



منتدى التعايش السلمي في النقب من أجل المساواة المدنية  
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Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality



המרכז לחינוך משפטי תלמי  
מרכז التعليم القانوني الأكاديمي



## **Internet accessibility solutions for Bedouin students as an integral part of exercising their right to education**



Following the transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgent need to connect all Israeli students to the internet has become first priority. On the other hand, tens of thousands of Arab-Bedouin students from unrecognized villages in the Negev-Naqab have had no access to internet infrastructures and means of online learning. The Negev Coexistence Forum, together with Sidreh Association, the Israeli Internet Association, Clinic for International Human Rights at Hebrew University of Jerusalem have published a position paper on the subject, with concrete demands from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Communications.

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*The Cover Photo was taken by: Husayn 'Abū al-Qi'ān, 2021*

Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF) was established in 1997 to provide a place for Arab-Jewish collaborative efforts in the struggle for civil equality and the advancement of a shared society, mutual tolerance and coexistence in the Negev/Naqab. NCF is unique in being the only Arab-Jewish organization that remains focused solely on the problems confronting the Negev/Naqab. NCF considers that the State of Israel fails to respect, protect and fulfill its human rights obligations, without discrimination, towards the Arab Bedouin citizens in the Negev/Naqab. As a result, NCF has set as one of its goals the achievement of full civil rights and equality for all people who make the Negev/Naqab their home.

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## **Internet accessibility solutions for Bedouin students is an integral part of exercising their right to education**

*"During the COVID-19 pandemic our children lost more than a whole year of studies critical to their development due to lack of digital means. Now, the Ministry of Education has declared that 20% of the studies in the country will be technological studies. Without basic internet infrastructure in our village, and in all the other unrecognized Bedouin villages, we will have no way to include our children in this important decision that will help the future generation advance academically and occupationally. We demand the full attention of the authorities regarding this problem, which will only get worse with the development of studies throughout the country, which we currently cannot participate in."*

Adnan al-Navar, a resident of an unrecognized village of Tel Arad

The long-term disparity in accessibility to Internet infrastructure and endpoint devices reflect Israeli society. Students in the Negev Bedouin society are at the bottom of the list in terms of accessibility to these means and have been suffering for years from a lack of basic digital literacy. These disparities leave Bedouin students in the Negev significantly behind other Israeli students in their readiness for the 21st century.

During the months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the immediate need of students from the Bedouin communities in the Negev to connect to the Internet intensified. Fieldwork, evidence from the community, as well as research results, show that the inaccessibility to education, which began as a result of distance learning enacted to deal with COVID19, is still having an impact, which is far from ending, on an entire generation of Bedouin students. Since the start of the school year, outbreaks of COVID-19 in over five Bedouin communities have led to sanctions, closures and a return to the routine of non-education. In other words, the lack of access to high-speed Internet infrastructure in schools and homes prevents Bedouin students from participating in the education system on an equal footing with students in other localities in Israel.

The Bedouin population in the Negev is the poorest population in Israel. 79.6% of its children live below the poverty line (National Social Security Agency (Bituah Leumi), 2018), including 24,000 children attending kindergartens and 96,300 in primary and secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2021). The global pandemic that has led to isolation and restrictions on access to educational institutions has forced the adoption of technological solutions for distance learning and have changed the nature of the education system. The inequality that existed before, has not been adequately resolved, which leads to the perpetuation of the digital divide and the inequality between different groups of learners in relation to online learning resources.

According to evidence from the field (parents and school principals) most of the Bedouin students did not attend online classes, due to lack of computers or telephones, lack of cellular reception, or in many cases - the inability of teachers to access the Internet and the lack of school preparation for providing distance learning.

Various moves taken by the Ministry of Education, such as distribution of computers (which reached only 13% of Bedouin students) were designed to overcome the digital divide, however, the reality on the ground showed that for most students this was not sufficient.

According to a report written by Dahan and Abu-Rabi'a-Quider (2020) on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Israeli education system, hundreds of thousands of students in Israel do not have access to the technological and physical environments required for distance learning.

In the case of Bedouin children from both recognized and unrecognized villages, the transition to online learning leaves even fewer learning options. The study concluded that most educational institutions with a high percentage of students from the lowest socio-economic groups lack the ability to produce educational content appropriate for online learning. Regarding the Bedouin population in the Negev, the lack of relevant and complete data, as determined by the State Comptroller in his 2021 report, limits the adoption of appropriate public policy for the development of strategic planning.

According to a 2018 report by the Israeli Internet Association, most of the Internet infrastructure in the Arab sector is unstable. According to the 2020 Internet Association's user survey on the quality of Internet infrastructure in the Arab sector, 31% of the Arab population is "not

so satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with the quality of the Internet at home (in terms of surfing speed and connection outages), compared to only 22% of the general population. Also, 45% of the general population testified to a positive or very positive experience using the Internet for work or learning from home, compared to 30% of the Arab population. Respectively, 15% of the Arab sector reported a negative or very negative experience compared to 10% of the general population.

Internet infrastructure is not as developed in the Bedouin localities in the Negev as in Jewish localities. In fact, 51% of Arab households in Israel do not have any infrastructure and Internet connection, compared with 21.7% of Jewish households (Dahan and Abu-Rabi'a-Quider, 2020). Similar disparities have also been found with regard to home computer ownership, and computer use among Hebrew speakers is twice as high as use among Arabic speakers. According to a report by the National Council for Children in Israel (2020), 52% of Arabic-speaking students do not have a computer available, in contrast to 35% of Hebrew-speaking students. About 56% of students in Arabic-speaking schools do not have a stable and strong Internet connection, as compared to 30% of the students who speak Hebrew.

For the Bedouin communities in the Negev, there is no specific data or research led by the Ministry of Education or the Central Bureau of Statistics, which usually does not include the population of the unrecognized Bedouin villages in its compilations. However, evidence from the field indicates that the situation in both the recognized and unrecognized villages in the Negev is worse in comparison to Jewish populations.

On September 2, 2021, the Negev Coexistence Forum, the Internet Association, and the Clinic for International Human Rights at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem appealed to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economy, and the Ministry of Communications to find Internet accessibility solutions for Bedouin villages in the Negev. As to date, the organizations have not received a response.

As such, the organizations demand that:

- A. The Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Education immediately begin in developing a strategic plan to quickly connect and expand access to computers to Bedouin schools and

communities in order to reduce the problem of Internet accessibility in the short and medium term.

- B. We demand that the Ministry of Education take action to reduce the dropout rate among the thousands of students from the Bedouin population in the Negev and provide culturally adapted solutions in the Arabic language to enable online learning in private homes for continuity of learning, as well as in educational institutions, including teacher training.

Internet access is part of the right to education in international and Israeli law and is included in all the Ministry of Education's programs and goals. State institutions must provide immediate temporary solutions for Internet access until the resolution of infrastructure issues which the State is working towards.

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NCF invests much effort in documenting the Negev/Naqab through various audio-visual projects. The pictures featuring in this report are part of the project *Through a child lens*, where NCF provides video and still cameras to Arab Bedouin children who document their everyday lives. The products of the various projects are used to raise awareness of the situation of the Bedouin population in the Negev/Naqab, through participation in film festivals, exhibitions in Israel and around the world, photo-albums, position papers and reports – such as this one.



*Photo: Husayn `Abū al-Qi`ān, 2021*

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In accordance with the law, the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality is proud to note that as a result of cooperation with friendly countries and international organizations that promote human rights, most of the funding for our activities comes from "foreign entities."



