**Forum for Joint Planning**

**An Arab-Jewish Environmental Project in the Central Galilee**

**2020-2022**

**Final Report**

**February 2023**

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7. **Project Background**

**The United States Embassy Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM) Grant Program**

In 2018, the United States Embassy in Israel publicized its CMM grant program to support initiatives for cooperative projects among Jews and Arabs in Israel. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) submitted a project proposal. In 2019, SPNI received confirmation that it had been awarded this grant. Documents were signed by SPNI and the United States Embassy in October 2019. Officially, execution of the project began in early 2020 and ended in September 2022. In light of difficulties in launching and managing the project, as detailed below, the project actually began in October 2020.

**Project Description, as Submitted to the United States** **Embassy**

The establishment of a *Joint* *Arab-Jewish Planning Forum* aims to foster Arab-Jewish cooperation in the Lower Galilee region that will jointly design and tailor solutions to increasing development rates and planning needs of both populations in the region, focusing on open spaces for public use and environmental benefit. The proposed pilot program will engage key Arab and Jewish stakeholders, community representatives, planning and development professionals, municipal and government representatives, together with SPNI and other environmental, advocacy and local NGOs in a joint process that will serve as a model for Jewish and Arab communities and stakeholders to effectively tackle planning and environmental issues and tailor shared solutions from a win-win approach. The 18-month program will advance along three major phases that will include establishing a joint planning forum, conducting joint learning and survey sessions, finally advancing to a more proactive stage. Throughout the process, Arab and Jewish forum members will discuss and draft working papers on central planning issues, taking into account nature preservation considerations, of concern and interest to the Arab and Jewish communities in the Lower Galilee. The working papers will be submitted to relevant agencies and planning committees in order to be adopted and turned into concrete municipal and local development plans that will be implemented over time. If proven successful, the intricate process will lead to a replicable model for Arab-Jewish coalitions that affect development and planning processes and decision-making nationally and in other areas in Israel.

**The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel**

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) is one of the most prominent organizations serving as gatekeepers for protecting the network of open spaces in Israel. It performs this role in various ways. One of these is participating in and following the statutory planning processes in Israel. SPNI represents environmental organizations for many regional and national planning institutions, which gives it “member” status in these institutions. In quite a few cases, SPNI finds itself embroiled in planning conflicts with entrepreneurs and promoters of various development plans. However, SPNI believes that dialogue is the preferred means for promoting nature conservation in Israel.

**Resolution 922: The Israeli Government’s Economic Development Plan for the Arab Sector**

After years of discrimination against the communities in the Arab sector, in 2015 the Israeli government passed Resolution 922, which included various measures to bridge the gaps that have arisen over the years between the Arab and Jewish sectors in Israel. Among other things, this included a series of actions in the field of planning. The objective was to promote approval of plans for the development of settlements in the Arab sector, including outline plans for settlements and detailed plans for neighborhoods. As with any development process, these plans have the potential to damage natural areas. As a result, there is a basis for conflicts between the development needs in the Arab sector and the need to preserve open areas. Additionally, conflicts between the Arab sector settlements and nearby Jewish sector settlements may be expected. Further, the local authorities of the Arab sector have distinctive needs, such as different spatial and planning characteristics and different economic and social needs. This raised complexities that were new to Israel’s planning system and to the entities involved in the planning processes, including SPNI and other nature conservation organizations in Israel.

**Establishment of a Forum for Joint Planning**

Against this background, the idea was born to establish a forum for joint planning in a designated area. Such a forum would discuss planning and environmental issues, with the aim of reducing planning conflicts between entities, institutions, and populations that may arise as part of the planning institutions’ approval procedures for development plans. These conflicts have the potential to escalate and lead to confrontations, which, rather than increasing opportunities and creating value for everyone, delay essential planning and development processes. Such conflicts may be on the Jewish-Arab axis (given the geopolitical and national tensions in the region) or on the development-environment axis.

The Arab-Jewish Environmental Joint Forum for Planning in the Central Galilee is a unique project, which offers a model for ongoing cooperation among multiple stakeholders, to build trust and working relationships that will lay a solid foundation for creating a Jewish-Arab-environmental framework for making agreements, preventing conflicts, and, as necessary, constructively managing and transforming any conflicts that arise in the planning procedures. The rationale for the project stems from the fact that the stakeholders have different needs and interests along these two axes, which sometimes seem irreconcilable and lead to conflicts that are often managed in adversarial and non-constructive ways in the planning institutions’ procedures. Over the years, many such conflicts have emerged regarding developing settlements in the Arab sector, developing settlements in the Jewish sector, and the need for nature conservation. These conflicts have intensified in recent years, in light of accelerated development processes in Israel in general and in the local authorities in the Arab sector in particular. The accelerated scope of development in Arab sector localities requires special attention from nature and environmental conservation organizations, and special tools and processes appropriate to these distinctive cases need to be developed.

The Central Galilee was chosen to be the area for implementing this project, since in this area Arab and Jewish local communities live in close proximity, and it includes a complex and diverse array of open spaces including agriculture, forests, rivers and streams. After selecting this region, the forum’s composition was designed to include representatives from local authorities, government ministries, and stakeholders in the field of environmental planning in this region.

