Community Responses
for Families and Individuals
in Vulnerable Neighborhoods
during the COVID-19 Crisis:

The Case of the Better Together Program
in Kiryat Shemona and Arrabe

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic. The pandemic led to extreme, rapid change in all walks of life to an unprecedented and extraordinary extent. Many countries around the world, including Israel, imposed restrictions on activity and mobility, and issued strict guidelines on social distancing. As a result, individuals and families spent lengthy periods at home, away from work, studies, and recreation. The combination of anxiety, family and financial pressures, and social distancing exacerbated situations of social risk and danger, due to the temporary loss of supportive frameworks that are the mainstay of children and families in regular times. The ability to lend physical, social, and community assistance diminished precisely at a time rife with danger, and communities were compelled to resort to creative thinking and solutions in order to provide the necessary responses.

There has been growing interest in recent years, in comprehensive community programs and the impact of social capital on tackling and preventing various social problems. Researchers and experts recommend that assistance to families and children be based on the community and its strengths, and call for the expansion of community programs in residential areas that are home to vulnerable populations.

Better Together (BT) is a comprehensive community program active in residential areas of vulnerable populations. It was established by JDC-Ashalim in 2006 with the aim of improving the welfare of families and children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The program is part of a group of community initiatives and is based on a model of change comprising three levers that lead to change in a neighborhood:

Organizational Lever

The establishment of inter-disciplinary organizational infrastructures which bring together a variety of professionals to advance neighborhood residents

Response Lever for Children, Youth and their Families

The development, consolidation, and expansion of diverse responses that respond to the needs of the neighborhood's families and children

Community Lever

Creating an infrastructure to allow resident activists and volunteers to assume dynamic responsibility for neighborhood families, and to enlist residents with leadership potential in program planning and operation in the neighborhood

This document examines the operations of the extraordinary, community emergency measures implemented by BT during the lockdown period imposed during the the first wave of the pandemic in Israel (March-May 2020), in two BT locations.

Goals

- To provide data on the extent of BT activities in Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona during the first months of the pandemic
- To examine the perceptions of senior figures in the local authority, program operators and community activists about the program's activity during the national crisis, its contribution to, and impact on, the sense of community resilience

Methodology

Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with senior local authority figures, program operators and community activists; data about the extent of responses provided was collected from BT's Administrative Data System; and a literature review was performed of community program responses during the global COVID-19 crisis.

Findings

1. **Organizational lever**

   - The preparation of organizational infrastructure in routine times, for emergency situations. Interviewees perceived that the preparation in routine times of organizational infrastructure for emergency situations spawned a highly organized, well-oiled array of services and responses that operated in the unexpected, extraordinary crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

   - BT as intermediary between residents, the local authority, and aid organizations. BT activists occupied center-stage in emergency efforts: They were part of the local authority's decision-making process for emergency measures, led the activist recruitment, received help requests from residents, mapped the residents requiring assistance, and directed the assistance to them. This process made it possible to provide precise responses to needs on the ground while enlarging the circle of activists involved in community life.

   - Efficient, well-matched management of community activists and responses. The program operators mapped the characteristics of existing activists (age, illness, background etc.) and used the map to identify suitable candidates for action in times of crisis. They also projected scope of activity and the need for additional recruits. Following the mapping, a methodical platform was created to galvanize the existing activists and quickly mobilize additional recruits; the program operators and the activists adopted creative solutions to continue to implement responses and numerous community activities while maintaining social distancing restrictions.

2. **Response lever**

   - **A broad scope of responses**. Assistance was provided to 37% of all households in Kiryat Shemona, and to some 54% of all households in Arrabe. The responses consisted of food and groceries, medication, toys and equipment as well as respite opportunities, scholastic assistance and holiday activities.

3. **Community lever**

   - Strengthening and developing social capital in the communities. The implementation of emergency measures via Better Together strengthened the community's social solidarity and collective efficacy and created a sense of unity even during the imposed period of strict social distancing restrictions and lockdown. The responses provided by the activists was helpful both

to themselves and to other residents throughout the community. This change contributed to the shaping of a new community narrative and reinforced residents' trust in the Local Authority.

- ▫ Substantial contribution of the emergency measures implemented. In the short term, assistance was provided to residents and they undertook to abide by the government's guidelines. In the long term, the implementation of emergency measures helped develop social capital and made it possible to handle and prevent diverse social problems (such as domestic violence, loneliness, nutrition insecurity).

Summary and Recommendations

Restrictions and lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic were first imposed on the population in March to May 2020. The difficulty of implementing social distancing was multiplied several times over in areas characterized as low socio-economic, where housing resources are scantier and access to resources is lower in routine times too. The strength of community initiatives lies in the planning and implementation of responses and services, and the provision of extensive assistance suited to resident needs – and it manifests itself in underprivileged areas precisely at times of crisis when challenges facing residents are numerous. From the perspective of interviewees, the consolidation of the BT Program and some of its unique working principles demonstrated maximal benefit during the crisis. Several recommendations derive from the findings:

- ✂ It is recommended that the model be implemented in ethnically or culturally unique communities (such as ultra-Orthodox Jewish and Muslim) or in areas that are home to populations in low socio-economic conditions. This is because the program is able to adapt to population characteristics and utilize "local wisdom" to devise creative, suitable responses.

- ✂ The program's reliance on community activists and their central role makes it possible to lean on the community's strength in the provision of assistance and to connect with the local authority to receive resources. It is recommended that the connection and trust between residents and the local authority be strengthened as these characteristics contribute to the population's compliance in following guidelines during an emergency.

- ✂ It is important to anchor the program budget within the local authority's official budget over time and to allocate a municipal job for the city program coordinator in order to promote the programs'

continuation. Sole reliance on residents' activitiy may wane or cease in the absence of a significant, professional program coordinator.

