



## Navigating Migration Flows:

### *Addressing the Needs of Asylum Seekers Living in Peripheral Cities in Israel*

Final Report

#### Background

Until 2006, there were approximately 1,000 African asylum seekers in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Today, that number stands at over 40,000.<sup>2</sup> This rapid influx has put the issue of migration center-stage in Israel. Who are these individuals, and what should their status in the country be? What of their increasing numbers? And who is responsible for their basic needs?

For its part, the government of Israel has adopted a policy of deterrence. Construction of a large-scale detention facility has begun, and Parliament passed legislation to enable long-term detention of asylum seekers. At the same time, in line with the international community's guidelines, Israel grants 'group protection' to both Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers. Asylum seekers from these two countries comprise over 90% of the African asylum seekers in the country; of the 40,000 mentioned above, nearly 35,000 have been officially granted the right to stay in Israel, even though they entered the country illegally and the duration of their stay is unknown.

Group protection, however, does not include permission to work or eligibility for social services. How, then, should a community that includes men, women and children survive on a day-to-day basis without access to employment or the basic social net that enables society to function?

<sup>1</sup> In this report we use the terms asylum seekers throughout to refer to African migrants who have come over land to Israel through Sinai.

<sup>2</sup> The numbers of asylum seekers in Israel is highly contested, and no one set of figures seems to be consistent with any other. While the Population, Immigration, and Borders Authority (PIBA) reports that some 58,000 have entered the country as of February, 2012, this figure does not match the number of conditional release visa holders listed by the Ministry of Interior, which by early 2012 should number something in the range of 40,000. Number of individuals with 5 (A) 2 Visas (15.11.2011):

Country of Origin	Number	(%)	Men	Women	Unaccompanied Minors
Eritrea	22,232	(58%)	19,716	3,744	161
Sudan	10,650	(28%)	10,162	349	44
Nigeria	1,070	(3%)	853	212	8
Ghana	387	(1%)	335	49	3
Other countries	2,284	(6%)			
Total	38,425	(100%)			

While the question of their status is a dilemma faced by Israel's national government, the problem of their living conditions also falls on the shoulders of local government. Cities that are home to asylum seekers must cope with this community's vulnerability, lack of resources, and difference. Although municipalities have, in fact, limited formal obligations vis-à-vis asylum seekers, *de facto* cities are on the front line of contending with the multiple challenges raised by this growing population.

The city most visibly on the front lines is Tel Aviv, where the majority of asylum seekers in Israel live. Tel Aviv municipality has responded to this challenge by working directly with the community and providing, within the framework of Israeli law, direct services and assistance. Importantly, Tel Aviv has been assisted in its efforts by a network of civil society organizations that have responded to the presence of asylum seekers in the city. This network is essential to the care of this community, and provides a wealth of services, in some places stepping in where the state is absent. These organizations are not, however, active outside of Tel Aviv. What, then, of the asylum seekers in the those areas outside of the center strip of the country running between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, otherwise known as the "periphery"? What are the issues they face, and what has been the response of other municipalities dealing with this phenomenon? Who, if anyone, assists asylum seekers living in peripheral cities?

This report explores the needs of asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea living in three peripheral cities with large or growing populations: Arad, Eilat, and Ashdod. We examined the community's demographics and living conditions, as well as the attitudes of both the municipality and the local population towards these newcomers. This report seeks to give a general overview of life for asylum seekers in these three cities, in order to highlight the characteristics and needs of the community outside of the center of the country.

## Arad

Arad is a small southern city located at the juncture of the Judean Desert and the Negev, between Beer Sheva and the Dead Sea. Traditionally, Arad was a resort town for Israelis, as well as a center of arts in the Negev. In the 1990's, like many cities in Israel, it nearly doubled its population with the influx of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Today, Arad is home to some 27,000 residents, including a sizeable Haredi community. Residents work in the factories and tourist industry of the Dead Sea, as well as in local government and local companies such as Motorola, Arad Towels, and Telma. Arad contends with many issues typical of Israel's periphery: limited employment opportunities, a relatively high percentage of low-income residents, a heterogeneous population, and underdeveloped public transportation and other infrastructure.