1. **Refining the Project Motivation and Goals**

**2.1. Advancing Implementation of the Project**

***2.1.1. Beginning the Project: Difficulties with Launching the First Project***

In October 2019, an agreement was signed between the United States Embassy and SPNI. Immediately after that, we began preparing for the project, and in particular sought to recruit a planner to lead the project. During January 2020, after advertising the position and interviewing the candidates, we chose a planner, who began working in March 2020.

About two weeks after this planner began working, Israel entered the first lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In mid-April, after consulting with the United States Embassy, we decided to suspend the project, because a significant part of the work involved building trusting relationships, and this proved difficult without the possibility for in-person meetings. Therefore, the planner and SPNI ended the employment agreement.

***2.1.2. Second Effort to Launch the Project***

A few months into the Covid-19 pandemic, we realized that we had to figure out how to work within the existing situation. We adapted the project so that work could be conducted through virtual meetings, as necessary. After receiving the embassy’s consent to the changes, we looked for a planner to coordinate the project. In October 2020, a planner (hereafter, called the project coordinator), Bayan Ali Musa, began her work in this position.

Immediately after starting in this position, the project coordinator held many meetings with SPNI’s project manager, Dror Boymel, in order to understand the project, formulate a work plan, locate interested parties, and to describe in detail the steps to take, processes, and thoughts about the final outcomes, taking into account the project activity period. In addition to the project coordinator and SPNI’s project manager, the core work team was joined by a consultant for building agreements and supporting the process, Dr. Ran Kotner; a project evaluator, Dr. Anat Abrahami; and SPNI members whose activities are relevant and could contribute to the project, such as members of SPNI’s Arab sector department and the nature conservation coordinator for the Northern District.

**2.2. Refining the Project and its Goals**

An initial work plan was developed reflecting the various, complex project goals. The project coordinator worked to define the project based on the proposal approved by the United States Embassy, given changes in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This plan would guide the project throughout most of its activity period. It should be noted that some details of the project have already been changed and updated, because, at its core, this project is based on consultations, in-depth cooperation, and joint development of a working model with the stakeholders, who influence and change the plan as it progresses.

***2.2.1. Major Milestones***

* Mapping of stakeholders, with an inclusive approach
* Mapping relationships, barriers, and planning conflicts in the area (assessment)
* Recruiting stakeholders to be involved with the project
* Selecting approximately three projects with the stakeholders, from a list of possible projects in the region
* Process design, which included:
* Holding plenary sessions
* Holding personal/individual conversations with participants, as needed
* Analyzing issues that arise during the process and proposing courses of action for addressing participants’ decisions
* Establishing dedicated work teams for ongoing work on the selected projects, in between the plenary sessions
* Summarizing the outputs, receiving participant opinions about them, and thinking about what to do next

***2.2.2. Project Goals and Objectives***

*2.2.2.1. Strengthening trusting relationships among stakeholders*

* Deepening the personal and professional acquaintance between all stakeholders
* Forming relationships between forum participants and building trusting relationships
* Creating ongoing frameworks for cooperation and for holding a dialogue about common, legitimate needs and interests
* Building recognition of the importance of joint work in urban, regional, and environmental planning processes

*2.2.2.2. Promoting and building agreements on planning issues*

* Establishing and maintaining a joint planning forum that will meet and enable open discussions around planning issues
* Selecting planning topics for the forum’s intervention, which are priorities for stakeholders
* Defining issues within the selected projects, expressing all forum partners’ needs and challenges, and making agreements about the project issues
* Focusing on tensions and conflicts that arise and managing them in a constructive and productive way

*2.2.2.3. Ongoing commitment to consensus building processes*

* Granting each and every forum member the right to speak and be heard
* Responding to members’ needs and interests
* Granting legitimacy to concerns, difficulties, and challenges that arise
* Building capabilities and creating an activity model that participants can adopt in other frameworks
* Creating small successes to strengthen faith in the process

***2.2.3. The Project Area***

In order to develop a planning forum that is sufficiently intimate to build positive and trusting relations, and with common development and conservation issues, it was decided to focus on a relatively limited geographical space. The selected area is in the Sakhnin Valley. This region has Arab settlements (Sakhnin, Arabe, and Deir Hanna), Jewish settlements (Lotam, Esh’har, Tzviya, Shoval, and Yuvalim) and a variety of open areas (agricultural, forests, nature reserves, and ecological corridors).



**Figure 1: Project Area**

***2.2.4. Compiling a list of stakeholders to participate in the forum***

Given the project goals and objectives, it was decided that the forum participants would include representatives of entities who have an interest in the project area and who are involved in planning processes on multiple levels. This would include local government officials and professional, Arabs and Jews, people involved with development and with conservation, and members of civil society. At the core of this inclusive approach is the assumption that representatives of all the relevant stakeholders identified in the mapping process will take part and be partners throughout the process.

The list of interested entities selected at the beginning of the project were: the local authorities of Sakhnin, Arabe, Deir Hanna, and the Misgav regional council, the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association, the Western Galilee Drainage Authority, the Planning Administration, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Ministry of Construction and Housing, the Nature and Parks Authority, SPNI (as the project leader), KKL-JNF, and the nonprofit organizations Sikkuy-Aufoq for a Shared and Equal Society, the Arab Center for Alternative Planning, Injaz, and Al Amal. From the beginning of the process, it emerged that the Western Galilee Drainage Authority and the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association would be key partners in the forum, with strong commitment to the success of the process.

