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Position paper

Uncounted: Indigenous Bedouin citizens neglected by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics

Introduction

For years, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) has refrained from a comprehensive and appropriate census of the Bedouin community and instead favors estimates based on various discriminatory assumptions and formulas. As a result, the State lacks a comprehensive and accurate picture of the Arab Bedouin population of the Naqab and its socio-economic situation, which is necessary for allocating services to tackle poverty-related problems that require governmental policy and regulation. For these citizens, a lack of valid data can harm the realization of their rights. This plays out in state and local budgets; regional councils, education, health and all welfare services rely on budget per citizen, but without accurate and truthful information, residents of unrecognized villages experience a shortage in access to basic services. The lack of local employment opportunities, public health clinics, public housing services, and food grants shows that not only is the state failing to lift communities out of poverty, it is also waiving citizens' rights to equal social services.

According to a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly, official up-to-date statistical information is critical for informed policy decision-making that supports development.¹ In this vein, vital statistics and their subsequent analysis and interpretation are essential for setting targets and evaluating social and economic plans. Although in recent years, efforts have been made to develop services in the Naqab's Bedouin communities under official five-year plans,² authorities continue to ignore the fact that they should provide services to purposefully unregistered residents who are excluded from budgetary allocation. For a population roughly estimated as tens of thousands of people, there are only seven schools, four clinics, and two stations for mother and child.

The authorities, including the regional councils within which the unrecognized villages are located, continue to ignore the fact that they provide services to a large unregistered population that is not included in budget allocation. Alternatively, the data is calculated according to different formulas for budget allocation by the Central Bureau of Statistics, rather than methods that are used for the rest of the Israeli population's inclusion in the census.

¹ Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 29 January 2014. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/yd3smmc8>

² Government Resolution No. 2397 of 12.02.2017, Program for Socio-Economic Development of the Bedouin Population in the Negev (in Hebrew).

As a result of this statistical disparity, there are between 90,000 and 100,000 residents living in unrecognized villages in the Negev³ who lack a geographical designation on their ID cards, meaning that they are not defined in the population registry as residents of a locality, but rather as members of a tribe.⁴ Some citizens without such a geographic designation are registered as residents of a locality they do not actually live in, and thus cannot receive services there.

The State documents that 72.9% of the Naqab's Bedouin residents are poor and 79.6% of Bedouin children live under the poverty line.⁵ However, **Bedouin residents from unrecognized villages are not included in these national poverty indicators.** Furthermore, between 2008 and 2015, the Bedouin communities in Southern Israel were not included in the "Report on the Dimensions of Poverty and Social Disparities."⁶ These reports are elaborated by the National Insurance Institute, a public entity responsible for guaranteeing basic subsistence to vulnerable groups within Israel, contributing to a more just distribution of national income and a reduction of poverty.⁷ The exclusion of more than 90,000 Bedouin citizens from this report reflects the State of Israel's denial of its responsibility for aiding this vulnerable group. Again, even though official employment rates among the Naqab's Bedouin communities are 62% for men and 30% for women (2019),⁸ Bedouin residents from unrecognized villages are not included in CBS statistics on employment nor labor force surveys. In addition, Bedouin residents are also excluded from the social survey, the family expenses survey, and more, which are crucial for decision making about policy and budget allocation.

Ongoing statistical disparities stems from the State's insistence on depriving thirty-five villages of infrastructure, basic services, and municipal recognition. Even though the State asked the High Court to find a solution for the issue of these unrecognized villages in the Naqab within the framework of the master plan for the Be'er Sheva metropolitan area,⁹ only eleven such localities were eventually recognized. Since the recognition of the village of Abu Tlūl aš-Šahbī in 2006, no additional Bedouin villages have been recognized. Furthermore, the State halted the recognition of localities that received planning approval, such as Ramat Tziporim, and even localities that received both planning approval and a detailed program and plan, such as the village of al-Fur'ah.

Such a situation means that decision-makers receive a distorted picture, which includes localities where the number of residents is "inflated," due to the registration of residents of unrecognized villages as recognized residents. In other cases, decision-makers receive a partial demographic picture. For example, many residents who sit outside the "blue line" of a municipality are not counted but may be in close enough proximity to receive all their services there.

Denial of the right to vote because of non-Registration in the Population Registry

Another civil right affected by this statistical neglect, is the right to vote in general and municipal elections. Israeli law states that "the right to vote and the right to be elected are among the most central and important fundamental freedoms." Notwithstanding, citizens in the population registered as tribal

³ Ben Gurion University, Online Database - Life Characteristics of the Bedouin Population in the Negev - Demographics. (2021). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/ayvtztem>

⁴ According to data from a report submitted to the General Director of the Interior Ministry (2018), the residents registered as a tribe in 2017 were about 82,000 citizens. Source: Lehavi, S., Shafran, R., et al. Recommendation document. The inter-ministerial team for examining the Ministry of the Interior's grants for registered residents in the Bedouin tribes in the Negev. (2018).

