Socially Sustainable Development: Planning Empowerment Among the Bedouin in Israel

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1 ABSTARCT

The term "empowerment" emerged in the literature on development in the late 1980s and early 1990s when it was realized that marginal and marginalized groups (including indigenous/first nation peoples) are impotent in affecting planning and development of their material resources vis-a-vis the political, economic and social dominance of governments and core regions. This realization led to a search for legitimate political resources to facilitate social and political empowerment in regaining control over these resources and the initiative in their development. Previously these groups were largely unaware of or did not realistically appreciate the very planning process, including its procedural, legal and scientific aspects. The empowerment approach was meant to fill in precisely this void by highlighting several issues with regard to communities whose organization carries meaningful territorial expressions. These include autonomy in decision making, self reliance, direct participatory democracy and experiential social learning. They constitute a socially sustainable development process meant to guarantee a significant long term share in social economic and political benefits accrued from these territorial resources.

This approach may be viewed as an "alternative" development paradigm to the conventional paradigm. The major reason for its emergence is epistemological, and is rooted in criticism leveled at the ideological grounds of the conventional planning and development approach and the nature of knowledge on which it is based. The traditional perception of the planning process has been viewing it as a technical practice meant primarily for determining land use objectives. In this framework the positivistic approach assumed a central role in conformity with its central legitimacy in contemporary Western discourse. Planners have accordingly claimed that their practices should also remain scientifically rational. In contrast the critiques submit that this Western epistemological basis excludes and marginalizes local groups by ignoring their other forms of knowing the world such as spiritual meanings of land and environmental resources, cultural meanings of place, and socio-political interpretations of space construction as viewed by local peoples as against the hegemonic rationalized Western scientific discourse. Therefore the alternative approach submits that reality should be shaped through planning and development forms that are different from rational planning.

These insights carry significant implications for the Bedouin in the Israel. This is an indigenous Muslin group that has been extremely marginalized by the State since 1948, particularly through expropriation of their land and a substantial elimination of their livestock economy. For almost half a century they suffered the socio-economic consequences of this development policy the essence of which was their relocation from their traditional territories into few townships established by the State. However, their protest and resistance have grown significantly in recent years and took the shape of empowerment in planning and development in order to regain control over their territorial resources.

Two forms of empowerment in planning and development are presented here. The first may be termed spatial planning empowerment. In this form a group of population takes a spatial collective initiative of self-relocation and migration to a specifically desired destination that will facilitate a substantial sustainable development of their living circumstances. By thus empowering themselves spatially they are presenting the democratic State with a new reality that must be given proper attention within the planning and development process. The particular case concerned refers to a tribal group of Bedouin who self-relocated in 1994 to their historical territory from which they were driven away in the 1950s. Such empowerment initiative led eventually to State recognition in their new place and its incorporation within the formal planning process, a move that contributes considerably to their sustained development.

The second form may be termed conscientious planning empowerment. It refers to an attempt at conscientious change in the planning knowledge held by the conventional planning establishment through confronting it with an alternative local-indigenous knowledge which presents the "other" as equally important vis-à-vis the hegemonic agent. The case concerned is an alternative plan submitted by the Bedouin in 1999 as an opposition plan to State Regional Plan. In this plan the Bedouin present an alternative knowledge of their cultural, social and spatial reality that suggests a different interpretation of space and place from that adopted by the State. This form of empowerment has since contributed considerably to a

significant adoption of the alternative knowledge by the State and to a considerable change in its development approach toward the Bedouin, particularly in recognizing many more Bedouin settlements beyond the few towns previously established for them. It thus provides for a more socially and culturally sustainable development of these people under highly tense and constraining political reality.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Bedouin of the Negev region in southern Israel have been settling in permanent towns and villages in the recent six decades. Until then they were a semi-nomadic society that subsisted on livestock and dry-farming. Under the State of Israel they were subjected to the arrangements and system of the modern state, and in particular to the land law according to which all of the territories inhabited by them previously are legally regarded state land. Land for the Bedouin has been a critical socio-political resource, and State refusal to accept Bedouin land claims ownership not only generated a land conflict between the two parties that has not been settled yet but deteriorated their quality of life considerably. Since the Bedouin refuse to evacuate their land the State has been denying recognition from many of their villages, including denial of public services and infrastructures and exclusion from all regional development plans.

