



The Bedouins of the Negev and the Implementation of Sustainable Development Programs: The Case Study of Qasr al-Sir Village

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Abstract

The article is a report from the fieldwork carried out in a Bedouin village of Qasr al-Sir in the Negev in Israel. The aim of the realized research field project was to critically analyze the sustainable development programs which have been implemented in the village by Bustan – a non-governmental organization from Be’er Sheva. In the first section of the paper’s main body there is a description of historical, cultural, social and economic aspects of the current situation of the Bedouins living in the region. The second part focuses solely on the village where the research was carried out, i.e. Qasr al-Sir. It is followed by a section providing a report on Bustan’s activities in the village. The fourth section consists of descriptions of five sustainable development programs, which have been implemented in the Bedouin community, i.e. PermaNegev, Negev Unplugged Tours, Eco Khan, empowering of Bedouin women, and teaching English. The article is concluded with a sketch of problems stemming from the cultural differences between Bedouins and Bustan’s westerners, which may be held responsible for delays or failures in implementation of the planned programs.

Key words: Bedouins, the Negev region, sustainable development, sustainable development programs

INTRODUCTION

The paper presents results of field research carried out from December 2011 till February 2012 and during a follow-up visit in July 2014 in a Bedouin village of Qasr al-Sir located in the northern part of the Negev desert in Israel. The goal of the research project was to describe and analyze the cultural factors influence of Bedouin tribes on the absorption of external sustainable development programs. In this paper I will focus only on the first of these aspects, i.e. the description of the programs being carried out by an organization called Bustan in Qasr al-Sir, and although I will try to remain in a sphere of description a certain evaluation, if only on the language level, is inevitable.

There were two main reasons why the community living in Qasr al-Sir was chosen as my research subject. Firstly, it is one of few Bedouin villages legally recognized and accepted by the state of Israel (which has a grand influence on the settlement's infrastructure as well as on living situation of its inhabitants and opportunities they have). Secondly, it is a model place of implementing sustainable development projects by a non-governmental organization Bustan (which operates from the city of Be'er Sheva that lies approximately 30 kilometers away from the village).

The main body of the article, preceded by a short methodological explanation, consists of three main parts, namely, (1) a section introducing the historical, cultural and economic situation of Bedouins in the Negev, (2) presentation of another main actor in the picture, i.e. Bustan – an organization responsible for planning and implementing sustainable development programs in Qasr al-Sir, and finally (3) a discussion of the programs.

METHODS

Due to the nature of the analyzed subject, the methodology chosen for the research project is specific to the field research and social sciences, in particular ethnography and cultural anthropology. The choice of particular methods to be used came quite naturally and was determined by the subject of the study, i.e. the design and implementation of particular sustainable development programs, as well as its goal – an attempt to come up with their honest depiction, i.e. such that would be burdened with the least possible subjective inputs.

For collecting data the following methods were used: theoretical studies before going and during the stay in the field (the materials came mainly from the Center for Bedouin Studies at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev), participatory observation, free-form interviews, qualitative interviews. For data processing I used the analysis of the subject literature, analytic method and synthetic method.

THE BEDOUINS OF THE NEGEV

In order to fully comprehend the actual situation of the people living in Qasr al-Sir it is necessary to get acquainted, if only briefly, with the historical, political, social and geographical context the Bedouins from the Negev live in. It is important to learn who Bedouins are, where they come from historically, where they live in the Negev, their current social and economic situation – the place they occupy today in the Israeli society, their problems pertinent to employment and material status.

The term “Bedouin” comes from the Arabic word “desert” and is referred to tribes of Arabs who lead, in accordance with their tradition, pastoral desert-dwelling life. The first documented settlements of nomads in Sinai date back to 5,000 BC. Before the formation of the State of Israel in 1948 there were 95 Bedouin tribes living in the Negev, or Al-Naqab desert. The majority of them migrated from the Arabian Desert, Transjordan, Egypt and the Sinai in the 18th and 19th century. Traditionally they are pastoral, half-nomadic people who settle down close to water sources. Very early, approximately in the 7th century CE they adopted Sunni Islam.

Before the state of Israel was formed there were approximately 90,000 Bedouins living in the Negev. Their pastoral lifestyle necessitated a semi-nomadic way of life, a seasonal movement and their travels „centered around historical villages that were organized according to a traditional system of individual and collective land ownership” (UKTF 2012, p. 3). The last point regarding land possession turned out to be of great importance for the current Bedouins-the state of Israel relationship.

In 1949 the Arab Bedouins who did not emigrate to Jordan or Egypt and remained in the Negev were transferred to an area called “Siyag” (the restricted zone), which included the territory bordered today by the settlements of Yeruham, Dimona, Arad and Be’er Sheva. Most of the restricted zone was not included in any local authority and hence defined as with no jurisdiction apart from the direct authority of the Ministry of Interior. The villages located on that land are considered “unrecognized” by the state (Almi 2003, p. 11).