✂ One of the keys to the success of the program in an emergency is the professional wraparound provided to the localities by JDC-Ashalim, which includes the development of knowledge, training, support, supervision, and a formative study. It is recommended that the local authority should know where to find similar inputs and make use of them in further implementation of the community development.

✂ It is recommended that continuing studies conduct surveys in neighborhoods with comprehensive community programs to examine the residents' situation in various walks of life, and their satisfaction with their lives and with the extent of their community involvement. It is also important to conduct a comparison with residents of neighborhoods where no emergency community initiatives were implemented.

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1. Background

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic. The pandemic led to extreme, rapid, and widereaching change to an unprecedented and extraordinary extent. Many governments around the world, including Israel's, imposed restrictions on activity and mobility, and issued strict guidelines on social distancing.

Despite their necessity, these guidelines caused widespread difficulties in virtually all walks of life: Workplaces, schools and studies, trade and industry, and the procurement of basic equipment for household management (OECD 2020). In the face of the dichotomy, between the desire to benefit from social distancing and, at the same time, to ensure the population receive basic responses and services – different countries implemented different policies.

The literature recommends, among other things, a welfare policy to help families and children, reliance on a community's strengths, and community involvement in the provision of assistance to its members in times of crisis (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2020).[1] This recommendation illuminates the significant role of community during the COVID-19 pandemic and its ability to address various problems such as financial difficulties, nutrition insecurity, childcare, social-emotional concerns, and loneliness. On the one hand, the community comprises populations in need of assistance, on the other hand, it commands the resources and human capital to provide the necessary assistance, strengthen individuals, and avert the development of diverse social problems (Marston et al., 2020).

In recent years, interest has grown in comprehensive community programs (Comprehensive Community Initiatives - CCI) and the impact of social capital on the management and prevention of various social problems, such as: reducing risk factors among children and youth, reinforcement of parental and familial competence, alleviation of loneliness among the elderly, and reinforcement of community resilience and strengths (Gross-Manos & Cohen, 2019; Brisson & Roll, 2008; Lavenda et al., 2017). These initiatives aim to establish strong, vital communities able to cultivate ties and connect between residents and organizations in order to foster adaptability to changing situations and overcome crises, thereby enhancing well-being.

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[1] https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/program-guidance-preventive-and-responsive-support-children-families

The Better Together Program (BT) was established by JDC-Ashalim in 2006 with the goal of improving the welfare of children and families living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The program is part of a group of comprehensive community initiatives. The initiatives concentrate on a defined geographical region (a locality or neighborhood) for which the program serves as a platform to recruit resources and promote various interventions determined by neighborhood needs. The program's intervention in a neighborhood is conducted via the joint enlistment of community members and service providers, and rests on the existing human and social capital and on the recruitment of resources. In addition, the program is based on a broad view of the range of needs and requisite responses.

The following section gives background on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social and community life and on BT activities both in regular times and in emergency.

1.1 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and community life

The COVID-19 pandemic affected numerous aspects of life in most countries worldwide. The various restrictions imposed in response to the crisis reduced the ability to maintain face-to-face contact, interpersonal relations and posed unique difficulties and challenges on the personal, family and community planes. For example, on the personal plane, the restrictions exacerbated psychological problems such as depression and anxiety, and increased poverty-related risk behavior such as delinquency, alcoholism, and substance abuse (Rajkumar, 2020). On the family plane, domestic conflicts intensified, the manifestations of domestic violence and abuse increased, and childcare, eldercare, and the care of people with disabilities became more difficult (Rivkin et al., 2020; Aizik et al., 2020; Arazi and Sabag, 2020). On the financial plane, social distancing caused the closure of industrial branches and small businesses, and employees either were put on unpaid leave or were dismissed, all of which engendered economic instability (Schwartz et al., 2020).

While the pandemic and ensuing restrictions affected the entire population, they proved far more onerous for vulnerable populations. These populations are characterized by greater dependence on state support, they live in crowded conditions, in homes without private balconies or yards, and in neighborhoods with fewer open public spaces. Moreover, they have less access to computers and the internet, and lower digital skills, impeding their recourse to online services in times of crisis (Aizik et al., 2020; IASC, 2020). The social and financial risks deriving from the restrictions have health implications. A report by experts advising the National Security HQ on coping with the pandemic

(2020) indicates a link between low socio-economic status and higher COVID-19 morbidity. It may be due to living in more crowded conditions and/or to occupations that do not permit working from home. The report emphasizes the key role of local authorities in impacting public behavior so as to prevent the pandemic's spread.

On the community plane, social distancing and restricted mobility in public spaces impacted the ability to maintain social contact with neighbors or participate in community events, as well as a sense of belonging. This predicament is potentially harmful to the sense of solidarity and to social networking (OECD, 2020; Stansfield et al., 2020). Indeed, many psychologists and researchers call for dealing socially with the pandemic and the need for isolation: To define the restrictions of social distancing as spatial, in physical terms alone, and to find creative responses to augment social closeness and solidarity between individuals living in the same geographical space; i.e., to strengthen the community's social capital (Abel & McQueen, 2020). Programs based on assistance from community members can help improve an individual's life, strengthen families, and reduce the tension between families and service providers (Gross-Manos & Cohen, 2019). Furthermore, there has been increasing evidence in recent years that in times of various crises, including health-related, the support of community activists can help the community in both the material and physical aspects of daily life, and in psychological aspects. The recommendation, therefore, is that governments and social organizations direct their efforts at operating community programs on behalf of the community (Marston et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2020; The World Bank, 2020).