There are approximately 500 Sudanese asylum seekers living in Arad, as well as a small number (22) of Eritreans. The Sudanese community in Arad is very diverse, with residents from four primary regions or tribes: Darfur (approximately half); the Nuba Mountains; Denka (South Sudan) and Nuweira, (includes a number of other smaller tribes, also from South Sudan.) There are many families among Arad's Sudanese community; of the 500 residents, some 150 are children. This makes Arad the city with the highest number of children outside of Tel Aviv and Eilat.

Asylum seekers from Sudan first arrived in Arad in 2007-8. As a result of large-scale employment by hotels in the Dead Sea, the community grew quickly, and at its height in 2009 numbered nearly 1,500. This rapid influx generated much panic locally; while numerous local activists stepped in to

assist these newcomers, Arad's current mayor was elected in 2010 on an anti-migrant platform. In the wake of the election, an atmosphere of hostility was tolerated and even encouraged. However, two years later, those passions have cooled considerably, and while there are still vocal opponents to the Sudanese presence in the city, the size of community itself has declined, and the municipality, for its part, has evinced a willingness to tolerate its presence. On a practical level, Arad enrolled Sudanese children in its schools from the beginning, and after a brief experiment with a Sudanese-only kindergarten, all children were integrated into the Arad school system. Today, there are 123 Sudanese children, from kindergarten through high school, in Arad's schools.

With a few exceptions, most members of the Arad community are employed and work in the Dead Sea hotels, as well as in road-construction, restaurants, and local factories. They earn minimum wage and report decent working conditions. There are reports of problems with employers in such issues as work hours and vacation, payment of benefits, and treatment, among others. However, relative to the many asylum seekers in the country who struggle with unemployment and egregious working conditions, their situation is stable. Because of the high percentage of employment in stable conditions, the Arad asylum seeker community is in a better position than most communities around the country. While many individuals within the community struggle to make ends meet, especially if one adult in the family is unemployed, overall the community is strong and many of its basic needs are being met.

This is visible particularly in the housing conditions of the community. Most families live in their own apartment, and small groups of single men share apartments after the fashion of any roommates, two or three to a home. This is in stark contrast to the living conditions of many asylum seekers in the country, where 8-10 individuals sharing a two-room apartment can be the norm. Problems with housing still plague Arad's asylum seekers; landlords who refuse to rent to asylum seekers, or take advantage of ignorance and vulnerability with increased rents or unfair conditions, frequent evictions without basis, and more. Their lack of familiarity with housing norms and expenses such as *arnona* (the municipal resident tax), language barriers and lack of resources when problems arise make the community particularly vulnerable in this area, and the combination of greed and anti-foreign sentiment creates an atmosphere conducive to exploitation. Housing is one of the most oft-cited problems raised by the community in Arad, alongside health care (for more on health care please see below), nor are there organizations that can assist asylum seekers in this realm. Outside of a few local volunteers, discussed further below, there is no assistance for the asylum seeker community in Arad, in this or other arenas.

The majority of asylum seekers live in the "Patio", one of Arad's original neighborhoods that extends out from the city center in two long lines. This is a poor area that has successively housed the city's most vulnerable communities; today, it is home to a mix of veteran Israelis and new immigrants, mostly from the former Soviet Union. Tensions exist in the Patio between asylum seekers and other residents, and the city receives complaints about the community, mainly related to noise.

The asylum-seeker community in Arad is well organized. While the community is quite diverse, each sub-group has recognized leaders and those leaders meet regularly and make decisions together. Their "Refugee Council" includes both Sudanese and Eritrean representatives, and inclusion and diversity is one of its stated aims. Three of the four Sudanese communities operate their own community centers: the Nuba Mountain community operates a center that is used by it and the Nuweir community (from South Sudan), as well as both other communities; the Darfuri community is in the process of re-opening its center after their previous landlord refused to renew their lease on fair terms; and the Denka community (also from South Sudan) has a center that primarily functions as a nursery school. These centers house activities and classes for children and youth such as English classes and organized sports, and men come during leisure hours to meet and relax; there is also at

least one women's group that meets regularly, usually in the church. Even so, the community struggles to find a large enough space to accommodate the full range of activities they would like to provide; children play soccer in the street because they do not have access to a proper field, and some community children cannot attend the thrice-weekly English lessons because there is not enough space.

