

Strategy, local sociology, political philosophy: Analysis of strategy of Non-Governmental Organizations under radical intellectual leadership

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Abstract

The study discusses the relationship between NGO strategy (both toward government and community), contextual conditions, and the sociological and political-philosophic background of the leaders of the organization. The empirical section focuses on a specific Israeli NGO (Bimkom) led by a radical-intellectual leadership whose aim is to promote the interests of poor communities. The organization under research activated a dual complex strategy, one that both criticizes and negotiates with the government, at the same time advocating for and empowering communities. The study points to a clear linkage between that strategy and leaders' own background. In fact, the latter served as a source from which the leaders carved out guidelines, perceptions, policy tools, and abstract resources (which in turn also affected outcomes). On a basis of these findings, the study suggests a model designed to improve the analysis of strategic management.

KEYWORDS

civil society, organizational leadership, political philosophy, radical NGOs, strategic management analysis, geography and geographers

1 | INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIES, ORGANIZATIONS, IDEOLOGY, AND THE CONSTITUTION OF POLITICAL ORDER

Traditionally, researchers who study non governmental organization's strategies, including strategies toward government, identified systemic methods that enable the realization of the mandate of the organization, that is, promoting a certain ideology or creating public value, etc. These strategies require identifying stakeholders' interests, setting alternatives, building coalitions, monitoring, and more (Bryson, 2004; Kearns & Scarpino, 1996; La Piana & Harrington, 2008; Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999).

It is reasonable to assume that applying these methods will improve the achievements of the NGO. Still, such analysis would not be a simple matter, as it crucially depends on a comprehensive understanding the mechanisms standing behind shaping strategy.

Studies focusing on this issue used two general approaches that may be roughly categorized, for current needs, as contextual-rational and humanistic.

By the term "contextual-rational," I refer to various schools that emphasize the objective conditions—policy space, socio-political-economic context, funding and stakeholder's interests—as the major force that influences or directs the organizations' strategy (Bryson, 2004; Coston, 1998; Prakash & Gugerty, 2010; Saqib, 2019; Young, 2000). According to this approach, once an organization faces a given context, the decisions made by its managers or leaders would more likely follow rational considerations, as a tradeoff between the desired situation and existing conditions. For example, Prakash and Gugerty (2010) analyze the nature of decisions made by advocacy NGOs as based on the analogy with shareholders in business firms, that is, following natural rational, instrumental considerations, such as cost–benefit analysis and the optimization of available resources.

A substantially different theoretical approach is suggested by scholars who shift the focus toward humanistic aspects, such as values, perceptions, culture, life stories and political philosophy of leaders-founders, and leadership succession, as significant input in shaping NGOs strategy and its performance (Asarkaya & Keles Taysir, 2019; Dahan, 2019; Froggett & Chamberlayne, 2004; Greenspan, 2014; Li, 2019; Ramanath & Ebrahim, 2010; Reese & Rosenfeld, 2008). These scholars admit that strategy, as well as policy and attitudes, is influenced by contextual conditions and rational political-realistic considerations. Such considerations, however, intersect and merge with the ideology, perceptions, and value system of the organization. Ramanath and Ebrahim's (2010) study is a typical example of this approach. The authors describe different strategies used by various NGOs speaking for poor residents in Mumbai during the early 1980s, in reaction to Indian government housing reform. They found that under the same socio-political conditions, the NGOs differed in the ways in which they intervened on the ground, using drastically different strategies and tactics (radical vs. pragmatic, antiestablishment vs. pro-establishment). Ramanath and Ebrahim concluded that it is not possible to explain how certain strategies are being selected, except by synchronizing the objective context (policy space, interests, etc.) with a given set of perceptions, core values, beliefs, narratives, and the political philosophy of each NGO.

The notion that strategy is influenced by multiple causes, as suggested by the humanistic view, may seem a trivial claim; despite this apparent agreement, however, there are two different approaches to this issue.

Post- and neo-Marxists argue that the values and perceptions of civil society, including its leaders, are most relevant for understanding NGOs strategy. Such influences, however, are

analyzed by these streams as if they were a reflection of objective and real conditions. On this basis, neo-Gramscian thinkers argue (Cox, 1983; Pauly, De Rynck, & Verschuere, 2017) that understanding the social and political order in the contemporary era must address the question: How do values and ideologies, promoted by the hegemonic class, manipulate ordinary people into acting in accordance with hegemonic values, rules, and norms? According to these scholars, to answer this question, researchers must identify how coercive and performative power of knowledge interweaved in social networks, markets and hierarchies, and how formal institutions (laws, state agencies, and courts) interact with non-formal institutions (education, values, norms).

A substantially different approach has been suggested by scholars who, following several paradigmatic innovations,¹ adhere to less mechanistic and more interpretative-humanistic methods (Giddens, 1984; Thompson et al., 1990; Wildavski, 1987). Although this general designation unites under one roof substantially different schools, all of them share the following basic presumption: social structures—political, sociological, and geographic—do shape each other and society as a whole; their effect in practice, however, depends on the *specific* set of ideals, historical background, values, and experience characteristic of the society or community in question.

In a broader perspective, contextual-rational vs. humanistic controversy cannot be viewed as simply stemming from methodological consideration or as a matter of angle. It reaches to a deeper epistemological level, boiling down to the strategy-agency problem. How should we explore the connection between strategic studies, which commonly claim universal validity, and a particular philosophy or ideology of the organization underlying a given strategy? Implicitly, scholars who rely on a contextual-rational approach tend to view strategy instrumentally, as something that has nothing to do with the morality and ideology of those who shape and execute it. An underlying assumption of this premise is that real life unfolds on two parallel planes: philosophy, which explains the purpose and meaning of life (the *why* question), and strategy, which commonly deals with *how* to achieve this purpose and meaning. In contrast, humanistic scholars assume that people, no matter how professional they are, are inevitably bound by their own sociology and philosophical views, which in one way or another affect strategy.

The present research seeks to reassess the validity and strength of the theoretical propositions suggested by the humanistic approach for analyzing the NGO strategy toward government. To reach this goal, the research addresses the question:

Does the specific background of leaders of organizations, in particular their sociology and political philosophy, influence NGO strategy?

2 | METHODOLOGY

To address this question, the present research uses the case study method, reaching conclusions based on exploring a certain case, reflected in a “rich, real-world context in which the phenomena occur” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 25). The case chosen for this purpose is that of Bimkom, a small human rights NGO operating in Israel. The focus is based on methodological considerations: Bimkom is a relatively homogenous NGO (below), as far as its leaders' occupation, ideology, and political philosophy are concerned, which is expected to enhance the credibility of the conclusions reached by the analysis.

