating in the initiative, in order to contribute to the development of solutions and actions to mitigate and eliminate these hazards. It is our basic assumption that a regional perspective that includes cooperation between Jewish and Arab municipalities is necessary to identify and address environmental hazards. The survey was conducted by the Western Galilee Township Association for Environmental Protection.

This survey focuses on the environmental hazards with the highest prevalence in the Central Galilee region: waste (construction and demolition waste, animal carcasses, plant waste) and sewage (resulting from a lack of infrastructure, poor infrastructure, and infrastructure maintenance issues). The survey also addresses issues related to business planning, licensing, and supervision, and to public and open spaces. The survey offers a series of recommendations to mitigate the hazards, improve maintenance and control of infrastructure, and address hazards at a regional level.

Industries, workshops, and animal husbandry in residential areas are prevalent in Arab towns, either due to the absence of designated areas for such uses, or due to poor compliance with planning and building laws as a result of limited land availability and other economic issues. Only some businesses have business licenses and meet the environmental conditions for business licenses. Businesses such as slaughterhouses, carpentry workshops, garages, aluminum workshops located in residential areas may constitute nuisances and cause environmental problems including noise, noxious smells, inadequate treatment of sewage, and accumulation of inert, industrial, and agricultural waste in residential areas. These hazards are exacerbated by the high density of construction in many Arab towns.

The Northern District is characterized by extensive open spaces (93.1% of the total District area), grounded in plans that preserve their scope and limit the permitted uses. Nonetheless, according to the survey, supervision is inadequate and the population has not yet adopted civic norms concerning the proper removal of construction and demolition waste.

In contrast to Jewish towns, most of the land in Arab towns is privately owned and fully appropriated. The absence of Israel Land Authority lands in these jurisdictions has led to a severe shortage of open public spaces for the residents' benefit, and of available land to construct environmental infrastructure such as recycling plants, transit stations, ramps for waste removal, etc.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey points to a diverse range of environmental hazards in the Central Galilee region. These hazards do not conform to municipal boundaries. As a result, the residents of both weak and affluent towns suffer the consequences.

The survey's final summary and recommendations chapter includes details of costs and recommendations to address construction and demolition waste as well as small-scale waste and sewage hazards. Recommendations address infrastructure, maintenance, inspections, and control of environmental infrastructure operations. Construction of transit and recycling sites for demolition waste must be promoted; municipalities must stipulate that occupancy certificates will be given only upon proof of debris removal to certified sites; and municipalities must act jointly to clean up open spaces and promote municipal legislation designed to improve the environment in the region.

Recognizing the need to institutionalize regional cooperation of Jewish and Arab municipalities in the Central Galilee region, the survey's recommendations reflect a regional approach to resolving environmental hazards.

Considering that many of the problems stem from a lack of funding in Arab municipalities, the survey recommends transferring the authority to enforce and maintain environmental infrastructure to a designated regional entity, which will be funded directly by the national government.

The survey is based on data collected from municipal department managers (departments of the environment, sanitation, water, engineering, and billing), site visits to each town and its environs, and written and photographic documentation of each hazard in collaboration with the responsible official in each town. Finally, the survey also contains recommendations to eradicate the hazards at both local and regional levels.

Notably, the participating towns differ widely in terms of economic, social, and other capabilities, particularly when comparing Jewish and Arab municipalities. These differences directly impact the state of the environment in each municipality, as well as the number and the types of existing hazards.

Substantial differences between the surveyed municipalities are found in municipal status (cities, towns and region); in socio-economic status (Sakhnin is ranked in the second bottom cluster of the Central Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Index, while Kfar Vradim is ranked in the second highest); in cultural diversity (differences in culture, customs, and worldviews of Jewish and Arab populations); and in the nature of the open spaces.

FINDINGS

Findings show that the surveyed governments differ significantly in the nature of their activities for preserving the environment and their attitude toward environmental issues. It was found that the municipalities that give limited attention to the issue are those with low socio-economic status; irregularities in local tax collection (municipal taxes, water and sewage rates); poor environmental administration; lack of sanitation by-laws and poor enforcement of existing by-laws; scarcity of manpower and tools, and lack of funds to address residents' complaints and requests. These features characterize the Arab municipalities that participated in the survey.

According to survey findings, the most common hazards are waste related, which are caused by a lack of municipal services or solutions; non-payment of fees to waste removal contractors; leniency toward dumping waste in public areas and in the many open spaces in the North; lack of enforcement by national and local government supervisors; difficulty in apprehending environmental offenders and mild punishments imposed for violations of environmental and sanitation laws.

The towns and regions where environmental hazards are more highly prevalent are also afflicted by sewage waste, caused by a lack of proper sewage infrastructure; a lack of end-user solutions, difficulties in maintaining infrastructure and pipelines, and lack of control to identify sewage blockages and malfunctions.

In Arab municipalities, the directors of the sanitation departments lack the tools to address and resolve residents' complaints. It seems that the residents have given up and have stopped complaining: There is no public activism campaigning to improve local and regional environmental quality.

At the same time, it is also important to establish regional forums where local governments can develop collaborative efforts based on a regional approach to environmental responsibility, and can reinforce ties among the municipalities to promote joint solutions. Such forums will also constitute platforms for joint learning and resource pooling.

Representatives of the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee, and the Ministry of Minority Affairs, municipal mayors, Township Association for Environmental Protection, and national and local environmental organizations should be involved in developing regional solutions based on findings from this survey and other environmental reports. Such broad collaboration will allow the development of a regional strategy for addressing the environmental and social issues documented in the survey.

Furthermore, efforts are needed to devise creative, accessible end-user solutions, and action is needed among environmental department officials (especially in Arab municipalities) to change their job perceptions by empowering them to implement proper treatment of environmental hazards in their jurisdictions.

Finally, in addressing environmental hazards, attention should be directed not only to the measurable aspects of environmental issues, but also to the civic perceptions of these issues, as well as the social, historical, political, economic, and managerial aspects which affect their resolution.