To date, there are no studies in the professional literature on comprehensive community initiatives that assumed responsibility for a population during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is, however, assorted evidence of local initiatives that launched community intervention for the provision of assistance during the crisis. One initiative, for example, described the importation of medical students to the US city of Pittsburgh (O'Connor-Terry et al., 2020). The community is characterized by a low socio-economic level and ethnic diversity. The most necessary assistance, according to the findings, was material and psychological due to social distancing and isolation – more so than medical assistance for which the students were brought in. Most applications made to individual and organizational initiators revolved around food shortages, help with childcare or eldercare, or with anxiety, depression, and psychological symptoms that surfaced due to social distancing. Another initiative, in Britain, focused on reinforcing community resilience in a neighborhood during the pandemic, which helped

residents and enhanced their well-being to better cope with the crisis (Stansfield et al., 2020). More global initiatives focused on policies in the Third World, noting the importance of community initiatives in devising creative, site-specific responses particularly in communities with manifold social and health challenges (International Institute for Environment and Development [IIED], 2020).

1.2 The Better Together Program

As noted, the BT Program intervenes at the neighborhood level and is based on the joint enlistment of residents and service providers amid mobilization of resources, and the development and implementation of responses for a range of specific needs in the neighborhood. Program activity in the neighborhood is headed and directed by a BT neighborhood coordinator. Interventions are implemented according to three main levers of change in the neighborhood (Somekh et al., 2018) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The three levers of change model

The organizational lever – The establishment of inter-disciplinary organizational infrastructure engaging varied professional staff to advance neighborhood residents

The response lever for children, youth and their families – The development, consolidation, and expansion of diverse responses suited to the needs of families and children in the neighborhood

The community lever – The construction of infrastructure composed of resident activists and volunteers to assume active responsibility for the families in the neighborhood, and to enlist residents with leadership potential in the processes of program planning and implementation in the neighborhood

Program activity began in four neighborhoods and, over the years, peaked at 50 neighborhoods in 30 cities countrywide. The program is currently being assimilated (i.e., the budgetary and operational responsibility are being transferred) at the Service for Community Work in the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services (MOLSA) via the Social Service Departments (SSDs) in the Local Authorities. To date, the program has been assimilated in 11 localities and, in the course of 2021, another five are expected to follow. Six other localities are continuing their activities under the responsibility of Ashalim, including Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona.

In 2020 the program began to be institutionalized and assimilated in Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona, the final stage of Ashalim's implementation of the program. At this stage, Ashalim's work and support the program envelope. The program goal was to create neighborhood leadership to develop community resilience and boost social solidarity so that it would be able to deal independently with its challenges and improve life in the neighborhood. Similarly, the target population, which in the past had focused on children and families, was expanded to all the residents, including senior citizens and people with disabilities. In Kiryat Shemona, the program was assimilated by the city's community centers, headed by the network's CEO; in Arrabe, it was assimilated by the SSDs, headed by the department manager. In both localities, a neighborhood coordinator was appointed. The activity in these localities was jointly funded by the Lisa's Stone Pritzker Foundation, other Third Sector organizations, the Local Authorities, the Jewish Federations of Canada-United Israel Appeal (JFC-UIA), and the business sector headed by Ituran.

The Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) accompanied the BT Program with an evaluation study from 2011 to 2015 (for more details, see Somekh et al., 2018). In 2019 the study was resumed and a summary report written presenting 10 years of program activity in the two cities of Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona.

This document examines the implementation of the community emergency provisions implemented by the BT Program during the period of restrictions imposed due to the first wave of the pandemic in Israel (March to May 2020), in Arrabe and in Kiryat Shemona.

2. The Study

2.1 Study Goals

- To provide data on the extent of activities of the BT Program in Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona during the first wave of the pandemic

- To examine the perceptions of senior Local-Authority figures, program operators and community activists of the program activity during the national crisis, its contribution to, and impact on, the sense of community resilience

2.2 Methodology

The study is based on three main sources:

- Data collection on the scope of program implementation from BT's Administrative Data System for the relevant months (March to May 2020)

- Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior Local-Authority figures, program operators and community activists in the two localities, conducted in April 2020. The interviews were transcribed, analyzed and processed by MJB's research team, using qualitative thematic analysis (Shkedi, 2011). Interviewees were informed in advance that their participation in the study was voluntary, that the interviews would remain confidential, and that the findings would be presented without any identifying features.

- An international literature review on the activities of comprehensive community programs and community responses in reaction to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

3. Findings

This section presents four principles of emergency work underpinning the activities of the BT Program implementers in Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona, in March to May 2020. These principles reflect the model of levers of change presented above, and the conceptions of distinctive accomplishments during the crisis: Reinforcement of community resilience, and assistance to neighborhood residents.

These topics will be presented and discussed vis-à-vis the recommendations of social organizations for the implementation of community programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the best practice for managing assistance in times of emergency.

3.1 The organizational lever – perceptions of the establishment of emergency organizational infrastructure

3.1.1 Accelerated, efficient implementation of emergency community provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel

As part of the operational provisions of the BT Program and according to its defined aims, neighborhood emergency teams had been created in Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona, by location (neighborhood/quarter), during regular times: Each area has its own specially trained task force of activists and volunteers. The task force operates under the regional emergency HQ (the regional coordinator) and all locations come under the municipal emergency administration of the Local Authority. The goal is to build a social leadership group during regular times that will be ready to respond to neighborhood residents in times of emergency: The responses include meeting day-to-day needs and security demands, as well as attending to special education and respites. The project was implemented and established in times of routine to prepare for times of emergency, and the group's work aims to reinforce community resilience and neighborhood solidarity.

The mayor of Kiryat Shemona said in an interview:[2]

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[2]   The interview was conducted in 2019 with a view to writing the activity report for 2018-19.

