



Common Ground News Service - Middle East

A new model for resident participation in East Jerusalem

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3 Septemebr 2009

JERUSALEM - All over the western world, community empowerment programmes encourage resident participation by involving community leaders and organisers in decisions about the city in which they live. What could be better than the authorities and residents coming together to take joint responsibility for municipal challenges? It seems that in East Jerusalem, all this is not so straightforward.

For those who aren't familiar with East Jerusalem, the Palestinian residents living in this part of the city constitute a third of its population. Their neighbourhoods and villages have been neglected for years by the Israeli establishment. In fact, significant discrepancies between East and West Jerusalem exist in every area of life.

In theory, the Palestinians could take action and change their situation. Most of them hold permanent residency rights and are eligible to vote in municipal elections and run for municipal office. They can also join a variety of frameworks that would allow them to influence municipal institutions such as parent committees, activist groups working to improve infrastructure together with municipal officials, committees within community administrations which encourage resident involvement and more.

Yet their level of involvement is very minimal. Instead, frustration and despair, and, to a large extent, passivity and acceptance of the situation have taken over. However, if we speak to residents across the city, we will discover that they are very aware of their rights and obligations. In order not to lose their residency rights, they pay municipal taxes consistently (if they don't pay this tax, they could lose proof of residency within the city boundaries) and are very keen to realise their rights to healthcare, education, housing etc.

There are many reasons for their lack of involvement. First, any cooperation on the part of the residents with the Israeli authorities may be construed as a stamp of approval for the continuing occupation. Secondly, the various arms of the Israeli establishment discourage leadership in Jerusalem which "could get out of hand". And third, regional and local chaos generates a sense that circumstances are determined by events that are beyond their control. As a result, the dominant approach is to refrain from involvement, while waiting for an outside source to come and save them.

So when seeds of a new approach emerge it is important to take note. For example, in the neighbourhood of Tsur Baher, which is a village in the southeast of Jerusalem, a group of residents came together a few years ago and set up a "committee supporting education". The committee works to improve the educational systems in the village which are operated by various elements – the Jerusalem municipality, the Islamic Waqf, UNRWA etc.

Instead of waiting for change, the group held a week of educational activities in the village, the pinnacle of which was a day of discussions in the form of "an open space meeting", which was moderated by the Jerusalem Intercultural

Center. The event was widely attended by local residents, principals, teachers, students and key figures in the area of education in the village and beyond, including senior education officials from the municipality.

In other cities this would not constitute anything new but in Jerusalem an initiative led by residents of the eastern neighbourhoods is rare and many people within the establishment were surprised by its success.

What was novel about the event was the statement that informed the whole event: "We are partners to the change that has to happen in the village". Instead of just accusing the authorities and demanding that they take action and allocate resources, there was a request to look for joint solutions – to be shared by both the authorities and the residents.

In a city like Jerusalem, this kind of development tends to give rise to a great deal of suspicion. The education administration within the municipality which is responsible for East Jerusalem panicked because collaboration with residents is no small nuisance for a dysfunctional system. In the village itself there were voices calling to boycott any dialogue with the municipality which is part of the apparatus that serves the occupation. There were quite a few figures from both the village and the municipality who did not attend events organised by the residents – the necessary conceptual shift that they would have needed to make was too far-reaching, at least for now.

To overcome these suspicions, the activists turned to two organisations to mediate between them and the establishment: the "Al Quds Dialogue Center", which is a Palestinian Jerusalem-based organisation, and the "Jerusalem Intercultural Center", a pan-cultural Jerusalem-based organisation. On the one hand these organisations work to persuade the establishment that collaborative efforts with the residents will assist in the provision of services. On the other hand, for the residents, they help clarify the distinction between collaborative efforts on the one hand, and accepting the occupation and cooperating with its messages, on the other.

The process makes for a very delicate balancing act in an extremely sensitive political climate. The tense atmosphere gives rise to mutual suspicions. Are the groups of activists what Israel calls "a hostile terror-supporting organisation" or are they "collaborators, agents of the Israeli occupation"? These suspicions have concrete implications. Any mistake could put the activists in harms way. Therefore, mediating organisations are extremely important in making a collaborative effort possible.

Education in Tsur Baher is just one example. Similar initiatives are beginning to emerge in other neighbourhoods and areas of life such as rubbish disposal, a mother and baby centre in the village of Silwan, Arabic translations of municipal forms, pedestrian crossings and road safety programmes for school children.

We hope we are witnessing the development of a new model for the advancement of the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, a mechanism that can improve their quality of life until a permanent and just solution is found for the city and the region as a whole. Perhaps also this type of model could be implemented in other places in the world which share a reality similar to that which exists in Jerusalem.

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