

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE: LESSONS DERIVED FROM GILO UNDER FIRE

BY DR. MICHAEL GANOR AND YULI BEN-LAVY, MSW

The Jerusalem Association of Community Councils and Centers

The Jerusalem Association, an umbrella organization for 28 public and non-partisan community councils and centers serving Jerusalem's 650,000 residents, helps address the needs of all sectors of the population, in times of both crisis and calm. The unique strength of each community council lies in its governing Board of Directors, mainly volunteers from the neighborhood, who determine priorities and set neighborhood policies in major aspects of life. The board is aided by the center's professional staff, who put the policies into practice. This article describes a model for developing community resilience implemented by the community councils in times of crisis.

An emergency is defined as an external situation threatening the life of a person or those of his or her friends and relations, causing physiological, behavioral, and social distress. An emergency may be a sudden, dramatic event, such as a terrorist attack, that threatens the feeling of physical and emotional well-being.

Jerusalem has been targeted for terror attacks more than any other city in Israel. Of 4,055 people hurt in 705 terror incidents in Israel since October 2000, 1,751 people or 40 percent were hurt in Jerusalem and 140 died. Among the larger terror attacks suffered by the city in the past two years are those in the Sbarro pizza parlor, the Moment Cafe, King George Street, Mahane Yehuda market, and buses in Gilo and Kiryat Menahem. During the same time period, Jerusalem neighborhoods, especially the south Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, were subjected to intensive gunfire shot at their homes. Since October 2000, Gilo has endured more than 100 days of shooting from the neighboring town of Beit Jalla, including mortar fire. Though miraculously no one was seriously hurt, the residents displayed many signs of ongoing stress. Then in June 2002, a terrorist exploded inside a bus coming from Gilo, killing 19 people. Sixteen of them were residents of the neighborhood.

The escalating stress caused by these attacks has put a severe strain on the emotional

well-being of Jerusalem's citizens: over the past two years, there has been a 200 percent increase in the number of people asking for emotional help.

An extensive body of research tells us that in emergency and threat situations, people are prone to experience acute stress disorder, expressed emotionally, cognitively, and socially.

- *Emotional repercussions:* self-guilt, anger, shame ("why me?"), damage to personal sense of worth and to feeling of well-being, and communication problems
- *Cognitive consequences:* sleep disorders, ongoing stress, tiredness, accelerated pulse, and a reduced appetite
- *Social or community consequences:* deteriorations in the state of community conflicts and unsolved problems, such as poverty, juvenile delinquency, and crime, all of these becoming prominent when a community comes under attack.

Research conducted in both New York after 9/11 and Israel show that acute stress symptoms disappear in approximately 90 percent of the population about a month after the traumatic event. However, in about 10 percent of the population the stress becomes worse, developing into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The Jerusalem Association of Community

Councils and Centers aims to improve the community's ability to help itself. Our challenge is to see the emergency situation as an opportunity to develop and strengthen the community—not only for emergency situations but in other fields as well. We use existing infrastructures in each separate community council to improve conditions in the community. We have found that the best way to confront the multifaceted community problems in times of emergency is to improve its community resilience.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

By "resilience" we mean the ability of individuals and communities to deal with a state of continuous, long term stress, which causes gaps between environment stimuli and their functional coping behavior. Resilience is more than hardness and the ability to endure pain; it refers to the ability to find unknown inner strengths and resources in order to cope effectively with long-term pressures. Resilience is therefore the ultimate measure of adaptation and flexibility. Community resilience is the ability of a community to stick together and to help itself as a group, as well as the families and individuals in its midst. The basic ingredients of community resilience are the six Cs:

1. *Communication* requires the flow of information, in real time, about the situation in the community, the threats it confronts, the services it can provide, the resources it can recruit, and the like.
2. *Cooperation* requires enhanced degrees of responsibility on a local level: relying on ourselves, rather than waiting for outside help.
3. *Cohesion* requires high sensitivity and mutual support, particularly for the weaker members of the community: the elderly, the new immigrants, the disabled, the disadvantaged, and the like.
4. *Coping* refers to the community's ability to *take action*. This action requires the presence and efficient organization of various mechanisms specifically designed to deal with trauma and help in times of crisis.
5. *Credibility* requires a new type of leadership: one that is not built on old political or partisan lines, but rather an authentic, grassroots leadership that comes from within the community and truly represents its uniqueness and aspirations.
6. *Credo* is the vision of a community, one that depicts a better future, a horizon of hope.

All of these ingredients must be present in order to help the community deal with the traumatic consequences of living under vital threats over long periods of time.

The good news is that community resilience does not have to be specifically created; it grows by itself. It is actually a by-product of the investment in community development in many areas, seemingly unrelated to resilience. When developing local lay leadership, we are actually developing resilience; when providing accessible services, we are strengthening resilience; and when setting up communication networks, we are actually enhancing resilience.

The bad news is that resilience cannot be achieved overnight; building community resilience requires a long-term investment in planning and concerted efforts from various organizational sources in order to create a community infrastructure that can, by definition, become resilient.