In addition, the community operates three private day cares for small children; children of the different communities attend together. These are housed in private apartments, with between 7-13 children each. Recently, the municipality has evicted some of these day-care centers from their apartments after neighbors complained about noise, citing that the residences are not zoned for commercial use and the centers are unlicensed. Many landlords refuse to rent to day care centers because of the anticipated noise and tension. Since finding an appropriate space located on a lower floor with outside access has been consistently difficult and sometimes impossible, smaller, cramped quarters are tolerated. While the conditions are far from ideal, they in no way resemble the neglect familiar from similar nursery schools in Tel Aviv.

There are also two churches run by the community, which offer services and activities such as Bible study, or the women's group mentioned above. Newcomers come to Arad from Africa in a steady trickle. When they do, the community takes them in and provides everything: housing, food, and clothing until the person can find a job and provide for themselves.

One of the issues of great concern to the community is the perceived hostility on the part of Arad residents and the municipality. Until 2012, there has been almost no formal contact between the community and city institutions. Arad residents are, of course, mixed in their responses to asylum seekers; some have expressed virulent anti-migrant sentiment in such forums as the local paper, others have defended the Sudanese presence in the city. Recently, there have been no anti-migrant demonstrations or debates in the paper, but there are tensions, particularly in the Patio area, and the city and police still report complaints. This year, a group of Arad citizens formed the "Arad Rainbow" to promote diversity and multiculturalism in the city. This group has decided to focus on the problems in the Patio, and have invited a representative from the asylum seeker community to attend their meetings and participate in the group. A larger meeting between this organization and the asylum seeker community as a whole is being planned.

From the beginning of the community's time in Arad, there have been a handful of Israeli activists and residents who have assisted the community. Today, there are four different groups. One is a former Ben Gurion University student who comes weekly to Arad. She herself provides information and assistance to large numbers of individuals; she also has anywhere between 2-12 volunteers working for her at any given time, who provide activities and classes for children and adults, and organize one-time events, such as trips to the zoo. Another individual used to run a community center known as the Olive Branch Center. While that center recently closed due to budget constraints, this person is still involved, and plans to operate a summer camp for youth this summer. He remains in touch with the community and available to assist. In addition, there are two youth movements that have been active in Arad. *Mahanot Olim* operates summer camps and day camps for youth during school holidays, and Young Judea organizes volunteer work for its participants within the community.

In addition to these more formal groups, there are individuals throughout Arad who assist the community in various ways. For example, a former teacher tutors Hebrew to community members for symbolic fees, and the community garden project run by the city hosts weekly activities for youth in which many Sudanese children participate. Amnesty International ran a leadership-training course in Arad for Sudanese men, and continues to facilitate a working group of graduates every

other week. It was these graduates who formed the "Refugee Community" council, and they continue to engage in various activities to assist the community. For example, they recently organized a two-day in-service with *KavL'Oved* wherein representatives from the organization gave a community-wide presentation, offered individual counseling, and accompanied asylum seekers to their work-places in the Dead Sea to advocate and resolve conflicts.

The Sudanese children in Arad are for the most part in formal frameworks during the morning hours, either school or child-care. There are a handful of families who keep their children at home, either because they cannot afford child-care or because they refuse to send their children out; some of these children are left at home alone. The after-school hours, where all children are meant to come to the child-care centers, are more difficult: there is a much larger number of children in the centers and a bigger age range. Older children often do not come at all and play outside unsupervised. Teenagers in particular have little or no supervision when parents are working long hours and unavailable. While many families with two incomes try to stagger their work shifts around the children's schedules, this is not always possible. School attendance is not 100%, and even when children are present in the classrooms, there is no guarantee of learning or success. The schools report difficulties with behavioral problems, payment of fees, communication, and involvement of parents. The barriers to the involvement of asylum seeker parents in the Arad school system are many: language, culture, and the lack of any formal structure to enable such involvement all contribute. In general, norms of child-care and child rearing are vastly different between Sudan and Israel, and Israeli urban society, even in a small town, does not resemble Sudanese rural life. All together, these factors combine to put these children at risk.

## Eilat

Located at the southernmost tip of Israel, at the border with Egypt and Jordan and with a population of almost 50,000 residents, Eilat is a tourist destination for Israelis and Europeans alike.