The Bedouin in response have begun a civil struggle for acceptance of their land ownership claims and recognition of these villages, the major objective being transforming them into socially and economically sustainable places. Their struggle has involved, among others, tools of empowerment targeted at the planning policy and procedures of the State. In this paper planning empowerment by the Bedouin in elaborated and analyzed, including two main types: spatial empowerment and conscientious empowerment. Following a discussion of these types in general concepts, two very recent case studies will be analyzed in detail. The paper concludes by elaborating on the impact of Bedouin planning empowerment on State recognition in their villages as a necessary step in transforming them into socially and economically sustainable human habitats.

3 BEDOUIN AND THE STATE: HISTORICAL MILESTONES

The 1948 Israeli War of Independence carried harsh consequences for the ~70,000 semi-nomadic agro-pastoralists Bedouin in the Negev. Flight and expulsion reduced their population to ~11,000, and many were further relocated by the state into a Bedouin reservation (seig) that was militarily administered until 1966. Population density there increased beyond the culturally and ecologically sustainable levels of semi-nomadic pastoralism. Massive settling of Bedouin in rural type hamlets begun, followed by an extremely high natural increase rate that peaked to around 5 percent annually. The state refers to all previous pastoral-tribal land in the Negev as state-owned, and therefore has perceived these processes a threat to its control over these territories. This triggered the onset of a long and yet unresolved land dispute with the Bedouin, who have been relying on their traditional customary law as a source of legitimacy for land ownership in this region (Ben-David, 1996). In the mid-1960s the government initiated a long term policy of further relocating the Bedouin, this time into seven state-planned towns (Figure 1). The project was aimed at putting Bedouin society on the modernization track, but with the hidden objective of weakening their ties to their traditional pastoral and dry-farming territories and thus seizing control over them (Meir, 1997).
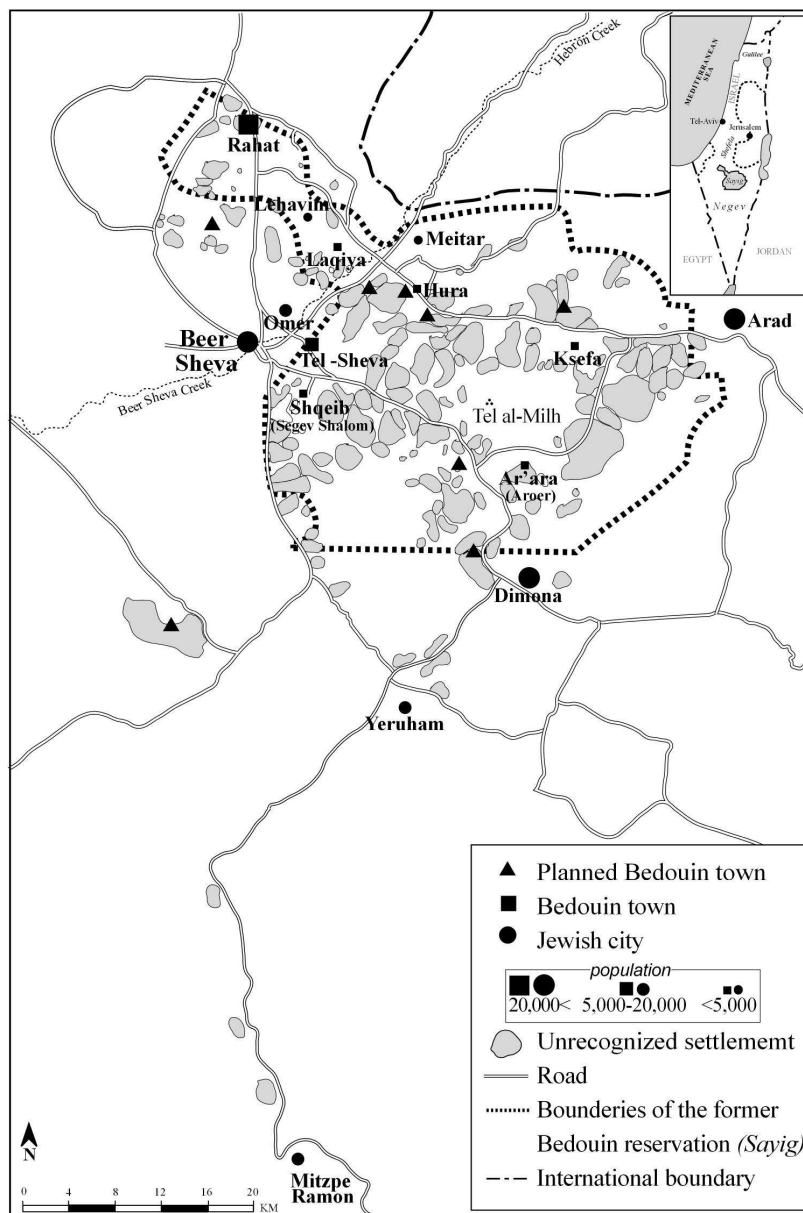
Figure 1: Bedouin settlements