"For in the end, what is a city? The city does not make the residents, the residents make the city. A strong community has a strong city, and that precisely was the idea... Because of their [BT] day-to-day work and the [fact that] they are [located] within the quarters, on the ground, and they 'live' the residents... so, firstly, they play a very important role in an emergency as well, for they know the problems better [than anyone]... on which floor there is someone with an oxygen cylinder, and where the wheelchair-ridden person is, and where the emergency path... In fact, it is the Local Authority's elite unit. A task force that is able to take on tasks and make the best of them... Speaking as mayor, this, it seems to me, is my 'commando unit'." (**Mayor of Kiryat Shemona**)

In keeping with the provisions made in regular times, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BT program played a key role in heading the municipal emergency provisions. The BT city leaders in both localities assumed responsibility for, and fully managed, the emergency setup and municipal assistance, providing the population with extensive help. This decision was not only unusual, but is uncharacteristic of social organizations which, generally, do not function during emergencies but accord their employees unpaid leave (Shitufim, 2014). The BT city leaders noted that only the program staff were designated essential workers and thus were not granted unpaid leave, in contrast to the employees of the other social organizations in the two localities, such as the community centers and the SSDs.

The interviews revealed that the efficient BT activity was based on the preparations for an emergency that had been made in regular times:

''About five or six years ago, we understood that if we are to carry out meaningful work in an emergency, we had to synchronize it with the work [done] in regular times... So that whenever we introduced a neighborhood manager in regular times, we defined them as such for emergencies as well [...] for war, earthquakes or any other emergency." (**City leader, CEO of community centers, Kiryat Shemona**)

In contrast, in Arrabe, there had been no program to establish emergency staff until the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, when restrictions were imposed, emergency teams were quickly appointed and they absorbed the community activists who operated in regular times. The city was divided into 11 neighborhoods, each with its own coordinator in charge of a group of activists. The activists identified and mapped the residents who lacked family support in the locality, as well as families in need of assistance during the emergency. City activities were managed by the Ashalim representative in the locality and the city leader – the director of the SSD. According to the interviewees, the activity during the emergency was efficient due to the infrastructure consolidated in regular times:

"[When the pandemic erupted], there was no [emergency setup in the locality], but what we had created in BT in recent years was a basic, strong, and organized infrastructure, leading the assistance campaign for residents during the corona crisis. What we had done in recent years... consolidating the group, training activists, promoting initiatives, translating them into activity, ...the emergency was the test case and [the work] proved itself. We built a real safety net for the residents and truly amazing things happened because of the corona crisis, in my opinion, the strengths and abilities of the activists came to the fore, and also of the organization, I am talking about the activists but also about the whole setup, the accompanying staff, the professional staff, the interface between the professional staff and the activists and volunteers was something amazing." (**City leader, director SSD, Arrabe**)

The implementation of the emergency model cited by interviewees is consistent with the principles of best practice for the management of volunteers in social organizations in times of emergency (Shitufim, 2014). Ashalim's national director of the BT Program described the professional conception at the basis of the program:

"Our community conception says that what works in regular times, should also work in an emergency. Now, this is not something we invented. It is a familiar assertion, it is just that I think the difference [is] that we made it part of our working program. So it would not remain a banner. An emergency can don different forms. ... there is a national emergency that affects us all. But an emergency can also be some disruption of the public agenda at the level of a city or the level of a neighborhood, and then the community has to be able to cope. Our conception was that we are building community infrastructure able to respond to any incident whatsoever, in the most effective way."

3.1.2 Congregation of all components of the emergency provisions under a single roof

Consistent with the organizational lever, in regular times the program created interdisciplinary organizational infrastructure combining varied professional teams to advance neighborhood residents. As in regular times, during the first wave of the pandemic the program took steps to gather the full array of assistance under one roof by: consolidating the partnership platforms; functioning as an intermediary agent between the Local Authority and the residents, and matching needs with responses; and centering all activity on the community activists – from the stage of planning tasks and responses to the implementation stage.

Consolidation of the partnership platforms in the locality

In regular times, the work of the BT program is characterized by partnership with the divisions of the Local Authority and with numerous organizations in the Third Sector and business sector for the provision of services to the locality. The partnership is involved at all levels and is based on mutual consultation, planning, implementation, and funding. The work of all the parties is synergized, based on the partnership platforms constructed by the program (Somekh et al., 2018). These efforts are defined in the work model under the organizational lever, the aim being to create interdisciplinary, organizational infrastructure comprised of diverse professional staff to promote the welfare of families and children in the neighborhood.

As it emerged from the interviews, in times of crisis, too, the emergency teams operated in partnership with different agents within and without the Local Authority:

> "From the moment that we introduced [the emergency provisions] into the municipal ensemble, it meant that in an emergency, social workers are assigned to a quarter, education staff are assigned, we even have military personnel assigned inside - we have a municipal company with each platoon in a different quarter, assigned to the quarter's setup [of provisions]. Logistics people who are assigned to the ensemble and, in fact, I manage the whole of the quarters and the logistics of the Local Authority in an emergency. Today, we actually activated the whole of the logistics and quarters, and every quarter has people assigned. ... Employees of the Local Authority are subordinate to the manager, employees who in regular times are subordinate to the Local Authority – in an emergency they are subordinated to the quarter. Now, this is something that we did not merely say or write throughout the year. Over the years, there were drills and now, we have had an opportunity to practice [it] in real life." (**City leader, CEO of community centers, Kiryat Shemona**)

Functioning as an intermediary agent between the Local Authority and the residents

In regular times, neighborhood management and the flow of resources are conducted by means of public involvement. The program operates professional committees in the neighborhood administration and the members consist of employees of the Local Authority, program implementers, residents and activists. The committees convene three to four times a year to discuss neighborhood needs, suitable responses and the allocation of resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, and in view of the demand to act quickly and efficiently, an apparatus was created to match needs and responses. Thus, for example, in Kiryat Shemona, the municipal hotline (106) and the hotline of the network of community centers (1221) worked together to refer calls to the body of community activists for an appropriate response to every individual call. In Arrabe, a special hotline was created at the SSD to take resident calls during the crisis, and magnets were produced publicizing the SSD telephone numbers along with other emergency numbers, and distributed to

every household. For the distribution, bright orange BT vests were manufactured, similar to those worn by the Home Front, to alert residents to the arrival of community activists to extend assistance.

