

**URSP 3050 SPECIAL TOPICS IN URBAN STUDIES I**

**TAKE BACK THE ECONOMY CASE STUDY REPORT**

**AN ANALYSIS OF KIBBUTZIM BASED ON TAKE BACK THE ECONOMY**

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## INTRODUCTION TO KIBBUTZ

Have you ever dreamed of sharing life together with those with common interests? Do you want to experience a strong sense of collectiveness within a community? If yes, then I believe Kibbutz would be a great place for you!

Kibbutz is a word in Hebrew which means commune in English. It is a self-sufficient community that practice sustainable development and Kibbutz members live and work together. The first Kibbutz was born in 1909 in Palestine and the history can be traced back to the Zionist Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Back in that time, a group young idealistic Jews were eager to move back to Palestine and Kibbutz Movement was started. They admired the concept of communism and would like to realize Marxist principles practically, and hence they formed the first Kibbutz, Kibbutz Degania. Somehow this idea gained much popularity among Jews, the numbers of Kibbutz rose sharply until mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, where at one point it even reached 67000 members<sup>1</sup>. However, there was a serious Kibbutz crisis in the 1980s owing to structural changes within Kibbutzim, in which bankruptcy happened and many of them closed down<sup>2</sup>. Now, there are 270 kibbutzim and the number of members of each Kibbutz ranges from 40 to 1000<sup>3</sup>.

There are three main principles of Kibbutz. First of all, which is also of utmost importance, **all members are equal and deserve the same rights**. This principle applies to every single member of a Kibbutz – it does not matter whether you are the manager of the Kibbutz or a factory worker, everybody is ensured the same rights and the concept of ‘social class’ does not exist in a Kibbutz community. The second principle is that **direct democracy is practiced** within a Kibbutz. Similar to FaSinPat mentioned in Take Back The Economy, all members have equal right to vote and raise their ideas and comments in regular

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<sup>1</sup> Schultz, R. G. (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Schultz, R. G. (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Schultz, R. G. (n.d.).

assemblies. Lastly, yet it is also important, is that **members should believe in cooperatives and are willing to share lives together.**

As briefly aforementioned, we can relate Kibbutz to Take Back The Economy from a number of perspectives. Commoning, Surviving Well as well as Distributing Surplus are the three aspects that have the strongest relation with Kibbutz (**Appendix A**). In the following, I will use my interpretation of the Commons Identi-kit as a basic framework to discuss the community economy of Kibbutz. I will also point out the challenges Kibbutzim are now facing and suggest ways to cope with them by using the example of the ongoing '**communal stream movement**'.

Here, I would like to acknowledge Uncle David, a member of Kibbutz Magen in Gaza Strip and has been living in Kibbutz for over 30 years, for providing a lot of useful and precious information in a one-hour interview during his stay in Hong Kong in late February<sup>4</sup>. I have also obtained many insights from various web-based materials, which has been listed on the reference list.

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<sup>4</sup> (D. K. Morse, personal communications, February 21, 2015)

## UNDERSTANDING KIBBUTZ FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMMONS IDENTI-KIT

In this section, we are to discuss Kibbutz as a **commons** from three aspects – the descriptive elements of a commons, process and outcomes. I have re-grouped and re-arrange the orders of the five elements of Commons Identi-kit as suggested in Take Back The Economy in order to fit my framework better.

### (1) Descriptive Elements – Access, Care and Responsibility

To being with, ‘access’, by definition, is shared and wide within community members. Since Kibbutz is a commune, members have all access and permit to use the common facilities, such as canteen, clinic, library, etc. In fact, apart from offices and neighbors houses, all other facilities are of common use therefore the access inside a Kibbutz is very wide.