African asylum seekers first arrived in Eilat in late 2006. They came in very small numbers, mostly from Darfur, and the municipality and residents received them with open arms. Families were taken in, found work, and assisted with life in their new residence. The hotel industry, where most found work, was happy to find a new work force, and began to bring even more asylum seekers, who were already residing in other parts of the country, to replace the foreign workers whose numbers were cut by the Ministry of Interior that year. The population grew steadily over the years, in part because of the availability of work and in part because of Eilat's proximity to the border with Egypt. Today, there are some 5,500 asylum seekers, representing over 8% of the city's population, in the city.<sup>3</sup>

Official attitudes towards this community have likewise changed. While the early years were characterized by tolerance and acceptance, the current mayor is one of the most outspoken critics of the "infiltrators," instigated a "red flag" campaign against the community and helped create a forum of Israeli mayors contending with the issue. The municipality famously refused to allow asylum seeker children into its schools, and set up a separate educational facility.<sup>4</sup> Local authorities have

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<sup>3</sup>According to the Ministry of Interior, there are only around 2,500 individuals with 5 (A) 2 visas living in Eilat. On the other hand, the city of Eilat offers numbers ranging from 8,000-12,000. Absent a door-to-door census, it is difficult to arrive at an exact population count. The number we offer, of approximately 5,500 refugees in Eilat, is based on our field research and takes into account estimates given by PIBA, the police, and the Ministry of Interior.

This policy is the subject of a pending law suit, discussed further below.<sup>4</sup>

adopted a policy of withholding services and non-cooperation wherever possible; according to them, Eilat already has more than its “fair share” of asylum seekers, and if conditions are too favorable, even more will come.

Of the 5,500 asylum seekers in Eilat, the majority are Eritrean (about 65%) and the rest from Sudan (both Darfur and South Sudan), with a small number from other African countries. There are some 200 children, mostly from the Sudanese community. Most of the community in Eilat lives in the neighborhood known as *Shicun Alef*, one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods located close to the city center; it is a poor area with an aging physical infrastructure. There are also a number of families who live on the surrounding *kibbutzim*.<sup>5</sup> Tensions between local residents and asylum seekers run high; egg and stone throwing are regular occurrences. Asylum seekers live in small apartments for the most part, of two or three rooms; families generally share with another family, and singles share apartments in large groups.

The vast majority of asylum seekers in Eilat continue to be employed by the hotel industry, in addition to sub-contracted jobs in cleaning and public works, and jobs in small industry in surrounding *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*. As the numbers of asylum seekers in Eilat has grown, so has unemployment. Large numbers of asylum seekers can be seen standing along the area where employers look for day laborers. There is greater unemployment in the Eritrean community, and many of the men who look for daily jobs are from this community. The area where they stand has become one of the many bones of contention between the city and the community. Local residents complain that asylum seekers, who stand for long hours in the heat without shelter, trashcans, or restrooms, despoil their gardens and buildings and frighten residents. The city built shelters for the laborers but located them a distance from where the majority prefer to stand. However, compared to some communities around the country, there are still a relatively high number of asylum seekers employed in stable work in Eilat. In addition, there are a number of community-run businesses in the city, located in the *Shicun Alef* neighborhood. Operated almost exclusively by members of the Eritrean community, these include coffeehouses, Internet stores, restaurants and shops. One ingenious operation is called the “kol-bo” (Hebrew for ‘everything inside’) by local Israelis; it is a single room divided by partitions which houses a beauty parlor, clothing store, small market, and café.

The Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seeker communities in Eilat have little contact with each other. The Sudanese community is small, relative to the Eritrean community, and well organized. Most Sudanese residents are employed, and there are many families among them. The community operates two community centers, both registered non-profit organizations. One, Youngster’s Dreams, is operated by the Darfuri community, and provides classes for youth and adults and collects and sends shipments of aid to Darfuri refugees in Chad. The other is operated by the South Sudanese community and likewise has classes for children and adults and serves as a recreational center. Until recently, both were located in *Sing-Sing*, the name of the building where many asylum seekers live. The South Sudan Organization for Development in Israel recently relocated to a different building in *Shicun Alef*. The communities also operate day-care centers for infants and toddlers, and there is a community church.