1. **Project Implementation**

After the process of initiating and refining the project, the main implementation process began. The core implementation process can be divided into several parts. They are not equal in scope, but are all necessary to bring the project to completion. These are not chronological stages, but rather aspects of the project lasting from its start to finish (with the exception of the extension period for the project execution, which will be presented separately).

* 1. **Recruiting Stakeholders**

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel is a nonprofit association, without any political powers. In light of the project’s nature, participation is completely voluntary. Therefore, a process was needed to recruit the stakeholders to the project and build initial trust in the proposed process. From the outset, we had to present the project’s goals and its importance to the various stakeholders, and explain how the project can support the interests of each individual stakeholder as well as, in a systemic way, support the interests of the entire region.

Recruiting the stakeholders required significant time and was done through multiple efforts, including emails, phone calls, and in-person meetings. Recruiting stakeholders and building their trust continued during the first plenary session, during which questions about the project were raised, expectations were coordinated, and needs identified. A primary part of the recruitment process involved trying to convince them that the model of a joint forum could be a positive basis for promoting consensual and joint planning in the area. Initially, the project was defined broadly as the establishment of a joint Arab-Jewish environmental planning forum in the Central Galilee, the goals of which are to reduce conflicts regarding planning in the region, and to propose a model for building consensus around planning issues. At this stage, it was not yet known to any of the partners, including the SPNI team leading the project, what specific issues the forum would address.

Although it may seem that recruiting stakeholders was an early stage of the project, it should be noted that efforts in this area continued throughout the process, from the application for the grant to the final plenary session, in order to consolidate and maintain the motivation for stakeholders to work cooperatively. This collaborative work required the investment of significant resources of time and energy from the forum members, many of whom are extremely busy with their daily tasks.

**3.2 Identifying and Defining Potential Arenas for the Forum’s Intervention**

In preparation for the first meeting and to identify potential arenas for the forum’s intervention, a review of the current situation in the Central Galilee region was prepared, including existing plans for the area, and limitations and constraints. Meetings and personal conversations were held with forum members before the first plenary session, to identify potential arenas that could be suitable for the forum.

After the first forum meeting, we continued to delineate potential intervention arenas relevant to the forum. The intervention sites identified must be important at the regional level and significant to the local authorities who administer the area. At this stage, the arenas for intervention that were identified were: planning for the upper basin of Nahal Hilazon (a river in the Galilee), a plan for walking and bicycle paths that cross municipal boundaries, and planning the development of Mount Marsan. It should be emphasized that project identification and selection were done together with the forum participants, during group meetings and personal conversations.

* 1. **Forum Plenary Session and Summary of its Activity**

The forum plenary sessions, held once every few months, are the core of the project’s activity, alongside individual work with the participants between meetings. The plenary framework consisted of representatives of the interested stakeholders. On principle, it included a wide range of participants in terms of the entities they represent (those interested in development or nature preservation) and nationality (Jewish/Arab).

Before each plenary session, the project manager, project coordinator, and agreement-building consultant held preparatory meetings to plan the session, define its goals and objectives, and identify expected challenges and opportunities. Also, in preparation for the plenary sessions, meetings and conversations were held with many of the forum participants in order to coordinate expectations.

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the ability to carry out these meetings. The first meeting was held on Zoom, and although was successful, if it had been held face-to-face the results could have been significantly different. The second meeting was held face-to-face, but it was possible to feel tension and discomfort due to the pandemic, and there were still many restrictions on group meetings. Subsequently, the restrictions became less strict and it was easier to hold in-person meetings.

• **The first plenary session of the forum 17.3.21 [via Zoom]**

The first meeting had two main goals. The first was to present the project and its goals to all forum members. The second was for the forum members to become acquainted with each other by offering a first opportunity to bring them together and providing a platform for open dialogue. In this plenary session, there was an emphasis on deepening personal and organizational acquaintance, and allowing each and every forum member to express their needs and interests, to listen to those of the other participants. This was done in small groups, with professional guidance, to enable discussion and listening, along with an open discussion with the full plenary group. In addition, we began the process of coordinating expectations between the project leadership team and the interested participating entities.

The Chairman of the Northern District Committee for Planning and Construction, Uri Ilan, honored us with his presence. He spoke about the processes for building planning agreements, and emphasized that this requires an ongoing investment of time, and is not a one-time effort. In all the group discussions, there was consensus regarding the forum’s importance as a platform for discussing the various complex issues, without being limited by municipal boundaries (among other things). The forum’s potential lies in the fact that it offers a comprehensive and broad look at various systems, such as transportation, industrial/commercial zones, natural resources, and more. The meeting ended with all forum members expressing optimism about the process and the project.

Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, role\_ and Mr. Omar Bentzioni from the United States Embassy also honored us with their presence for the forum’s celebratory first meeting.

• **The second plenary session of the forum, 28.4.21 [in person, at the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association office in Sakhnin]:**

The second plenary session had three main goals: compiling a list of potential areas for intervention regarding which the forum members want to make agreements; division into work teams; and formulating work procedures for the teams. These goals were derived from the project work plan. After the plan was presented to the forum members, they expressed some reservations regarding the intensity of the meetings, which may not be compatible with their busy schedules. Additionally, the forum members indicated they were ready for more advanced discussions on the issues and to arrive at agreed-upon principles. They requested that the forum work to promote activities that will have results on the ground.