This process produced a double-spaced Bedouin society. Within metropolitan Beer-Sheva there is the semi-urban space, consisted of those seven towns with a total population of about 70,000, mostly of the class of the 'landless', also known as 'annexed' or 'fellaheen' (Ben-David and Gonen, 2001). The second is a mostly undeveloped rural space known as pezura (Hebrew for 'Dispersion'), consisting of dozens of hamlets of various sizes. Their inhabitants (~ 70,000) are mostly real Bedouin, the previously genuine pastoral nomads of the Negev. They refuse to relocate into the towns, fearing loss of their claimed traditional land ownership rights in the 'Dispersion' (Ben-David, 1996, 2004) and of their traditional cultural and social values (Ben-David, 1993). In reaction the State has been denying formal recognition from these hamlets, claiming they are illegal intruders on State land, and also barring the provision of public services and infrastructures there. These places have thus become informal squatters of extreme deprivation and underdevelopment with unsustainable economic, social and ecological future (Yiftachel, 2004, 2009; Lithwick, 2000).

State plans prepared until the 1990s for settling all Bedouin in the towns have come recently under attack and criticism. Many Bedouin tribes, particularly the landed ones in the 'Dispersion', had persistently rejected not only the idea of settling in the few large towns that provide no economic opportunities, but the very idea of top-down planning in which they do not participate. They have therefore begun to conduct various practices in order to make the planning process more democratic (Meir, 2003). In a nutshell, the Bedouin have begun a process that, following Sandercock (1998; 1999; also: Geddick, 2001), may be termed 'insurgent planning' that sets an alternative to State conventional planning (Meir, 2005). One of the avenues

in which this process proceeded may be conceptualized as planning empowerment. This concept is elaborated in the following section.

4 PLANNING EMPOWERMENT

Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and marginal groups in developing as well as developed countries have been mobilizing and organizing in recent decades within NGOs and other extra-establishment organizations (Wellard and Copestock, 1993; Blant, 1996). The objective of these local national and often international organizations is taking action toward what the development discourse refers to since the 1970s as 'grass roots development'.

In recent decades an even further approach has been proposed that presents these social and political actions as 'development empowerment'. The concept of empowerment surfaced in the planning and development literature in the early 1990s (Friedmann, 1992) when marginalized groups (indigenous peoples and first nations as well as populations of marginal regions) realized their weakness and inferiority vis-à-vis the political economic and social dominance of the ruling establishment and core regions. This realization has led these underprivileged groups into searching for legitimate power sources that would facilitate their socio-political empowerment in their struggle for their own development resources and planning thereof. Quite often the objective has been gaining control over resources expropriated from them by the state and its agencies, including the right for their future development.