The second phase of the Bedouin settlement project started in the mid-1960 and lasted till the end of the 1980s (Hanson 2013, p. 8). Siyag, which had been kept under military

administration, was finally closed in 1966 and resettlement to newly built towns began. Seven of such towns (“known by the residents as ‘concentration townships’ or ‘ghettoes;’” Almi 2003, 11) were constructed within the restricted area. Houses in the unrecognized settlements were torn down. Unfortunately, new houses were designed and built with no consideration of the Bedouin culture and their daily routines. The plans neither took into account the much larger size of Bedouin families in comparison to Jewish settlers (in 2007 the average number of children per woman among Muslims is 3.9, which among Jewish women only 2.8; 19.8% of Arab households have seven persons or more, compared with 4% of Jewish households – Habib 2008, pp. 1-2), nor their attachment to animal breeding, mainly goats and camels.

The third phase started in 2003. Since that year so far “unrecognized” villages have been progressively legally recognized by the state of Israel (so far 11 of them) (Sadik 2013). The village that is a subject for this study – Qasr al-Sir was recognized in 2003. Life in Qasr al-Sir as well as in other recognized settlements has improved drastically. On the other hand homes in the unrecognized villages were kept being demolished by Israeli forces. In August 2010, for example, in Al Arakib, a village of population of approximately 300 people 40 houses were torn down. The village was stormed by the Israeli troops for the third time that month (Tramel 2010, p. 13).

In September 2011 a new plan was formulated for the Bedouins of the Negev – The Bill on the Arrangement of Bedouin Settlement in the Negev, the so-called the Praver Plan (UKTF 2011), which, in my opinion, may be counted as the forth phase of resettlement. It aims at relocating of 40,000 to 70,000 Bedouins to the state-recognized local councils areas. According to the Prime Minister Office, the bill was based on four main principles: (1) Providing for the status of Bedouin communities in the Negev; (2) Economic development for the Negev's Bedouin population; (3) Resolving claims over land ownership; and (4) Establishing a mechanism for binding, implementation and enforcement, as well as timetables (PMO 2011). The bill, although heavily criticized by both the United Nations and European Parliament, was approved by the Israeli Knesset in June 2013. In December 2013 the plan was halted and it is not clear if it has been shelved or temporarily postponed (Aderet, Lis 2013).

According to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Bedouin population in the Negev amounts to 210,000, of which approximately 120,000 live in seven towns (established in the second phase of the resettlement) and in eleven recognized villages and approximately 90,000 in so-called “non-regulated” communities. According to the Praver Plan, 30,000 of the last group were planned to be relocated (IMFA 2013).

It should be stressed that Bedouin population – the fastest growing in the word is perceived as a certain threat by the Israeli government. It is estimated that by 2020 their

population in the Negev will be 300,000 (ILA 2013, p. 1), and with the growing numbers come the growing political influence. According to the Israel Land Authority, the Bedouins have already claimed the ownership of land that is 12 times the size of Tel-Aviv (ILA 2013, p. 1).

As one can see, the state of Israel so far has not come up with a good plan for its Bedouin minority. Like most other Arabs who remained in Israel after 1948 the Bedouins were granted Israeli citizenship, by many it is considered as an inferior citizenship status. It is pointed out that even today many Bedouins do not enjoy basic civil rights like e.g. the right to vote and be elected (Swirski, Hasson 2006, p. 5). On the other hand, many Bedouins voluntarily serve in Israel's military – the Israel Defense Forces. In 2012 it was estimated that half a percentage of eligible Bedouins enlist (Sales 2012) and it should be noted that it is not mandatory for them, as it is the case for the most Jewish citizens. There are even whole battalions composed solely of Bedouins volunteering to serve in the IDF (IDF 2014). Many Bedouins have adapted and lead successful lives in Israel. The Director of Bustan – the non-governmental organization implementing sustainability programs in Qasr al-Sir may serve as a good example here.