The basic approach of the following analysis of the case under discussion is based on identifying the relationships and causalities between various sources of influence. The model by which these relationships are constructed derives from the *abductive analysis* (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), a method that creates reasoning through a process of revisiting, defamiliarizing, and alternative framing of theoretical knowledge by way of allowing surprising research evidence when formulating and testing hypotheses (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Thus, the empirical section strives to make causal inferences about the case by means of recursive examination that produces a list of hypotheses. This process relies both on common generalizations and local data that emerge from the specific arena.

The empirical section (Section 3) starts with a brief overview of the organization under discussion, including its ideology, vision, goals, and funding, and proceeds to describe in detail the strategy—the explained factor. To gain a general holistic view of the strategy, the review will be carried out *synchronously*—namely, identifying, and conceptualizing strategy without following historical chronology. To this end, I use content analysis of primary and secondary sources, such as official websites, existing studies, and programmatic policy papers produced by the organization.

The next stage (Section 4) analyzes the validity of various explanations/expectations. It starts with examining, on a basis of preexisting generalizations, whether and to what extent objective conditions and contextual explanations, mainly macro-structural ones (e.g., political socioeconomic disparities, spatial dynamics, etc.) explain the strategy (Subsection 4.1.). Next stage examines the relevance and weight of the leaders' background on shaping the strategy. The latter include two subsystems: first, leader's sociology—class, values, collective biography, and socio-political affiliation (Subsection 4.2). Second, the leaders' own political philosophy on shaping strategy (Subsection 4.3). For the current discussion, political philosophy refers to the leaders' fundamental worldview, including morality, narratives, images, epistemology, theoretical frameworks, and perceptions, as expressed by the leaders in the context of power and public sphere. Exploring the leader's political philosophy is based on content analysis of numerous articles published by the leaders of the organization.

To provide a general outlook on how strategy has shaped reality, Section 4 ends with a short review, which summarizes the main achievements and failures of Bimkom in selected fields, based on reported sources and interviews (Subsection 4.4).

Based on the above process, Section 5 summarizes the conclusions and generalizations about the research question, and on this basis suggests a model for improving strategic management analysis.

3 | BIMKOM: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND STRATEGY

Bimkom, “Planners for Planning Rights,”² is a small Israeli NGO (in 2016 the total number of employees was 24) that was established in 1999 to protect poor communities at marginal locations with the overarching aim to “strengthen democracy and human rights [and] the development of planning policies [to be] responsive to the needs of local communities.”³

Although objectively Bimkom may be considered a small NGO, the volume and public impact of its activities are quite significant because, among other reasons, the generous financial support it receives from international foundations and agencies, committed to universal values of social justice. The total revenue of Bimkom for the first quarter of 2016 was

approximately \$214,000,⁴ received from the following sources: the European Union, UN-Habitat,⁵ ACP-Spain,⁶ Oxfam-Novib (Netherlands),⁷ and the Norwegian Refugee Council.⁸ In addition, Bimkom is supported by the New Israeli Fund (NIF)—a large foundation established by liberal American Jews. For the year 2017, the NIF granted Bimkom \$87,000.⁹

To achieve its goals, Bimkom follows a complex strategy. Dealing with the government, Bimkom applies a two-pronged approach: criticizing and confronting the Israeli government, at the same time, in practice, initiating meetings and negotiating with Israeli officials. Toward the greater community, Bimkom implements the policy of advocacy and empowerment. The following description and analysis support this conceptual framing.

A clear manifestation of Bimkom's critical-confrontational position is seen in its tendency to critically review master plans produced by Israeli official bodies and municipalities. Officially, Bimkom rationalizes this line of action by the need to protect the interests of the poorest among Israeli communities that are, according to Bimkom, naturally liable to be harmed by such plans.¹⁰ These are mainly the communities of, Israeli Arab citizens, Palestinians, Jews of Oriental origin, African refugees, and other foreign workers. This unification of substantially different communities under one roof, in itself, reflects a strategy of a universal cross-cultural strategy. Below are several examples.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been increasing discontent of Israeli citizens, mainly of those living in the poorest areas of Tel-Aviv, with the growing presence of illegal asylum seekers and refugees in their midst. To alleviate this problem, the Israeli government took several steps, including building a detention facility (the "Holot" facility, 2011–2013) far away from large metropolitan areas, designed to serve as a temporary residence for such illegal immigrants. Bimkom opposed this initiative. Its lawyers appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court against the Minister of Interior (2013), arguing that jailing people who are not criminals and limiting their freedom is a crude violation of basic human rights.¹¹

Such a critical position may escalate to the point of confrontation with the Israeli legal system, and its de-legitimization. For example, at the beginning of the 21st century, the municipality of Lod, an ethnically mixed town, sought to demolish several illegal buildings constructed and inhabited by local Arabs, which led to social unrest and violent demonstrations. Several activists of Bimkom, jointly with other closely related NGOs, stood with the local Arabs, and delegitimized the Israeli administration and its legal system (Yacobi, 2002).

Criticizing the government and the establishment could be done through a constructive dialogue, especially when the issues under debate pose no immediate or concrete threat. An example of this style of action occurred in December 2018, when Bimkom, together with ACRI (The Association for Civil Rights in Israel), initiated an assembly session at the Knesset (Israeli parliament) on the topic of "Planning as tool for deprivation or for social improvement?"¹² The organizers explained the necessity of this meeting by the need to "discuss how spatial planning can affect human rights: by causing deprivation or by ensuring equality and social justice."¹³ Various public figures were invited to speak at the session, including the chairperson of Bimkom, parliament members, planners, and experts.

Alongside criticism, Bimkom practices advocacy, that is, "making systematic efforts aimed at influencing public policies by appealing to the actors against whom claims are made" (Prakash & Gugerty, 2010, pp. 1–2). The actions undertaken by Bimkom fit this definition in the sense that the organization strives to help and protect poor communities by providing advice, helping build coalitions of social movements, and producing professional reviews and policy papers submitted to policy makers.¹⁴ For example, during 2010–2012, the Israeli

government initiated a plan to resettle Bedouin population and redistribute land ownership in the southern peripheral district area of Israel. Bimkom did not agree with this plan (known as the “Praver program”), arguing that this program will displace and harm the interests of the Bedouin population (which they call “indigenous”). To sway public opinion, Bimkom professional staff wrote and published policy papers that suggest different ways to handle this issue.¹⁵

Another typical example of advocacy is reflected in the way Bimkom intervened in promoting affordable housing policy (2010–2012). Since the late 1990s, there has been a clear trend of rising cost of living in Israel, especially in the housing market. To address this problem, which led to social unrest and protests, Bimkom initiated several steps, including establishing a coalition of civic bodies to operate as a lobby, and writing policy papers that proposed various ways of incorporating and assimilating affordable housing in the official Israeli national master plan.¹⁶