Therefore, it was decided to focus on a project along Nahal Hilazon in the Sakhnin Valley. The forum members worked together to formulate a broad and inclusive vision for making the stream usable and accessible to people along its entire length, with trails for walking and bicycling, benches and seating areas, lit with solar lighting. These facilities should connect Nahal Hilazon and its tributaries to the settlements in the area, while preserving its ecological functions and scenic aesthetics.

At this second meeting, the possibility of submitting a joint application to the Open Spaces Protection Fund was raised. This opportunity already received the support of all forum members. Prior to this meeting, it had seemed extremely ambitious to achieve such a goal within the project’s schedule.

• **Building a cooperative model for submitting a grant application to the Open Spaces Protection Fund for a planning project in the Nahal Hilazon area:**

After the this second highly successful and optimistic plenary session, SPNI convened a meeting to create a partnership with the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Associationand the Western Galilee Drainage and Streams Authority to advance the Nahal Hilazon planning project. This involved establishing a steering committee to work on an application to the Open Spaces Protection Fund and to clarify the submission requirements and procedures. In this meeting, it was decided that the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Associationwould be the signatory for the application to the Fund, and will manage the planning process in the future, if funding is received for the project. It was also decided that the budget for a planning company to prepare the application will be provided in partnership by SPNI and the Western Galilee Drainage and Streams Authority, and that the contract with the planning company for submitting the application will be through the Drainage Authority. The forum as a whole would oversee preparation of the application to the Open Spaces Protection Fund, and it must be approved by all forum members, so that they will be able to officially give it their support. During this time, there were many meetings to formulate the plan to be submitted in response to the Open Spaces Protection Fund’s call for proposals.

Following the previous meetings and the mapping of needs that was conducted at the beginning of the project, the forum members’ needs were consolidated and transmitted to the planning company for use in preparing documents for the grant application. The planning company prepared the application documents based on the forum members’ comments and requests, with close support and supervision from SPNI’s project management team, the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association,and the Western Galilee Drainage and Streams Authority. The application documents were submitted to the Open Spaces Protection Fund in October 2021.

**• The third plenary session of the forum, 22.8.21 - Nahal Hilazon [in person, at the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association office, in Sakhnin]:**

This plenary session was dedicated to working on preparing the documents for the application to the Open Spaces Protection Fund to receive funding for the Nahal Hilazon planning process. The planning company that was preparing the application documents presented the initial principles to be included in the application. The goal of this plenary session was to consolidate participants’ responses, needs, and concerns, in order to incorporate them into the application documents.

Their responses can be divided into two categories. The first concerns technical issues that could be incorporated into the application documents immediately. The second category includes issues related to details of the planning for which a specific solution or alternative could not be formulated within these application documents, and which could be incorporated only as general guiding principles for the planning. For example, the interface between Nahal Hilazon and the route of the Highway 805 Sakhnin bypass road is highly important to both the Sakhnin local council and the Misgav regional council. This issue was raised and incorporated into the application documents, but without specific details for the river-road interface. It was emphasized that the Sakhnin local council opposes expansion of the road , because it would pose great difficulties to private landowners. Other issues that were raised include how to connect the various settlements in the area to Nahal Hilazon; limiting development in order to protect natural areas; creating connections between Jews and Arabs in the Nahal Hilazon area; and ensuring a contiguous ecological corridor along the river, and more.

The specific issues related to the plan that were raised in this meeting were summarized into a list to be discussed in greater depth later. It was explained to the forum members that this was a request for funding for the planning process, and not the planning process itself, and therefore would include guiding principles for planning, which had been cooperatively formulated by the forum members in previous meetings.

**• The fourth plenary session of the forum, 13.10.21 - Nahal Hilazon [in person, at the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association office in Sakhnin]:**

The objectives of this plenary session were to discuss potentially conflictual issues in the planning for Nahal Hilazon, and to organize a tour of the Nahal Hilazon area. Prior to the meeting, conflicts in the area were mapped, and a strategy was formulated for a holding a constructive discussion about them.

During the plenary session, there was discussion about issues such as development of the river, including the level of development along its course, and which areas will be preserved and which areas will be developed. Other issues raised in the discussion include: interfaces between and connections to centers of interest in the settlements, ecological restoration, drainage, the Highway 805 bypass road, private lands, and ongoing maintenance and management of the area.

**• Finalizing the tour route and issues to be discussed in the field:**

Since the engineers employed by the local authorities are the ones who deal with current problems in the field, the tour was organized to include them, along with representatives of the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Associationand the Drainage Authority. The tour was designed to address the planning issues raised in the fourth plenary session.

• **The fifth plenary session of the forum, 23.11.2021: Tour of the Nahal Hilazon Upper Basin area:**

The fifth meeting took the form of a field trip along the length of Nahal Hilazon. The goals were to provide an opportunity for forum members to become more intimately familiar with the area, and for them to review and openly discuss various issues relevant to the area. On this tour, we visited places where the river and its tributaries intersect with the proposed highway route, two points where it may be possible to establish runoff management ponds, and the Deir Hana Lake. There are disagreements between the Deir Hana local council and the Nature and Parks Authority on issues related to the management, maintenance, and official designation of Deir Hanna Lake.

