

The Question of Environmental Justice in Israel

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The question of environmental justice is central in Israel, as it is a country with severely limited land, growing number of population with significant minorities, limited resources and acute security concerns. Neglecting the issue of environmental justice can lead to broader geopolitical implications in the region in the pursuit of peace and regional sustainability. Thus the [Association of Environmental Justice in Israel \(AEJI\)](#) was set up in 2009, focusing on the issues of environmental justice from both the grassroots level and research and policy oriented activity. We sat down with the director general of AEJI, **Carmit Lubanov**, in Tel Aviv to discuss the work of her organization, the environmental issues in Israel and the international cooperation in the field.

The Issue of Environmental Justice in Israel

Israel is a small and densely populated country which is characterized by growing population (about 1,8% annually), due to natural growth, immigration and rising life expectancy, and economic growth. Today the country covers an area of 20 000 sq kilometers and has a population composed of 75% Jews, 20% Arabs (including Druze and Bedouins) and around 4% are other groups (,mainly non-Arab Christians, other religious).). The external and internal security concerns shape the majority of the country's policies' priorities. These facts combined with socioeconomic gaps (among the highest in the OECD), political, cultural and historic factors have a direct effect on the question of environmental justice and consequently have to be taken into consideration.

In addition there are numerous environmental problems. Today some of the biggest environmental problems in Israel are air pollution in the major cities like Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The main sources of air pollution are industry, transportation and electricity generation, which are responsible for the most health damages in Israel. One of the most polluted cities is Haifa due to its high concentration of heavy industrial plants, including an oil refinery and chemical and petrochemical industries, with high transport load and port activities. In addition to air pollution also water pollution especially in the rivers is a major concern. As these problems affect mainly the environment, the citizens health and the (already sensitive) ecological balance, some other environmental problems have direct geopolitical implications.

A concern shared by most of the Middle-Eastern countries is water shortage. Total of 1/3 of Israel's water supplies comes from the shrinking lake of Galilee and with scarce water resources Israel has developed various world leading technologies in preserving water. One such technology is desalination of seawater. In total today Israel produces around 40% of its domestic water use from seawater desalination and it is actually creating a water surplus. What is more, Israel is a pioneer in new breakthrough technology in the field of solar energy technology, as over 90% of Israeli homes use solar energy for producing hot water. Whereas technology has helped to relieve some of the most acute environmental problems that could have effect on the security and geopolitics of the country, many environmental concerns remain that are directly associated to the question of environmental justice.

Implementing Projects that Could Make a Change

Carmit explains, that before establishing the AEJI in 2009 she with her team mapped all of the other environmental organizations' activities and decided to focus on the environmental justice by doing research and evaluating of the environmental inequality situation in an empirical way. Thus from one side, the AEJI aims to support the inter-connectedness of society, environment and decision-making framework in Israel, by doing research based on empirical research to make policy recommendations, while promoting environmental justice values, from the other side, activities are aimed to promote the civic participation of minorities and residents of the periphery.

The notion of “environmental justice” as such was born in the USA in the mid-1980s in relation to the civil rights movement. Therefore this idea has tight connotations to the civil rights movement, as it emphasizes that environmental equality is a basic right for all citizens. In recent years, the direct link between the environmental and social injustice in Israel has become clear, as the disadvantaged groups in sense of environment, which are mostly the ethnic minority communities, are deprived of enjoyment of many primary environmental benefits. Carmit explains, that this is due to the combination of neglect for years from one side by the government and from the other side the minority's own community leaders different priorities.

In a recent project AEJI built up a profile of all the municipalities in Israel and provided this research in a socio-economic focus. Five categories were taken into consideration: access to water, sewer, pollution, availability of public transportation and green spaces in municipalities. According to the research the results are staggering, “For example among the 54 municipalities without any green yards only 2 of them are belong to the 6-10 upper scale of municipality ranking¹ and 95% of them are Arab municipalities”. This means that environmental issues especially in the minority communities are acute and need to be addressed both by legislative measures, by the government policy by and by civic environmental protection actions. Thus the AEJI through its research attempts to elucidate the issues related to environmental injustice and support the decision-making framework by developing tools for policy making.

Another activity of the AEJI is the empowerment of the minority communities who are disadvantaged in the sense of environmental justice and residents of the periphery, including social periphery. For example, there are still places in the country where routine garbage collection does not take place, especially in the minority communities. Without any waste containers, there is no waste separation, and without waste collection system there is no recycling. Residents in those communities dump their waste in the outskirts of the communities or simply burn it illegally. This is a direct consequence of the lack of waste collection infrastructure and environmental awareness. Therefore there is a need to increase activities in localities with poor waste management and recycling in an effort to reduce gaps and inequalities.

According to Carmit, most of the governments has somewhat neglected these communities, thus the AEJI helps to empower the leaders of these communities themselves – as the development of the environmental infrastructure was not a priority of the government, people have to take their own responsibility. The AEJI provides them with necessary tools – e.g. legal assistance, professional planners, and initiated recently a new program with Tel Aviv University aimed to

¹ All the municipalities are ranked into 10 socio-economic clusters by the Interior ministry.

develop environmental leadership for students who live in those communities. . Today there are already some legal activities the organization is undergoing: for example they provided assistance the local community residents to sue owners of a dumping site and the municipality' planning local committee where the waste site locates in its jurisdiction. The organization provides support however they make it clear that in the end the community leaders need to take responsibility, so they are the ones who need to go to court.