Until the 1970s these groups were not particularly familiar with the state apparatus of the very planning process of spatial and environmental resources, nor with the various perspectives of research, procedural and legal actions associated with it. Empowerment is meant to fill-up precisely these gaps by underscoring several fields. This included autonomy in decision making for communities whose organization carries predominant territorial expression, self-reliance, direct democratic participation, and experiential social learning.

This approach, as John Friedmann presented it, constitutes an alternative paradigm for development vis-à-vis the conventional paradigm that has been shaping state policies. The major motivation for the growth of alternative planning and development approaches is epistemological. It is rooted in the criticism leveled at the knowledge and ideological infrastructures of the conventional and established approaches. The traditional and classical conceptualization of the planning process views it as a technical action intending merely to determine physical land uses. Within this tradition positivistic science, being a major source of legitimacy of discourse in contemporary Western society, has assumed a central position, and planners have accordingly become accustomed to view planning as a rational scientific action.

This planning discourse has spread from the Western, modern, more developed world outwards into the less developed world, and it is this kind of hegemony which ignited heavy criticism. The major criticism (Friedmann, 1987; Hillier, 1993; Tauxe, 1995; Sandercock, 1998) claims that by overlooking other epistemological modes, this Western-based epistemology tends to marginalize and weaken local groups. There are many other ways than those of Western cultures for knowing, familiarizing and experiencing the world practiced by local groups in terms of, for example, grasping the traditional and spiritual meaning of land and other environmental resources, comprehending the multi-faceted nature, rules and arrangements of a human settlement, and understanding the nature of elementary social units of reference in development. These modes have been pushed aside however by the hegemonic Western rationalized discourse. The alternative approach suggests that if reality may be understood only in a positivistic mode, it is conceivable that the same mode should be adopted for designing it. However, if different modes exist for understanding the same reality, than reality of the relevant people may be designed and planned in ways that are different from the rational-positivistic one. This idea has been cast within the general debate between social constructionist postmodern planning theory and modernistic-positivistic planning practices (Rydin, 2007).

Presently, and more than previously, many local and marginal groups worldwide are already aware of this insight and of its practical implications for their livelihood. It carries significant implications for understanding the process of planning empowerment for the Bedouin, and this is demonstrated below through two cases. The first one may be conceptualized as spatial planning empowerment that involves in particular a material change whereby the group concerned takes a spatial initiative of self-relocation into a highly and long desired place (often of historical significance for them), confronting thus the authorities with

a new planning reality. Alternatively the group may initiate change in their livelihood organizational or material conditions in situ. In both cases the new reality produced may facilitate a substantial sustainable change in their present livelihood conditions. The second type is consciousness planning empowerment that concerns a change in the conventional-established planning knowledge by introducing an alternative indigenous or local knowledge through which the 'other' is viewed by the hegemonic as equally valuable. The underlying assumption in both types is that they carry a potential of changing the planning circumstances of their particular desired space of habitation. The following discussion presents two cases of Bedouin planning empowerment.

5   SPATIAL PLANNING EMPOWERMENT

The case presented here is an important event that took place in the mid-1990s with the Abu-Gardud section of the Al-Azazmeh Bedouin tribe. This tribe is the southernmost of all Bedouin tribes that remained in the Negev region, and compared to others has been strongly inclined towards pastoral-nomadism and less toward farming sedentary habitat (Bar-Zvi and Ben-david, 1978). Its past territory has stretched from the Central Negev Highlands to north-eastern Sinai Peninsula (Figure 2). Following the 1948 warfare most of the tribe's population left the Negev and some even were expelled to the Sinai, with only few hundreds remaining in the Negev.

