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and Agriculture:
the Opinions of Residents of Central
Israel's Countryside**

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Residents of Central Israel's Countryside**

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Summary

Israel's countryside and agricultural land has undergone many changes in the past twenty years. The countryside in central Israel has been exposed to extremely heavy land development pressures. These pressures have had far-reaching consequences which are expressed in changes in employment patterns and the reallocation of agricultural land for nonagricultural enterprises. In response to these trends, changes have occurred in the national and district planning authorities aimed at the reinforcement and preservation of agricultural land and open spaces with an emphasis on environmental issues, the countryside's landscape and tourism (ILA National Outline Plan no. 31, 35; District Outline Plan no. 3/21). For the purpose of efficiently managing land resources in Israel's countryside and for the purpose of implementing a policy preserving the countryside's landscape and agricultural uses — it is important to clarify the opinions of the countryside's residents regarding the region's future and the conditions required for the preservation of agricultural pursuits.

The main purpose of this project is to identify and characterize appropriate patterns for developing the countryside as seen by the residents of central Israel's countryside. Additionally, this study aims to identify the conditions and incentives which the residents think will allow those who pursue agriculture to continue in their pursuits.

The survey population consisted of the residents of central Israel's countryside. Several samplings were taken from several settlement types within the local council of South Sharon: five moshavim (Givat Chen, Sdeh-Varburg, Neve-Yamin, Sdei-Chemed, Hagor), three kibbutzim (Ramat Hakovesh, Eyal, Einat) and two community settlements (Matan and Nirit). The study employed two surveys of two different types: in the primary survey personal interviews were conducted with the residents of the settlements selected for the study. During 2007, 199 interviews were conducted – a total of 67.2% of the sample population. A second mail survey was conducted among residents of the three kibbutzim Eyal, Einat

and Ramat Hakovesh¹ between the summer and fall months of 2007 (97 effective questionnaires – 32.8% of the sample population). The questionnaire used in the study had several versions, which were used in accordance with the settlement type and survey type. A set of photographs was used as well. The photographs represented different building types that shape the countryside's landscape and they were used as supplementary tools to help the respondents understand the questions presented to them.

The Study's Main Findings

The present study's findings indicate the following:

- ❖ The Sharon South local council is one of the central areas characteristic of the transformations affecting the agricultural sector in central Israel in particular: a dramatic decline in the centrality of agriculture as a primary source of income for the population living in Israel's countryside; this population's consequent turn to local urban markets. Other transformations include changes in land uses and changes in the region's physical landscape.
- ❖ A majority of the residents in the region's moshavim, kibbutzim and community settlements support the development of non-agricultural businesses in their towns as either a supplement to or a substitute for agricultural businesses. Nevertheless, the study points to the residents' interest in preserving the region's rural character and the potential for agriculture as an integral part of the region's rural character.
- ❖ The degree to which residents of agricultural settlements, and kibbutzim in particular, rely on agriculture as their main source of income is rather small. Surprisingly, a greater percentage of residents in moshavim reported that they do not reject the possibility of working in agriculture in the future.
- ❖ Most respondents replied that the main conditions that might influence the will and ability of farmers to continue working their farms were: government assistance, profitability and the potential for earning a living.

¹ For logistical reasons, a mail survey was conducted among the kibbutz residents in addition to the primary survey (personal interviews).

I. The respondents' positions on the components and land-uses that define the countryside's landscape

- ❖ A significant percentage of residents of agricultural settlements view the development of non-agricultural businesses in their settlements positively. A majority of these respondents, however, also think that such businesses should be set up in a separate area designated for that purpose and not in the residential areas.
- ❖ The most commonly held view is that non-agricultural land uses and businesses should not be established in the countryside. Nevertheless, large differences were noted among the different types of communities. Kibbutz residents expressed stronger support for the development of non-agricultural businesses in comparison with moshav residents, and the support among residents of community settlements was still lower in comparison to kibbutz and moshav residents.
- ❖ Non-agricultural uses of the land such as outdoor event centers arouse a great deal of protest among all respondents, though kibbutz residents expressed reserved support for outdoor event centers operating within the kibbutz as long as they were placed outside the residential area.
- ❖ The respondents did not express firm support for dense economic activity such as large commercial centers and industrial complexes.
- ❖ The respondents expressed a different attitude toward tourist attractions: residents of the countryside thought that tourist attractions which were based on agriculture were in keeping with the region's rural landscape more so than other leisure activities that had no particular link to the region's character.
- ❖ In general, the respondents' support for non-agricultural, commercial, and other uses of the land was lower than their support for agricultural land uses and activities and for the preservation of natural, open spaces and tourist and leisure-related businesses.

II. The respondents' positions on potential directions for developing the countryside.

- ❖ Despite their positive attitude toward the development of nonagricultural businesses in their residential areas, most respondents agreed with the statement that nonagricultural land use harms the rural landscape.

- ❖ A significant percentage of the respondents think that nonagricultural economic activities in the residential areas harm the residents' quality of life. The opinion that nonagricultural activity might **complement** agriculture is more prevalent than the claim that nonagricultural activity should be developed as a **replacement** for agriculture.
- ❖ A majority of the respondents think that nonagricultural economic activity should be strictly regulated by clear guidelines defining the permitted activities, their scope and location.
- ❖ A vast majority of the respondents in the region's moshavim, kibbutzim and community settlements is aware of the importance of preserving the region's rural character and thinks that agriculture contributes to quality of life. However, they are not quite as firm in their opinion of the need to protect agricultural land from changes in its designated uses.
- ❖ Kibbutz residents expressed stronger support for the possible incentives suggested in the survey in comparison to residents of moshavim and community settlements.