Today there is little connection between the Arab population and the NGOs in the green movement. Thus the AEJI targets the younger population in universities to build up environmental leadership among Arab youngsters. Today the project's target group are mostly women who are teachers in their communities, as they are the educators of other youngsters. Giving the youngsters education on environment issues in general and environmental justice and leadership in particular they have the potential to lead the change. Thus the AEJI activities are focusing on cooperation with the schools, aiming also to achieve a wider impact on the community and municipality in the long term. However, Carmit admits, "It has not been easy, as some environmental protection activities, such as national conservation by the government to reserve the Biblical areas, have been seen by the Arab communities as an act against them. The AEJI is today one of the only NGOs in Israel which is not avoid to cooperate with the Palestinians".

From Civic Action to Governmental Priority

Israel is a member of OECD and this membership has given a new impetus in the sense of climate strategy. As the result of the strong civic pressure and the criticism received from the OECD with regard to the environmental issues, as there was little governmental activity in Israel on these issues, in 2014 the Environmental Protection Ministry drafted an [environmental justice strategy](#). The long-term strategy included an environmental justice covenant between the government and its citizens, a waste management plan for minority and low-income communities, environmental national service and education and capacity building. The goal of the plan is to reduce the environmental injustice in low socioeconomic communities and the geographic and social periphery.

A recently published OECD report [Measuring and Assessing Well-Being in Israel](#) brought out that the Arab population is relatively poorer, less employed, less healthy and less educated, and consequently in general have lower quality of life. Thus making it clear that Israel has to strengthen its efforts to provide quality of life for all its citizens. Today about 1,6 million Arab, Druze and Bedouin citizens live in over 100 local communities in Israel, most of them ranking low on the socio-economic scale. They generate about 1,4 million tons of waste each year that ends up on the streets, forests, streams and open spaces or is burnt, contributing to air pollution, soil and water contamination. This has caused the social and environmental gaps to widen. Thus one of the activities of the environmental justice plan is to support waste collection and recycling in the periphery.

The environmental justice strategy that was drafted is an important part of equal economic, social and environmental opportunities. Equitable distribution of environmental costs and benefits among different population groups is based on the premise that every citizen has the right to clean air, water, land, landscape and heritage sites and protection from environmental pollution and hazards. In conclusion the wider aim of the strategy is to close the gap between low and high

socio-economic communities, between the center and periphery, between religious, ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews, and between Arab and Jews.

Israel and the Paris Climate Pact

In December 2015 during the Climate Conference an historic agreement to combat climate change was agreed by 195 nations in Paris. Among those countries [Israel agreed to take measures to reduce greenhouse gas \(GHG\) emissions](#) as a part of a global effort. Preceding this Israel has ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on the Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1996 and its Kyoto Protocol in 2004. Israel's GHG emissions contribute about 0,2% of global emissions and this is forecasted to increase significantly.

Israel's projected population growth rate is 1,8%, which is three times more than OECD' state members average. By 2030, Israel's population is expected to reach about 10,6 million, compared to 8,4 million in 2016. Its annual GDP growth per capita is high and continues to grow at a faster rate than the OECD average. Taking into consideration the projected population growth and GDP, Israel has decided that per capita target for GHG emissions reduction is appropriate and thus Israel has set the goal to reduce per capita emissions to 26% below 2005 levels by 2030. However Carmit admits, that according to her this is not ambitious enough, as per capita emissions are expected to increase more minimally, then cutting emissions per unit of GDP. In this field, AEJI has initiated in 2010 climate justice research aimed to explore the "Carbon inequality Index" according to consumption patterns by different socio-economic groups, and to formulate policy tools in the field of economy as "fair Carbon Tax", enable the government to finance the national climate plan. This research already has acknowledged international recognition when selected to be presented on the main web-site of UNEP Paris COP21, please see the references links.

Conclusion

In Israel the environment is a highly political issue as the link between environmental and social injustice has become more evident in recent years. Historically, security and terrorism issues have been priority, therefore problems of environmental concerns have not received enough attention. Thus organizations such as AEJI that start social discourse can function as catalyst fostering with their projects a change at the local and the governmental level. According to Carmit, in order for the goals of the Paris Climate Pact and the Environmental Justice Strategy to be successful, these goals need to be on the governmental agenda.

Carmit believes that the key to achieving environmental justice is to engage successfully local communities, is civic engagement. "Environmental questions should be in the local municipalities agendas and there should be a green council in every municipality. This would be a big success as it signifies a change of mindset," she explains. "The AEJI intervenes in the process and usually in the beginning there is a small fallback. Thus it can be characterized more as a marathon, then a sprint. In terms of human rights every person should have the possibility to enjoy environmental benefits However to achieve this, the civic force needs to be empowered to be independent" she concludes.

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