The Eritrean community is far larger, and is characterized by its more urban, atomized nature. While the Eritrean community in Israel has a strong political leadership that includes representatives from all cities, that leadership does not necessarily take an active role at the community level. Rather, community relations center around church and life-cycle events such as weddings (almost every

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In addition, the “Sudanese Village” known as Kfar Eilat, located on Kibbutz Eilat, housed about 300 families until it closed.<sup>5</sup>

weekend in Israel there is at least one Eritrean wedding, and people from all over the country travel to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv to attend), sports and entertainment (there is a national soccer league and music and theater artists perform regularly throughout the country), and business, personal and family relationships.

Rather than community leaders, individuals tend to seek assistance from family, friends and acquaintances. This is in keeping, of course, with the size of the community. (In Arad, for example, where only 22 Eritreans live, there is more of a sense of community, and yet these individuals, especially in the early days when there were only one or two, were taken in by the Sudanese community, lived with them and relied on the Sudanese community leadership for assistance.) In Eilat, there are no Eritrean community centers *per se*, but there is a church and numerous small businesses, all of which perform a social and community function.

The situation of youth in Eilat is difficult. School-age children, for the most part, attend the *Nof Eilat* school, the special school created by the city for asylum seekers located on Kibbutz Eilat just outside of Eilat. In an Israeli court case, this school has been accused of sub-par infrastructure and pedagogy, and the fact of its separation from the regular Eilat school system challenged. Eilat claims that if asylum seekers are indeed here temporarily, there is no imperative to integrate them. Furthermore, integrating children without language skills or an equal educational base is unadvised pedagogically. These arguments would, perhaps, be more persuasive if the premises of Nof Eilat were not so worn-down, if the curriculum was rigorous and all of its teachers certified. Certainly the education children receive at this school is not the same as that received by Eilat school children; on the other hand, many staff members are clearly quite dedicated, and some Eilat residents point out that these children have been protected from the racism and violence they may have faced in the regular schools. The school, if allowed by the court to continue, will move locations next year. The fate of this separate system is due to be decided by the courts in June 2012.

Infants and toddlers are cared for in community-run day-care centers. Conditions in these centers are quite poor: located in two windowless rooms, 40 children are cared for by two women in each center, sometimes overnight. The caregivers barely have time to feed and diaper their charges, let alone attend to such luxuries as early childhood development. After-school, while there are activities for children in the community centers, many children are left unsupervised, or go out to play on their own. Older youth are particularly at risk, with almost no frameworks to reach out and occupy them. They spend most of their time in the street, in a poor neighborhood with high incidents of drug dealing, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and petty crime.

There are a number of local activists who work with and assist the communities in Eilat. There is a Christian Hostel where members of the community know they can go for emergency humanitarian aid and general assistance. Numerous activists connected to this hostel, including many young Israelis, volunteer with the South Sudanese community in particular, especially the youth. Some teenagers participate in the youth group and conferences of this community. There are also activists from local institutions such as the Arava Institute located on Kibbutz Ketura, who volunteer and teach classes. Currently, they are teaching a Water Use and Conservation course. As a result of efforts by ASSAF, local social work students have been involved with the community at various points. In general, ASSAF is one of the few Tel Aviv organizations with an ongoing presence in Eilat. Staff members visit regularly, respond to issues and crises, and are in touch with the communities there. Most of the local kibbutzim have taken in at least one family and integrated them into their community. Even so, there is an overall sense of isolation within the community; asylum seekers report feeling that they have been left to fend for themselves in an outright hostile environment.

## Ashdod

Ashdod is a city of some 230,000 residents and has the highest concentration of new immigrants in the country. Located south of Tel Aviv, it is the largest city in Israel's southern periphery. *Rovaim*, or large neighborhoods, each of which has its own commercial center and educational and cultural institutions, comprise the city. Much of the asylum seeker community in Ashdod lives in *Rova Beit*, one of the original *rovaim*, home today primarily to veteran Israelis and new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. It is a poor neighborhood with an ageing physical infrastructure, and is known as a weak neighborhood with a vulnerable population.

There are approximately 900 asylum seekers living in Ashdod. One-third are from Sudan, primarily Darfur, and the rest are from Eritrea, aside from a handful from other African countries such as Ghana, Ethiopia and the Ivory Coast. The Darfuri community is almost exclusively single men; there are currently three women in the community. The Eritrean community is mostly single men with approximately thirty families; there are about 6 infants and toddlers in the community, all of whom are cared for by a religious Israeli woman who runs a *day care* from her home in *Rova Gimel*. There are no school-age children.