‘Care’ can be divided this part into three subcategories. Firstly, it can be interpreted as **members care for each other**. As illustrated by Uncle David, members are willing to help each other. For instance, neighbors are willing to help pick up your children from school if you are busy, they will also help you prepare dinner if you are sick, etc. Secondly, care can also be interpreted as **members care for the Kibbutz**. Examples include members will take care of every facility in the Kibbutz in order to prevent them from damage and broken down, they will also collect their own dishes and wash them and keep the common areas of the Kibbutz as clean as possible. In fact, this has already gone beyond the concept of ‘care’, but they treat it as their responsibility which must be taken. Lastly, members believe **the Kibbutz cares about them**. It shows their confidence to the Kibbutz and this, in fact, is also one of the principles of Kibbutz – members should believe in cooperatives as mentioned in the introduction. They are certain that the Kibbutz will take care of all their daily needs and they do not have to worry about daily living. For instance, it is ensured that they have enough budget to feed themselves and buy clothes, which actually is illustrated in Maslow hierarchy of needs – the Kibbutz helps it members to fulfill their

physiological needs. Moreover, they are ensured with retirement protection as a return of their contribution to the Kibbutz.

Regarding 'responsibility', once a person decides to join a Kibbutz, he or she should bear the responsibilities as a member of the Kibbutz, which is assumed by all the members. For instance, most Kibbutzim have a practice of **position rotation**. This implies every person in the Kibbutz is responsible to take up a position within his or her stay in the commune at least once in order to show their commitment and respect to other members. However, regarding the duration of rotation, every Kibbutz has different rules and it just depends on the agreement among Kibbutz members. In Kibbutz Magen, which is the one where Uncle David lives in, has the practice of rotation every two to five years, depends on the positions. For instance, the position of manager will be rotated every five years, whereas committee members of different sectors, such as cultural committee members and administrative committee members, will be rotated every two years. However, there is a limitation regarding this practice, that is professional positions like doctors and teachers are not suitable for rotation. Hence, position rotation is applicable for most of the members but there are still exceptions.

## (2) Process: Distributing Surplus – Use

When we focus on the 'use' of the Kibbutz, we can relate it to distributing surplus since we would like to understand how does the Kibbutz use and allocate the surplus. But before that, we should first raise one question: where does the surplus come from? According to Uncle David, there are two ways. Firstly, there are incomes generated within the Kibbutz, mostly from the agricultural and industrial sectors. As agricultural products and industrial products produced in the Kibbutz will be sold in markets, the revenue generated will all be kept by the Kibbutz instead of individuals like the workers. Secondly, since thirty percent of Kibbutz members work outside the Kibbutz, the surplus also comes from these members, where they have to hand in all their income generated outside to the Kibbutz. This brings us

back to the use of surplus. Generally speaking, the Kibbutz uses the surplus in two ways – redistribution of surplus to members and investment in community facilities. For the former one, owing to the fact that members do not get paid for working for the Kibbutz, redistribution of surplus is necessary so as to provide each member a certain amount of money for their daily expenses and personal savings. A point to note is that every member will get the same amount of money regardless of their positions in the Kibbutz, this idea follows the first principle of Kibbutz as aforementioned. Only families with children get extra budgets. As for the latter way of using the surplus, it will be used to improve facilities within the Kibbutz, such as import better healthcare technologies in clinics and sprinkler systems in agricultural fields. Therefore in general, the use of surplus is actually a benefit for the members and this will be further elaborated in the following part.

### (3) Outcomes: Surviving Well – Benefit

Benefits of the members are actually outcomes that generate from both their belief to the Kibbutz and the use of the surplus. As mentioned by Uncle David, Kibbutz members enjoy strong sense of self-esteem as well as sense of collectiveness - social segregation and discrimination are not existed due to the first principle of Kibbutz, of which all members in the Kibbutz are treated equally. At the same time, they have a strong sense of belonging to the community and they are proud to be one of the members of the community. In fact, they enjoy a diverse variety of benefits from the Kibbutz, from young to old, for instance free education from kindergarten to secondary school, free healthcare services, stable 'income', provision of housing as well as all kinds of facilities which are good for their wellbeing, retirement protection, and more. In the context of Hong Kong, people always have concerns over accommodation, retirement protection and children's educations, etc., and may find it hard to address these concerns since the price level in Hong Kong is too expensive. This shows a huge contrast when comparing Hong Kong with Kibbutz in Israel. They may not have a large amount of 'budget' for personal

uses, but as Uncle David said, it is enough and sufficient for basic needs and they do not have to concern about what to eat or where to live or worry about the future. This discussion brings us to the topic 'Surviving Well' and it would be nice to take Uncle David as an example in order for us to find out how Kibbutz benefits the quality of lives of its members (**Appendix B**). Here I will refer to the five wellbeing properties as suggested by the book 'Take Back The Economy'.

