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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Bedouin Population in the Negev

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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 Bedouin population in the Negev is characterized by substantial gaps compared to the general population in Israel with respect to education, employment, health, personal security, civil involvement, housing and infrastructure, personal and social welfare, and the use of information and communication technology. The Five-Year Plan for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Population in the Negev for 2017–2021 (hereafter: the Five-Year Plan) is intended to reduce these gaps.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the Bedouin population, particularly with respect to employment, education and social welfare. The challenges derived from the pandemic call for changes to be made in the implementation of the current Five-Year Plan and in the planning of the next one, in order to meet the urgent needs of the Bedouin population while optimally using the plan's budget.

The Department for Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Society in the Negev (within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development at the time of launching the government resolution; within the Ministry of Economy and Industry during 2020; and within the Ministry of Social Welfare since mid-2021) asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Bedouin population, which will serve as a basis for responding to those effects in the short- and medium-terms.

Goals

1. Mapping the life domains of the Bedouin population affected by the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Identifying the directions of the pandemic's effects and their magnitude in those life domains
3. Devising policy recommendations for dealing with the pandemic's effects

Methodology

The study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The research tools included: a telephone survey of 254 Bedouin residents of both recognized and unrecognized localities carried out between December 2020 and March 2021; interviews with key representatives of the Bedouin population and with officials in the local authorities and government ministries carried out in August-September 2020; processing of administrative

data obtained from the National Insurance Institute on employment of the Bedouin population prior to and during the pandemic.

Main Findings

- **Substantial impact of the pandemic on the Bedouin population in several life domains:** Employment – a drop in the number of salaried employees between June 2019 and June 2020 and a significant decline in business activity; Health – a decrease in the consumption of routine medical care; Education and Social Welfare – worsening of the mental health and psycho-social functioning of the respondents and adverse effects on their children's schooling.
- **Weakness of the local authorities – both professionally and organizationally** – hindered effective coping with the pandemic and lowered residents' trust in the authorities' ability to deal with the crisis.
- **Lack of digital infrastructure and insufficient knowledge and experience** in the use of digital services significantly impeded the residents' ability to keep consuming services, utilize their rights, obtain needed assistance and maintain the learning process in schools.
- Many of the survey respondents reported that **their economic status worsened**. However, **only a few reported having contacted social services or having obtained material assistance, information or consultation in order to cope with the effects of the pandemic**.

Conclusions

The study indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the Bedouin population, thus exacerbating prior gaps in infrastructures and services between them and the general population in Israel. Various government ministries, alongside the local authorities, made efforts to **address the immediate needs** that arose as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, it seems that **programs designed to meet the Bedouin's pre-existing needs**, which were exacerbated by the pandemic, **should be reinforced and accelerated**. Based on the study findings, several recommendations intended to deal with the short- and medium-terms effects of the pandemic were made. These recommendations are also relevant to the fundamental difficulties faced by the Bedouin, and they may affect them in the long run. The recommendations should be carefully examined as to their feasibility and the conditions required for their implementation, with the goal of formulating a detailed plan of action.

Recommendations

1. Develop **solutions that will increase the Bedouin's digital literacy**
2. Develop **relevant vocational training** for existing workplaces or those to be developed in the future
3. Consider the possibility of **accelerating or prioritizing the development of industrial areas and businesses** in the short- and medium-terms
4. Strengthen **mechanisms for crisis management in the local authorities** and learn from those that did manage to provide an appropriate response
5. Develop **solutions to cope with the pandemic's adverse effect on the education system and the expected increase in school dropout**
6. Enhance and improve **remote learning** within schools and provide the adequate infrastructure for teachers and students