Asylum seekers come to Ashdod in search of work, or because a friend or loved-one is there. It is only recently that asylum seekers began coming in large numbers to this city. The community here is fairly transient in nature, and perhaps due in part to the lack of families, relatively atomized. Individuals may know their friends, but there is no organized leadership in either the Sudanese or Eritrean community. While there are a few individuals within the community who are active on its behalf, in general there is a sense that beyond their circle of friends, community members do not know or particularly come in contact with one another.

Asylum seekers in Ashdod are employed in a range of jobs, including restaurants, event halls and factories. They also work in surrounding *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*, mostly in grounds keeping and maintenance. Asylum seekers in the community report the full range of labor-rights abuses and poor working conditions; employment here is never large scale, so asylum seekers are at the mercy of individual employers. There is fairly high unemployment in Ashdod and many asylum seekers stand every morning at a designated street corner waiting to be picked up by people who need day laborers. The lack of secure employment compounds the vulnerability that hangs over the community. One of the impediments to employment, in addition to the lack of jobs, is the lack of work permits. Unlike hotel settings, where large human resource departments have a relationship with PIBA and understand the law, small businesses and single employers have no such mechanism and are often in the dark. A job candidate who cannot present a proper work permit will not be hired.

In Ashdod, there are some fifteen asylum seeker-run small businesses, a very high number, especially in relation to the total number of asylum seekers in the city. They are located in the *Rova Beit* commercial center and include an Internet café, a barbershop (housed inside the internet café), restaurants, bars, and small stores. Local authorities frequently send inspectors in an effort to shut these businesses down, but those that comply with municipal standards remain open. The center in and of itself is home to numerous shops and small cafes and bars, as well as an open-air market. This area, also frequented by local Israeli residents, comprises the social and commercial hub of both the Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seeker community in Ashdod.

In the recent past, one of the main issues cited by asylum seekers in the city was violence and harassment on the part of Israelis against the community. There have been incidents of homes being firebombed, and individuals attacked in the street. Recently the situation has calmed



somewhat and there have been no such reports. One of the Sudanese activists took the initiative of talking to some of the local youth instigating these incidents and the intervention helped. However, there are still reports of fighting between asylum seekers and Israelis. For the most part, asylum seekers in Ashdod live in *Rova Beit* in shared apartments, sometimes 8-10 in two rooms. They also live in areas *Alef, Gimel, Vav, Het, Tet*, and others. Housing, here like every other city in Israel, is a difficult arena for asylum seekers. Landlords take advantage, and there is no one to advocate for the asylum seekers or censure the landlords; the atmosphere of tolerance and harassment contributes to a sense of impunity. There are constant new arrivals in the city, as well as frequent departures.

There are some activists within the community as well as outside it. One Darfuri asylum seeker runs a community center, a branch of a similar center in Tel Aviv, which conducts English classes and hosts other community events. The leadership there has changed frequently as a result of the community's transience, and the center is currently facing a serious budget crisis. There are English classes taught every night, and the new Hebrew class offered by a local volunteer (discussed further below) takes place there.

The Eritrean community has a church, in addition to various other community groups and activities. There is a soccer team that is part of the Eritrean national league and plays matches in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; it does not have a field to host matches, and the team practices in the park. There is a comedy/theater group that practices regularly and performs, but it lacks sufficient technical equipment and finds it difficult to find venues. Recently, when an Israeli volunteer offered a Hebrew class to the community, there were many interested participants but no place to hold the class. Finally, the Darfuri center opened its doors and offered to hold a mixed class; this may be the first such effort in Ashdod. Aside from businesses and private apartments, there are no venues that provide a community space for members of the Eritrean community.

In the past, a small circle of Israelis have been involved with Sudanese asylum seekers (and not Eritreans. Generally speaking, any single person or group of activists is involved with one segment of the community only, often because they do not realize there are differences.) They taught Hebrew, functioned as liaisons and helped with basic necessities. Most of those volunteers have moved away and are not active anymore. One has recently agreed to get involved again – a retired teacher and wonderful educator who is teaching a two-hour weekly Hebrew class for beginners and advanced students for the Sudanese and Eritrean community. In addition, this year Amnesty International ran two Leadership Training Courses for members of the Sudanese community, and participants continue to meet weekly in a guided working group. Aside from Amnesty's presence, there is infrequent contact between the community and the Tel Aviv organizations.