At the same time, Bimkom made efforts to improve the well-being of the communities by means of empowerment, that is, proactive interventions designed to raise civic activism, improve capabilities, and increase the responsibility of the citizens toward the community (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013, p. 2208). An example of applying this strategy can be seen in the “Issawiyah project” (Cohen-Blankshtain, Ron, & Perez, 2013). Issawiyah is an Arab neighborhood in East Jerusalem, with the population suffering from inequality and lack of opportunity.¹⁷ To change this situation, in 2003–2012, Bimkom initiated several actions, including the preparation of an alternative master plan, intended for submission to the official planning authority of the Jerusalem Municipality, and the establishment of a social team, with the aim of informing the residents about the planning process and organizing discussions on the neighborhood vision. Cohen-Blankshtain et al. (2013) revealed an underlying objective behind the establishment of the social team: empowering participation. The latter refers to the idea that no matter what are the practical results, there is much value in learning skills and internalizing ideas that help community members recognize their ability to make change and develop a new notion of “we.”

As noted, the main objective of the present research is to investigate the mechanisms and the origins standing behind the abovementioned strategy.

4 | MECHANISMS AND ORIGINS OF BIMKOM STRATEGIES

4.1 | Context

Viewing the Israeli society through a socio-political macro-lens may suggest several reasons for Bimkom, as organization, adopting the strategies described above. The most important factor in this regard is that the State of Israel was established on a clear National-Zionist basis, deriving its legitimacy from deep-rooted Jewish national traditions, myths, and symbols (Eisenstadt, 1992). Various legislation, such as the Law of Return¹⁸ and the recently passed the Jewish Nation State Law¹⁹ illustrate this. This basis is reinforced by the geo-political aspect: since the very beginning of Jewish settlement in modern era (late 19th century) to date, Israeli society was engaged in a bitter struggle and wars with the Arab population (Morris & Benny, 2004; Shafir, 1996). According Israeli scholars (Adelman, 2003; Ben-Eliezer, 1997), this ongoing conflict affected the cultural and symbolic fabric of Israeli society, making it a militarized society.

Against this national-historical background and moves, growing activity of oppositional Israeli NGOs, including Bimkom, may be explained as natural counter-reaction (Kaufman, 2018). Marchetti and Tocci (2009) support this theoretical-logical explanation:

In democracies with a strong military presence and militarized culture, civil society is often associated with the push for democratization and civilizations of politics. In democracies founded upon strong ideological consensus (e.g., Zionism, Kemalism), civil society acts in surveillance and critique of the state....²⁰

Marchetti and Tocci (2009) labeled the organizations that are leading this critical counter-reaction as Conflict Society Organizations (CoSOs). Kaufman (2018), who described a similar type of civic activities in the Israeli context, called them Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), whose basic motivation of the organization is to “challenge the status quo in the community and society” (Kaufman, 2018, p. 2).

An additional condition that has likely contributed to the emergence of CoSOs/SMOs has to do with the level of class and social disparities. Since the early 1990s, Israeli society has been undergoing substantial transformations, such as increasing integration into the global economy and a move toward neoliberalization—a process that widened socio-economic gaps and shaped the Israeli residential and housing environment as a highly segregated one (Kaufman, 2018; Ram, 2013; Rosen & Razin, 2009). From a Neo-Gramscian perspective, Pauly et al. (2017) argue that such transformations unavoidably reorganize the relationships between the state and civil society, leading to a greater tension and increasing the chances for the emergence of conflictual NGOs as a counter-hegemony that aims to challenge the neoliberal order.

Israeli scholars who specifically focused on Bimkom provided structural and rational reasons for the existence of this NGO, such as those presented above, adjusting for local geographic-political circumstances. Orr and Golan (2014) view the emergence of Bimkom as natural, given that minorities with less power, in particular Arab, increasingly suffer from deprivation and exclusion. According to these authors, to change these conditions, Bimkom criticizes the Israeli government without adopting a radical stance, as such a stance could compromise its legitimacy: “[Bimkom] did not want to be perceived as extremists by the Jewish public in Israel or take action on an issue so remote from the consensus of this public” (Orr & Golan, 2014, p. 80).

Cohen-Blankshtain et al. (2013) presented a much subtler and more sophisticated explanation, built on similar theoretical basis. They pointed to several conditions that naturally stimulate the emergence of Bimkom, for example, the official Israeli system (both politics and urban planning) depriving and excluding the Arab minority, and local Arabs deeply mistrusting the Israeli establishment. Under these conditions, and given that the official Israeli system does allow for bottom-up changes, Bimkom enters a policy space in which it functions as moderator, bridging the gaps and negotiating between the community and state authorities, mostly following a realistic-rational approach.

At first sight, it seems that the contextual-rational explanation appropriately fits the strategy employed by Bimkom. At a second glance, however, it is not quite satisfactory. At the beginning of the 21st century, most Israeli NGOs that aimed at bringing about social change (5% of active Israeli NGOs, Gidron, Bar, & Katz, 2003, pp. 60–61; 210–220), did not follow strategic lines similar to those adopted by Bimkom (Gidron et al., 2003). Furthermore, the contextual-rational explanation is too general and too abstract, therefore it may mask other causalities. Why should “changing the status quo” be a natural, unavoidable reaction, as implicitly argued by

Kaufman? Does changing the status quo and empowering community stems exclusively from the position of Bimkom as a human rights NGO, or does it involve additional values and interests as well?

The following discussion focuses on these questions by shifting the spotlight to *local* and *internal* aspects, to explore empirically the relevance and impact of the leaders' sociological background on shaping strategy.

4.2 | Local sociology

An instructive aspect that affects Bimkom strategy is related to class and socio-cultural milieu within which Bimkom members operate and socialize. Many Bimkom members are “seasoned political activists with strong academic background” (Cohen-Blankshtain et al., 2013, p. 63) and “professionals who have accumulated knowledge, power, and influence” (Yacobi, 2007, p. 756). These qualities may explain several aspects of the NGO strategy. First, they grant Bimkom members great confidence and a sense of entitlement in criticizing and confronting the government. Second, their being highly educated intellectuals is associated with the application of the abovementioned universal cross-cultural strategy (applying the general line while ignoring cultural differences). Swidler and Arditi (1994) pointed to this connection: “Enlightenment figures [and] educated elites [tend to] emphasize universal arguments and abstract generalizations [...]. Trumpeting the general over the particular [...] deemphasizing local or regional variations.” (p. 314).

