

From Israel: Project Renewal: An Insider's View

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Neighborhoods, like people, have souls. The challenge of Project Renewal is in learning about the souls of Israeli neighborhoods and doing something for them . . . If Project Renewal fails, not only the Israelis will be to blame; the blame will also fall squarely on those who didn't grasp its importance and didn't make the effort to get involved.

Project Renewal is probably one of the least understood and least appreciated social programs ever formulated by the State of Israel. It took nearly two years for most Israelis to fathom the social, economic, and political implications of Project Renewal, and the local and national machinery required for its earnest implementation is just now moving into high gear. So much so, that the Minister of Finance has had serious second thoughts about the scope of the enterprise. But it is too late to stop its momentum and dissipate the hopes of 45,000 slum families and the new relationships Project Renewal has forged between Israeli and Diaspora communities.

If Israelis have just woken up to the importance and magnitude of Project Renewal, a large proportion of Diaspora Jews are still in the dark, and worse, they see this new effort as simply a new gimmick of the United Jewish Appeal to gather more charity for Israel. They are convinced that since Israel is not at war with its neighbors, slums have been substituted for tanks and airbases in order to raise money. And every country has its share of slums, so why all the fuss? The tragedy is that Project

Renewal is perhaps the most important social enterprise to appear on the Israeli and the Diaspora scene in the last 20 years, and a misunderstanding about its potential for improving the social fabric could have serious repercussions for several generations.

What is Project Renewal? Where did it come from, and why is it different from past social programs?

Soon after Prime Minister Begin was installed in office, he proposed to the Assembly of the Jewish Agency that Israel and Diaspora Jewry undertake a five-year crash program to renew 160 slum neighborhoods housing 45,000 low-income, mostly large, families of Middle-Eastern origin. He proposed establishing a fund of 1.2 billion dollars, 50 percent to be raised in Israel and 50 percent to be raised abroad. The Ministries of Housing and Labor and Social Affairs had prepared a list of the most needy neighborhoods, each containing between 3,000 and 8,000 residents, located mostly in urban, but also in some rural areas. These were neighborhoods which had been forgotten after the mass immigration of Jews from the Moslem countries were settled in them the first decade of the State's existence. The small, hurriedly-built apartments were bursting with bright, but disadvantaged children, and the social service infrastructure, like the undersized sewage pipes, was inadequate for the needs of the residents almost from the day they were built. These particular neighborhoods fell far below national norms by elementary criteria such as overcrowding, average per

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capita income, quality of housing, social services available, and citizen involvement. Despite enlightened legislation regarding income maintenance, free high-school and other *national* schemes, the neighborhoods remained untouched and continued to deteriorate. Over 70 percent of Israel's welfare cases live in the 12 largest towns; the urban slum has become the core of the country's social problems, even more than the development towns. The suburb of Jerusalem, Neveh Yaakov, for example, now houses more Israelis than the town of Kiryat Shmoneh in the Galilee.

It is also of crucial importance to remember that the overwhelming bulk of disadvantaged Israelis are Sephardi Jews, the same Jews who gave the majority of their votes to Mr. Begin, hoping they would not be forgotten after the elections. After the appearance of street-corner Israeli Black Panther Youths in 1971, and the publication of the Prime Ministers' Report on Disadvantaged Youth in 1972, the nation became much more aware of the extent of its social problems, and the Sephardi community in Israel and abroad began to congeal around a demand for social change. Project Renewal is a partial, but important, response to that demand.

Gearing Up

The Deputy Prime-Minister, Professor Yigael Yadin, was given Cabinet-level responsibility for Project Renewal and a Ministerial Committee was established to approve renewal plans, after initial screening by a committee of director-generals from the various Ministries. The Jewish Agency, the holder of 50 percent of the "Diaspora shares," appointed Mr. Eliezer Raphaeli as Deputy-Director General for Project Renewal and a staff of facilitators and watchdogs was created. During the first two years of Project Renewal a number of lessons have been learned the hard way. The machinery to review grants was cumbersome, and, above all, there was no early

clear-cut definition of roles for the various agencies involved. The government insisted, on full responsibility for implementing Project Renewal and did not relish expansion of the Jewish Agency into a mini-Ministry of Housing, Welfare, and Education. There was a prolonged and demoralizing debate between Major Teddy Kollek and Housing Minister David Levy as to who would be responsible for Project Renewal in Jerusalem; each wanted the responsibility and the glory, come election-time.

Surprising (to some), the main ray of sunshine during the battles at the national level was the neighborhood response. The grass-roots, neighborhood groups and local municipal and volunteer organizations, who were highly motivated, got together and began planning and taking systematic inventory of their needs. The in-fighting at the local level was totally different and much less irresponsible than that at the national level.

The other important, crucial development which took place during the first two years of Project Renewal was the growing sophistication of Diaspora, and particularly North-American, Jews about the Israeli bureaucracy and politics, and especially an appreciation of grass-roots views of Israel's social problems. This "greening of the leadership" was perhaps the most important piece of spin-off from Project Renewal. Some of the newly-educated Diaspora leadership began exercising their clout as holders of 50 percent of Project Renewal "shares" to pressure Israeli counterparts to settle major issues of vital importance to Project Renewal's success. Mayors were invited abroad to present plans for "their" neighborhoods, and even more important, residents in the Renewal neighborhoods engaged in an open, heart-warming dialogue with representatives of communities abroad who for the first time met face-to-face with the proud, but hopeful, man-in-the-street Israeli. This partnership between Diaspora

Jews and street-level Israelis, and the potential coalition which this entails, may become the residents' back-door into the Mayors' and the Ministers' offices. There is no doubt that persistent involvement of Diaspora leaders has been an important feature in resolving many local political and ideological squabbles. This input has been very positive and, in my opinion, a legitimate role for keeping Project Renewal on course. The funds gathered for Project Renewal are not charitable, hit-and-run donations, but investments from a partnership point of view. Therefore, the partners are responsible for "following" the investment as closely as possible. The irony is, however, that as of this writing we Israelis have spent more on Project Renewal than the Diaspora communities, which suggests that the commitment and appreciation of the importance of the Project are lacking abroad.

