**Water = Life**

Ensuring the Right to Water of the Residents of the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev

The right to water is a basic right for every human being. Ensuring the right to water as an existential need means ensuring the right to life. The right to water has been established in numerous international conventions to which Israel is a signatory; accordingly, Israel is obliged to respect, protect and observe this right. As part of this obligation, Israel bears a responsibility to ensure equality in the process of supplying water to all its citizens, in accordance with the following principles:

- **Available water** - sufficient for drinking needs, the preparation of food, personal hygiene and the household.
- **Drinkable water** - ensuring protection from diseases and infections.
- **Economically accessible water** - ensuring an affordable price for all individuals.
- **Physically accessible water** - ensuring flowing water within the household.

This commitment on the part of the state is ignored in the case of the residents of the unrecognized villages in the Negev, as will be described below:

1. Some 85,000 residents of the unrecognized villages are not connected to water infrastructures. Accordingly, they are forced:
   - To purchase water containers, tractors and large quantities of water privately at high costs.
   - To invest hours waiting for the containers to be filled with water.
   - To use water that has been in the container for several days, creating potential pollution due to the development of algae and rust.

   This lack of access to water has a direct impact on personal hygiene and sanitary conditions, and even more so on the health of the residents.

2. The connection between water and health: polluted water, the lack of sanitation and hygiene combine to form the tenth most important cause of morbidity in the world. The main problem created by polluted water is intestinal infections, from diarrhea to cholera and typhus. In August, the hottest month of the year, when the “diarrhea plague” erupts, some 16,000 Bedouin children are hospitalized each year, as compared to 5,000 Jewish children.

   The shortage of water also has an impact on health. The absence of basic services at home and the community, the absence of public transport – hence, the need to walk for miles everyday to the main road and to transportation services to schools – all entail intense physical activity during the day, with a resulting loss of fluids. Due to the chronic water shortage and the uncertainty as to when the water in the container will run out and how it will be refilled, the residents are forced to use water sparingly for drinking, laundry, personal hygiene, cleaning and cooking. This austerity influences their general and environmental health. Without a healthy environment, hygiene and proper sanitation, it is difficult to protect oneself against infection with skin diseases such as scabies, and once infection has occurred, it is difficult to maintain the level of hygiene required in order to treat the infection effectively.

   In addition, comparative international figures show a close correlation between access to water and infant mortality. The better the access to flowing water, the lower the level of infant mortality. The infant mortality rate among the Bedouin Arab population in the south is the highest in Israel – almost three times the average for the population as a whole – 15.8 per 1,000 live births among the Bedouin Arabs, compared to 4.7 among the population as a whole (2004 figures). This exceptionally high figure is due largely to genetic
disorders resulting from the high rate of marriage among relatives. However, genetic disorders explain only some 40 percent of the discrepancy in the infant mortality rate. It is reasonable to assume that an additional reason for the high mortality rate is the lack of access to water.

3. By contrast to most of the population of Israel, in order to connect residents of the unrecognized villages to water, they must receive authorization for a private water connection from Mekorot. This authorization is supposed to be granted by the Drinking Water Allocation Committee managed by the Bedouin Administration, which is a subdivision of the Israel Lands Administration. The committee is supposed to recommend to the Water Commissioner whether to approve or reject applications for connection. In practice, the Commissioner functions as a rubber stamp for the decisions of the Bedouin Administration. Moreover, the Water Commissioner has a representative on the committee, which demonstrates the blurred distinction between an “advisory” committee or an executive one.

4. In accordance with the Supreme Court ruling of February 2003, a special procedure was developed for the residents of the unrecognized villages concerning applications for connection to the water system. According to this procedure, they are required to organize themselves in groups of ten families in order to submit an individual application for connection to water services. The individual is chosen by the family and serves as the group representative. Once the application has been approved, the remaining users are supposed to attach secondary pipes to the representative’s pipe, and to pay him directly for their use of water. The current situation, where some of the residents have private connections, has created a situation of intense internal inequality within Bedouin society, creating a fierce struggle over this vital resource and the possibility for profiteering and the exploitation of residents by their neighbors.

5. Those residents who receive authorization are required to lay pipes by themselves and at their own expense from the water point to their home, a distance of several kilometers. Placing the entire responsibility on the residents creates a situation in which they are effectively required to become experts in the field of water, and to develop an infrastructure for complex water systems, without having the knowledge.

6. The water system infrastructure the residents are required to establish raises a number of problems:
   • The permitted diameter for the connection is extremely small, usually one inch. This results in a very low water pressure, creating difficulties in providing a sufficient supply for some 100-500 people.
   • The large number of users results in numerous pipeline branches laid across the desert soil, causing an obstacle to passers-by.
   • Since the pipes laid along the ground are exposed, the water becomes boiling hot in summer, while in winter the water becomes very cold and even freezes during the night.
   • Algae and rust develop in the pipes, polluting the water.

7. In practice, few residents manage to secure authorization from the committee to connect to the water system. The conduct of the committee raises numerous questions:
   • There are no clear and equal criteria for eligibility to connect to the water system, and the reasons for the committee’s decisions are unclear.
   • There is a lack of transparency in the decision-making process:
     A. Applicants are not informed of the dates of the hearings of the Water Committee.
     B. Applicants are not generally invited to the meetings of the Water Committee in order to argue their case.
     C. Most of the applicants do not receive written notification of the committee’s
D. Most of the rejection letters state that the residents can move to the permanent communities, where there are water connections. According to General Comment 15 regarding the right to water of the UN Economic and Social Committee, the realization of this right is not to be prevented due to the status of the building or land (article 16).

It is unacceptable that an arm of the state act in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner, and it is unacceptable to abuse state authorities conditioning the right to water by means of implementing the declared policy of transferring the residents to permanent communities. The residents of the unrecognized villages are citizens of the state, and, first and foremost, are human beings, and accordingly they should not be abandoned to their fate. Public representatives should ensure the rights of the citizens, ensure that their life be protected and ensure an elementary standard of living for all.

We urge you not to cooperate with one of the gravest human rights violations in Israel, and to ensure that all the residents of the unrecognized villages enjoy direct and equal access to flowing, accessible and drinkable water – and the sooner, the better!

The Coalition of Organizations to Advance the Right to Water includes the following organizations: Al Jamaheer; Community Advocacy; Forum of Representatives and Activists of the Water Groups (establish and guided by Community Advocacy); Friends of the Earth – Middle East; Israel Religious Action Center, Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism; Negev Coexistence Forum; PHR-Israel; The Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev; Shatil.

For questions and further information, please contact:

052-5345941 (Sultan Abu Obaid, Shatil)
(Suleiman Abu Obaid, Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev) 8519806-050
050-7701119 (Suleiman Abu Zaed, Negev Coexistence Forum)
050-6705901 (Suleiman Al-Grinawi, Community Advocacy)
054-6844495 (Orly Almi, PHR-Israel)
03-5605383 (Tamar Keinan, Friends of the Earth Middle East)
02-6256261 (Reut Michaeli, Israel Religious Action Center)