Such heavily universalistic orientation intensifies also because of the collective socio-political biography of the wider community within which Bimkom operates. Bimkom entered the Israeli political arena at the turn of the 21st century, when the majority population group, Israeli Jews, became sociologically, ideologically, and politically divided more than ever before. A substantial divide within this population is the growing contention between religious and secular communities, which has escalated to a level of a “dormant culture war” (Kimmerling, 1998). Over the years, this divide has increasingly correlated with the strife between the conservative and the progressive community, to which Bimkom belongs (Greenspan, 2014; Orr & Golan, 2014).

Similarly to the North American progressive movements (Rosdil, 2011), the wider Israeli progressive community supports the ideals and values of social justice, civic democracy, human rights, women's rights, and tolerance toward non-conventional life styles as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). Sociologically, this community identifies with secular, liberal, moderate pro-Zionist ideas, and with the old and well-established Israeli elite, the so-called liberal former hegemonic elite (Mautner, 2011). The best-known NGO, most identified with Israeli progressivism, is the NIF (Haklai, 2008), which, as noted, supports Bimkom financially.

At the same time, the Israeli greater conservative community, which consists of various sub-groups, tends to share and protect national and family values, and is less likely to criticize the capitalist social order (Rynhold, 2002). Politically, many conservatives support the largest party, the Likud (Rynhold, 2002), which has been in power, almost without interruption, since 1977. Prominent within the Israeli conservative community is the religious-Zionist sub-community, which since 1980s has been increasingly turning into a spearheading force striving to lead Israeli society (Dahan, 2019; Levy, 2016; Sprinzak, 1998), and it is therefore perceived as a threat by the progressives. This ideological-cultural clash has intensified in 2010–2019, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (1996–1999, 2009–present), who is mostly

identified with religious and conservative constituents, attacked the NIF for being hostile to Israel and to him personally.²¹

In short, both political history and internal sociological-ideological rivalry affect the critical-confrontational strategy adopted by Bimkom in that it sets the wider progressive community on a *collision course* with Israeli governments, which identifies with conservative constituents.

The cooperation-negotiation component of Bimkom's strategy is also related to local sociology. Greenspan (2014) found that members and staff of many progressive NGOs have highly prestigious backgrounds and rich experience in the Israeli state service. As an organization at odds with the establishment, Bimkom does not quite fit this categorization; yet, its social relationships with the wider progressive community allows it to maintain mutual influence, as well as provide certain advantages (Greenspan, 2014). As bearers of various types of *cultural capital* (Greenspan, 2014)—educated, secular, of European origin, possessing good verbal skills—members of the wider progressive community are considered by other Israeli elite groups as reliable and professional. They easily gain access to decision makers at higher levels, and especially to mainstream media. In other words, being in possession of such attributes, Bimkom can shape its cooperation-negotiation strategy, taking advantage its social and cultural capital.

In sum, the local sociological review adequately reflects the strategy adopted by Bimkom, providing an angle complementary to contextual-rational explanation. Yet, this explanation is not fully satisfactory either, and raises several questions that cannot be answered by pure sociological analysis: Is the strategy of empowerment a mere result of the meeting between Bimkom leaders (an elite group) with their followers' objective weakness, or does it also have to do with the *leaders' own perceptions* of “followers” and “weakness”? Furthermore, given that Bimkom activists paint their activities in anti-establishment colors, the rational-functional explanation claiming that Bimkom enters the policy space, as a moderator between the community and state authorities seems to be both lacking and puzzling.

To address these questions and fill in the missing elements, we must go beyond objective sociology, to a deeper level of defining and conceptualizing fundamental perceptions, preconceptions, and values, from which Bimkom founders/leaders derive their strategic line.

4.3 | Leaders' political philosophy

Individuals who have led Bimkom since its establishment as chairpersons (some of whom are still at the helm) teach in Israeli academic institutions. They include Prof. Tovi Fenster, Chairperson of Bimkom (1999–2003) and its president (since 2018); Prof. Haim Yacobi, the Chairperson of Bimkom (2007–2010); Prof. Erez Tzfidia, Chairperson of Bimkom from 2016 to the present; and Prof. Oren Yiftachel, the moving spirit behind many civic activities associated with Bimkom.²²

As professors in the field of social geography and urban planning, each has published numerous academic articles focused on various issues, which in some way are relevant for understanding the Bimkom strategy, and especially grand strategy (Fenster, 2004; Tzfidia & Yiftachel, 2004; Yacobi, 2002; Yacobi & Tzfidia, 2019; Yiftachel, 2013; Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003).

As I show below, the perceptions, political arguments, and strategies voiced by these leaders are clearly inspired by and anchored in theories and concepts formulated by well-known critical thinkers, primarily Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Eduard Said, Michel Foucault, David Harvey,

and Henri Lefebvre. Key concepts that guide these leaders are social justice, class and power relations, post-colonialism, identity politics, cultural relativism, utopianism, and radicalism.

These conceptions, ideas, and theoretical sources are interwoven with the leaders' moral view and political narrative. Schematically, this narrative is laid out along the following general line: the social, spatial, and political order in Israel, since late 20th century, has been pernicious and cannot be easily changed; therefore, some proactive intervention is sorely needed. This narrative has been rationalized by a broader perspective that correlates four socio-political components: national ideology, government, the common people, and civilian leadership.

At the level of national ideology, the chairpersons of Bimkom reject Zionism. Furthermore, inspired by the concept of "super-structure," commonly used by post- and neo-Marxist thinkers, these leaders deeply believe that the establishment of the State of Israel was a fundamental event that, historically and presently, drastically worsened the quality of life of many local residents (Tzfadia & Yiftachel, 2004; Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). They argued that the ongoing inequality of rich and poor, Jews and non-Jews, and Jews of European versus Oriental origin is a built-in characteristic of Zionist ideology, which they identify with the colonialist movement (Yacobi, 2002; Yacobi & Tzfadia, 2019; Yiftachel, 2013). Therefore, the Israeli regime, with its official planning system, cannot change this flawed substructure; on the contrary, it maintains it. Inspired by the concept of hegemony, formulated by Antonio Gramsci, these leaders regard the political decisions of Israeli governments as instruments that the hegemonic, privileged groups use manipulatively to serve their own interests. To support this view, they contend that various "ordinary" and "legitimate" tools, such as laws and the planning system, have been the traditional mechanism by which the Zionist movement, and later the Israeli State, sought to maintain a demographic balance favorable for the Jewish population (Yacobi, 2002). In this spirit, Fenster (2004) argued that the master plan of the Israeli planners, TAMA 35 (officially accepted by the Israeli government in 2005), was not designed only to ensure spatial effectiveness or to improve the well-being of Israeli citizens, nor is it an outcome of personal interpretation or cultural preferences, but mainly to consolidate the interests of hegemonic groups. To support this argument, Fenster pointed to fact that the plan does not comprise Palestinian historical sites, in other words, the memories and sense of belonging of local Arabs (Fenster, 2004).