Concomitantly, other organizations providing assistance, as well as the Local Authority, contacted BT activists for purposes of the distribution of produce, food parcels, toys, hygiene kits, and medication to those residents requiring them. Thus, as in regular times, the program became the intermediary agent between the residents and the activists, and between the organizations and the Local Authority, the service providers.

"One good thing was that everything functioned under one roof. Wow, I'm trying to imagine what it would be like if every body and every organization that works with us would have tried to act alone, what a mess there would have been here... duplication on the one hand, and people that no one reached, on the other. And here, everything is concentrated in the same framework, which is connected to the municipal hotline as well, and to people like me who are able to reach volunteers and activists, and [who] know how to get there... You tell me what the needs are, we will try to help you with the responses... we had tasks as if, really I don't know how they even got to me. A social worker from the 'Clalit' health plan who spoke to me and a few other people who are alone at home, whom she handles, and she didn't know what to do. I spoke to Adi [BT Manager in Kiryat-Shemona] and within minutes we organized five volunteers, one for each one, for each family. One person wanted someone to pray with them, one just wanted someone to sit and talk to them." (**Kiryat Shemona activist**)

Centering emergency activity on the community activists – from the stage of planning to the stage of implementation

At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, the activists themselves were part of the planning, recruitment, and assistance setup. The theory on the implementation of comprehensive community initiatives refers to these processes as "bottom up." Their aim is to build community resilience by allowing residents a voice and lending them the strength to act towards the improvement of life in the neighborhood despite the difficult social and economic situation, which excludes its voice from the discourse and decision-making at the Local Authority (Brisson & Roll, 2008;Kubisch et al.,2010).

This process contrasts with that of "top bottom," wherein the Local Authority conducts municipal planning processes that are not based on surveys or assessments of the residents' needs, and do not involve the public.

The interviews revealed that the activists were included in HQ meetings at the Local Authority which discussed the provision of assistance to residents and reported on resident needs and the warranted assistance:

"The number of volunteers should be doubled and not only to distribute food to the elderly but to help with medications and whatever they need. The families are far from one another and every family is alone with its own children. The elderly remain alone and there is no one to ask after them, so it is important that this is what there should be. To go in and ask if they need help with something, so that they do not feel that they are alone. At the municipality, my idea was accepted and preparations are now under way. There is an advertisement for more volunteers and recruitment is also via Facebook, word of mouth, the friends of activists and MOLSA programs. After COVID-19, the volunteering of visiting the elderly should be continued so that we do not disappear on them. You have to like what you do. To volunteer from the heart." (**Arrabe volunteer**)

By means of the bottom up practice, the activists not only operate the emergency setup and provide assistance to residents, but also recruit and run additional activists. The parallel practices of bottom up and top bottom are at the foundation of the program's intervention model as part of the organizational lever. The BT national director explained:

"We did and do believe in 'local wisdom'. And this is precisely the combination of local professionals, and I include in this also the political leadership, and the professional level. And the political activists who trust one another, know one another, know the added value of everyone. And make room for one another."

In fact, the community activists who distributed emergency provisions planned and carried out the responses in full cooperation with the Local Authority and additional organizations. In Kiryat Shemona, for instance, one key activist, on his own, built a database of 250 activists which he ran on Whatsapp. After the BT coordinator approached him, his database was used and the volunteers in it were directed to ongoing tasks in the emergency provisions.

The activists also worked as recruiters and operators of the volunteers through the emergency hotlines, and they were thereby able to respond to distress calls from residents who could not be assisted through other agencies.

The precise link between needs and responses, the situation of community activists in key planning positions, and the responses and assistance put in place, reinforced trust between the residents and the Local Authority and enabled them to abide fully by the guidelines of social distancing in the locality. The BT national director said:

"One of the goals of the program is that, ultimately, there will be trust between the Local Authority and the state, on the one hand, and the residents, on the other. For example, in the case of COVID-19, the guidelines are really from up top. For there are residents who are not exactly - a state that is not in daily contact with them - suddenly it hands down guidelines, why should they listen to it?! So I think that in order for the relationship to really exist, the sense of community must be strengthened. Because I think that in the final analysis, the [party] that can ultimately put across the message sharply - messages of the state or the Local Authority - to the family or resident - it is those activists. Those activists who are daily with the families, the youth, so that when they [the activists] say so, it is different than when someone says it some time at a press conference."

According to the program managers, in the first wave of the pandemic there were very few verified cases (about 10 in each locality) and no hospitalizations at all. But, a qualification is in order – this was not necessarily due to the activities of the program.

The matter of the Local Authority's functioning in times of emergency was raised in the report of experts advising the National Security HQ on dealing with COVID-19 (2020). The report notes a close connection between how guidelines are transmitted and the conduct of the Local Authority in a crisis and, on the other hand, public behavior. In localities where there is trust between the Local Authority and the residents, the latter are able to abide by the guidelines of social distancing to sever the chain of contagion.

3.2 Perceptions of the efficiency of the management of community activists during the pandemic

3.2.1 Recruitment and management of activists, suited to a locality's needs in times of crisis

It emerged from the interviewees that the recruitment and conduct of community activists during the crisis was efficient and appropriate for the hour of crisis.

The literature on best practice in the preparation of organizations for emergencies (Shitufim, 2014) reveals that organizational managers should first prepare to activate community activists; in other words, to examine the characteristics of the activists who operated before the crisis and determine their suitability for acting in times of crisis. In fact, the program managers in Kiryat Shemona defined the characteristics of suitable activists. They concluded that the COVID-19 crisis demanded activists that did not belong to groups at risk: Above the age of 60, with a background of illness. The desirable characteristics of suitable activists were their age and occupation – young people who were on unpaid leave from work due to the pandemic, and youth who in this period could be more available for the tasks.

