VOICES IN THE DESERT
LEARNING FROM ENGAGEMENT
WITH TWO BEDOUIN COMMUNITIES IN THE ISRAELI NEGEV REGION

Photograph by Matthew Parker, (Wikimedia Commons)

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The Heschel Center for Sustainability
Partners

- The Living Knowledge Network, with EC (FP7) funding through the PERARES project
- The Israeli project ‘Gateway to Community Engaged Research’, hosted by the Heschel Center for Sustainability
- The Department of Politics and Government at the Ben Gurion University in the Negev, with funding from the Council for Higher Education.
Background

- Limited community engagement with research in Israel, particularly in the fields of environment, health and sustainability

- Existing models of academy-community cooperation (law clinics, courses, planning labs, internships, ‘activist researchers’)

- But, not always suited to community needs, no formalised structure (courses, activist researchers), mostly limited to academic year, lack of funding, no acknowledgment for academics involved or academic accreditation for student’s work in the community, sustainability issues.
Science-in-Society Call 2008

• Structuring Public Engagement in Research
• Science Communication: From ‘transmission’ to ‘interaction’ (‘understanding’ → ‘engagement’)
• ...engagement that will make a difference to research strategies...
• ...broadest European coverage...

→ PERARES: 26 partners, 17 countries, 4 years, EC-Grant 2.7 Million Euro
The Negev Region

‘Ha-negev’, Al-Naqab
12,500 km², 60% of the territory of Israel but only 8% of the population.
Arid and semi-arid climate
Periphery of Israel
Local municipalities low on most socio-economic indicators
Bedouin about 25-30% of the population.
The Bedouin in the Negev

Bedouin have settled in the Negev desert for several centuries. Traditionally a pastoral, semi-nomadic people who cycled their land settling near water sources. Limits to their autonomy start in 19th & 20th century.

Map showing the Bedouin tribes around 1908. Source: Father Antonin Jaussen "Les coutumes des Arabs au Pays de Moab" ("Arab customs in the Land of Moab") published in Paris in 1908.

Traditional Bedouin camel race in the Negev desert, near Arad, Israel. Photograph by Shy Halatzi (Wikimedia Commons).
Conflict with the State

Since 1948 the Bedouin are in conflict with the Israeli state over land rights and traditional vs. modern settlements. Problem of 'unrecognised settlements'.
Conflict with the State

1960s-80s – first attempt at resettlement (7 Bedouin towns founded)
2004 – A regional council created with a limited recognition of settlements.
2008 to present – various plans for resettlement.

Demolished house in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Alsara, January 2008, Photograph by Neukoln (Wikimedia Commons)

Photograph of Rahat by David Shankbone (Wikimedia Commons)
The Bedouin in the Negev

Currently: 191,000 in the Negev, of which 120,000 in towns, 66,000 in unrecognised settlements and 5000 in the Abu Basma regional council.

The Bedouin population is consistently at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

Qasr A-Sir, photograph by Meira Hanson
Examining the potential health effects of living in near proximity to a high tension wire in the Bedouin municipality of Tel Sheva

Photograph by Eliad Tamir
Founded in 1969, the first of 7 towns in the Israeli government’s urban resettlement of the Bedouin. At the bottom of the national municipal socio-economic ladder.
A 161 kw high tension wire (HTW) crosses the town’s southern neighbourhoods for 1.9 km.

A local plan authorised housing despite conflict with rules about proximity to HTWs.

Locals concerned about health effects of exposure.
- Project initiated with a professor of public health at Ben Gurion University, affiliated with Physicians for Human Rights (PHR)
- Information gathered over 2 years by:
  - 2 students in a course on planning and human rights
  - A student interning at PHR
  - 2 students in the course ‘Clinic: a right to health and environmental justice’
- Locals assisted with introductions and translation.
Results

Out of 46 households within an est. 20m proximity of the HTW 31 were surveyed.

Findings: no statistically significant excess in morbidity and mortality from cancer or miscarriages that might be attributed to the HTW.

Next steps: legal and/or political action
CLINIC: THE RIGHT TO HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Review of environmental health hazards in the Bedouin village Qasr A-Sir
Qasr A-Sir

Recognised by the Israeli government in 2003

Part of the Abu-Basma regional council

Prioritised for infrastructure development

Issues of development from above/below

Source: lehava Rahat (Pikiwiki)
Access to Water
A septic tank in Qasr
The project

Report ‘commissioned’ by ‘Bustan’ on environmental health hazards in the village, including a survey of the population’s rating of the hazards.

Bustan: Sustainable Community Action for Land and People is an NGO that works in the Bedouin and Jewish communities of the Negev. Through analysis, education, and action, it is the mission of Bustan to work for fair resource allocation, as well as social and environmental justice for all peoples in the region.

Photographs from www.bustan.org
The environment is all the physical, chemical and biological factors external to the human host, and all related behaviours, but excluding those natural environments that cannot reasonably be modified.

This definition excludes behaviour not related to environment, as well as behaviour related to the social and cultural environment, genetics, and parts of the natural environment.

The students & course coordinator developed a questionnaire based on definitions studied in class and a review of the existing literature as well as an interview with the village’s head.
The Dimona River
Results

Due to local cultural issues (men working with a female translator) and local politics (involving different extended families) only 20 residents were surveyed in the time available and the results were not statistically significant.
Achievements

Tel Sheva
- A mapping of the majority of the homes near the HTW.
- Issues identified other than mortality and morbidity (effects on quality of life, animal husbandry, etc.)
- Local awareness to the issue.

Qasr Al-Sir
- A provisional description of local health hazards.
- A questionnaire that can be used in other Bedouin villages.
- A potential local initiative to organise locally on the Dimona River situation.

A hands-on learning experience for the students involved
Problems encountered

- Language barriers
- Cultural issues influenced the information gathering and (probably) the results
- Local politics somewhat influenced the information gathering
- Researcher’s time constraints

Tel Sheva

- Language barriers
- Cultural differences significantly influenced the information gathering
- Local politics significantly influenced the information gathering
- Lack of contact in the local community

Qasr Al-Sir
Lessons learned

1. Work with a community group or a community based organisation
2. Work with an organisation that has the capacity to participate in the project (may conflict with the above)
3. Match methods used to cultural context
4. Identify alternative methods for collecting information in future Bedouin-Jewish research partnerships
5. A student project must be for at least an academic year
6. Try adapt the course to the project rather than the project to the course
7. Structural: academic incentives for the researchers involved.

Long term funding!!!
Participants

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Thank you for your attention!

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