The Ashdod Police have a Community Police station in the *Rova Beit* commercial center; one of its police officers speaks Arabic and is willing to assist asylum seekers. As a result, she has been very helpful resolving individual problems for Sudanese asylum seekers; her connection with the Eritrean community is less strong. The Immigration Police (formerly *Yechidat Oz*) regularly come through the area fingerprinting people, checking visas, and distributing flyers, in English and Arabic, offering repatriation. Asylum seekers in the community report feeling harassed by these visits and question the voluntary nature of those community members who choose to return to Africa.

The municipality in Ashdod is concerned that any cooperation or assistance to this community will draw more asylum seekers to Ashdod, and therefore does not work with the community. Indeed, because there are no school-age children and so few families, the formal obligations and points of contact between local authorities and the community are few. The municipality actively supports the work of PIBA in the area, has increased police presence in *Rova Beit*, and, as mentioned above, frequently sends inspectors to monitor asylum seeker-owned businesses.

## Common Issues

There are a number of issues that are common to asylum seekers in all three cities that bear mention.

### Health Care and Employment

Finding and retaining work, and employment conditions, are some of the topics of greatest concern for asylum seekers in Israel. Absent a social net, they depend on jobs for everything. Combined with cultural and language barriers and lack of familiarity with the basic terms of employment in Israel, this dependency make them a particularly vulnerable population.

Workers in peripheral cities can be divided, broadly speaking, into two categories: those with long-term employment in large, established institutions that employ many asylum seekers, such as the hotel industry in Eilat and the Dead Sea, and those without. For those in areas where employment is mostly found in small and mid-size businesses that employ one or two asylum seekers at most, the risk of violations increases, as does the difficulty in finding a job. The search for steady employment is probably the single largest factor in bringing asylum seekers from the center of the country into small and mid-size cities around Israel such as Arad, Ashdod and Eilat.

To the degree that employment of asylum seekers is institutionalized and routine, instances of violations of workers' rights decrease. Among those employed by the hotel industry, many report that they receive social benefits and salaries in accordance with the law, as well as vacation and breaks. In Arad and Eilat, where most asylum seekers are employed by the hotel industry, reports of poor working conditions and violations of rights are far fewer than average. In Ashdod, on the other hand, where asylum seekers work in small businesses and factories, and where many do not have permanent work and so take "daily jobs," instances of abuse are rife.

The issue of health care for asylum seekers is a complex and difficult one. Because Israeli law only mandates the provision of emergency care for asylum seekers, the community's health care needs are left to the vicissitudes of employers and the resourcefulness of community members. Language, cultural barriers, lack of familiarity with the system, dense bureaucracy, and outright manipulation by employers who promise benefits but do not deliver, combine to make health care one of the foremost challenges asylum seekers face, even for those employed by the hotels. As a result, asylum seekers pay in preventable suffering and illness, and in extreme cases, death, and Israel pays in exorbitant emergency care costs. There is no community surveyed in this report that did not struggle with the issue of health care; its importance and centrality cannot be stressed enough.

### Adult Education

The topic of adult education bears comment, because it reflects one of the basic tensions of life for asylum seekers: with an undetermined status in the country, and limited to work in manual labor, asylum seekers are robbed of their ability to plan for the future and build a better life. The availability, not only of vocational training and language education, but also of university-level studies and continuing education is critical to the health of this community. In each city surveyed, asylum seekers have taken steps to provide continuing education for themselves, whether in language or computer classes or other areas. Still, it is one of the main desires express when asked about their needs: access to adult education.

### Finances and Small Businesses

Money management is a critical topic for all asylum seekers, but particularly for the Eritrean community. Opening a bank account in Israel is usually dependent on two conditions for asylum seekers: production of a valid ID and confirmation of employment. Often, banks require a passport as the ID; visas are insufficient. For members of the Eritrean community, procuring a passport requires payment and registration with the Eritrean consulate, a delicate and political step. Many Eritrean asylum seekers choose to forego this process, thereby leaving them with no means to open a savings account. As a result, hundreds, if not thousands of asylum seekers must keep their money as cash, on their person, or with other community members. They are therefore vulnerable to theft and violence, and an overall feeling of insecurity prevails. The situation is compounded by the fact that most Eritreans live in crowded conditions with many others, often strangers.