In addition, some of the interviewees described the pandemic period as an opportunity to enhance social involvement and involve more people in community work:

"We have a young man who is the chef at the [events]. And he arrived on the first day, came with ,you know, such charisma, I entered his contact on my my phone as: [name] from the municipal, I was sure he was a city employee sent to help us. One day goes by, two days go by, the young man takes, helps, travels, comes, I am sitting and talking to him and I say, 'What division do you work in?' And he says, 'What division? I am the chef of the hall in Kiryat Shemona. And he is with us to this day, he does everything, at some point he assumed a position and he tells me what to do, where to take [things] and what to do. Now, because he is also a chef, he prepares lunch for us and spoils us all day long. And suddenly, someone whom we would never have reached because of his working hours, because of everything, has become one of our most prominent activists. This period has wrought wonders, exposing many many good people." (**BT manager, Kiryat Shemona**)

In Arrabe, the Ashalim representative defined the characteristics he sought in activists for the time of emergency – above the age of 60 and no youth. At first, 75 out of the 150 volunteers that are active in regular times were found to be suitable. Later, additional activists were recruited by the core that had begun to work during the pandemic, and from other organizations working in the locality. The mapping of the population in need of assistance in Arrabe was performed by the activists themselves. Every volunteer was asked to register 10 households, thereby expanding the assistance throughout the locality.

Arrabe, an Arab-Muslim locality in Israel's north, decided not to accept assistance from the IDF due to cultural sensitivities and tensions, but to rely on volunteer residents of the community. The management of the activists under the BT program made this possible:

"There [in Tel Aviv] the Home Front handles distribution. Here [the BT volunteers] did the work of the Home Front. By the way, the Home Front also wanted to enlist in the task, we told them 'thank you, we're managing.' They understood the sensitivity, they come in, arriving in uniform and go into people's homes in uniform, there's a certain delicacy involved. Although I do thank them, they did great work, excellent, deserving of all praise. Nevertheless, we can rely on our volunteers in civvies." (**Mayor of Arrabe**)

A coordinator from the groups of activists in Arrabe described the population's apprehension at receiving assistance from people outside of the extended family – the hamoula – during the pandemic:

"On the first day of food distribution, I was with the volunteers in the field and I would like to share how I felt. I went into somebody's home, with a mask and gloves, and the volunteers with the trays. She said: 'Oh, you're coming into my home. You have corona!' Their perception is that anyone with a mask has caught corona… so we prepared bright BT vests to identify the [volunteers]. They go into [the homes of] old people and families, so there should be identification, who they are, whom they belong to, and where they come from. There is apprehension in the community about strangers coming into their homes. When they see it [the vest] they know and are calm. In Arrabe, the city is special." (**Coordinator in Arrabe**)

3.2.2 Sustaining continued community activity by devising creative responses

The in-depth interviews revealed that the scope of operations and responses offered in regular times was maintained during the pandemic thanks to the activities that took place in a digital environment, which is safer and meets the need for social distancing. The activities included children's clubs, homework assistance, and telephone contact with elders living on their own who were offered psychological care and referred to additional support services. These findings are consistent with the new styles of volunteering during the pandemic when 63% of the activity was conducted online or by telephone, as opposed to 4% prior to the outbreak (Israel Volunteer Network, 2020).

"We managed to continue numerous projects… We functioned on Zoom, really, we did it on a level where 10, 12 kids would come to this type of enrichment center… We have an initiative now, in its second week, which we have actually called 'I came to help a friend,' we saw all the chaos in the community in the area of online learning and we set up an operations room of students available at different hours so that anyone in fact doing homework - if parents can't help or have no time - picks up a telephone and a student or National Service volunteer helps them. " (**BT manager, Kiryat Shemona**)
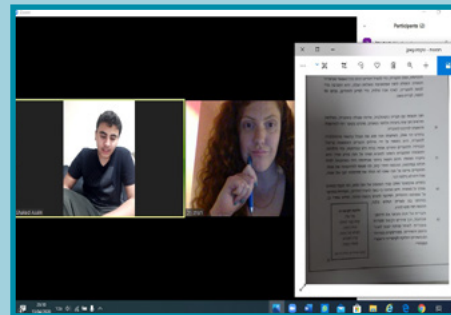
Similarly, in Arrabe, other community responses were implemented to facilitate social distancing in culturally-sensitive ways and simultaneously help the population. They were made possible through the cooperation between the Local Authority and the activists, in both planning and executing the emergency setup. The BT national director related:

"For example, in the emergency [in Arrabe], one of the problems in the Arab sector is that on the 28th of every month, old-age pensions and other benefits are distributed. If a family has no digital means, the distribution is by post. And then a huge bottleneck is created, the post office becomes a place of crowding, and there the fear of contagion is great. Because they did not know how to resolve it. Now comes the activists' highly creative thinking. They approached the mayor and said: 'What's the problem? There are three banks in city, you're the mayor, talk to the bank managers. Tell them to open the banks on those days for longer hours. We will make sure to bring the pension recipients in staggered fashion to avoid crowding. We will be able to let them enter one after another,' and that is how it was. Within hours, the pensions were distributed and social distancing was maintained. The Home Front heard of it and was amazed at the simplicity of the solution, but one that worked. Because it did not happen in any other Arab locality."