First of all, from the material aspect, Uncle David found it to be **sufficient** since he can basically buy what he wants and everything he needs. It is mentioned in the interview that he can even buy a car too, which he thinks it is kind of a luxury. Secondly, Uncle David really enjoys what he is doing in terms of occupation. He is now a book-keeper of his Kibbutz, Kibbutz Magen, as well as a choir conductor outside the Kibbutz. In fact, he does not receive any money from conducting choirs, but as this is his interest and passion, he keeps conducting choirs for the past 30 years. On the other hand, in the past, Uncle David was the manager of the Kibbutz for around five years, but owing to the position rotation, which have just been discussed in 'responsibility', he was rotated to be the book-keeper of the Kibbutz. As he loves his occupation, he rates this aspect as **excellent**. As for community aspect, it is worth emphasize that 'people do really care about each other' and 'if there are any troubles or happiness, people really react'. Therefore, Uncle David thinks he can feel the sense of collectivity within his Kibbutz and hence he would rate it as **sufficient**. Fourth of all, physically, owing to the high level of healthcare standards in his Kibbutz, he finds himself **excellent** in terms of physical aspect.

However, there are still limitations when people live in a Kibbutz. For Uncle David, he thinks that his social life can be regarded as **poor**, this is because the community is relatively small for a Kibbutz, and sometimes you find some members are not that interesting, or you have had a quarrel or a fight with some other members, after all the years, you may end up with just a few or even no friends.

## WHAT CHALLENGES ARE KIBBUTZIM FACING AND HOW TO TACKLE THEM?

Generally speaking, the 'Kibbutz Era' may have already been passed and there are doubts on the future of Kibbutzim. In this section, I would like to address the main challenges and changes Kibbutzim are facing now and suggest ways to curb them.

In the interview, Uncle David mentioned policies from the government nowadays are less favorable to the development of Kibbutz, and his idea is also supported by Ami Isseroff<sup>5</sup>. One of the crucial reasons is that less political leaders come from Kibbutzim. In the past, many of the Israel political leaders were raised in Kibbutzim and hence they supported socialist policies and recognized its pivotal role in the society. For example, Kibbutzim provided large supply of manpower to the national army, and some Kibbutzim even served as national defense center<sup>6</sup>. Yet, at present, less political leaders are raised in Kibbutzim and their thinking are more of capitalistic, as a result government policies are less favorable to Kibbutzim, such as granting high interest loans for agricultural development in Kibbutzim. Since agricultural activities are one of the major source of income, this directly leads to financial problems of Kibbutzim and it is hard for them to sustain daily operations<sup>7</sup>.

In order to revive the Kibbutz Movement, I think education is of utmost importance. It is suggested by Uncle David that the idea of Kibbutzim is gaining less and less popularity among the younger generations, where only just a few of them have the passion to continue the Movement. This is due to the fact that the younger generations may appraise individualism and have a relatively weaker support on equality and solidarity<sup>8</sup>. From the results of a questionnaire set by Leviatan<sup>9</sup>, it is shown even the high school students raised in Kibbutzim do not have a full support towards the principles of Kibbutz, which sets the

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<sup>5</sup> A web journalist who is expert in Middle East affairs, especially Jewish and Kibbutz development

<sup>6</sup> Isseroff, A. (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Isseroff, A. (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Abramitzky, R. (n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> Leviatan, U. (2003).

future of Kibbutz Development with a serious doubt. Luckily, some young Kibbutz members have started a movement called '**communal stream movement**' which strives to strengthen communal adherence inside a Kibbutz, given the existing loosened and weakened bonding among Kibbutz members<sup>10</sup>. In fact, this movement is part of the results of education to the young. Through education, these young people learned to appreciate the principles of Kibbutz and are willing to bring this concept to their generations. This movement helps connect young people with Kibbutzim by providing opportunities of personal experience and encourages them to take part in this collective action.

