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What America Can Learn From Israel's Peripheral Communities

GUEST POST WRITTEN BY

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A picture taken on February 4, 2016 at the main entrance of the southern Bedouin village of Hura, shows a road board indicating the village, which is located in the Northern part of the Negev desert, near the city of Beersheva.

In his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance recalled his upbringing in Middletown, Ohio, explaining the psyche of communities neglected by the “Obama economy” as jobs were lost to the effects of globalization. The election of Donald Trump shed light on these communities of disenfranchised voters of Middle America.

As globalization moved jobs overseas, industrial manufacturing communities in the U.S. fell on hard times. Blue-collar factory jobs in places like Macomb County, Michigan; Youngstown, Ohio; and South Bend, Indiana gave way to drug use, joblessness and despair.

We are now faced with the question of how to help these communities going forward.

The United States should cast its glance across the Mediterranean and follow Israel's lead. Israel's Southern Negev region managed to make the desert bloom and is now successfully transforming a nearly uninhabitable desert into a desirable community of students, young families and innovation, all while supporting the region's blue-collar jobs. It would behoove America's rural cities to do the same.

According to Tamar Gil, director of resource development for Tor Hamidbar, an organization working to develop the Negev, the number of students who stay in the Negev after university has doubled in the past ten years. For young Israelis, moving to the periphery may be their only realistic ticket to even dream of buying a home.

Gil's organization began mentoring young residents who run social businesses in their peripheral communities when they realized the large gap between those who say they would like to stay in the Negev after university and those who actually do. Gil conducted over 500 interviews to understand the needs of young adults in the region and found that lack of employment was the biggest hurdle for young people who wanted to stay in the Negev.

Yoel Rosby, partners and projects coordinator for the Jewish National Fund, agreed. Like Tor Hamidbar, JNF is dedicated to enlivening Israel's peripheral communities and has been the biggest player in ensuring this growth.

"The first thing to look for when moving to a new community is a job and education," Rosby said.

Out of this need, the Lauder Employment Center in the Negev city of Beersheva was established as a joint project between JNF and Tor Hamidbar. The Lauder Employment Center acts as a meeting point for business owners, bringing together employment agencies and offering a forum for human resource directors to share their experiences and look for solutions together.

According to Dr. Miki Malul, professor of finance and public policy at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, for each high-tech worker in the Negev, five to six new jobs are indirectly created in service, maintenance, food and restaurant, and commercial sectors. Malul found that for every job created at Israel Chemicals Ltd. and its Negev subsidiary Dead Sea Works, an additional 2.6 blue-collar jobs are created. The expansion of army personnel in the Negev also creates the beginning of a critical mass of activity in the region, said Malul.

JNF seeks to build this critical mass by bringing half a million Israelis to the Negev over the next ten years—a hefty feat considering the population of Israel is under 8.5 million.

"The world needs to see this model," said Gil. "It's not only about population density, but development, change, and the future."

In the meantime, JNF and Tor Hamidbar are working on building the right conditions for population growth of the periphery as well as building a sustainable, comfortable lifestyle through the creation of bottom-up initiatives.

This means building infrastructure such as hospitals, universities and schools, and modes of transportation, but also changing people's perceptions of the periphery.

Gil wants the Negev to be desirable for young people and families. "It's about creating a culture and hub for young professionals," she said.

"It takes many motivated local authorities to create change. We need to know how to tap into people's motivation to become connected citizens, but we also don't convince them—this is a bottom-up process that comes from the people who want to build a mission-driven community in the Negev."

Moving to the periphery offers an affordable life style, and more importantly, Gil maintains that building a community offers meaning as the community actualizes their shared vision.

JNF has revived old junk yards into parks, installed an



amphitheater and cultural center, built sports and culture facilities, and offered incentives for people to move and work in the city such as zero-interest loans on buying plots of land, tax breaks, as well as cash incentives.

Tor Hamidbar helped a bankrupt school become one of the best public schools in Beersheva, now with a waiting list.

They helped Revital, an unemployed, single mother living on Israel's border with Gaza create an after-school tutoring program. Within two months after giving Revital the tools to build a business model, manage cash flow, and find civic investment and partnerships, she was able to pay herself a salary as well as provide employment for 12 other local women and teachers who did not previously have an income. Among the 200 students tutored, average grades went from 69 to 87% and Revital is opening another branch with the same business model.

"So many cities that were given up on need to know they can do this also," said JNF's Rosby.

Of course, this model is not a one size fits all, but Rosby maintains that with focus on the strengths and needs of the people, a little innovation, and robust business model, any peripheral city has the potential to become self-sustaining.

Gil affirmed that the model is replicable if built from the bottom up, as each community is built according to the character of its members, their partners, and the municipalities.

In the United States, young people are already beginning to move to peripheral communities in search of affordable living, but it must be followed by growth of businesses and charitable investments in order to keep them there. Compared to big cities, these communities offer quality of life for residents hungry for change.

The development of Israel's Negev is the perfect example of creating opportunity out of the periphery. By borrowing best practices from Israel and innovating, it can and should be done in other peripheral cities around the world.

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