**• Preparation for the concluding plenary session for the 2021 activity year:**

During this time, we prepared for the end of the project being supported by the United States Embassy, and planned a concluding plenary accordingly. At this stage, we did not yet know that the project would be extended or that we would receive a grant from the Open Spaces Protection Fund. Preparations for the plenary session were based on the need to summarize the activity of the forum to this point, and to examine options continuing the forum.

**• The sixth and concluding plenary session of the forum, 15.12.21 [in person, at the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association office in Sakhnin]**

This plenary session had two main goals. The first was to summarize the project’s activity during the previous year and the forum’s outputs. This included both the content level (i.e., preparing documents to apply for funding for the Nahal Hilazon planning project) and the process level (i.e., building trust and capabilities for ongoing cooperation). The second goal was examining possibilities for the forum to continue its activity.

As part of supporting the ethos underlying this partnership, we invited a guest lecturer, Eran Ettinger, **Deputy Director of Environmental Resources at the Ministry of Agriculture**. He gave a lecture on Participatory Basin Management, a cooperative work model developed at the Ministry of Agriculture. This concept gave inspiration and support to the forum’s work.

Next, there was a panel discussion with heads of the local authorities and directors and executive managers from various relevant entities. The panel included the mayor of Arabe, the deputy head of the Misgav regional council, the chief executive officer of the Western Galilee Drainage and Rivers Authority, and the acting CEO of the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association. The goal of this panel was to highlight the forum’s achievements and to emphasize that they could not have been realized without collaborative effort.

Following the panel, there was a conversation with the Deputy Cultural Attaché of the United States Embassy about the embassy’s activities in various fields. The final part of the plenary session was a discussion among the forum members regarding the question: “How do we continue from here?” Suggestions were collected from participants.

Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr. Omar Bentzioni from the United States Embassy in Israel honored us with their presence at the forum’s concluding meeting (as we perceived it at the time), within the support of the United States Embassy.

**3.4. Activity towards the (temporary) conclusion of the project**

After the plenary session in December 2021, we held personal meetings with the stakeholders. We asked them to analyze their experience with the project and the process they underwent, express their opinions about the forum sessions, make suggestions for improvement, note which aspects they would preserve, and ask questions regarding the future of the forum. These discussions were held in preparation for the end of the project activity that was supported by the United States Embassy. This was before we had received approval to extend the activity. During this time, we prepared for passing the baton for leading the forum activity to the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association.

**3.5 Activity During the Project Extension Period**

At the end of March 2022, we received permission from the United States Embassy to extend the project activity. After receiving this approval, we updated the work plan, and prepared to resume activity accordingly. At this time, we felt that there was a strong chance that we would receive funding for the Nahal Hilazon planning project from the Open Spaces Protection Fund, and updated the work plan so that the forum’s continued activity would include preparing for the Nahal Hilazon planning project.

* Personal discussions were held (in person or via Zoom) with all stakeholders in order to renew the relationship and update them about the status of the project and the status of the application to the Open Spaces Protection Fund, and to coordinate expectations for continued activity.
* In June 2022, confirmation was received from the Open Spaces Protection Fund that the application for the Nahal Hilazon planning project that had been submitted by the forum members would be fully funded. The project team signed contracts with the Open Spaces Protection Fund, and held working meetings with the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association to specify the conditions of work on the project.
* Together with the forum partners and stakeholders, key issues to be developed in the context of the Nahal Hilazon planning project were formulated.
* Towards the end of the project, the leadership baton was passed to the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association. Given the ambiguity regarding the model for partnership between SPNI and the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association, we held meetings to formulate SPNI’s exit strategy, and to prepare the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association for the period after SPNI’s involvement in the project ended and help them take the reins as the entity expected to lead the Nahal Hilazon planning project.
* Given that the project’s agreement-building consultant had been involved in negotiations between the Deir Hanna local council and the Nature and Parks Authority, and assisted in formulating an outline for joint work on the winter ponds, a connection was made between the projects, to help pool resources and leverage the activities in the Nahal Hilazon area. The project coordinator participated in several meetings with the Deir Hanna local council regarding Deir Hanna Lake. At these meetings, principles and guidelines were drawn up for changing the status of Deir Hanna Lake from a designated nature reserve to a winter pond without nature reserve status. Additional meetings on this issue were held with the Western Galilee Drainage and Streams Authority, since Deir Hanna Lake is part of the Nahal Hilazon drainage system.
* A planning and coordination meeting was held with Netivei Israel, the entity in charge of planning the route of the Highway 805 Sakhnin bypass road. During the meeting, we presented the Nahal Hilazon project and its connection with the currently approved highway route.
* Preparation for the final plenary session. This plenary session was expected to be the concluding session for the project supported by the United States Embassy, and the starting point for the Nahal Hilazon planning project. Preparation for the plenary session included, among other things, intensive work sessions with the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association, since they signed the contracts with the Open Spaces Protection Fund and are expected to be the entity leading implementation of the planning project. Therefore, this plenary session was structured in a way that allowed them to take a central role in planning and leading it.

• **The** **seventh and concluding plenary session of the forum - 15.12.21 [in person, at the Beit Netofa Environmental Towns Association office in Sakhnin]:**

The main goal of this session was to announce to the forum members that the grant had been awarded, and to begin the planning and contracting processes with the Open Spaces Protection Fund and the planning company. We were able to conclude the project with a clear output: being granted support, in the amount of NIS 700,000, from the Open Spaces Protection Fund for the Nahal Hilazon planning project.

Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr. Omar Bentzioni from the United States Embassy in Israel honored us with their presence at the forum’s concluding meeting (as we perceived it at the time), within the support of the United States Embassy.

1. **Summary of Forum Activity**

This project can be divided into four parts. In the **first part**, the main tasks were to recruit stakeholders to participate in the project, create an identity for the project, and formulate its goals and objectives. This process was conducted with great sensitivity and attention to the stakeholders and their needs. At the start of the project, individual meetings were held with representatives from each entity, whether it was a local authority, a national government ministry, or other organization. We mapped their needs and concerns, identified common interests and potential areas of agreement, as well as possible conflicts and barriers. This was done using the conflict assessment method as a preliminary step in building agreements (Shmueli et al. 2004; Susskind & Thomas-Larmer 1999). In these meetings, there was discussion about the project goals, and questions regarding needs and interests, while emphasizing commonalities. A central interest for the local authorities is pooling and mobilizing resources. It was important to present the project as a resource that would enable a response to their needs, in order to motivate the local authority (or any other organization) to invest time and effort into making the forum project a success. The first plenary session can be seen as a continuation of the process of recruiting stakeholders for the project.

In the **second part**, the main task was building agreements regarding the specific projects to be carried out. We listened to the participants and made adjustments as needed. As noted, there was a decision to progress quickly on one major activity, the Nahal Hilazon planning project, in an attempt to produce tangible results during the project period.

The **third part** of the project dealt with preparations for the cooperative activity, and submitting the application for funding the Nahal Hilazon planning project in response to the call for proposals from the Open Spaces Protection Fund. This required significant coordination between the participants. Each entity was given an opportunity to clearly voice their needs, interests, barriers, and the challenges they face, so that these could be addressed in the application, as part of the process of building a consensual vision for the project. **The broad agreement that formed the basis for the submitted proposal was of a high enough quality that it was eventually fully financed by the Open Spaces Protection Fund.**

The application submitted to the Open Spaces Protection Fund expressed the legitimate needs and interests that each organization in the forum brought to the table, as Uri Ilan, Chairman of the Northern District Committee for Planning and Construction, beautifully described it in the first plenary session. The Nature and Parks Authority requested including principles of ecological conservation and restoration in the application, and the Ministry of Environmental Protection insisted on integrating principles of environmental protection. The Arab local authorities insisted that a respectable place in the proposal be dedicated to making the project accessible to the residents of their settlements and to connect the river to points of interest, such as parks and recreational areas, that they are promoting. The Misgav regional council requested that the plan limit use of motorized vehicles near the river, and that the plan would allow, not prevent, the completion of Highway 805 bypassing Sakhnin.

The concise description of the various principles and interests expressed by the forum members included in the grant request also indicates many of the conflicts and challenges that arose, including some that almost caused one local authority to withdraw from the project. It should be noted that the engineer of this particular local authority chose not to take an active part in the forum, and another party represented that local authority. It is possible that the non-participation of this engineer diminished this local authority’s sense of partnership in the Nahal Hilazon planning project. It is important to note that the process of selecting a planner to submit the application to the Fund and the discussions to clearly define the proposed activity increased the forum members’ trust in the process and their understanding of why it was worthwhile for them to participate and invest their time.

After submitting the application, we moved on to the **fourth part**. At this point, it was not yet known whether the Nahal Hilazon planning project would receive funding. Given this uncertainty, the forum decided to delve into key issues that they would address during the Nahal Hilazon planning process, and to continue to work on building the forum’s social cohesion.

1. **The Evaluation Report and Lessons Learned**

The project was accompanied by an external evaluation, at the request of the United States Embassy. The evaluation procedure utilized two main research tools. The first was evaluation questionnaires filled out by project participants in two rounds: at the first plenary session and at the sixth plenary session (the concluding session, prior to the extension of the project). The second evaluation tool was in-depth interviews conducted with selected participants. Additionally, interviews were conducted with project leaders after the extension period. The main findings of the evaluation report are summarized below.

* **Trusting relationships between participants**: It emerged that the level of agreement among the forum members increased during the project. The creation and strengthening of trusting relationships, along both the Arab-Jewish axis and the development-conservation axis, makes joint work possible.
* **Project impact on participants**. The results of the evaluation questionnaires on this issue are shown in Figure 2. An overwhelming majority agreed that the project led to an improvement in participants’ ability to conduct dialogue and reach solutions. The participants’ level of trust in the project itself increased. There was an increase in the participants’ general willingness for inter-organizational cooperation. Most respondents agreed that the project gave them a better understanding of the other organizations’ needs and they became better acquainted with their partners. Participants agreed that the project enabled them identify common interests with other forum members.

**Figure 2**



Figure 3 shows that a high percentage of the respondents said that the agreements formed during the project were good for their organization; they understand and respect what is important to their partners in the project; and during the work those representing environmental considerations and those representing development considerations came to understand each other better. High, but slightly lower percentages, said they think that the representatives from other organizations participating in the forum understand and respect what is important to their organization.

