



Urban Planning in Israel's Arab Communities Essential and Complex Challenge for Economic and Residential Development

February 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The IATF briefing paper, [Urban Planning in Israel's Arab Communities: Essential Component and Complex Challenge for Economic and Residential Development](#), explores the status of efforts to modify and apply Israel's planning processes to the development needs and realities of Arab cities, towns and villages.

Up-to-date master and detailed urban plans are the foundation for all residential, commercial and municipal development projects and a prerequisite for all construction permits. For most of Israel's history, however, most Arab communities had no urban plans and experienced development driven by organic population growth (eleven-fold since the founding of the state). Years of unplanned development have yielded Arab localities that today are overcrowded, lack public space and facilities, face housing shortages and have little available land for development—not to mention have a high rate of unauthorized construction and little professional planning experience or capacities within their municipal bodies.

The complexity of planning challenges created by these built-up realities, which stray from planning standards and codes, are compounded by the fact that much of the land in Arab localities is privately owned. Most of Israel's planning procedures are designed for new communities built on state land. Planning for development on private land entails additional legal processes many of which are not only complex but viewed with suspicion by Arab landowners with historical experiences of state land confiscations.

In recent years, the difficulty implementing existing planning processes and regulations has been recognized as both a major barrier to socio-economic development in Arab society and one of the most sensitive sources of tension in state-minority relations.

In 2015 a government commissioned "120 Days Committee," created to examine planning and housing gaps in Arab society, formally acknowledged that existing planning policies and regulations were not meeting what had become crisis-level conditions in Arab society. Their far-reaching recommendations to adapt policies to meet the needs of Arab society and intensify planning efforts were adopted into several government decisions including [Government Resolution 922](#) (GR-922), the historic five-year economic development plan for Arab society approved in December 2015. In parallel, stricter enforcement measures against unauthorized

construction have also been implemented, making the last five years a period of unprecedented focus on these planning and construction issues.

Unprecedented budgets and efforts to resolve planning barriers¹ over this time have led to some important advances—today an unprecedented 67 out of 132 Arab localities in Israel have updated Master Plans (more than a 100% increase since 2015), and at least 19 detailed plans representing some 25,000 housing units are in the approval process. However, little actual construction has taken place due to the persistence and complexity of implementation barriers, and both the quality of plans in the pipeline and duration of the approval process are raising questions about whether plans will be implementable or still relevant once approved.

With GR-922 entering its final year in 2020, there is growing urgency to advance existing planning projects, and to apply lessons learned from the past five years for future initiatives. One outcome of intensified focus on planning has been greater coordination and communication—despite tensions and disagreements—among central and local government representative, civil society and local leaders. In 2019, new government and civil society committees and conferences have been convened and publications issued to increase knowledge sharing and cooperation among stakeholders and identify next steps. Their assessments served as the basis for much of the full briefing paper and insights going forward summarized below.

New Government Recommendations and Insights from the Field

A new inter-ministerial committee convened by the Ministry of Justice to review recent planning efforts and progress issued a report in September 2019 soliciting public feedback. The report acknowledged continuing incongruities between existing policies and realities and emphasized that public participation and partnership is key to finding implementable solutions. The Committee also recommends greater flexibility and nuance in government approaches (i.e. policies that differentiate between urban vs. rural localities, between older and younger generations, and between subgroups within Arab society).

The Committee also made specific policy recommendations including (i) solutions for more effective compensation for private land development for public facilities; (ii) boosting the Arab housing market on state land by enabling traditional residential patterns (i.e. living close to extended family); and (iii) more budgets for overcoming difficulties planning on private land, more planning assistance to Arab municipalities, and more public participation to raise awareness and facilitate cooperation.

More generally, numerous government bodies, Jewish and Arab civil society organizations, and planning experts have been key to various aspects of advancing planning efforts over the last five years. Their main lessons-learned and recommendations for priorities going forward include:

¹ Some of the barriers related to professional urban planning in Arab municipalities include Arab towns predating state planning; history of land confiscation; high ratio of private land ownership; unplanned and unauthorized construction to meet 11-fold population growth; overcrowding and shortage of land for development; lack of professional planning capacities in Arab municipalities, and issues of traditional residential patterns mismatched with state policies.

- **Building Professional Capacities:** A major challenge remains the weakness and lack of capacities in Arab local government to lead professional planning processes. New government-budgeted positions such as Strategic Planners and Mowared Integrators may add important capacities, as can civil society organizations that accompany municipal leaders in these processes and are professional resources for the field. In addition, increasing the number of qualified Arab planning professionals through academic programs, professional development and training is a priority.
- **Representation in State Planning Bodies:** Representation of Arab professionals and familiarity with planning needs of Arab society continues to be a challenge in all government planning bodies. According to the State Comptroller's report, "the representation rate of the minority population [in national planning institutions] is meagre ... and cannot be seen as answering the need for fair representation as required by law." Consequences range from plans that are not compatible with realities on the ground to under-utilized policy reforms and budgets available to Arab society due to lack of awareness of them
- **Trust-Building and Public Engagement:** Despite greater coordination in recent years, mistrust between Arab society and state planning bodies remains high. Left unaddressed, it becomes a barrier to implementing new planning policies. Opportunities to deepen cooperation and understanding between central planning bodies and Arab society, apply greater flexibility in centralized policies, and promote cases of success in which in planning benefited the community would ease resistance and increase interest in participation among Arab leadership, landowners and the Arab public.
- **Cooperation Platform on the Local Level:** Recent success cases have benefited from opportunities to generate broad-based cooperation and engagement among multiple stakeholders around specific planning needs and challenges. The need for such coordination has resulted in more conferences, committees, and public feedback efforts on a national level. However, a similar need exists locally where face-to-face interaction between state planning representatives, local leaders, and public stakeholders can deepen understanding and generate goodwill to resolve barriers on a case-by-case basis.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** External experts and civil society bodies have an important role in monitoring the implementation of new government policies and budgets, thus making the process more transparent, providing feedback to government, and enhancing trust by the Arab leadership and public. For example, the work of civil society experts has been key to modifying the initial preconditions set for the Strategic Agreements, making them more applicable to local realities, and ultimately allowing 10 Arab localities to move to the second stage of the process in the fall of 2019.
- **Developing and piloting new models:** Several new models are currently in initial planning or pilot phases (*See Appendix I*). In these cases, government bodies rely on local experts and civil society organizations for their local knowledge and access to promote and enhance the projects' receptivity and relevance. In addition, some of these pilots cannot rely on governmental funds and require additional private sector or philanthropic investments.

[Download full report here](#)