Still, tenths of thousands of Bedouins live in poverty and inhumane conditions. Regardless whether they reside in Bedouin urban centers, recognized or unrecognized villages. It seems that the same lack of understanding of the Bedouin culture by the Israeli government led to a failure in organizing proper dwellings in the second phase of resettlement makes it unable to find an acceptable political solution today (e.g. the Praver Plan and its breakdown). Bedouins are Sunni Muslims but as Bailey puts it:

The Bedouins' extreme exposure to the desert's harsh environment, and their scant recourse to help in the event of adversity, have made their quest for the means to attenuate their fears particularly strong. This quest has led them to adhere to practices that give them the sense of exercising a degree of control over the recurrent afflictions of nature. (...) Islam provides a caption for the overall religious identity (...), it is but one of sever belief systems practiced by them simultaneously. Moreover, the survival of the Bedouins' pre-Islamic, environment-oriented, practices during the fourteen centuries since the advent of Islam indicates that they have served the Bedouins well. (Bailey 1982, p. 65)

On the account on my research in the fieldwork I should agree with the above statement. It seems that Islam is merely a part, although the constitutional one, of the Bedouins' worldview. Their connection to nature due to their centuries-old pastoral and semi-nomadic way of life appears as equally important. The existence of these two dimensions of the Bedouins' ideological framework made me choose that group for my research in the first place. Both, close and direct connection to the environment, and Islam, which creed presupposes and propagates intergenerational justice and intrinsic value of nature (Bernat 2012, pp. 36-38) make a Bedouin

village a perfect ground for implementation of sustainable development programs, including permaculture, sustainable building as well as women empowering projects.

QASR AL-SIR

The village of Qasr al-Sir is situated one kilometer east of the road 25, approximately 30 km south of Be'er Sheva and 3 km west of Dimona. The state built an asphalt road that connects the main road with the government-built facilities, i.e. the school and the clinic. However, the main street in the village has not been asphalted.

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in December 2011 the population of the village amounted to 1,090 people (CSB 2011). This number differs significantly from other estimations that give the number 3,000 (Riemer 2012, 44; Rudnitzky, Abu Ras 2012, 15), and the number I was given in 2012 by the locals, namely 3,500 (which was followed by the prediction that the number of the villagers will undoubtedly reach 8,000 in 2020). Qasr al-Sir is a home for the al-Hawashla tribe composed of three family groups: Almanazia, Gom Hasam, and Alsawalma. By tradition Sheik is the leader of the village and every family group has its representatives in the village council. The unemployment rate in Qasr al-Sir is extremely high – approximately only 50% of men and 1% of women have jobs (Riemer 2012, p. 52). The ones who are employed have rather simple jobs and are hired for uncomplicated tasks that do not require high qualifications, like drivers, cleaners, or janitors in the nearby towns (Dimona, Be'er Sheva) or do work of a seasonal nature in agriculture, e.g. harvesting peppers in the neighboring *kibbutzim* or *moshavim*.

In 2003 the village was granted the status of being “recognized” by the state, what has brought a significant improvement in the quality of infrastructure. The state built a clinic and a school at the outskirts of the village. The school is especially important for female pupils. In 2004, according to the Central Bureau of Statistic 10% of Arab women had never gone to school (Abu Asbah 2007, p. 2). It should be also remembered that Negev Bedouins are very conservative in regard to gender equality. As I was told, many fathers would not allow their daughters to go to school to another village because it requires them to commute by themselves (usually in a *sherut*, or a shared taxi).

There is running water in Qasr al-Sir but no proper pipeline infrastructure has been built. The houses are connected to the water system by thin rubber hoses curling on the ground. Leaks happen quite often and it is not easy to find it. The whole system is rather provisional and flimsy. The lack of sewerage brings about risks of pollution and degasses caused by inadequate sanitary

standards. There is an immediate need for a cesspool. The village, in spite of enjoying the status of being “legal” has no connection to the grid, although at the distance of less than 100 meters there are transmission lines. The villagers use electricity generators fueled by oil. Due to high prices the supply of electricity is time-limited to just a few hours per day. However, more and more inhabitants use photovoltaic panels for electricity generation.

BUSTAN

Founded in 1999 in Be'er Sheva, Bustan is a non-governmental organization that works in and for the Bedouin and Jewish communities in the Negev region. Its name – *Bustan* denotes in both languages, Arabic and Hebrew, a fruit-yielding orchard. A *bustan*, as it is written on the organization's webpage, “is sustainable due to its diversity: one plant is a natural insecticide for another, another acts as a trellis for a vine, another preserves water in its roots and sustains neighboring plants.” (Bustan 2014). In the mission of the organization it is stated that “Bustan's vision is to see fair resource allocation, promotion of self-sufficiency via affordable green technologies and 1st-world environmental regulation matching 1st-world consumption, as mainstream” (Bustan 2014).

Two work of Bustan aims also at bringing together two feuding peoples living in the region – Arabs and Jews. They recognize the political aspects of development and the impact it has on the environment as well as social and economic reality. There are no doubts that sustainable development is a banner of Bustan – the organization realizes in practice its ethical postulates. As Ciałozala writes: “The formula of sustainable development belongs to the tradition of universal ideas, such as pacifism, (...) environment protection movement, which in principle have always stood against the existing setup of political and economic interests” (2004, p. 56) And further on she continues: “Their fundamental power was referring to the public opinion, civic movements and international non-governmental organizations” (Ciałozala 2004, p. 56).

