

Progress in Project Renewal*

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Project Renewal is an enormous "turn-on". It will help contributors develop a further stake in Israel and will result in a strengthening of the basic campaign. Project Renewal represents the people-to-people Jewish connection. It is an opportunity and not a problem.

THE concept of Project Renewal is not an easy one to grasp: 160 neighborhoods of 300,000 people in fairly acute situations and 200,000 of them children. A major goal of the Project has been to encourage maximum participation of people in the local neighborhoods to plan, articulate and work towards meeting their own needs. I had been somewhat skeptical since I had done consulting during the days of the U.S. War on Poverty, had assisted with Model City-work and was familiar with theories of community development. I also had some knowledge of what had gone on in the U.S. Peace Corps. So, when the self-help concept of Project Renewal was posed I could agree with the desirability of its hypothesis, but I knew that it really hadn't met with success in the United States or other parts of the world.

In April, it was proposed by Irving Bernstein of U.S.A. that I go to Israel and critically examine Project Renewal developments. The letter said in part: "Project Renewal secured pledges in the amount of \$75 million the first year, \$25 million the second year and there will be approximately \$10 to \$15 million this year . . . obviously in America there is a belief that the Program is limited and

requires less funds. In Israel, there is the opposite attitude, experimentation is over and Project Renewal is moving ahead geometrically to meet the human dimensions of the Program. Is this the case? I feel you could address the dilemma as it truly is from your experience. . . ."

A typical Project Renewal neighborhood might be described thusly: 30 percent of the heads of households is unemployed, 16 percent of the 5,000 population is 60 years of age and over. The bulk of the residents are from Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Lebanon, and Syria. There is a high population density and very limited open space in the neighborhood. There is a neglected physical environment. There has been a lack of effectively utilized cultural, recreational and social services. There is a high crime rate. The educational system has a poor reputation. Past governmental treatment of problems tends to encourage dependency and passivity on the part of residents. Attempted solutions or interventions are primarily emergency in nature. The neighborhood suffers from a negative self-image. Residents feel deprived in relation to other neighborhoods. Children reach compulsory school-age unprepared for formal schooling. Parents are unable to participate productively in their children's education. Large numbers of youth do not work or attend school.

It was necessary for me to establish first that I would go to Israel as a free

*Based on a report to the National United Jewish Appeal Leadership, Washington, D.C., May 22, 1982. Project Renewal has been described in articles previously published in this *Journal*. Cf. Elieger Jaffe, "Project Renewal: An Insider's View," Vol. LVII, No. 2 (1980), pp. 181-84.

agent and not as one previously programmed. The U.J.A. gave complete assent for me to "see and deal with and meet with whomever you want. Think through what you want to do and take it from there. . . ."

I developed a list of people I wanted to see, people I felt who would give me the story straight and off I went early in May. In Israel I met with the following people: 2 mayors, 13 staff people working in 8 different Project Renewal neighborhoods, 4 supervisors of Project Renewal areas representing approximately 38 neighborhoods, 3 officials of the Housing Ministry from top level to middle echelon, a key person from the Ministry of Education, the Director of JDC in Israel, the Associate Director of the Corporation of Jewish Community Centers of Israel, a research team of 2 people from the Neaman Institute of Haifa University, who are in the process of a two-year evaluation of Project Renewal, the Deputy Director of the UIA, the key professional with the inter-ministerial team who works with Project Renewal, 4 neighborhood Councils from different Project Renewal communities, and various others, including "rank and file."

The following represent solely my own observations. I have not reviewed this report with anyone. It has been written, moreover, freshly upon my return with little intervening time.

Project Renewal is one of the greatest challenges that the State of Israel and the Jewish people in the Diaspora have ever undertaken. There is no precedent in history in its concept of partnership and shared responsibility. This incredible endeavor aims to eliminate slums and improve the quality of life and mainline underclass people in Israeli society.

The Impact of Project Renewal

1. Generally Project Renewal did not begin with sound planning in the local

areas, in the governmental ministries and in the Diaspora. It was a most uneven beginning and planning became a second step rather than a first one. Hence, much of the complication and some of the disenchantment of those of us in the different communities in the States who became super critical.

2. While this is the third-year of Project Renewal, it has been in the last 12 months that the Program has really taken off. *Today, the participation of the people in the reshaping of neighborhoods, determining service needs and generally improving the quality of their life has been unbelievable. From the people themselves, from government officialdom, from Mayors, from Project Renewal staff, over and over again I heard this statement " . . . people feel they have a say in their lives, future and destiny."*

3. An exciting indigenous leadership is emerging and is being nurtured in the different Renewal neighborhoods. An example would be in Sela, a neighborhood of Natanya where there is a man whose nickname is Kushee. He is big, he is tough-looking, the people adore him. He has developed articulation skills, he leads. They feel they are making progress in terms of their life, homes are being beautified, etc. This man has gone back to school and this is one of the amazing developments which is happening with Renewal.

4. College Programs were created when the people serving on the local community Councils or Vaads felt they needed to improve their skills to compete and function fully with the professionals and officialdom in the Councils. Today there are 230 people from the different Renewal communities who are pursuing higher education at regional colleges. This Fall, there will be over 500 people in this type of program. It is an open University Program, the people are studying human relations and politics, and most importantly, they are actualizing their dreams for the future.

5. There are 100,000 children in school in these neighborhoods and instead of going to school from 8:00 to 12:00 noon, they attend until 3:30 p.m. I saw them taking special classes in literature, in cultural arts, math, etc. Many of us have seen the computers that 10,000 children in 60 schools are using in learning math. Teachers with deep personal commitment are staying on for the afternoon session. There are even *volunteers* who work with the children. The achievements of these children in this enrichment program are phenomenal. Parents from affluent areas now want similar exposure for their children.