In Arad and Eilat, most members of the Sudanese community can and do have bank accounts with Israeli banks. Likewise, asylum seekers from the Sudanese and Eritrean communities can and do send remittances home. While there are no direct channels to Sudan, asylum seekers can send money through South Sudan or other countries.

Asylum seekers who want to open a business must have an Israeli to sign for the license application. Because asylum seekers are usually unfamiliar with regulations and the system of business operation in Israel, their businesses are often closed or cannot open because of non-compliance, even after they have invested significant money.

### Changing Family Relations

Perhaps one of the biggest issues for asylum seekers, outside of the struggle to meet basic needs, is the change wrought in family relations as a result of their move to Israel. There are many components to this move, including cultural dislocation that often involves separation from a network of extended family and support. Here in Israel, numerous changes occur, including women working outside the home and different norms for childrearing and gender relations. These changes can lead to tensions inside the home, between husband and wife and between parents and children. Almost always, the norms and laws of Israeli society are unknown to asylum seekers. As a result, the issue of domestic violence, while no more rampant among asylum seekers than any other community in Israel, has particular contours in this population and requires a particular kind of intervention. Nor are the standard responses of Israeli police and welfare necessarily effective.

### Crime, Alcohol and Drug Abuse

In none of the three cities did police report crime on the part of asylum seekers. They do report "lifestyle" infractions, including noise and public drunkenness. While the extent of drug abuse in the community is hard to ascertain, it seems clear that high levels of alcohol consumption are a norm for certain sub-sections of the community. Unemployment, isolation, rejection by the society at large, limited opportunities for education and advancement and next to no leisure activities all combine to make this community particularly vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse, nor are there resources or services available for prevention and treatment. Asylum seekers from Eritrea in particular point to the risk of drug and alcohol abuse in their community, but it seems clear that the entire community, including youth who are growing up in a society they are simultaneously a part of and excluded by, is at risk.

## Conclusion

While the majority of African asylum seekers in Israel lives in Tel Aviv, the periphery of Israel is also home to sizeable communities. In fact, Eilat is home to the largest concentration of asylum seekers outside of Tel Aviv, and Eilat and Arad both host significant numbers of families with young children. Asylum seekers in the periphery of Israel have limited access to the non-profit organizations that assist their community in the center of the country.

Tensions between asylum seekers and Israelis have ebbed and flowed over the years; currently they are experiencing a resurgence in some localities. The question of diversity outside of the Jewish community is always a delicate one in Israel; the asylum seeker and guest worker communities challenge Israelis to address this sensitive issue. There are few, if any, resources devoted to helping Israelis contend with difference, and xenophobic accusations against “infiltrators” only serve to fan the flames of hatred. Moreover, policies of neglect often result in the very behaviors feared in the “other”; while accusations of high crime rates are unfounded today, at least in peripheral cities, it seems clear that it is only a matter of time until poverty and marginalization take their toll.

In general, the impact of the asylum seeker community on the smaller, more vulnerable municipalities in the periphery is significant. Discussions with municipalities reflect their ambivalent response to the growing numbers. On the one hand, there is a sense of a looming threat, one that must be contained and stemmed. To their minds, services and assistance, even formalized contact, translate as “integration,” and therefore are eschewed. At the same time, while local authorities have limited obligations towards asylum seekers, they must contend with their vulnerabilities; meeting the needs of this community is an additional strain on already taxed resources. Without clear guidelines from the national government, local authorities are, in many important respects, left to decide on their own how to relate to this community. Their decisions are open to censure and potentially precedent setting, thereby making every step fraught and often inhibiting action. Underlying all of this is often a sense of compassion for the plight of this community, and awareness that asylum seekers do not have proper access to services. In answer to these questions, local authorities point to the national government.

In practice, Israel’s policy of deterrence is tantamount to a lack of policy when it comes to the question of services. If Israel’s goal is to contain the number of asylum seekers residing in the country, it fears that providing basic rights to asylum seekers will only attract more. Moreover, rights provision is, in effect, integration, a demographic move Israel cannot condone. However, this position leaves a policy vacuum regarding the 35,000 asylum seekers who have been granted formal permission to reside in the country without concomitant rights. They, and the municipalities where they reside, have been left to meet their respective challenges on their own.