Similarly, Yacobi (2010) treated the controversial issue of the presence of African foreign workers and asylum seekers in the Israeli urban landscape. Unlike the position of the state, which maintains the Israeli "exclusively Jewish immigration [policy]" (p. 48), he considered the presence of such immigrants positively, a phenomenon that "has contributed to a further change of Israel into a de facto 'normal' immigration state" (p. 48). He severely criticized the Israeli government, which invested great effort in fortifying and securing Israeli borders against illegal immigrants. As a scholar adhering to a materialist-realist worldview, he condemned this policy, arguing that it neither truly expresses the ideals of the Israeli nation, nor derives from value preferences, but rather is designed to serve particular interests, and at best, it is an outcome of a "geopolitics of fear" (p. 63).

As opposed to the formal-legal basis, upon which Israeli administration bases its policy and enforcement, these leaders advocate substantive criteria for setting policy. For example, in the case of the conflict between Jews and Arabs in the city of Lod (above), Yacobi (2002) supported the local Arabs who violated the law, arguing that the entire Israeli legal system was constructed in a way that inherently dispossesses Arabs, so that acting in accordance with the law was pointless. To sustain this alternative morality, Yacobi used distinct terminology. For example, the phrase "illegal building" (commonly used by the Israeli establishment) was replaced by

“informal building” (Yacobi, 2006, p. 39), and “illegal business” operated by illegal immigrants was replaced by “informal urban space” (Yacobi, 2010, p. 13).

Based on these theoretical-epistemological-moral values and perceptions, these leaders approach local problems as a formula in which all the above components—national ideology, planning system, and politicians at both national and local levels—perpetuate the situation, leading to a dead end instead of a solution.

According to this perception, the common Israeli people, especially the working class, widely holding a traditional-hierarchical worldview, also participate, in one way or another, in maintaining and reproducing this status quo. Having adopted the concept of “false consciousness,” commonly recognized by Marxists scholars, Bimkom leaders claim that because of their class affiliation, common people fail to reach true understanding: they are “trapped by planning,”²³ “victims of the Judaization project” (Yiftachel, 2000, p. 753), living in a “trapped identity” (Yiftachel & Tzfadia, 2004, p. 204), “‘trapped’ by the... Zionist project” (Tzfadia & Yiftachel, 2004, p. 41).

Nevertheless, the status quo is not entirely static. Fenster (2004) recognized that ordinary people are naturally less aware of large and abstract mechanisms that shape their well-being; but the “daily practices” (p. 410) of these people may indicate a dynamic of “power from below” (p. 413), which has a potential to undermine the hegemonic “oppressive” power and “challenge municipalities and government planning projects” (p. 404). This is exactly the place where these leaders view themselves as a driving force that can fuel such dynamics.

Bimkom leaders believe that the best way to break out of the status quo is by creating a new political bloc that would challenge governmental top-down politics by supporting “power from below.” Inspired by Gramsci, who pointed at intellectuals as a crucial force within the overall effort to change capitalist social order (Cox, 1983, p. 168), these leaders regard themselves as a determined vanguard capable of identifying the “power from below” and channeling it into the right direction by shaping the “critical planning discourse” (Yacobi, 2007, p. 748).

In light of these perceptions, it is not surprising that Bimkom enthusiastically advocates practices that are associated with “power from below” and bottom-up activities: maintaining a dialogue with the people, social activism, and civic engagement, in other words— empowerment.

4.4 | Policy outcomes

Taking into account two decades of activity, it can be roughly concluded that Bimkom partially succeeded in achieving its goals. Bimkom succeeded, although on a limited scale, to reorganize land use on behalf of Arab minorities who live in ethnically mixed municipalities, for example, establishing community gardens.²⁴

Clearly, under the influence of Bimkom, at least some policy makers have changed their attitude toward planning for underprivileged populations. A highly positioned municipal official, who used to negotiate with Bimkom extensively admitted: “They set a mirror in front of our eyes; their intervention forces us to face moral and social dilemmas, and to think twice before making decisions.”²⁵ On the other hand, the establishment deters and often rejected Bimkom intervention. That same person explained:

See, our official policy, which is well-internalized by our municipal staff, is to encourage public participation in the entire process of urban planning. We welcome various NGOs, including those that act on behalf of Arab neighborhoods.

When it comes to Bimkom, however, it is different. Our staff members feel uncomfortable with their intervention. They raise antagonism: they wish to negotiate with the establishment while they are anti-establishment. The pervasive sense is that they don't take a constructive part in teaching citizens how to be involved in city life, but rather to oppose city establishment. Besides, it is almost impossible to cooperate, I mean emotionally, with an organization that has no problem with citizens who build illegally, that is, who legitimize violating the law.

Unsurprisingly, Bimkom credibility and legitimacy have gradually decreased; initiatives led by it were blocked by politicians and professional planners.²⁶

As a component within a wider network of human rights NGOs, it appears that Bimkom intensified its influence. For example, Bimkom succeeded in shifting public attention to promote affordable housing, a policy that until the end of the 20th century was beyond the horizon of Israeli politicians. A clear manifestation of this is seen in the housing reform initiated (2015) and led by the Israeli Minister of Finance (Moshe Kahlon) who is identified with lower-middle class Israeli mainstream constituents. Yet, few politicians and communities see eye-to-eye with Bimkom. Furthermore, as a part of wider network of NGOs financially and morally supported by European governments, Bimkom is identified as a hostile and anti-Israel body (Steinberg, 2006), and it did not gain a wide, massive support even from the communities on behalf of which it acts. In a general perspective, Bimkom failed to achieve some of its goals, probably because of powerful ideological, political, and cultural tensions between the organization and the Israeli establishment and wider community, which are driven by national pride and conservative-hierarchic values (Dahan, 2008).

5 | GENERALIZATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS

5.1 | The origins of Bimkom strategy

The above data and review serve as the basis for addressing the main research question, concerning the relevance and weight of the leaders' sociology and political philosophy on shaping strategy. Based on the empirical section(3,4), Figure 1 schematically outlines the relationships between the various components discussed above that undergird the Bimkom strategy.

With respect to its values and goals, Bimkom proclaims being a civic organization that strives to promote social justice and democratize spatial planning (Figure 1, box a).