In early days, young people had the common subjectivity to acting together in order to develop a Jewish community, which can be considered as a form of collective action. Yet, young people nowadays are shaped in a totally different context, where an individualized form of subjectivity has been raised and living in a Kibbutz, as a collective action, may be challenged under this circumstance. In my opinion, kibbutzim might offer young people a complete different lifestyle from the Western development model, and this maybe is the element what they lack of, which is collectiveness. Daily living is not just about what a person wants and needs, but is a practice of sharing instead of selfishness, where they have to interact with each other. Hence, living in Kibbutz may offer young people a unique and precious experience that change their entire lives.

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<sup>10</sup> Abramitzky, R. (n.d.).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the elaboration aforementioned, it can be briefly concluded that the practices of Kibbutz are closely related to Take Back The Economy, especially in terms of Commoning, Surviving Well as well as Distributing Surplus. Through explaining the three main principles of Kibbutz – (1) all members are equal and deserve the same rights, (2) the practice of direct democracy and (3) members should believe in cooperatives and are willing to share lives together – by the Commons Identi-kit, it is illustrated that Kibbutz is a sustainable and self-sufficient community and it is also showed that equality and equity are highly emphasized and recognized within the communities.

In the discussion part, I have first described the ‘access’ of a Kibbutz and ‘care’ and ‘responsibility’ of its members. It is followed by the ‘use’, where I interpret it in terms of Distributing Surplus in order to find out how the Kibbutz uses its surplus. Lastly, ‘benefits’ of Kibbutz members are discussed and Uncle David has been used as an example to help illustrate the wellbeing of Kibbutz members. To sum up, Kibbutz is proven to be a commons with diverse benefits that contributes to a more sustainable and equitable lifestyle.

In terms of challenges ahead, one of the major challenges is to prevent the loss of young Kibbutz members and to recruit more members at the same time in order to continue the Kibbutz Movement. I have explained the critical reason which leads to the current situation in the previous section and have pointed out that education is the best way to tackle this challenge. It is believed that educating the younger generations verbally is important, it allows them to understand the importance of equity and solidarity as a community, but educating them practically and let them experience the sense of collectivity, as a collective action, is even more important. For instance, the ‘communal stream movement’ provides chances for the younger generations to have personal experience on the sense of collectivity and hopefully it can once again revive the national Kibbutz Movement. This is one of the

possibilities that young people can explore if they are concerned about current Western development around the world. This movement does not only confine to Jews, but people from all over the world can also participate and even turn the Kibbutz Movement into a global movement.

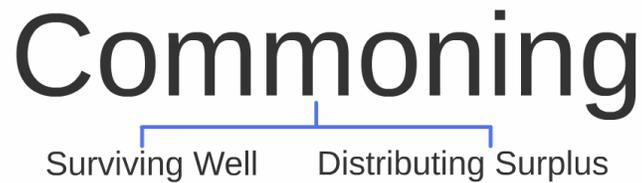
All in all, from this case study, we can see that people are taking back the economy in various ways. Maybe we have no idea on why the Kibbutz members are willing to share probably most of the things, which we may not be likely to share, with one another, but it is proven that these practices are possible and the only thing matters is our willingness to acquire this kind of lifestyle. If we are willing to do so, we can affect people in our social circles and take back the economy collectively.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

I use 'Take Back Property – Commoning' as the main pillar of my case study, and 'Take Back Work – Surviving Well' as well as 'Take Back Business – Distributing Surplus' are the subdivided pillars. The 'Commons Identi-kit' will be used to elaborate my case study and I interpret 'Distributing Surplus' as BENEFIT whereas 'Surviving Well' as USE.

### FRAMEWORK



### APPENDIX B

The following shows Uncle David's wellbeing scorecard, with respect to the five wellbeing properties suggested from Take Back The Economy. The results are summarized from the interview I had with him on late January 2015.

	1 POOR	2 SUFFICIENT	3 EXCELLENT
MATERIAL		✓	
OCCUPATION			✓
SOCIAL	✓		
COMMUNITY		✓	
PHYSICAL			✓

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