The sub-territory of the Abu-Gardud section also extended westward across the new Israeli-Egyptian border. Similar to other tribes of cross-border territories during the1950s-1960s in the Negev, this group was evacuated for security reasons away from its border territory and was relocated some 20 kms inwards close to its main tribal kinsmen. During the years they have approached the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and State authorities for several times requesting to return to their traditional home territory. Time and again they were turned down on the basis of military and security excuses such as proximity to the Egyptian border or IDF land uses and needs. The State also rejected their claim in the years following the 1981 Peace Accord with Egypt that the accord rendered these excuses redundant.

In the early 1990s the IDF has decided to yield the areas allocated for military uses in this region in favor of civil needs that excluded those of the Abu-Gardud Bedouin. Realizing this they resubmitted their request to return to their traditional territory on the grounds that they have a priority over all other civil land uses. Needless to say this request was turned down again, but now the Abu-Gardud group decided to ignore the rejection. By 1994 a group of eleven families of them (~80 people) self-relocated to their previous location in Bier-Hadaj (Hebrew Beer-Khail) located in the midst of the Regional Council (rural municipality) of Ramat Negev which is composed exclusively of Jewish villages. Few months later more families joined the original group, and by mid-1995 the evolving place numbered 150 families. Since then, this original nucleus has grown due to both migration and natural increase to 600 families split between about 60 extended families (hamuleh) and a total population of 4,000, constituting about a quarter of the entire El-Azazmeh tribal population.

Despite allegations by the authorities that this group intruded into State land (as against the Bedouin's narrative that they simply returned home), the government has decided for political reasons to refrain from taking any action. However, the considerable population growth of the Bedouin there begun to generate problems typical of the unrecognized Bedouin settlements elsewhere, particularly those that are located within the territory of a Jewish regional council. These included lack of public services and the right for voting in the municipal elections, both of which have been denied from the Bedouin by the State, frictions with neighboring Jewish settlements over territorial resources and property crime against homes and farms. When these problems amounted to an intolerable threshold the regional council demanded the State to provide solutions. Following the activities of the Administration for Advancement of the Bedouin with regard to the Metropolitan Plan of Beer Sheva the government has decided in 1999 to establish an independent settlement for the Bedouin in Bier Hadaj. The administration began to implement the relevant planning and construction procedures required by the law including a committee to decide on the village's territorial boundary. Presently these procedures are handled by a new Abu-Basma Regional Council established by the State in 2005 precisely to govern the similar problems of eight (now twelve) new recognized Bedouin settlements, Bier Hadaj included.
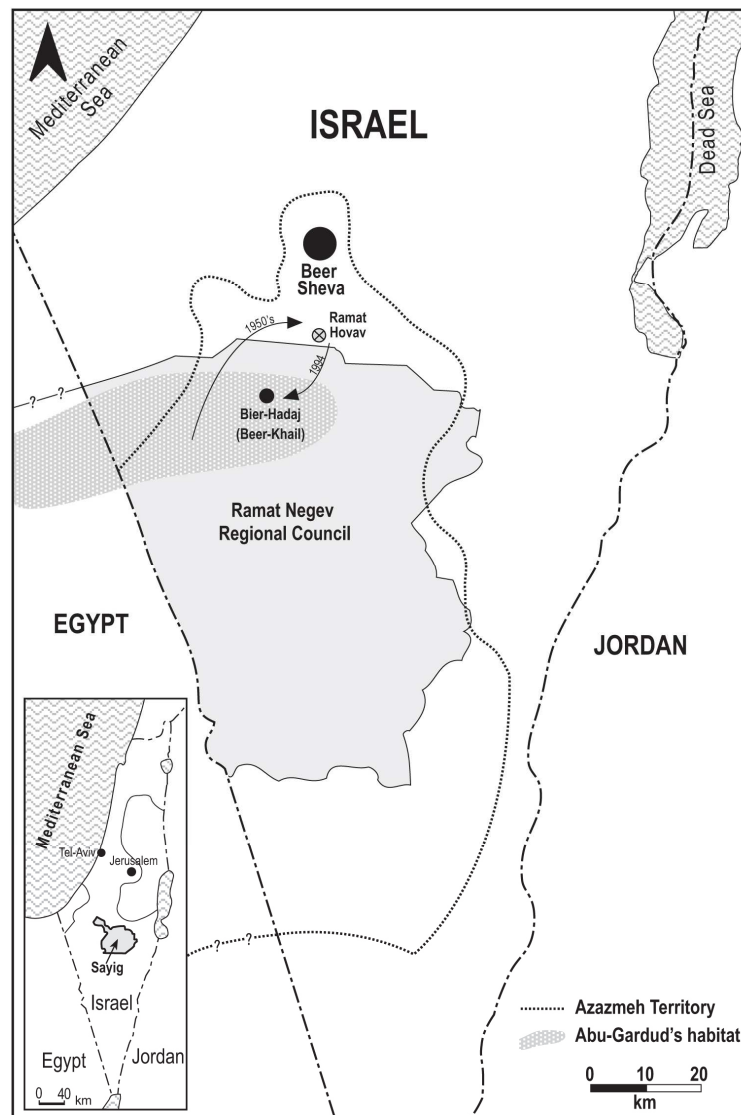
Figure 2: Azazmeh territory and Abu-Gardud's spatial history.