**Figure 3**



* **Ongoing commitment to consensual planning processes**. There was no apparent change in participants’ understanding of the importance of cooperation. However, a commitment to working in partnership was evident among all the organizations participating in the project.

Below are the main points that came up in the in-depth interviews.

* Interviewees said that the partners came to recognized the forum’s importance in such a way that may lead to collaborations around other processes taking place in the region.
* The interviewees from the Arab sector were asked if they felt that their voice and their interests had been heard in planning processes. They said that the establishment still does not fully understand their needs or the critical land issues and their limited ability to ask for land to use for their public needs, given the characteristics of Arab society.
* There was consensus that there should be an ongoing joint planning forum among all members. However, interviewees made recommendations regarding its activity. For example, some said the forum should focus on practical work on defined projects. Another recommendation was that one entity should be appointed to lead the forum’s continued work, in order to develop systems for the work, coordinate meetings according to tasks, and strengthen the forum.
* The idea was raised that this should be a professional forum, without political status.
* It was noted that the option to have meetings outside the context of a planning committee, in the framework of a roundtable with the forum participants with the goal of coming to agreements, was a precedent for this region.
* Interviewees from various entities participating in the project said that they developed a deeper understanding of issues related to private lands and the inability to use them for public purposes; these are issues unique to the Arab sector.
* The interviewees agreed that there are advantages to the process of dialogue and creating consent in planning processes, such as:
* Stakeholders’ involvement in the projects may reduce objections by planning committees to various planning procedures.
* Barriers can be identified in relatively early stages, enabling appropriate planning that will address everyone’s concerns.
* Creating consent around planning issues allows for an alternate way to advance plans, without the statutory committees that usually cause numerous barriers.

**Conclusions and Recommendations of the Evaluation Report**

* The roundtable format and dialogue to identify common interests yielded positive outcomes, created trust between the partners, created a positive atmosphere and good communication, and deepened the acquaintance between the partners and the understanding of the various organizations’ needs.
* The stakeholders from the Arab sector changed their perception regarding environmental issues in planning; they spoke about addressing issues related to energy policy and environmental preservation, while meeting the public’s recreational needs in open areas.
* There was a change in forum members’ image of SPNI. Additionally, it was possible to see that SPNI developed a deeper understanding of planning issues in the Arab sector. Representatives of the Arab sector local authorities expressed hope that the change in SPNI’s approach would lead to a similar change among other environmental organizations. As a result of this project, SPNI has established a knowledge infrastructure that will hopefully assist them in negotiations and building agreements in other processes in which it is involved.
* The interviews indicate that in order for environmental organizations to consider various issues, there is a need for an in-depth political process that includes discussions between representatives from local and national government entities and environmental organizations to address people’s needs and land issues. This includes promoting environmental issues and management of open spaces within and between Arab sector local authorities, and between Arab and Jewish local authorities. The current feeling is that this space has been abandoned, and things end at the “blue line” inside the construction zones.
* Regarding the forum’s continuity, a leader should be appointed, and the forum should be involved with specific, practical activities that will create a model of small but tangible successes. The relationship between the partners should be strengthened through publications and updates via email and WhatsApp groups in order to maintain a strong and ongoing relationship between the forum members.
1. **Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations for Continued Activity**

At the beginning of the project, the main goals were: to strengthen trusting relationships; to develop and promote agreements; to establish an ongoing commitment to planning processes based on agreement; and to design a specific project based on the principle of cooperation among participants in the planning process, through discussions about their needs, interests, and barriers. This required agility and adaptation on our behalf along the way. We adapted the work plan and the meetings to accommodate the vision and needs expressed by the stakeholders in the forum, particularly their common desire and commitment to move swiftly towards activity on the ground. Many of the participants made it clear to us that in order for the project to succeed and to develop their motivation and trust in the collaborative approach that we sought to implement, there was a need to have a tangible result. Without this, it is unlikely that the cooperation would have been achieved.

In light of this, the project took an unexpected turn. Instead of selecting a number of intervention arenas for the forum to address and make agreements about, we focused on intervention arena – planning for the Nahal Hilazon area – and to concentrate our efforts on a tangible result. Therefore, we submitted a funding request, with the support of all forum members, in response to a call for proposals from the Open Spaces Protection Fund, for a planning project in Nahal Hilazon. To everyone’s delight, this was approved near the end of the project’s extension period, fulfilling the desire for groundbreaking and concrete results.

The project achieved its three main goals to varying degrees. **Trusting relationships were strengthened,** as reflected in the submitted application for funding, which included letters of support from all forum members. **Agreements on planning issues were developed and advanced,** as seen in the intensive work among the stakeholders that resulted in the formulation of principles to be included in the funding application. The third goal, to inspire **ongoing commitment and build capacities to design planning processes through agreement**, can be attested to by the almost full attendance of the stakeholders at the final meeting, showing their commitment and trust in the project. It is important to note that it will only be possible to assess success in this goal over time. It is necessary to continue to make determined efforts towards create an integrated entity that will establish this forum as a sustainable planning body in the region.

In addition to being granted funding for the Nahal Hilazon project, the process of mobilizing the stakeholders in the region in an equitable forum, for the purpose of discussing planning conflicts, was an essential aspect of the final output.