Bustan, although operating locally in the Negev, has always been internationally funded. It is financially supported by private donors, mainly from Israel, the United States and Germany. Its goal is to attain financial independence (thanks to the programs it provides, Bustan partially reached that goal in 2013).

During last several years Bustan has operated mainly in Qasr al-Sir, where it focuses on implementing sustainable development programs. The village is treated as a specific experimental ground that in the future may serve as a model for other regions or communities requiring organizational, economic, environmental help or assistance.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Currently there are five ongoing programs carried out in Qasr al-Sir by Bustan's employees and voluntaries. They are: (1) PermaNegev; (2) Negev Unplugged Tours; (3) Eco Khan; (4) Economic and social empowering of Bedouin women; and (5) Program of teaching English available to both, men and women.

The PermaNegev program consists in 10-week course of permaculture – a kind of ecological design aiming at creating self-regulating agricultural systems in the image of natural ecosystems. More precise definition of permaculture elucidates it in the following way: permaculture is “consciously designed landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fiber and energy for provision of local needs” (Holmgren 2013, p. 3). The course of ecological farming is complemented by an opportunity of learning Arabic from people from abroad. The participants, mainly students from the USA live and work in the village. In summer 2013 the regular price for the program was \$2000.

Bustan organizes also Negev Unplugged Tours – ethnographical day or night trips in Qasr al-Sir. This program is targeted to the people from the outside of the village, especially school youth, who are keen to learn about Bedouins' culture, lifestyle and cuisine. Nowadays, a dozen or so tours are being organized per year.

Eco Khan is the largest infrastructural project carried out by Bustan and the villagers in Qasr al-Sir. It consists of revitalization of the center of the village, including a few buildings and tents (Eco Khan), which serve as a living and sleeping areas for the participants of the PermaNegev program. Eco Khan is also a place where presentations and lectures for the guests of the Negev Unplugged Tours take place. Apart from that Eco Khan is a meeting point for the local community as well as Bustan's employees and volunteers. The area is partially fenced; it is a place where all agricultural and permacultural activities are carried out. There is an olive garden and a greenhouse in time to be surrounded by fruit trees.

Probably the most successful program so far has been the project of empowering the village women. Recognizing the very difficult situation of the female members of the Bedouin community in the job market (they are doubly excluded, as Bedouins and as women) Bustan supports the idea of creating working positions in the village. A building for a communal kitchen was erected by the villagers and Bustan's employees and volunteers. There, Bedouin women prepare meals to be sold to the participants of other programs – PermaNegev and Negev

Unplugged Tours as well as to members of the local community. Also a sewing room was opened in the same building. There, clothes and souvenirs are being produced to be then sold mainly to the people coming with the Negev Unplugged Tours. Moreover, some of the women grow vegetables in jointly erected greenhouses.

The program conducted by Bustan in Qasr al-Sir concerned teaching English by volunteers to the local community, both men and women. The continuation of the project has not been verified. The aim of the program was to increase the qualification of the villagers and improve their situation on the job market. English is the third most used language in Israel (after Hebrew and Arabic). The classes were held once a week in two groups – for men and women, by a male and female tutor respectively.

CONCLUSIONS

Bustan is definitely a great example how various sustainable development programs, i.e. environmental, social and economic can be implemented in a holistic manner. Of course, the implementation of each of the aforementioned programs has encountered many difficulties, especially of organizational nature, which at least partially stem from the difference of the cultural conditioning and values between Bustan's "western" employees and volunteers and Bedouins. A detailed analysis of that problem would surely be a fruitful and interesting topic for further research. The particular problems that come to mind are: Bedouins' very specific understanding of ownership (private vs. common), their deterministic attitude and the lack of individual self-agency (which may be quite accurately summed up by an Arabic proverb *Insha'Allah* – "if Allah wills"), their relation to time. Naturally, those problems, if they should be considered as such, are a result of my "western" upbringing and the culture I grew up in.

Working in a different part of the world, in a different culture, one should always be aware of the fact that their culture is just one of many, and hence we do not possess the right to forcibly impose our way of thinking, our technologies, and finally our values on others, of course, in the exception of the ones we hold to be universal. Still, such a situation has to be deemed inevitable if two people from two various cultures meet. We should be aware, however, that bringing in a new technology, for example, into less technologically developed communities, will necessarily have an impact on it (Bernat 2010, pp. 26-27). Often, without even realizing the possible harmful consequences such people may adopt ideologies, agendas, technologies, lifestyles, or even plant or animal species. Hence, any such an introduction, regardless whether it

is the idea of sustainable development or a plastic bottle, should be accompanied by the culture embedded proper information on the issue.

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