Arrabe

11 neighborhoods in the emergency

No. of residents in Arrabe – **26,481**, living in **7,000 households.**
Assistance was provided to **2,500 families** and **1,296 elders living on their own**

The total scope of assistance provided in the locality reached some 54% of the households

20,000 warm meals
To the elderly and at-risk population

550 activity kits
And children's games

300 hygiene kits

Assistance to Elders Day
Helping elders withdraw their social security benefits from the post office in an orderly, safe manner

Community activists
170 adult activists

Vegetable picking
30 volunteer pickers
8 picking days
180-200 kg. of vegetables per work day
100-120 crates per week

Rewards for volunteers
1,300 coupons / petrol rebates / Ramadan's Festive meal ('Iftar')

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics – 2006 Population Census, BT Administrative Database (municipality and quarters)

Kiryat Shemona

4 quarters in the emergency

No. of residents in Kiryat Shemona – **22,795**, living in **7,000 households.**
Assistance was provided to **2,500 households**, families and people living on their own.

The total scope of assistance provided in the locality reached some 37% of the households

56 emergency days

35,000 warm meals
To the elderly and at-risk population

3,000 packages
Food baskets, relaxation kits, coupons to the elderly and at-risk population

3 festive trucks
Independence Day, Mimouna, and the Sabbath

Community activists
134 adults

150 youth

23 partner organizations

500 participant residents in municipal/national projects

100 private lessons
To children and youth on ZOOM

National commemorations
2 memorial ceremonies

3 honor guards

1 torch ceremony

2 "living-room memorials"

122 memorial candles lit for the fallen in cemeteries

100 parcels
Distributed to bereaved families

150 calls to two hotlines
The community center hotline (1221)

The hotline of the municipality and the quarters (106)

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics – 2006 Population Census, BT Administrative Database (municipality and quarters)

3.4 The Community Lever – Perceptions of the contribution of social capital and community resilience

Social capital relates to social networks, shared norms, reciprocity, and sense of trust –taken all together, it allows members of a neighborhood or community to act as a group to achieve common goals and enhance their well-being both as individuals and as a group (Pavin & Lev Ari, 2003; Putnam, 2000). In the evaluation of community programs, a community's social capital is a sign of the extent of its ability to achieve goals, and its test is the quality of its social interactions, the degree of social cohesion, collective efficacy, and informal social control (Sampson et al., 1997; Portes, 1998; Carroll et al., 2005).

This section presents interviewee perceptions concerning the impact of the emergency provisions during the pandemic on the development of social capital and community well-being: The level of social cohesion, the handling and prevention of broad social problems during the pandemic, the significance of volunteering for the community activists.

3.4.1 Strengthening a community's social capital

The interviews revealed that the social cohesion developed in the neighborhood before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was strengthened during the crisis by virtue of the program activities in the two localities:

"… I can speak about myself, [I mean] about our family cell… we learned how much the investment in family and children is our most important asset in life, and how meaningful the community's support can be… we live at a distance of hundreds of kilometers from our origine family. All our siblings are spread over the whole country, no one lives here in our area. And when you have a supportive community… I, myself, was in isolation for the first two weeks of the corona. Because I had been at a wedding with someone who was ill with corona. And my wife could not leave the house with the children, and community people came and did her shopping, took out the garbage for her. Like, they brought her things, it was crazy, it is impossible to go through it alone." (**Activist in Kiryat Shemona**)

It also emerged that the assistance provided, mainly by community activists, contributed to strengthening the sense of belonging, the personal and community resilience, and the sense of collective efficacy:

"All the people who were here had a good feeling. They felt that [people] were not working for them... that they [too] were part of the effort. Even those who did not themselves come to volunteer now and could not [conduct the] distribution, they knew that they were in a group and community in the neighborhood of the people doing the work, so even if I cannot today, OK, I was there yesterday, so today it is my neighbor because I returned to work. There is a community feeling that everyone is doing it together. Amazing." (**Activist in Kiryat Shemona**)

The strengthening of community resilience and community building has a bi-directional advantage for the community: On the one hand, a strong, organized community is able to point to its needs and, on the other hand, the Local Authority relies on the community in its decision-making processes and channels its resources to the establishment of responses accordingly (Kubisch et al.,2010; Walzer & Weaver, 2018). These findings are consistent with the literature on the importance of resident involvement in community life as impacting community resilience and specifically, the ability to help and offer support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stansfield et al., 2020).

Another advantage of the community building and reinforcement of collective efficacy during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic was the construction of a new community narrative. In Kiryat Shemona, for example, program implementers made a concerted effort to change the residents' "language." The common "I am owed" was replaced by, "What can I do for myself and for my community?" In other words, a new narrative developed for residents living in one of Israel's most peripheral cities; a city considered disadvantaged, vulnerable, marginal, and under constant security threat, one that had received extensive resources from the state up until the 2000s. According to the activists, the assistance that they themselves had provided and organized consolidated the understanding that the community is strong and resilient, and that volunteering had helped it, as follows:

"... there's ... something like a disadvantage in the story that people tell themselves about the city. It starts with seemingly real things and continues with a mentality that adhered to the people here, that we were dumped here in '48 or '58... that the state does not care about us, that Ben-Gurion promised this, that Begin promised that. And everyone ate up our food, drank our drink, and lied to us etc. It is not always easy to live in a place where a lot of people do not want to live in. But we would like to tell a different story. That is what we are trying to do. I hope we succeed: That Kiryat Shemona is a good place to live. That we live in the most, the most beautiful scenic landscape in the country. And that there are numerous advantages to living in a frontier city. That the pace of life here is amazing, and the sense of community is amazing and the warmth of the people and the connection between everyone. And distance too has its advantages. That real Zionist deeds are happening here. When I served as an officer in the army, I did not feel that I was doing anything meaningful but when you live in a place like this, you know – like – most of the people do not want to live here. And you – carry the flag here, so to speak. ... It lends life a lot of meaning." (**Activist in Kiryat Shemona**)