* 1. **Challenges During the Project Implementation**
* **Uncertainty at the beginning of the project and during recruitment of stakeholders**. Since this is an unprecedented pilot project, there was great uncertainty in terms of the detailed work plan and how the meetings should be conducted. This uncertainty also stemmed from the desire to leave adequate opportunity to adapt to changes during the process. We needed to have the ability for adaptive change and to demonstrate agility. The participants exhibited uncertainty due to the lack of a clear definition of the project and what added value it offered them.
* **Logistical difficulties**: The project began during the Covid-19 pandemic. The complexities of this time made it necessary to adapt, in particular by holding hybrid (in person and online) meetings in later stages. At the beginning of the project, forum members’ commitment was ambivalent, making it difficult to coordinate meetings and plenary sessions. This impacted the meeting schedules and our ability to advance the project. Over time, members’ commitment increased, as they came to understand the forum’s importance. This was reflected in greater flexibility in coordinating the meetings. As a result, the project progressed at a faster pace.
* **Distrust between local authorities, government ministries, and nature conservation organizations**. In the first plenary session, it was possible to feel the level of mutual distrust between the various government ministries, local authorities, and environmental organizations. For example, at the first meeting when the project was presented, the head of the Misgav regional council expressed disapproval of governmental policies that make it difficult to expand settlements under his authority, while the Arab local councils have greater options to expand and develop in their settlements’ areas. The Arab local authorities perceived the government ministries, and especially the environmental organizations, as valuing the lives of trees and plants over the lives of the residents in their communities. At the same time, the prevailing perception regarding the Arab local councils was that they don’t care about protecting the natural environment. These perceptions present an existing challenge, independent of our project. During the discussions before and during meetings, it was necessary to direct the discourse towards shared interests and a common future, and not to get bogged down by each organization’s established perceptions of the others.
* **Tension between the political and professional realms within the authorities**. The forum included both the political and professional realms. Dealing with those in the professional realm was significantly easier than dealing with those in the political realm. This was not only because of their different content worlds or scheduling difficulties, but also because of the political sensitivities of the heads of local authorities, especially prior to elections. This tension could be felt, for example, when the mayor of Sakhnin arrived at final plenary session and expressed reservations about the planning principles for Nahal Hilazon, even though the entire process had been conducted in cooperation with him and the engineer from the Sakhnin local council, and they mayor had signed the letter of support. The municipal engineer was visibly tense in relation to his words.
* **Cultural change.** The concept of work and the work patterns that this project proposed are not common in the daily work in the world of regional planning. Since the participants are not used to participatory dialogue processes and consensus building in planning processes, this presents challenges for them and makes it difficult to achieve the vision of building a lasting forum.

**6.2. Conclusions and Recommendations**

* **Be attentive to the forum members and project participants**. The success of the project largely depends on them. The project team listened to and included all forum members’ needs, responded to their requests, and changed the work plan. This is essentially what increased their trust in the project team, contributed to a large extent to the project’s success, and eventually led to an outcome that could not have been expected at the beginning of the process.
* **Make it easier for the forum members to participate**. Clearly specify meeting times, minimize the number and length of meetings, offer a combination of in-person and online meetings, and use other methods of communication such as written correspondence, telephone calls, etc.
* **Increase the number field trips.** The tour that took place as part of this project was significantly different from the meetings in a conference room or via Zoom. There was more active participation and a friendly atmosphere, with small talk and chatter that had not been observed in the other meetings. This tour played a major role in increasing trust among participants.
* **Emphasize social cohesion.** At the beginning, because of restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we were unable to have in-person meetings that had been intended, among other things, to create social cohesion among participants. As the project progressed, all the forum members demanded efficiency and focus during the meetings. At the same time, towards the end of the project and in the closing discussions, some forum members said they felt the need for greater social cohesion in the ongoing forum activity.
* **Focus on potential successes, even if small**. Initially, we intended to select three projects, but in in response to the forum members’ requests, we decided to focus efforts on only one project and move towards a tangible result. Choosing to focus solely on this project resulted in a success that could not have been expected. Being granted NIS 700,000 to support the planning project in Nahal Hilazon had far stronger resonance than writing general documents for three potential projects would have had.
* **Appoint a leader.** To ensure sustainability for this type of forum, someone must be available and dedicated to manage it and ensure its ongoing activity. Even planning and holding this limited number of plenary sessions, recruiting the forum members, the regular communication, the preparatory meetings, etc., required a major time investment.
* **Work in a systematic and orderly manner**. Utilize existing methods, processes, and knowledge in the fields of agreement-building, managing integrative discourse, and building sustainable collaborations. In this project, work was based on knowledge and experience that SPNI had accumulated in the processes of building ongoing dialogues and collaborations in other environmental projects. This enabled us to create a safe and enabling space, at least for the duration of this project, which yielded fruitful results.
* **Establish a strong basis for the forum’s sustainability and continuity.** The forum’s achievements do not guarantee its continuity. It is necessary to continue to make an effort to support an entity that will continue to implement cooperative work practices within the framework of the forum, both in implementing the Nahal Hilazon project and by initiating additional projects for the forum. The stakeholders are not used to systematic collaborative work based on agreements with various parties in the region. Given their heavy workload, they tend to focus on their day-to-day tasks. This is not self-evident, and even goes against the usual way of doing things. The goal of institutionalizing and establishing the forum should be at the forefront, so that environmental projects in the shared space of the Sakhnin Valley can be advanced.