As far as contextual conditions are concerned, Bimkom operates in a reality of a nation state characterized by increasingly growing socio-economic and spatial disparities between its citizens (Figure 1, box b). Given these conditions and its aim to achieve concrete and visible solutions, Bimkom's adopting a strategy of confrontation and cooperation, of advocacy and empowerment (Figure 1, box S) appears reasonable and aligns well with the emergence of other organizations that both operate under and challenge neoliberal regimes.

The empirical analysis, however, uncovers a more complex picture, pointing at the leaders' own sociological and philosophic background as an additional source that shapes Bimkom strategy.

The leaders and people who are generally supporting Bimkom share a common background: they are secular, well-educated individuals with a global orientation, inspired by radical

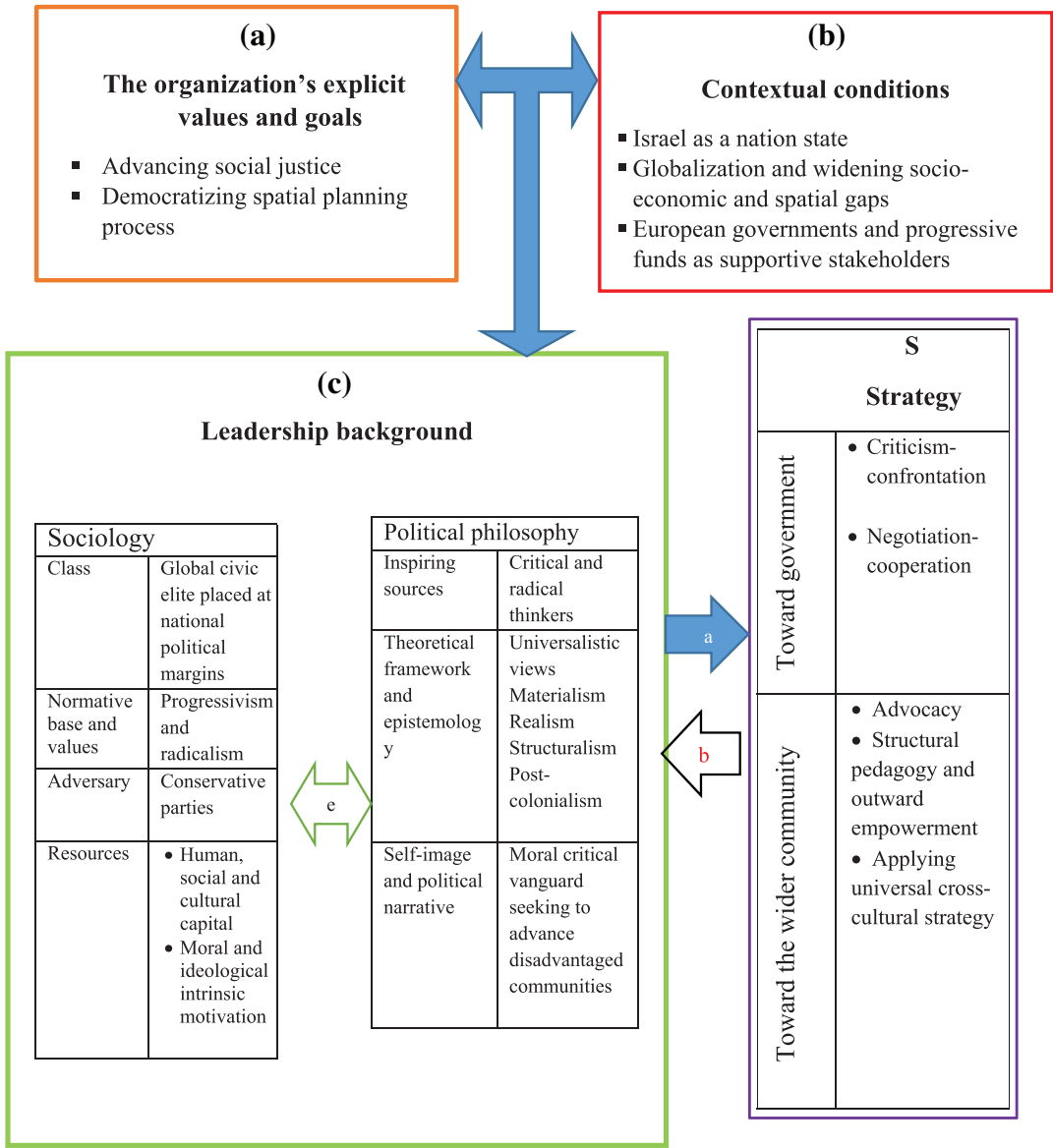


FIGURE 1 Mechanisms that shaped the strategy adopted by Bimkom

and progressive values. These characteristics significantly influence the strategy adopted by the organization in several respects (Figure 1, arrow a). First, Bimkom leaders, who find themselves at the political margins, engaged on a collision course with successive Israeli governments, which since late 1970s have been dominated by conservative parties. Second, enjoying a high level of human, social and cultural capital, Bimkom members feel great confidence and entitlement to criticize and confront the Israeli government. Third, as global-universal people, Bimkom leaders tend to adopt a universal, cross-national, and cross-cultural strategy, with local adjustments, to be applied in substantially different communities, who are presumed to be poor and oppressed (Arab citizens, Jews of Oriental origin, refugees and asylum seekers).

The leaders' political philosophy, both as an independent factor and influenced by local sociology (Figure 1, box c, arrow e), is also crucial in this respect. Inspired by critical and radical thinkers, and driven by post-colonial theories, rooted in structuralist–materialist–realist epistemology, Bimkom leaders view themselves as an intellectual vanguard whose mission is to redeem the proletariat, or what they perceive as the “victims” of oppressive structures.

5.2 | Implications for strategic management analysis

The above findings have far-reaching implications for strategic management analysis. Table 1 presents a comparison of the two discussed approaches: contextual-rational versus the integrated sociological-philosophic (henceforth, integrated approach/sociological-philosophic outlook). The criteria used for comparison are based on a common model for strategic management analysis (appeared in Bryson, 2004), adjusted to current needs and focus.

The left column in Table 1 lists three techniques for analyzing strategic management,²⁷ selected on the basis of “the implicit theory that underlies most public sector-oriented literature” (Bryson, 2004, p. 25). According to this theory, managers who aim to improve decision-making processes should use the following techniques: create ideas for strategic intervention; build a winning coalition; monitor and evaluate strategic intervention. The analysis below uses these techniques, formulated as practical guidelines, as a conceptual tool to identify the sources and logic of Bimkom strategy.

Creating ideas for strategic intervention involves (Bryson, 2004, p. 32) problem formulation, search for a solution, and assessment of political feasibility.