III. Potential avenues for development in the agrarian sector as a function of the respondents' worldviews and characteristics.

- ❖ Of the countryside's residents, those respondents who thought there is a need to protect agricultural land from changes in its designated uses also supported stricter regulation for the preservation of the countryside's character and landscape. Furthermore, those respondents were also better aware of the danger that nonagricultural activity presented for the agrarian character of the region and its quality of life, and the need to protect the region through strict regulation of nonagricultural activity. Individuals who express these opinions also tend to agree with the unpopular, radical claim that non-agricultural uses of agricultural land should be entirely banned.
- ❖ Respondents who expressed support for the replacement of agriculture with nonagricultural businesses also thought that tourist attractions (such as amusement parks) are in keeping with the character of the rural landscape, as opposed to respondents who supported the development of nonagricultural

businesses in order to supplement agricultural businesses who did not share this view.

- ❖ Despite the general popularity of the proposal to expand and increase the density of the residential areas, those who agree with the need to protect agricultural land from changes in its designated uses are opposed not only to the development of businesses such as warehouses but also to the expansion of the residential areas.
- ❖ Individuals who agree with the need to protect agricultural land from changes in its designated uses also indicate that they think it highly probable that they will take up agriculture themselves in the future.
- ❖ Middle-aged individuals, between the ages of 45 and 54, tend to support the development of nonagricultural businesses in order to supplement agricultural activity, as opposed to younger (ages 23-44) or older (over 55) age groups.
- ❖ On the whole, individuals who support the replacement of agriculture with nonagricultural businesses are either younger (between the ages of 23 and 44) or older (over the age of 55). Middle-aged individuals tend to express less support for the option of replacing agricultural businesses with nonagricultural businesses.

IV. The prospect of agricultural tourism

- ❖ Kibbutz residents identify a significant potential for the development of agricultural tourism. The respondents were especially supportive of organized and guided tourist activities that held the prospect of benefiting the kibbutz.
- ❖ Moshav residents are more doubtful and less convinced of the prospects of agricultural tourism in comparison with kibbutz residents.
- ❖ Kibbutz and moshav residents who supported agricultural tourism also thought that the necessary conditions for its development were: government economic support; innovation; training farmer-tour guides; financial feasibility for the operating farmers; legal, organizational and public-relations support at different levels, from the local administration to the Israel Lands Administration and the Israeli government.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- ❖ Despite the decline in the place of agriculture as a primary source of employment and income in central Israel's countryside, the study's findings give rise to reserved optimism as to the future of agriculture in the region and the prospect of reviving it. Nevertheless, if the place of agriculture in central Israel is to be restored, there is a crucial need for the educated young generations to take an interest in agriculture as a viable source of income.
- ❖ As opposed to the commonly accepted opinion among the general public and decision-makers, the countryside's residents expressed quite reserved support (and even opposition) toward the development of large commercial and industrial complexes in central Israel's countryside. In light of this finding, it is recommended that decisions regarding the development and location of commercial and industrial land-uses in the region take into account the interests of the region's residents.
- ❖ The "rural" character of the landscape and of the region encompasses more than just its agricultural character; the respondents identified agriculture as a principal but not exclusive component of the rural landscape. .
- ❖ Despite the seemingly antithetical character of the two statements: "agriculture improves quality of life" and "non-agricultural activities harm the quality of life" — these two statements do not necessarily represent two opposites. The types of agricultural and nonagricultural activities and uses as well as their location impact their effects on the quality of life.
- ❖ It is important to support environmentally friendly agricultural practices which are expected to minimize the tensions between the agricultural and residential uses of the countryside. The study showed that certain agricultural activities (which involve nuisances such as noise, smells, etc.) mostly disturb those who are not farmers.
- ❖ This study points to the environmental, social, and economic potential presented by investing in agricultural tourism (agro-tourism) and rural tourism in central Israel both as an integral part of agricultural farms and as a possible avenue for developing additional jobs in the region. Furthermore, the development of these kinds of tourism is an important factor in the implementation of policies designed for the preservation of scenic agriculture and the rural landscape of

central Israel's countryside. These findings may prove valuable for planners and policymakers. Government assistance should be provided for kibbutzim and moshavim in their development of agricultural and rural tourism and for their businesses from their initiation and throughout their development and marketing stages. Agro- and rural tourism should be regulated according to planning policy at the local level and its main objective should be to minimize the bureaucratic obstacles preventing farmers from developing agro- and rural tourism.

To conclude, it is clear that the dynamic changes, taking place in Israel's countryside as well as in other developed countries as a part of a process of adjustment to modern economic conditions, will continue in the future. Nevertheless, the study's findings indicate that through the use of economic, planning, and regulative tools, it is possible to rearrange and redefine the countryside efficiently in order to serve the needs of all the groups influencing the countryside's character and landscape (for example, by zoning the region (functional division)).

The present study examined potential avenues for developing the countryside in Israel's central region as they are perceived and understood by the residents of the different types of rural settlements in the region. The study's findings may contribute valuable information towards the development of an effective planning policy concerning the countryside in general, and in Israel's central district in particular. One of the main purposes of this policy is preserving the agricultural and rural landscape and character of Israel's central district. Nevertheless, future studies will be necessary in order to examine additional questions: to what degree are the activities of various elements and groups shaping the countryside compatible with one another? To what degree are the expectations and opinions of the region's residents compatible with local policy decisions? What is the role of the local authorities and committees in this process? These and other issues should be addressed in future studies.