What Doesn’t Work Well in Normal Times Won’t Work at all in Times of Emergency (Original Hebrew article, here)

Sliman Al Amour and Ariel Dloomy March 25, 2020 10:44

The Corona pandemic caught all of us unprepared, Jews and Arabs alike. While the Ministry of Health quickly took command of the crisis for the Jewish population, preparing and disseminating information and guidelines in a massive campaign, the Arab population, once again, was left far behind. It took time for the Ministry of Health to realize that hundreds of thousands of Arabic speakers in Israel could not understand the directives and only then did they provide materials in Arabic as well. Once the Health Ministry did this, the Arab population quickly came on board and complied with the regulations. In spite of the fact that these regulations require significant changes particularly in the lifestyle of Arab society, the understanding that we face a situation of dire emergency, has elicited wide cooperation to prevent the spread of the virus.

Unfortunately, as usual, one group of citizens was left behind: the Arab Bedouin residents of the Negev. More than a quarter of a million, half of whom live in unrecognized villages, the poorest members of Israeli society, were forgotten. It’s not surprising, as even in normal times, half of Bedouin society does not receive basic infrastructure – electricity, running water and other critical services. Coping with the present emergency becomes challenging if not impossible. How can you continually wash your hands if you don’t have running water? How can you quarantine and isolate sick family members living together in ramshackle housing with more than ten others? Not only public health directives did not reach the residents of the unrecognized villages. Government representatives, lab tests or support teams have been absent. At a time like this, when the state fails the Arab-Bedouin population, non-governmental organizations enter the scene. Special teams that we created in these unrecognized villages are presently providing support for the residents of these villages in a wide range of emergency situations, explaining the guidelines and regulations and supplying crucial services on the ground. The two ambulances that we operate in cooperation with Magen David Adom (Israel’s Red Cross) with the support of Keren L’Yedidut, are the only ambulances that serve the thousands of residents in these villages, and the Forum of Imamim (Islamic religious leaders) which we created are using their mosques’ loud speaker system to communicate the public health directives of how to prevent the spread of the virus.

As the largest civil society organization in the Negev, we understand that we have an important and significant role in this present crisis. We will continue to play that role, providing aid, dispatching volunteers, assisting the local municipalities and the public in general. But it is critical that government offices wake up and understand that civil society organizations, as committed as they are, are no substitute for government action. What doesn’t work well during routine times will not work any better during times of emergency.
The long-term neglect, dilapidated infrastructure and lack of health and welfare services take their toll in times of crisis. As the Corona virus spreads, it won’t distinguish between Jews and Arabs. The situation behooves government offices to step up to the plate and relate to the residents of the unrecognized villages as equal citizens who also need help at this time.

It is said that the strength of society is measured by the strength of its weakest link. This is truest at times of crisis. If we do not recognize the unrecognized Bedouin villages, improve the state of their infrastructure, and equalize the level of services to all of society, we will discover that in every future crisis, we will be dependent on the strength of our weakest link.

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