6. And the mothers! A special program has been established in the neighborhoods called Tehila. There are 15,000 mothers in the different Tehila classes in the Renewal neighborhoods. Some come two to three times a week. They never knew how to read Hebrew, they are learning now. They sing together. They have their own form of network. They are learning why the children should study, why the kids should stay in school, how they can be supportive of the children. These women are being mainlined and their 80,000 children are experiencing understanding and support from a home environment where previously there had been a huge gap.

7. I saw mother and child programs called *Et Gar*. 50 units with 5,000 young children and parents playing, doing, learning together. Through Renewal, the women are developing better self-images and are becoming part of Israeli society. What is the impact on their husbands? There are some pain and resistance. I had no opportunity to do any assessment of this, but only to see the growing role of women and how key is their leadership in the neighborhood Councils.

8. Bomb shelters have been con-

verted into youth centers, adult clubs and kindergartens. Housing renovations, the beauty of the plantings, the people's pride in their areas defy the limits of this report. The people are doing much of the physical renovating themselves based on Project Renewal's architectural plans and designs. Paint, seeds and materials are provided. 1500 housing units have already been expanded and another 1500 are in the works. 14,000 housing units have already been renovated. It is not enough, but the Housing Ministry is committed to continue expanding and they know why it is necessary. Loan programs from government are taking effect so people can borrow to expand their housing. The value of renovated homes has doubled and trebled.

9. People not in Renewal areas are asking of officialdom why their areas aren't being enhanced and they are motivated to do neighborhood preservation themselves.

10. 1300 young adults from the different Renewal neighborhoods are going to Universities on modest scholarships, and they in turn come back and volunteer in their communities and serve as models for teens. The impact therein has been incredible as they tutor and serve as group leaders.

11. Some current facts on Renewal: of the 69 communities in the Project, 51 are well-twinning in the United States. Out of the total pledges of \$110 million in North America, only \$35 million has been paid. Collections are slowing down. The saving grace in the program, ironically, has been the fact that the Israeli government has put in over \$85 million which can be vouched for by Project Renewal professionals. Even though there have been certain strains and stresses, it must be acknowledged that the Israeli government has more than kept the faith. It is still freshly in mind how many of us initially had

doubts about this. Well, the government has put in nearly three times the amount of dollars that has come from the States. We have run out of United States Project Renewal cash, and are \$5 million short. Israeli officialdom is upset at our failure to keep our part of the bargain, they are aware that communities have been holding back money. We have a problem—for the first time the Israelis are beginning to wonder and to raise questions about our carrying out our end of the partnership. They know that in three years they are going to assume full responsibility but they are looking for us to execute our part of the partnership until then.

12. No matter to whom I spoke in government, I got a clear and outspoken understanding that after five years, the fiscal part of the partnership from the States will be concluded. It was fascinating to see mayors using their own influences in bringing in government monies and beginning to plan how they would pick up the totality of the program when the Diaspora role ends. This Project is for *real* and our *support* is needed. I have never felt anything so keenly.

13. If I were to advise National Project Renewal leadership, I would say let us bring key Federation executives and presidents to Israel for a special consultation. They have to see and feel and taste the importance of Renewal. We have to get cracking in our communities in intensifying our fund-raising and cash collection efforts. We have a winner like we have never had before and the damndest thing is, it's a well-kept secret.

14. I quote the Mayor of Tel Aviv. "Without Project Renewal, neighborhoods would have remained festering sores. People are beginning to believe that the Israeli establishment will deliver. If the mayors are involved, Project Renewal within a neighborhood will be a

success. The retreat of the cities of the Diaspora from Renewal must be gradual. When Missions come to Israel, they should not visit Renewal for only a couple of hours, they should really engage and dig in with the people." However, I received a much different reaction from a very prominent government official who is concerned about the involvement of people in their neighborhoods. He feels that they are going to be very turned on and when the Jewish Agency concludes Renewal, the government will have a major problem with people accustomed to asserting themselves.

15. I asked a number of people what message they wanted me to take back to the Jews of America. There must have been a half-dozen people who said in different ways "... come share with us, look at what we are doing, be a part of us, but do not treat us as a charity case."

16. The Deputy Director of the Community Center Movement in Israel said "... things will never be the same in Israel again, the politicians didn't fully realize what they were getting into with Project Renewal. Tens of thousands of people are making decisions for the first time in their lives."

In Conclusion.

1. I found that the different Ministries are cooperating more with each other and with the Jewish Agency. Yes, there are many, many problems that remain, but there are more cooperation and working together than we have ever before experienced.

2. The Project Renewal Program has really been strengthened by virtue of long-range planning in each neighborhood. The professional staff of the Project Renewal team in Israel have had seminars, they have done creative thinking, they have interfaced with cer-

tain government officialdom. Where there has been positive community involvement in the Diaspora, there is a successful project. Not only in the area of funding, but also in the value of Diaspora input and depth of commitment. Where involvement is weak, it is reflected in weaker activities. It is a source of concern that the Project is functioning in only 69 of the 160 communities.

3. Ten more neighborhoods need entrance into Project Renewal. What

will our answer be? We cannot forget these people! New twinning is needed.

4. Project Renewal is an enormous "turn-on". It will help contributors develop a further stake in Israel and will result in a strengthening of the basic campaign. Project Renewal represents the people-to-people Jewish connection. It's an opportunity and not a problem. We should never forget that Israel mounted Project Renewal in a period of great Middle-East tension. What other society in the world would have the courage to do so?.