According to contextual-rational logic, the main problem that Bimkom contends with is the existence of social, political, and spatial marginalization that ails Israeli communities. To solve this problem, a proactive intervention designed to heal these communities, by advocacy and empowerment, is needed. The sociological-philosophic exploration, however, finds this diagnosis limited. Guided by their post- and neo-Marxist views, Bimkom leaders are deeply persuaded that poorness and marginality are merely the visible expression of a deeper problem that lies at the super-structure level, which they associate with the existence of Israel as a nation state and a colonial force. Hence, according to this outlook, the solution based on advocacy and empowerment is not the mere result of pure strategic logic but also derives from the perceptions and theoretical frameworks of the organization: radicalism and realism. The following elaborates and emphasizes this allowing us a better understanding of the solution outline suggested by Bimkom.

First, Bimkom leaders strongly believe that the problem cannot be solved only by means of wealth redistribution or by reorganizing land use. Instead, they believe that efforts should be directed toward solving the “real problem,” by undermining and modifying the national-primordial worldview adopted by successive Israeli governments—hence, shocking the system from *top-down* by criticizing and confronting the Israeli regime. In addition, Bimkom strive to shock the system from *bottom-up*, by initiating and encouraging local resistance. The empirical analysis indicated that the tools designed to serve advocacy and empowerment, such as projects, meetings, and policy papers are not intended just to serve practical ends but also to reshape community thinking. This type of intervention fits the “structural pedagogy” and “outward empowerment” patterns (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013; Hasson, 1985) in which leaders, mainly of radical organizations, strive to make their followers internalize a critical attitude toward the

TABLE 1 A comparison of the contextual-rational versus integrated sociological-philosophic approach to analyzing strategic management (the Bimkom case)

Techniques of strategic management		A contextual-rational analysis	Integrated contextual-rational and sociological-philosophic analysis	
			The logic	Practiced by Bimkom
Creating ideas for strategic intervention	Problem definition	The Israeli regime, in particular its planning system, excludes and deprives less power groups	Problem definition also stems from the leaders' preconceptions, which, among others, are shaped by their political philosophy	Bimkom leaders believe that social exclusion and marginality lies also at the super-structure level (which they identify with the existence of Israel as a colonial nation state)
	Solution outline	Proactive intervention is needed in order to empower and advocate for the disadvantaged groups	Solution outline draws also from the leaders' epistemology and political theory	Bimkom directs its intervention so as to undermine the super-structure from top-down (by criticizing the government) and bottom-up (applying structural pedagogy and outward empowerment)
	Feasibility	Stems from policy space, abilities, and an objective gap between the organization goals and political environment	Policy space and abilities also fixed by abstract resources drawn from leader's socio-cultural background and perceptions	Bimkom leaders are expert academics who socialize and share common interests with wider civic elite, and perceive themselves as moral critical vanguard
Building a winning coalition		Based on utilization of resources, abilities, and relative advantages in accordance with the existing power structure and stakeholders' interests	Using relative advantages and meeting stakeholders' interests influenced by the political philosophy and sociology of the organization	Bimkom chooses its allies with the view of creating counter-hegemony as a long-term grand-strategy
Monitoring and evaluating strategic intervention		Based on objective measurable criteria: Improving the welfare and political abilities of the communities	Criteria used for evaluating policy are often exclusive and selective, drawn from the political philosophy of the organization	Parameters used for evaluating improvements and mobility of the communities, set on collectivism, structuralism, and materialism

government, and train them to take action that would undermine state institutions (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013).

Third, the integrated review produces a better understanding of the mechanisms that regulate the relationship between civil society and the government. The contextual-rational analysis assumes that this relationship is delineated mainly by institutional and functional boundaries, as a balance between elected representatives and participatory democracy. The truth is, however, substantially different: Bimkom builds its strategy on rejecting representative democracy. Its activities, carried out in the name of participatory democracy, are not intended only to supplement certain built-in deficiencies of representative democracy, but rather to instill doubt and undermine its legitimacy.

The implicit logic of the contextual-rational approach assesses feasibility of goals mainly based on policy space and the objective gap between organizational vision and the nature of the political environment. Given this gap, Bimkom has not much leeway other than negotiating and compromising. Although there is much truth in this realistic assessment, the sociological-philosophic outlook brings to light additional aspects. It shows that the issue of feasibility is also affected by less visible factors deriving from the background of leaders as possessors of expert knowledge, cultural capital, and self-perception as a critical moral vanguard. As can be seen in the case of Bimkom, in reality, policy space was shaped also by these abilities and perceptions.

Building a winning coalition to increase ability entails making efforts to combine various forms of power, in accordance with the existing configuration of interests, networks, parties, NGOs, and stakeholder's interests. The contextual-rational analysis shows that Bimkom chose its allies based on this definition, or to use Bryson's conceptualization (2004), on a distinction between "supportive stakeholders" (NIF and European governments) and "opposing stakeholders" (the Israeli regime). The sociological-philosophic analysis, however, substantially questions the validity of such a value-free explanation. Led by neo-Gramscian leaders, Bimkom built a coalition guided by the long-term grand strategy of creating a counter-hegemony on a wider platform, which includes various actors who share common values and interests. This sheds an instructive light on the real structure binding together NGOs and stakeholders. Indeed, financial support provided by various European agencies and liberal Jewish donors probably has influence, in one way or another, on the outline of the strategy and the volume of operation of Bimkom. This exogenous factor, however, combines with the endogenous one—the unique sociology, philosophy, qualities, virtues and resources bound up with the specific grantee (intrinsic qualities such as ideological motivation, moral insistence, and academic backing).

Monitoring and evaluation refers to a process by which policy makers strive to better synchronize policy goals and outcomes by following the dynamic along the implementation of policy. The contextual-rational logic assumes that Bimkom follows clear and objective criteria for monitoring and evaluating policy (both that of the government and its own): improving the well-being, enhancing the abilities, and advancing the political interests of marginal communities. The political-philosophic examination, however, reveals this assumption as limited and even deceptive. In truth, such objective universal criteria are particular and selective, subject to the leaders' theoretical frameworks, mainly collectivism and structuralism. Accordingly, to evaluate whether or not a policy succeeded, especially in improving community welfare and mobility, Bimkom takes into account *only* the changes that pass this theoretical filter, that is, structural-exogenous sources and collective action. Individual activities and endogenous mechanisms that may affect social gaps or spatial hierarchies, such as local culture, local leadership, personalities, and individual biographies, ignored (Dahan, 2008, 2018).

6 | SUMMARY AND THEORETICAL LESSONS

The main purpose of the present study was to examine whether NGO leaders' sociological and political-philosophic background is relevant for understanding NGO strategy. To this end, the study focused on the case of Bimkom, an Israeli human rights NGO that acts on behalf of marginal communities.

