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The Program for Empowering Bedouin Municipalities – within the framework of the Plan for Socioeconomic Development of the Bedouin Population in the Negev, 2017-2021 (Government Decision 2397): An Evaluation Study

Interim Report: Fall 2020

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This study was part of a multifaceted research program for the Government of Israel's five-year plan to promote the well-being of the Bedouin in the Negev, carried out in cooperation with the Department for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Society in the Negev



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About the research program of the five-year plan for the Bedouin in the Negev

The research program was jointly funded by the Department for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Society in the Negev and the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute. It spanned 3.5 years and includes an array of topical studies, including education, children with disabilities, employment, and local government, as well as cross-cutting studies evaluating the five-year plan work programs; the values, strengths, and challenges of the Bedouin population and their leaders; key indicators of the health, economic, and social well-being of the Bedouin population; and an integrative assessment of the five-year plan.

The research program was carried out as a cooperative effort between the Department for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Society in the Negev and the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB). The Department led the choice of issues to be studied and provided feedback on the research. MJB coordinated the research program and was responsible for the quality of the studies.

Abstract

Background

The five-year plan for the Bedouin population in the Negev, 2017-2021 (set forth in Government Decision 2397) is the second sequential government five-year plan designed to help this population. The Bedouin population in the Negev has the lowest socioeconomic ranking in Israel. The plan seeks to reduce the gaps between the Bedouins and the general Israeli population and promote their integration into Israeli society and its economy. For the first time, this five-year plan includes a Program for Empowering Bedouin Municipalities (hereafter, the Empowerment Program), designed to provide support to the nine Bedouin local authorities in the Negev, enhance their administrative and organizational capabilities, and improve their service provision.

The Ministry of Interior was appointed to implement the program and was allocated a budget of NIS 525 million. Most of this budget was meant to be reallocated to the Bedouin municipalities in order to implement their work plans, with the intention of upgrading the infrastructures and the services provided by the municipalities. The entire five-year plan is coordinated and managed by the Department for Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Society in the Negev at the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (initially, the department was part of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, then part of the Ministry of Economy and Industry, and now part of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs). The department commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct a comprehensive evaluation study of the five-year plan, part of which was an evaluation study of the Empowerment Program. This interim report presents the findings collected as of late 2020.

Objectives

To analyze the conceptual basis of the Empowerment Program; describe its implementation; examine barriers that can prevent its optimal realization; assess its effects; and ultimately help draw conclusions from it, offer ways to improve it in future implementation stages, and form a basis for informed follow-up programs and initiatives.

Method

The study was conducted mostly during 2020, mainly using qualitative methodology, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with key individuals involved in drawing up and implementing the Empowerment Program on both the central governmental level and in each of the recognized Bedouin municipalities. Forty-four relevant

officials were interviewed. In addition, we held multiple background discussions to gather complementary information and preliminary learning tours in the municipalities, and analyzed relevant documents and quantitative administrative data.

The data were analyzed thematically, including interpretation of the change theory informing the program. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed in three main stages: open coding, mapping analysis, and focal analysis, enabling us to extract themes and subthemes and map the relations between them.

Main Findings

The analysis of the Empowerment Program revealed constant tension between the desire to quickly promote high-standard services for the inhabitants and execute projects and the desire to establish better planning and implementation capabilities in the municipalities – a process that is by nature long-term. This tension recurred in multiple contexts.

The utilization of the budgets progressed at a relatively slow pace. Thus, by September 2020, only 61% of all the budgets that had been allocated to the municipalities for use by the end of 2019, as part of the Empowerment Program, had begun to be utilized. By that time, only 20% of these budgets were fully spent. Among the five core areas designated by the program, budgets in the areas of economic development and organizational excellence were utilized less than in the other three areas – governance, society and community, public space and services.

Nevertheless, at the time of this writing, interviewees in some municipalities have already indicated a significant contribution of the Empowerment Program to the quality of services provided by the municipalities. They have also noted early signs of improved capability to operate in a more efficient and better organized way, among other things with regard to meeting essential work procedures. Nevertheless, significant change is still not apparent in all municipalities.

The study identified several barriers that made it difficult to make the most of the program's potential. Among other things, significant barriers were identified as related to both the bureaucratic overload due to the program's monitoring mechanism and the municipalities' shortages in human resources. Other barriers included insufficient definition of the program's purpose and inadequate preparation by the Ministry of Interior to provide appropriate solutions and guidance to the municipalities. Note that other barriers, related to the general condition of the Bedouin population in the Negev and the years-long relationships between it and the state, and among various section of the population, also prevent the municipalities from implementing the program at a satisfactory pace.

Recommendations

The study clearly indicates the need for a follow-up program to leverage the initial progress made and continue the positive trend of developing the Bedouin municipalities and their capacity to provide services to their residents. Other recommendations have to do with the program's conceptual basis, its monitoring mechanism, and the resources required in order for it to maximize its potential. We propose that a customized intervention be designed for each of the municipalities according to its needs, situation, and functioning level, based on predetermined criteria and indicators. This customized intervention will include individual adjustment of the monitoring mechanism requirements as well as of the emphasis on economic development and the way it is promoted; an organizational development plan; a decision on whether to employ an external project leader or an in-house employee to lead the process in each municipality; and finally – an appropriate balance, for each municipality, between the Empowerment Program's two main goals: emphasis on rapid project implementation as opposed to emphasis on empowering the municipality's capabilities to operate more independently, with higher procedural standards. Periodic adjustments to these custom interventions could be made in the course of implementing the program, following changes in the municipalities as it unfolds.