



Exclusive to Calcalist: 80 percent of the housing tenders in the Arab communities fail

The Housing and Construction Ministry has difficulty meeting the construction needs of the Arab sector. A study by Sikkuy that has come into the hands of Calcalist maintains that the state marketed lands for high-density construction, but the citizens claim that they are not accompanied by suitable infrastructure. The director general of the ministry in response: "We have to build at high density – in the minorities sector as well"

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Not many people are aware that the state has for several years been trying to market lands belonging to the Israel Lands Administration to the Israeli Arab sector. This is in an attempt to deal with the illegal construction in communities identified with the sector, and as a solution to their genuine distress as a result of a construction shortage. In spite of that, in the past decade the government failed to sell about 80 percent of the land it tried to market via tenders in Arab communities – those are the findings of a study by Sikkuy, a Jewish-Arab organization that works to advance equality between the sectors in Israel, which was presented at the end of last week at a conference in Haifa.

According to the study conducted by city planner Hagit Naali-Joseph, in the years 2005-2010 the Housing and Construction Ministry succeeded in selling only 6,000 tenders for the sale of land, out of 30,000 that were offered, and that were supposed to meet the demand in the sector. For the sake of comparison, while only 20 percent of the land marketed in the Arab sector actually reached the point of a transaction, in the Jewish sector 70 percent of the land that was marketed was actually sold.

Major tenders that failed in recent years

Community	Year	Units offered for sale	Units actually sold
Tamra	2009	243	86
Nazareth	2010	678	374
Kafr Manda	2005	188	8
Kafr Qasem	2004	207	80
Sakhnin	2008	246	0

Why did the land tenders fail in the Arab communities?

1. Bureaucracy - A shortage of manpower in the Housing Ministry and in the administration to concentrate on the needs of the population
2. Reading comprehension - The tenders are not accessible to the Arab public – written in Hebrew only

3. Hamulas – extended families - Difficulty in promoting the sale of land with multiple owners for fear of lawsuits
4. Vision and reality - Failure to adapt construction plans to the Arab population
5. Discrimination - The tenders system gives preference to those who have completed military service, although the sector is exempt from such service
6. Lack of understanding - The Arab sector is deterred by high development costs
7. Private homes - The Arab sector clearly prefers private homes and objects to high-density construction
8. De facto problems - Marketing land that is unavailable, some of which has been taken over by squatters
9. Passivity- An absence of initiative in the local councils when it comes to marketing state land

Among the barriers to greater land sales, researcher Naali-Joseph mentioned a lack of accessibility in the form of tender brochures in Hebrew only, construction plans that are unsuited to the character of the communities where they were marketed, and a shortage of manpower to help Arab local councils to promote the sale of land or to remove squatters from it. Naali-Joseph added that in some of the tenders in the Arab communities there is discrimination due to preference for citizens who have completed their army service, while most of the residents of the Arab communities are legally exempt from such service.

The main conflict: How many housing units per dunam (1000 m2)

The findings of the study aroused a furor in the conference hall. On one side of the hall leading members of the Arab sector were assembled, and on the other senior officials from the Housing Ministry. Director General Mordechai Mordechai claimed that "the subject of preference for those who served in the army in sales tenders for the resident [tenders in which the person who receives the housing is the entrepreneur who offered the lowest final price – S.S.E.] was examined with the Justice Ministry. If it is found to be reasonable, we see no reason not to introduce such a clause to tenders in minorities communities," said Mordechai, infuriating at least half of those seated in the hall.

Mordechai claimed that one of the main barriers concerning tenders in the Arab communities is programs for high-density construction, which encounters considerable opposition in the sector. He says that there should be high-density construction in the Arab sector, because the government is familiar with the nature of construction in the sectors, which is reflected in the new plans as well. "We know that it's impossible to plan 18 stories, or even 12 stories, in the minorities communities," said Mordechai. "We found a formula for saturated construction of six residential units per dunam, and in the end it was reduced to four units. We have to build at higher density in all the sectors – including the minorities sector."

Mordechai was asked in response why in the expansions of the moshavim and the kibbutzim the state allows the construction of one-family homes on half a dunam, and replied that Nazareth and Sakhnin are not communities defined as rural. Mordechai agreed with Naali-Joseph that the manpower shortage makes it difficult to deal with the Arab sector, but explained that "the Finance Ministry does not allow us to hire personnel at all, and therefore it wouldn't be right to designate some worker or other for a specific population, just as we won't allocate special manpower to the ultra-Orthodox or the secular community."

The mayor of Nazareth: "Don't call us 'minorities'"

On the subject of increasing subsidies for land development, Mordechai said that this year a new list of minorities communities will come into effect. He also announced that he had turned to Ayman Saif, Director of the Authority for Economic Development in the Arab Sector in the Prime Minister's Office, with a request for a budget of about NIS 350 million to close gaps in infrastructure, public institutions and planning.

Naali-Joseph called on the Arab local councils "to take the reins into their hands. There is no possibility of succeeding without their involvement in marketing land." Mordechai agreed with her, and said that in every community where there is no cooperation with the local leadership the marketing efforts are doomed to failure.

In response to Mordechai's words Ramiz Jeraisi, mayor of Nazareth and chairman of the Committee of Arab Local Councils, said that for years Arab leaders were excluded from the decision-making centers, and in their absence erroneous decisions are made. Jeraisi gave an example of the grants program for purchasers of a first apartment in the periphery, initiated by Housing and Construction Minister Ariel Atias. He said that in its first incarnation the plan included mortgage subsidies for buyers of an apartment in high-density construction at a density of at least four residential units per dunam. "First of all, in Arab communities there is no mortgage market," he explained. As for the density conditions for receiving a mortgage subsidy, he said: "In Nazareth there is actually no problem, but in every other Arab community there are no construction plans with such density."

After a battle over the issue, an amendment was made to the law granting a subsidy for a first apartment in the periphery, to the effect that the benefit would not be given as a mortgage subsidy, but as a grant for the buyer of a first apartment in a high-density construction project in a city included on the list of cities. The changes suggested by Jeraisi, that independent high-density construction through a contractor also be recognized, and the density per dunam be lower than four residential units, were not accepted.

Jeraisi got angry at Mordechai and other senior Housing Ministry officials at their use of the word "minorities": "I don't like to be called 'minorities.' It's true that we are a minority, but we have an identity. Just as I don't say 'the Jews' and 'the non-Jews.' Just say Arabs." Jeraisi added that during his past two terms he was appointed a member of the North and Golan Regional Committee, and that his presence and that of another Arab council member is leading to more suitable decisions for the Arab sector.

He added that there are many state lands adjacent to Arab communities, which could be opened to high-density construction. "There's an argument that's used in order to perpetuate the existing situation, to the effect that Arabs don't want to live in apartment houses. It's true, but there are Jews like that too. In Nazareth there's saturated construction and I would also like to have 'Build your own home' neighborhoods, which would prevent Nazareth residents from fleeing to Upper Nazareth," he said. "Not a single Arab community has been built in decades. I dream of living in a communal settlement. I'm willing to live in a 20-story building. But it should include public areas and wide roads and infrastructure. For the time being there is no such community."