Introduction

Of all the minorities living in Israel the Bedouin population represents the most disadvantaged group. Bedouin society in the south of the country numbers some 180,000 individuals, about 25% of the population of the Negev as a whole. Nearly 80,000 live as displaced persons in scattered settlements unrecognized by the Israeli government. The socio-economic status of the Bedouins is the lowest in the country with close to 60% of all families living below the official poverty line. Educational levels are consistently low with only very few individuals reaching higher education levels.

For years, government policy focused on settling Bedouin communities in a few concentrated townships and villages. More than half of the Bedouin population now lives in such “recognized” towns but these were developed along standard western lines, all too often with little input from the inhabitants themselves, little consideration to traditional, social and cultural needs, and little concern for ecological dimensions of living sustainably in a desert habitat. The seven planned Bedouin towns are the poorest of all municipalities in the country with high rates of joblessness, crime, and high school drop outs. Conditions in the unrecognized settlements are even worse, with most people deprived of basic services: electricity, clean running water, proper waste handling, phone services, schools, and health care facilities. In addition, the Bedouin society is undergoing a process of forced, accelerated transition from a nomadic, pastoral existence to a settled way of life in an industrial world. The process is putting enormous pressure on all its traditions, institutions, culture and mores.

Stressful conditions of a society in the throes of deep cultural transition has been further aggravated by a chronic lack of economic opportunities, the highest birth rate in the world, land disputes with Israeli authorities, pressure from military needs for training grounds, persistent exposure to toxic pollution and hazardous industrial waste, an uncaring bureaucracy, discrimination, and a disinterested public. All of these combine to create a vicious cycle of deteriorating conditions suppressing potentials for development, well-being and hope. The plight of the Bedouin populations has persisted for years despite full citizenship and a proud tradition of service in Israel’s Defense Forces. It has been increasingly recognized in recent years as a potentially gravely destabilizing situation, one of the most critical problems in the broader question of a peaceful, democratic coexistence with the larger Arab-Israeli minority.

The specific situation of the Bedouin community has been variously described as a human, social, economic, ecological, and security disaster. Yet, in close proximity to hopelessness and poverty, some of the country’s most advanced centers of science, research and learning are flourishing. Technology and research institutions at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, including the Robert Arnow Center for Bedouin Studies and Development, as well as The Blaustein Institute for Desert Research, with its Zuckerberg Institute for Water Research, the National Solar Energy Center, and the
Desert Architecture and Urban Planning Unit, may offer the very resources and tools which, if effectively combined, can help lift the Bedouin community from a dire state and deliver on a promise of a sustainable, prosperous future.

As David Ben-Gurion, first Prime Minister of Israel observed long ago: “The Negev offers the greatest opportunity to accomplish everything from the beginning.” This may still be the case today, particularly with respect to developing new, bold approaches for improving the long term prospect of the noble, proud and capable Bedouin community.

Project Concept

The underlying concept for this proposed project is to contribute to the long term welfare of the Bedouins by developing and implementing a radically innovative, demonstration model for a sustainable desert community. The project will assist a selected pioneering Bedouin group to develop its own, self-reliant approach to development, faithful to key aspects of its tradition, driven by fundamental sustainability principles, and combining key social, educational, technological, economic, and spiritual elements in one comprehensive approach.

In interviews and conversations over the years, many Bedouin leaders have expressed their frustrations with standard approaches to development imposed on their communities. Many have consistently voiced their desire to have the opportunity to develop their own lives in a rural environment, following time honored traditions and practices, and developing an independent livelihood close to the land. The proposed project will work toward achieving such a goal by building on traditional wisdom and integrating appropriate community development practices with capacity building, and breakthrough technologies in alternative energy, food production, waste recycling, and desert habitation. It will seek to build a viable, self-sufficient economy incorporating a variety of key components including intensive crop raising, aquaculture, animal husbandry, commerce, and eco-tourism. In particular, the intent is to amplify advantages inherent to potential synergies in the interactions between such areas of activity.

A four-fold purpose will underpin and guide the development of the project:

- To work with a small Bedouin group in developing a model of a peaceful, self-reliant, sustainable desert community.

- To incorporate a set of rigorous sustainability principles in guiding the plan and afford the Sustainability Laboratory its first opportunity to develop a pilot of this kind.

- To demonstrate the effectiveness of the Design Science approach in addressing community development efforts of this nature and scope.

- To develop a scalable, replicable model of relevance to the rest of the Bedouin community, to other community development efforts in the region and, possibly, to other arid areas in the world.
Critical Success Factors and Potential Significance

This project represents an ambitious concept. It will require dedication and considerable effort to plan and implement. A number of factors will be critical to ensure ultimate success:

- A stable, willing Bedouin community.
- Forward looking, dedicated local leadership able to articulate and lead authentic local priorities.
- Participation of key “external” players possessing the necessary technical resources and expertise.
- Secured resources to jumpstart the project and support its development to the point of self-sufficiency.
- The co-operation of the necessary Israeli authorities.

Success of this project could have far reaching implications. In addition to demonstrating an innovative approach to development, providing creative livelihood and ensuring well-being of the directly engaged community, it could empower and inspire the broader Bedouin population to pursue proactive initiatives for securing a brighter future; it may encourage the Israeli authorities to pursue more enlightened policies in relation to the Bedouin population; and, it may offer a model for similar, disadvantaged groups in other countries, and enrich the sustainable development debate in general.

Other Efforts

Other NGOs are active in the region with a variety of projects. All represent important activities usually focused on a particular topic or a few burning issues of significance to the community.

The uniqueness of the proposed project is in taking a comprehensive approach to the realization of an innovative model, integrating, in one demonstration project, all the aspects that are essential for breaking through the log-jam of continuing to live with things as they are and developing instead, an enduring sustainable community.

Laying the Necessary Foundations

It is proposed that approximately a year’s effort will be invested in developing a thorough project concept and a project development plan. This first major phase will be devoted to laying the necessary foundations for the project and achieving the following:

- Early assessment of concept validity and actual implementation prospects.
• Refinement of project concept based on discussion with potential stakeholders on the ground.

• Identification of a Bedouin community willing to fully participate in the project.

• Commitment of a strong local leadership.

• Identification and recruitment of potential project partners: key players in the Bedouin community; environmental and other NGOs; academia, technology research centers, and others.

• Identification and preliminary contact with key stakeholders: government agencies; planning, local and military authorities; key groups within the Bedouin community; and sources of potential political and financial support.

• Establishment of a local project team.

• Development of project strategy and overall project design.

• Launching of selected, preliminary capacity building steps.

• Development of detailed project plan and full project proposal.

Assuming the necessary resources are in place, this in depth planning phase will require approximately 12 months to complete.

**Taking Initial Preparatory Steps**

In order to minimize risk, the project could be launched with an early preparatory phase during which a series of steps will be taken to establish a more refined project concept and budget, and galvanize commitment for the full planning phase. This early preparatory step could be accomplished within approximately four calendar months. It would culminate in a joint strategy meeting of key potential participants, during which roles would be agreed upon and initial tasks will be laid out.

This early preparatory step, itself, could begin with a short reconnaissance mission aimed at ascertaining validity, assuring interest in principle, and establishing the necessary connections for assembling the early project infrastructure.

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