A community's level of resilience can be expressed in different ways: its level of crime and employment, the feeling of well-being, the physical state of the community, its standard of living, the existence of local leadership and more. How then may these levels be improved?

Developing Community Resilience

The development of community resilience requires an investment in identifying, training, and strengthening lay community leadership and in strengthening the commitment of professional staff. It presupposes an ever-widening base of community volun-

teers, and it calls for special attention to the neighborhood residents, as individuals, as families. We must ask these questions:

- What are the needs of children when they hear sirens at school?
- What are the needs of parents running for shelter?
- What are the needs of seniors confined to their houses?
- What are the special needs of handicapped individuals, such as the hearing impaired, who cannot even hear the sirens?!?

When a community is under fire, as is the Gilo neighborhood in Jerusalem, community resilience translates into the implementation of various emergency mechanisms designed to meet these needs.

Community Emergency Mechanisms

Several emergency mechanisms have been developed in Gilo, primarily by its Community Council. Unfortunately, these days we are forced to use the model in other communities hurt by terror, such as Kiryat Menachem, where on November 20, 2002 a terrorist exploded in a bus, killing 11 people from the neighborhood and wounding 130. The following components are used in an emergency:

- *Erecting an Emergency Headquarters (HQ):* The HQ are located within the community council and centers and activated in times of emergency. The HQ roundtable includes representatives of the various services in the community—members of the local government, social workers, community council workers, and representatives of the Council's Board of Directors. The HQ maintains ongoing contact with the police and army forces, and the director of the community council heads the emergency operations. It is the clearinghouse for all the information about the event: who was hurt, what immediate tasks lie ahead, and how to complete them. The HQ divides the tasks among the neighborhood intervention teams. Among the tasks dealt with in every crisis are preparing for funerals—in some cases, several of them a day; organizing hot meals for families during the Shiva; preventing demonstrations by enraged citizens; and more and more.
- *Interdisciplinary intervention teams:* These teams act rapidly, not waiting for calls for help or damage reports, but rather initiating supportive action by interdisciplinary teams of volunteer psychologists, social workers, and youth counselors, according to the population's special needs. In Gilo, the intervention teams entered the shelled and fired-at homes; in Kiryat Menachem, they targeted and approached new immigrant youth to help them deal with the outcome of the attack.
- *The Gilo Hotline:* A phone hotline was manned by resident professionals volunteering their time to help their fellow residents cope with mounting stress and anxiety.
- *Community TV and media:* These assume a new importance when they become tools for educating the population on the proper actions and reactions in times of attack, shelling, and post-trauma.
- *Leisure activities:* Programs are specially designed to provide relaxation in dire times in conditions of enhanced safety—within shelters, with chaperones, etc.
- *Family welfare services:* These address the specific needs of poor families, whether directly or indirectly suffering the consequences of an ongoing war.
- *Networking and volunteering:* A complex system of on-call volunteers, support groups, and welfare agencies is created that must be coordinated and orchestrated closely in order to maximize their potential benefit and contribution.
- *Leadership Development:* This involves investing in strengthening neighborhood lay leaders, who at the same time serve as opinion leaders, soothers, and mobilizers,

as well as coordinating civil efforts with army and police forces in real time.

**LESSONS DERIVED FROM THE
EXPERIENCE IN GILO—STAYING
AFLOAT IN A SEA OF TROUBLES**

- **We are all in the same boat:** Competition and ill will that often characterize the relations among various organizations in one community must be put aside and replaced by an ethos of cooperation and interdisciplinary work.
- **There are many fish in the sea:** The search for community potential and the realization of human capital lead to the discovery of many talented individuals, ready to volunteer and take responsibility, thus enabling complex networks of communication and civil action.
- **Small fish are beautiful too:** Everyone counts; the trauma of a community under fire provides new opportunities for empowerment, leadership, and responsibility taking.
- **Learn to swim:** The preparation, training, and development of lay and professional leadership and the creation of norms supportive of organizational learning are critical for developing community resilience. These efforts must take place well ahead of the crisis: learn to swim before the storm, rather than during it.
- **It is better to swim than float with the stream:** Go with or against the stream, but be on the move. Being active has been

proven to one of the best medicines against passive anxiety.

- **Beware of the sharks:** The storm discloses the soft belly of a community. In times of crisis, human passions and weaknesses become more apparent; and manifest themselves in decision-making processes affecting the organization, management, and control of the situation. The ability to constantly improve management abilities is imperative to community resilience.
- **Help the lifesavers:** Psychologists are human too. Helpers need help as well, particularly if they are members of a community under attack. Never underestimate the vulnerability of professionals, who in times of crisis are themselves in need of a shoulder to cry on.

The model built for developing community resilience is based on our experiences in Jerusalem's neighborhoods in the past fifteen years. The model can be applied to community development in general, not only in times of crisis. It emphasizes community continuity, long-term planning, investing in people, and developing local leadership. The principles noted above, implemented by the Community Councils and the Departments of Welfare and of Social Affairs at the Jerusalem Municipality, continue to help community residents cope with traumatic situations as they arise and—as much as possible—to lead a full and fulfilling life within their community.