**The Meaning Granted to the Aging Phenomena by Heads of Municipalities in Israel**

**Abstract**

The municipality is the government body closest and most accessible to citizens; it is thus expected to provide solutions to changing needs required for quality of life. On a practical level, however, this issue becomes quite complex; inter alia, because in Israel the relationship between central and local government, and between local government and residents, is not clearly defined. Furthermore, the degree of responsibility borne by local government is somewhat unclear, in terms of developing social services in general, and those for the elderly in particular. Despite all of this, there is evidence of creativity in the development of services for the elderly in municipalities, and these reflect both progress in democratic values and realization of rights, as well as local strategic thinking on matters of aging and old age.

The research literature indicates that there exists both theoretical and practical awareness of the significant role that the personal identity of the head of a municipality plays in shaping municipal policy in different contexts such as education or environmental issues. Issues of aging, however, have not been concretely addressed. This important perspective has not yet been studied in the scientific literature—neither in terms of understanding the role of local government versus national government, nor in the context of understanding development of services for the elderly population, nor in the context of gaining a better understanding ageism in its local-political context.

For this reason this study seeks to examine the meaning ascribed to aging by municipality heads, as they personally understand and experience it, addressing in particular how they perceive the consequences of aging and its effect on their communities, and how they understand the specific social policies they have adopted, as part of their responsibility for addressing this phenomenon.

The research is being conducted as a qualitative phenomenological study. The research method was a semi-structured in-depth interview. The data sample included 16 heads of municipalities—15 men and one woman—representing a variety of municipalities: large, medium and small authorities, central and peripheral ones, Jewish, mixed and Druze ones, urban and rural ones. Their age range is wide, spanning from age 40 to nearly 80. Two of them define themselves as religiously observant.

Analysis of the findings gave rise to three central themes:

**The first theme** takes an "upward" look: the attitude of the municipality toward the central authority from two perspectives. The first takes a critical approach toward central government on issues of old age in various contexts, such as lack of planning, turnover, low priority—a focus on weakness. The second takes an approach of the municipalities “self-positioning” relative to the central authority, particularly on issues of old age.

**The second theme** takes a "broad" look: the municipality head’s attitude toward aging from three perspectives. The first—how the head of the municipality personally perceives the concept of aging; the second –the authority's grasp of aging, in terms of the challenge of shaping municipality’s policy on aging; and finally—the personal awareness and understanding of the need to develop policies to specifically address this issue.

The third theme takes a "downward" look; that is, development and planning of services for the aged in the municipalities, in terms of particular services: from the perspective of community, of assisted living and institutions, and of creativity and innovation.

Analysis of these three central themes reflects a complex reality in which municipality heads express a wide variance in their social construction of the meaning of aging, ranging between two polar opposites. In terms local governance, there are municipality heads who demonstrate a high sense of autonomy and maneuverability, while others experience great dependence on central government which prevents their ability to function freely. In terms of ageism, there are municipality heads at one end of the spectrum whose outlooks consists of ageism and stigmatization with regard to disabled elderly people or from a labor force perspective, while at the other end there are those who adopt anti-ageism attitudes and view old age as a period that allows for renewal and creativity, a new and optimistic stage. Finally, in terms of local services, there are heads of municipalities who lack the opportunity for creativity, remaining reliant on existing services, even though these do not truly provide adequate solutions, while on the other end of the spectrum there are municipality heads who are energized, creating innovative services that are more suitable to the elderly, implementing long-term plans that take into account institutional and real-estate factors.

The research findings reinforce and underscore the significance of the personal and subjective aspect of the identity and the attitudes of municipality heads on the social construction of aging and development of services at the municipal level. The findings demonstrate the potential for implementing a system of values and visions at the municipal level that are age-focused, despite the objective pitfalls posed by the very structure of the municipalities and Israeli law. All this, however, hinges upon the social construction of authority and the meaning ascribed to aging by those in charge of the municipality's hierarchy.