In Arrabe, the assistance measures received added force when a group of activists with disabilities stood out for the assistance they provided to neighborhood residents: Distributing food, picking agricultural crops, and traveling to the residents' homes. Note that this salient activity by the group began in regular times; its members are impelled by a desire to be significant and prominent, and to change the realities of the conservative community in which they live:

"At first, everyone looked at us (people with disabilities) due to our particular disadvantage. We decided to show people that we are able to do everything. We are able to give, just like regular people. Nor are we as busy as regular people with work and other chores. We wanted to prove ourselves in the community and in the city. And during the time of corona, the group really stood out in volunteering. A wheelchair-ridden young man drives in a car and distributes food. Also the visually-impaired and vertically challenged participate. When people with disabilities arrive and distribute gifts to children with disabilities, it lends them, the small child, a certain reinforcement that they too will have a chance to give when they grow up, that they have a place in the community." (**Group activist**)

3.4.2 Management and prevention of broad social problems

The literature provides evidence that a community is able to help its members cope in day-to-day life with difficult social conditions such as poverty and unemployment, as well as childrearing in these conditions. The community can also be the agent managing and indeed preventing negative social phenomena (Gross-Manos & Cohen, 2019). The city leader and manager of the SSD in Arrabe spoke of the significance of providing assistance under the BT banner as the focus through which it is possible to manage the diverse social problems that developed in this period, such as child abuse and neglect, domestic violence and so forth. In Arrabe, the mayor decided that all assistance would be funneled through the SSD. As a result, requests also came in from families not known to social services, regarding various issues such as childcare and assistance to the elderly. Through the BT assistance provisions, activists could be dispatched to distribute food, clarify a situation, distribute toys to children and so on. If a professional response was required, the case was passed on to the online treatment centers. Thus, the city leader related:

"We opened an emergency hotline at the SSD and constantly publicized the numbers in the media, asking people to call... [as] we were prepared to extend assistance. That was our initiative for there was no public reception at the SSD, but concomitantly, we initiated contact with families to identify need and provide responses, ... to build the relationship [and] through it – community resilience, the flow of information, extension of assistance, guidance, referrals, exercise of rights, material assistance, everything. You would be surprised to hear that there were a lot of people, really, dozens of people, because we were the only department working at the municipality, most of the departments were at home, and all requests filtered down to us. Many people not known to social services... we began... we had to handle them and see to their needs. The problem was that most venues were closed... School, the welfare office, people were at home and there was also an increase in... domestic violence that we had to deal with... and then the violence unit, to handle violence... we have a center for family well-being that also worked, once during the [time of] emergency and there were calls, referrals [to the center] to provide a response."

This perception of the program contributions is consistent with other desirable outcomes perceived around the world (such as the UK and the US): These related to publicity campaigns to raise public awareness of the phenomena of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect during the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the decrease in reported cases due to closure of the education system. The immense importance of residents within the community was emphasized – figures who come into contact with families and children, extend assistance during hours of lockdown or isolation, and are able to pay attention to signs of violence in children, to report these and to help.[3]

The BT initiative to operate and extend assistance in the social sphere thus made a key contribution to the population's coping with the pandemic. These and other findings attest to the development of creative community responses, moreover on the basis of local wisdom, serving the needs of residents and activists while abiding by the emergency guidelines. "Local wisdom" ties in with culturally-sensitive needs that emanate from the community on behalf of the community, thereby building trust between the Local Authority and the activists and residents, and enhancing the feasibility of honoring the emergency guidelines to prevent the pandemic's spread.

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[3]   https://www.herts.police.uk/news-and-appeals/constabulary-supports-national-child-abuse-awareness-campaign-0167

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the months of March to May 2020, restrictions were first imposed on Israel's population due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The difficulty of abiding by the rules of social distancing was compounded in areas of a low socio-economic level where housing and access to resources fall short in regular times as well. Precisely because of the many challenges facing communities in these areas during an emergency, the strength of community initiatives is manifest in the planning and implementation of responses and services, and the provision of extensive, effective assistance suited to the needs and characteristics of the community (Abel & McQueen, 2020; Marston et al., 2020).

This document describes the activity that took place in March to May under the BT Program in two localities where it functioned and was assimilated: Arrabe and Kiryat Shemona. Neighborhood emergency teams established in both localities were charged with the entire social assistance operation in the community during the emergency, as part of the preparations made in regular times. The emergency provisions operated on the principles of the program's working model, based on the three levers of change: organizational, responses, and residents.

In the perception of the interviewees, the consolidation of the BT Program and its distinctive working principles were of maximal benefit during the pandemic. Several recommendations for policy and research derive from the findings:

- The model should be implemented in ethnically or culturally unique communities (such as the ultra-Orthodox and the Muslim) or in areas housing populations in low socio-economic conditions. This is because the program is capable of adapting to a population's characteristics and utilizing "local wisdom" to devise creative, suitable responses.

- The program's reliance on community activists and their central position makes it possible to rely on the community's strength in the provision of assistance and to connect with the Local Authority for the receipt of resources. The connection and trust between the residents and the Local Authority should be strengthened as these characteristics facilitate the population's responsiveness in abiding by the emergency guidelines.

- It is important to anchor the program budget in the books of the local authority over time and to allocate a municipal job for the city program coordinator for the good of the programs'

continuation. Sole reliance on the activity of residents may wane or cease in the absence of a significant, professional program coordinator.

✂ One of the keys to the success of the program in an emergency is the professional wraparound provided to the localities by JDC-Ashalim, which includes the development of knowledge, training, support, supervision, and a formative study. It is recommended that the local authority should know where to find similar inputs and make use of them in further implementation of the community development.

✂ Continuing studies should conduct surveys in neighborhoods with comprehensive community programs to examine the residents' situation in various walks of life, as well as their satisfaction with their lives and with the extent of their community involvement. It is also important to conduct comparative surveys with residents of neighborhoods that did not implement emergency community initiatives.

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