Innovations

Project Renewal funding is different in four significant ways from the regular UJA donations, and it is very important to grasp the implications of these differences. The four basic innovations, as I see them, are:

1. *Financial Accountability*

A separate budget account has been opened in the Jewish Agency for Project Renewal funds. The money does not flow on automatically to longstanding objects and on-going programs such as Youth Aliyah and higher education, but is released only on approval of the Ministerial-Jewish Agency Committee on Project Renewal, and earmarked for specific neighborhoods. This arrangement requires submission of renewal plans on a neighborhood basis, and can facilitate security of expenditures and prevention of leakage of funds.

2. *Integration of Physical Planning with Social Service Planning*

Until now, most agencies have not co-

ordinated their planning with that of other government agencies, and the result has often been undue competition, overlapping, and waste of money. Project Renewal requires that each local community submit an "integrated plan," where physical renovation and building will be accompanied by social services, manpower, and community services. This is a very crucial innovation since physical improvement, without parallel personal services for the residents, can result in slum conditions all over again in a few years. No money can be released from the Jewish Agency without approval of an integrated plan.

3. *Involvement of the Residents in Planning*

Until now residents in disadvantaged areas have been objects of aid, but rarely partners in deciding what should be done in their neighborhood. The traditional paternalism and benevolence of government, nationally and locally, toward residents are anathema to Project Renewal. The "contract" approved by the Cabinet and the Jewish Agency calls specifically for securing active involvement of residents in developing plans for their neighborhood. If we succeed in implementing this goal and no other, Project Renewal will still have been a great success. There are signs that residents are beginning to get involved, and an enlarged corps of community organization workers are working very hard to insure residents' participation.

4. *Twinning of Slum Neighborhoods with Diaspora Communities*

The form of partnership desired by most Israelis is embodied in the twinning (*not* "adopting") of Israeli neighborhoods slated for renewal by Jewish communities abroad. For example, Jerusalem's Musrara (Morasha) area is twinned with the Los Angeles Jewish community, Tel Chanan in Haifa is twinned with San Francisco, Hatikva in Tel Aviv with New York's

community, Neveh Sharett in Tel Aviv with Cleveland, etc. This twinning mechanism requires a "Federation Task Force" in the Diaspora community, periodic site visits, face-to-face contact with the residents and the local planning committee, and many other features of partnership. The donors and donations to Project Renewal are now identified with a specific neighborhood and population, and this arrangement is the vehicle for a personal involvement which can well create a new, more intelligent and brotherly relationship between Israelis and Diaspora Jews. It is hard to tell whether communities abroad are ready for the move from charity to involvement, and no one knows whether involvement will turn people off when they learn of our very human political and personal frailties, but the sooner people know us as we are, the healthier the relationship will be. Without the twinning ingredient, a major innovation and a basic feature of Project Renewal would have been lost.

The present effort on the Israeli scene concerning Project Renewal involves a number of goals: on the one hand, many communities included in the Project Renewal list are working to complete the formulation of integrated plans for review and funding. On the other hand, many of us in the social welfare and human services field are insisting that Project Renewal not take the place of *national* government policy regarding the disadvantaged, since only 160 communities are included in Project Renewal, while many more are not on the list. Many of us are "watchdogging" Project Renewal from the point of view of its machinery, bottlenecks, manpower resources, and resident involvement. Some excellent examples of spinoff have been increased funding of and enrollment in

community organization programs at schools of social work, some beautiful instances of Diaspora involvement, and the appearance of new leadership in Israel and abroad.

The Ministry of Finance has murmured thoughts of reducing Project Renewal funds in view of Israel's economic problems, and Mr. Dulcin, Prof. Yadin and many others have reacted very angrily to such proposals. I think that rising expectations in the neighborhoods make pulling-back a very dangerous option at this stage. I believe, however, that Project Renewal will require a decade or more to do the job well and in enough communities. If the Israeli government does indeed pull back, my sincere advice to Diaspora leaders would be to do Project Renewal alone; there is no reason not to work with the neighborhoods on a private basis, if things come to that. People who are "family" should not wait for invitations to do what has to be done.

Neighborhoods, like people, have souls. The challenge of Project Renewal is in learning about the souls of Israel's neighborhoods and doing something for them. Will the Project succeed? Is it just a gimmick for raising funds during peacetime? The answers to those questions depend on how all the parties involved visualize their roles. If the Diaspora communities concentrate only on fundraising without personalization of the causes for the fundraising, then we are back to the charity mentality and public relations gimmicks. If Project Renewal fails, not only the Israelis will be to blame; the blame will also fall squarely on those who didn't grasp its importance and didn't make the effort to get involved. Ten thousand of Israeli families have been waiting a very long time for this Project. It is long overdue, definitely feasible, and very exciting.