In recent decades the Bedouin, which have been a sedentarized and partly urbanized society, have accumulated considerable territorial organizational capabilities (Meir, 1996). In taking this empowerment action the particular group concerned took the autonomy in decision making concerning land and other territorial resources for which their claim of ownership is anchored in their own cultural traditional customary law of land ownership (Meir, 2009). From an epistemological perspective this perception of land ownership and land use contradicts the doctrine of the planning and administration bodies which originates from the rationalist approach. The State was thus compelled to accept the Bedouin position, that is, to acknowledge in principle both Bedouin's historical right for the territory and their traditional cultural land ownership system, to initiate the process of recognition of this new place and begin its legal planning and development within formal State frameworks.

By becoming a recognized settlement this place is now entitled to all those civil rights deprived earlier, that is, provision of public social services (education, health and welfare), municipal services (water, electricity, sewage, and public utilities), and access to and integration with national, regional and local physical infrastructures, as well as realization of their civil rights in local elections and political representation. All these are potentially capable of remedying the social environmental and cultural ills of the unsustainable unrecognized settlement in which they lived earlier, including a positive sense of the new place of Bier-Hadaj by the people who took this planning empowerment action.

6 CONSCIOUSNESS PLANNING EMPOWERMENT

This second type of planning empowerment is demonstrated through an event that took place in the late 1990s when the Bedouin submitted a regional plan for the Northern Negev as an alternative to the official plans prepared by the State. The plan was submitted in late 1999 by a Bedouin NGO established two years earlier called The Regional Council for the Bedouin-Arab Unrecognized Villages (RCBUV). It constituted an oppositional plan, a procedure made possible through the Planning and Construction Law. Its objectives were as follows: recognition of all 45 unrecognized villages in the 'Dispersion', development of a municipal authority for these villages based on the regional council model of rural government in Israel, realization of voting rights for local government for the villages' inhabitants and finally provision of all social and municipal services as required by law and common elsewhere in rural Israel. The underlying principle of all these goals was that their realization should not be contingent on the practice adopted by the State that demanded settlement of the land conflict as a prior condition.

The very act of establishing the RCBUV is still another demonstration of a spatial planning empowerment. It is of the kind involving change initiated from below by the local people in the governing-administrative conditions of their space. This was followed by the establishment of several other similar organizations, further substantiating its considerable empowerment role. Yet, the RCBUV was only a shadow local government organization of a purely symbolic meaning. Thus this act was primarily a protest from which the Bedouin did not have any real practical expectations. Its major contribution lies in challenging the conventionally established planning knowledge concerning the Bedouin through the plan submitted. This involved in fact reconstructing the prevailing conventional planning knowledge and discourse in all cultural, socio-political and spatial aspects of indigenous Bedouin society (Meir, 2003; 2005).