⁵ Dimensions of Poverty and Social Disparities - Annual Report, 2018, retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/6jve9ckz> [Hebrew]

⁶ Report on the Dimensions of Poverty and Social Disparities - Publications Social Security, 2021. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/4ecsywpy> [Hebrew]

⁷ National Insurance Institute, 2021. Benefits | ביטוח לאומי. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/we586kf2>

⁸ Tirosh, O., Cohen, D., Zablotzky, A., & Somekh, S. (2021). Indices and targets in the field of employment for 2025 for the Bedouin population in the south.

⁹ HCJ 4540/00 Isaac Darijat v. Minister of Health et al.

residents are not entitled to vote in municipal elections, thus preventing them from exercising this basic democratic civil right. The violation of the right to take part in the management of public life at the municipal level is also considered a violation under the UN Civil and Political Rights Convention as well as a violation of Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “the will of the people is the basis of governmental authority.”

Many services provided by the state are connected to the geographical location of its residents. According to the Regulations in the Population Ordinance (1965),¹⁰ if registered by tribal membership, a citizen is denied a geographical affiliation and therefore cannot be assigned to a municipal district. Municipal affiliation is the basis for eligibility for various services (health and education, among others), infrastructure (such as access to utilities and roads), and participation in local elections and democratic processes.¹¹

The main implication for registration by tribe, is that many citizens that are unregistered at their place of residence and therefore cannot vote there, nor access convenient voting locations. This results in a serious violation of the Naqab’s Bedouin citizens’ right to vote and creates obstacles for democratic representation and input in national and local policy, further negatively impacting one of the poorest communities in Israel.

The Knesset Election Law establishes rules for the division of the State into voting districts in order to ensure equality in access to ballot boxes¹² and specifies measures to protect the right to vote of people with disabilities, institutionalized inmates, prisoners, soldiers, military personnel, people in military custody, diplomats, and even of settlers living across the Green Line. However, the electoral commission has so far refrained from providing a solution to voting disenfranchisement in the Bedouin community, even eschewing stopgap measures such as the allocation of shuttles to bring people to the polls or by placing ballots in schools located in unrecognized villages.

Conclusions

The CBS has justified its inability to produce a comprehensive and accurate census that includes all Bedouin localities of the Bedouin community with logistical and methodological reasons, claiming that census workers cannot access dirt roads to the villages’ populations, nor conduct interviews with women without their spouses, and that the census suffers from a low return rate.

However, using the state-of-the-art geographic information systems available to the State, the CBS can easily hold a census in the unrecognized localities, and present its data with the names of the unrecognized villages or by geographical coordinates and landmarks. However, the CBS refrains from doing so, out of fear that such publication will legitimize the existence of unrecognized villages or the rights of their residents. Rather than serving the citizens of the State, the CBS chooses to prioritize political interests and act as a servant of government planning policy over its professional-scientific role as arbiter of accurate demographic and socio-economic pictures of the population.

The fact that the state lacks basic data on the Bedouin community reflects official neglect and disregard and contributes to the absence of efforts that address the needs of the community, and therefore perpetuates the State’s discrimination towards the Naqab’s indigenous populations, deepening poverty and social disparities.

¹⁰ Regulations in the Population Ordinance. (1965). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/4s64ydzc>

¹¹ Regulations of the Population Registry, (Registration of the Address), 1974, Regulation No. 6

¹² Knesset Elections Law, sections 8-13. (1969). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/9xf8eute>

It would be appropriate to reckon that the CBS's disregard for the Bedouin community is related to its organizational structure. On February 26, 2019, the Negev Coexistence Forum, addressed the Prime Minister and the CBS highlighting poor representation of Arab citizens among members. Among the approximately seventy members of the Public Statistics Council, there is only one Arab member, the CBS management itself has no Arab members, and out of approximately ninety senior CBS employees listed in the Bureau's Freedom of Information Report, there is only one Arab employee.¹³ The CBS legal counsel responded to the letter, briefly stating that a reply would be given soon, but no answer has been received to date.

The result is that in the absence of verified and segmented information, each government entity operates according to different "estimates" (in reality, different opinions) regarding the size of the Bedouin population in the Naqab. This leads to bureaucratic chaos and inadequate administration.

The CBS must conduct a comprehensive survey of the residents of the unrecognized villages, and present decision makers with complete information. This will allow them to make appropriate and fair decisions regarding the planning of the area and the distribution of resources while providing an appropriate response to civic needs and access to basic services. A fair and accurate census could promote the rights of the Naqab's indigenous population.

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¹³ Letter from Negev Coexistence Forum "Request for a change in the composition of the Public Statistics Council". Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/47z2jxs8>