Bimkom strategy is clearly influenced by natural rational considerations that guide many NGOs—the need to find practical solutions—and by the specific conditions under which Bimkom operates. Context matters.

Yet, the empirical analysis revealed a wider, richer, and much more complex picture, indicating the fact that the leaders' sociological and philosophical backgrounds do matter, and indeed, are closely related to the adopted strategy.

Important theoretical lessons derived from this complicated picture.

First, it sheds critical light on the contextual-rational approach to understanding NGO strategies. Table 1 illustrates this point, making it clear that researchers who take into account *only* contextual-rational mechanisms come up with a partial explanation and risk misinterpretation.

Second, findings also shed a critical light on the neo-Marxist approach to analyzing the relationship between civic society and state. It is not that objective conditions by themselves, for example, class disparities, privatization, and conflict over hegemony, lead to the emergence of confrontational civil organizations. Rather, when objective conditions encounter a specific organization whose members share a critical stance, as in case of Bimkom, there is significant potential for establishing such organizations.

Third, these findings belie the prevalent conviction regarding the separation of strategy and philosophy. The fact that strategy is indeed affected by the philosophy and ideology of the organization and its institutionalization, supporting an important conclusion that strategy is not alienated from agency, that is, from the identity and worldview of those who formulate and execute strategy. Philosophy and ideology (the why question) are inextricably bound with strategy (the how question).

The notion that NGO leaders are not dissociated from their own background does not mean that they are not able to interpret their environment reflexively. This raises an intriguing question. Would unforeseen developments, such as unexpected outcomes, which inevitably occur over the life span of the organization, result in a change of strategy by leaders? Or, given that the NGO in question achieved limited success, will the philosophy of its leaders keep shaping its strategy in a predetermined, fixed manner, and prevent reorganization?

Consistent with the humanistic-interpretative approach, this is an *open* question, which means that there is considerable potential in conducting further research in this direction. Unlike the present study, which adopted a synchronic outlook, prospective research should be *diachronic*, that is tracing the evolution of the strategy by shifting the focus to decisions made at certain historical crossroads over the life span of the organization.

Such examination may uncover a constant, rigid strategy pattern. In this case, we may consider several explanations. One is that by avoiding strategic reorganization and reproducing the original pattern, the leaders seek to protect and reaffirm their preexisting beliefs, core values, and theories, which in a way support in-group social-organizational cohesiveness (Figure 1, arrow b).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I hereby declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ These include the sociology of knowledge (Swidler & Ardit, 1994), political culture (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990; Wildavski, 1987), and the theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984).
 - ² In Hebrew, the term “Bimkom” has a double meaning: “in a place of” and “instead of.”
 - ³ <http://bimkom.org/eng/our-mission/>
 - ⁴ Sources: a report submitted to the Israeli registry of non-profit organizations, Ministry of Justice, see <https://www.nif.org/about/grantmaking/>; <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/ngos/bimkom/>
- In the first quarter of 2018, Bimkom received grants from the following bodies: European Union, \$160,000; UN Habitat, \$12,000; ACP, \$5,100; Oxfam-Novib, \$5,300; The Norwegian Council for Refugees, \$32,300.
- ⁵ The United Nations agency for human settlement and sustainable urban development. <https://unhabitat.org/un-habitat-at-a-glance/>
 - ⁶ An NGO that aims to “defends democratic values... social and economic justice... peace, tolerance and dialogue.” <http://www.ficemea.org/?p=3300>
 - ⁷ A “world-wide development organization that mobilizes the power of people against poverty.” <https://www.oxfamnovib.nl/donors-partners/about-oxfam/our-story>
 - ⁸ An independent humanitarian organization helping displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers. See <https://www.nrc.no/who-we-are/about-us/>
 - ⁹ <https://www.nif.org/about/grantmaking/>; <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/ngos/bimkom/>
 - ¹⁰ <http://bimkom.org/eng/about-us/what-is-spatial-planning/>
 - ¹¹ <http://bimkom.org/eng/?s=Asylum+seekers>
 - ¹² <https://www.acri.org.il/single-post/104>
 - ¹³ <https://www.acri.org.il/single-post/104>
 - ¹⁴ <http://bimkom.org/eng/category/httpbimkom-orgengpublications/>
 - ¹⁵ See <http://bimkom.org/eng/wp-content/uploads/Bedouin-Negev-Alternative-Master-Plan.pdf>
 - ¹⁶ See Hagit Naali-Yosef and Sari Kronish: *Approaches for assimilating affordable housing in the Israeli national program for housing*, Bimkom, 2012.
 - ¹⁷ Historically, Issawiyah was part of the Jordanian kingdom until 1967. Following the territorial acquisitions in the Six-Day War (1967), the Israeli government officially annexed the territories of East Jerusalem, and the population was granted the status of residents but not of citizens. As such, the residents of Issawiyah can take part in municipal elections but cannot participate in national elections. In practice, however, as a political protest, the locals do not participate in municipal elections either; therefore, they are not represented in the municipality (Cohen-Blankshtain et al., 2013).
 - ¹⁸ According to the Law of Return, all Jews worldwide who immigrate to Israel qualify for Israeli citizenship immediately upon arrival.
 - ¹⁹ The Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People law, passed by the Knesset in July 2018, establishes the identity of the State of Israel on a firm and exclusive national basis. <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf>
 - ²⁰ Marchetti and Tocci (2009), p. 203.
 - ²¹ <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-New-Israel-Fund-hostile-to-Israel-killed-Rwanda-migrant-plan-547802>
 - ²² Professor Yiftachel served in various positions and capacities at many NGOs, all supported by the NIF.
 - ²³ <http://bimkom.org/eng/category/httpbimkom-orgengpublications/>

²⁴ For example, see “Bimkom celebrated opening the communal garden in the Arab neighborhood—Ras-El-Amud,” (June 12, 2019). <https://bimkom.org/>

Often, municipalities willingly to cooperate with Bimkom for practical reasons: Bimkom does the hard work behind the scenes. In the case of establishing the communal gardens, Bimkom identified and brought together the relevant main actors (landowner and donors), and negotiated with the municipal department.

²⁵ Interview with Mr. Ofer Grediner. Head of the Department for Urban Planning, Jerusalem Municipality (October 15, 2019).

²⁶ Interview with Mr. Ofer Grediner.

²⁷ The original model also includes “organizing participation” as a technique in which the managers are “deciding who should be involved, how and when” (Bryson, 2004, p. 27), which I do not find to be significantly relevant or useful for the case under discussion.

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