Thus, in the cultural field, the conventional planning discourse has portrayed Bedouin identity in a highly narrow 'Bedouiness' stereotype, meeting thus the hegemonic needs of the State at the national, regional and local levels and the ensuing planning solutions, primarily in corralling them into urbanism. In contrast, in their plan the Bedouin have portrayed the same identity as rather multi-dimensional and far more complex in several respects: their linkage to the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel at the national level, their cultural role within the northern Negev metropolitan area at the regional level, and their historical linkage to the specific places of their habitat in the unrecognized settlements at the local level, along with the diversified planning solutions required from all these identity dimensions.

The socio-political field represents in the plan submitted by the Bedouin an alternative knowledge concerning the organization of the tribal, sub-tribal and extended family structure. This knowledge too challenges State simplistic narrative which regards the Bedouin tribe as the exclusive and basic planning unit with the derivative of recognition of uni-tribal new settlements only. Again, the RCBUV plan portrays a considerably broader and complex socio-political structure with which the State has to cope. It constitutes an alternative reality in planning the municipal-organizational structure of the Bedouin settlements rather than an epistemology chosen by the State that supports its goal of transforming all Bedouin into an urban society and thus disengaging them from the land they claim for.

Finally, in the spatial field the plan challenges the principles of spatial organization controlling the modern urban world and its accompanying rational planning approach imposed on Bedouin space by the hegemonic planning of the State. This planning approach ignores blatantly the unique spatial organization and spatiality developed by the Bedouin through time as an inherent necessity deeply rooted in their culture. This spatiality has become one of the most elementary socio-political sustainable development principles for the Bedouin as a previously semi-nomadic agro-pastoral indigenous group forced into a metropolitan reality.

The new knowledge suggested in the plan by the Bedouin in all three fields constitutes not only novel insights as an input to the conventional planning, but rather different points of departure for understanding this society and formulating an appropriate planning policy by the Israeli planning establishment. It comprises primarily pooling cultural resources which refer to their imagined space. They have empowered themselves and their civil struggle through these conceptual tools in order to reach their goal of recognition in their villages and the territorial resources necessary to make them socially and economically sustainable.

In contrast to the former form of empowerment which is material in nature, this form of a consciousness planning empowerment is conceptual-ideal. As such its potential impingement on the planning establishment is considerable. The Bedouin regard this form of empowerment as highly responsible for the recent changes

in the planning approach, concepts and procedures adopted by the State. These changes are embodied partly in the decision made by the State to establish twelve more recognized settlements municipalized under the Abu-Basma Regional Council. It seems that the major success lies in Bedouin self-realization of the political weight of this empowerment initiative and the necessity to sustain this high threshold of alternative planning achieved by them. Indeed, the RCBUV has undertook this sustained goal of alternative planning (Abu-Sumur and Yiftachel, 2007) parallel to the activities of the Abu-Basma Council, in both the general planning of Bedouin space and the detailed planning of the individual settlements.

7   CONCLUSION

This paper suggested the concept of planning empowerment as one of the major keys for understanding socially sustainable development among marginalized groups. The concept suggests that there are groups of population, particularly indigenous groups, who are often deprived of their historical resources and civil rights due to structural marginalization by the State. In order to remedy this social, environmental and spatial injustice they resort to empowerment that provides them with tools for struggling with the State. One of the types of empowerment is planning empowerment, in which the group takes action that is expected to result in changes in the planning policy, procedure and concepts by the planning establishment. These changes may lead to an improved sustainability of their communities which are benefitted in various ways. Two types of planning empowerment were suggested: spatial empowerment and consciousness empowerment, and the Bedouin of the Negev in Israel provide a good case in point. Both types of planning empowerment have resulted in considerable changes in the degree of sustainability of their unrecognized settlement, primarily through forcing the State into recognition and planning the settlements in manners that conform to their cultural social and spatial needs. Under the new circumstances, many of their villages have become eligible to all the services and physical and social infrastructures necessary for sustained development and improvement in quality of life.

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