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The Dangers of the Discourse of "Obligations"

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The basic assumption of this article is that a democratic country has an obligation to ensure the rights of its citizens, and that this obligation is the most important foundation of the state framework. Of all rights, the right to equality among the citizens is one of the most important. It is surpassed only by the most fundamental human rights. In a country with a majority group and a minority group, where the minority group suffers from discrimination in the distribution of the country's resources, a foremost challenge for the government – in the context of rights and obligations – is to do its utmost to change the distribution of resources and to promote the right of the minority, as individuals and as a group, to equality.

The Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel constitute about one fifth of the citizens of the country, and since the establishment of the state have been suffering from ongoing and systemic discrimination in all areas of life and government policy. This discrimination is also reflected in an unequal allocation of state resources (in other words, policy input), as well as in the situation of Arab citizens in many areas (policy output). For example, the budgets for social welfare, education, development etc. are allocated unequally to Arab citizens, who receive a far smaller share than their percentage in the population or their percentage in the specific population in need of those budgets.

Added to that is serious and ongoing discrimination in the allocation of public lands, and in the hiring of Arabs for civil service jobs. In many areas there is discrimination of dozens or hundreds of percentage points in the allocations to Arab citizens, and the direct result is a large disparity in policy outputs, in other words, a gap between Arab and Jewish citizens in life expectancy, educational achievements and more.

On the background of the large gaps and this ongoing discrimination against Arabs, the discourse of obligations is gaining strength in the public arena. A central part of this discourse deals with Arab citizens and the demand that national service be made mandatory and a condition for equal rights. This discourse is morally problematic, because it undermines the state's obligation to ensure the rights of its citizens. It is also very dangerous in social terms,

because it attempts to make conditional something that is the foundation of any democratic society – rights in general and the right to equality in particular.

After 62 years of ongoing discrimination, these champions of obligations are now trying to condition Arab rights on the fulfillment of obligations. Make no mistake - some of those who are leading the battle to make equal obligations a condition for equal rights are people who are very familiar with Arab society and its de facto opposition to national service. For them promoting the discourse of obligations is nothing more than a way to perpetuate discrimination against Arab citizens and to grant it legal validity.

Sikkuy is a civic society organization for both Arabs and Jews. Our goal is to promote full equality between Arabs and Jews in Israel. The Israeli government is responsible for distributing resources to all the citizens, and in effect implements this distribution. Therefore the key to promoting equality between Jews and Arabs lies in a change in government policy, and Sikkuy is working with the government to change the policy. We use the tools and concepts of public policy (many of which I learned in this school) in order to identify the barriers preventing an egalitarian policy and to act to remove them. In the past year we developed a model for identifying and mapping barriers that prevent equality, and for formulating effective policy recommendations – "From Barriers to Opportunities."¹

I would like to point out that I am not opposed to creating a government framework for civic volunteering in which young Arabs would also be able to participate in a year of volunteer work. Such a move – only if implemented in full cooperation with the Arab leadership – could have far-reaching positive consequences for Arab society and for the relations between Arabs and Jews in Israel. In my personal opinion, both the government and the Arab leadership are making a serious mistake by not trying to reach an agreement on this volunteer framework.²

Because of the serious breakdown in relations between the state and the Arab citizens, we are still far from formulating such an agreement. In any case, even if such an agreement were reached, volunteering will be an option rather than an obligation. The inequality in Israel between Arabs and Jews is not only morally unacceptable, it also constitutes a genuine threat to the survival of the country and of Israeli society. That is why it is in the supreme interest of all the inhabitants of this country, both Jews and Arabs, to courageously recognize the danger inherent in the discourse of obligations and to replace it with the discourse of rights, which at its heart must be the struggle to promote equal rights for all the citizens.

¹"From Barriers to Opportunities, Mapping the barriers and policy recommendations for achieving equality between the Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel," Sikkuy 2010, <http://www.sikkuy.org.il/english/hasamim/mediniuteng.pdf>

² It is also worthy of mention that even today, and in spite of the opposition of the Arab leadership, there are young Arabs who are interested in volunteering in the framework of National Service, but there are not enough allocated places for them. So that even in this area there is discrimination against Arabs.