

Climatic and Environmental Justice Course

2021–2022



The SFP is committed to education on a wide range of subjects relevant to promoting peace and equality. Growing concern with the environment in light of climate change has sparked interest in the overlap between politics and the environment. Access to natural and industrial resources often exacerbate existing national conflicts, and this is certainly true in the Israeli-Palestinian context.

The field of environmental peacebuilding refers to the practice of ameliorating national tensions by correcting environmentally salient injustices, or cooperating in order to mitigate shared climate concerns. This requires contemporary knowledge of the global climate crisis, and awareness of critical environmental justice theories. The 2021-2022 Climatic and Environmental Justice course set out to provide just that.

In total, 23 participants attended, all of whom were environmentalists, educators, and activists (13 Jews and 10 Palestinians with Israeli citizenship) who took the time to receive the conceptual and practical tools needed to recognize, analyze, and hopefully correct environmental injustice. The hope is that graduates can become effective agents for a more egalitarian, sustainable, and peaceful reality.

The course took place between June 2021 and March 2022. Participants answered a call for applicants, and underwent introductory interviews with the Palestinian and Jewish facilitators of the course: Mr. Harb Amara and Dr. Noa Barkai. Sessions were held either once or twice a month, with most taking place in Wahat al-Salam - Neve Shalom, the unique mixed village in which the SFP resides. But three of the sessions took us on excursions to locations around the country to see real world examples of environmental injustice. The program consisted of three modules: dialogue discussion groups, professional tours and lectures on environmental peacebuilding and justice, and initiative planning and entrepreneurship.

As we have learned, environmental injustice is often implicit and hard to spot, and noticing the links between climate issues and political conflict requires that we adopt a perspective not limited by national boundaries.

The course aimed to provide such a perspective. Luckily, we had Prof. Dan Rabinowitz as academic advisor for the course, whose academic knowledge, practical experience and skill were invaluable. Prof. Rabinowitz is a renowned anthropologist, sociologist, author, and senior lecturer at Tel Aviv University Faculty of Social Sciences. He also acted as chairman of Greenpeace Middle East and North Africa. Together, we learned of the role that Israel plays in the global climate crisis, and the endemic problem of unequal infrastructure between Palestinians and Jews. As one participant said, “The course expanded my understanding of the society in which I live, and the ties between politics and the environment.”

Needless to say, the process of opening our eyes to unsettling political realities is both cognitively and emotionally challenging. The SFP dialogue method focuses on group identity, allowing an encounter between Jewish and Palestinian nationalities, while emphasizing the role of power dynamics and conflict situations in dictating our shared reality. **As Dr. Noa Barkai, a Jewish SFP facilitator, pointed out, participants are asked to “step out of their comfort zones as individuals and assume the role of representing an entire national identity.”** This means being receptive to different perspectives on historical and national narratives that might shed a negative light on a significant part of one’s identity. It means addressing deep-seated grievances and trauma.

To ensure respectful discussion and dialogue, facilitators from both sides were present, and a simultaneous translator allowed for equal representation in bi-national group sessions.

Commenting on the dialogue portion of the course, one participant said that “the dialogue section opened my eyes to the full complexity of the conflict, improving my sensitivity and understanding of the issues.” Another echoed this sentiment, saying that “both bi-national and national dialogues helped me better understand what matters to me, and clearly articulate it to myself and the other side of the conflict as well.” Another participant commented that “the dialogue workshops improved my understanding of my neighbors’ narratives, as well as the different views on “my side” of the conflict.”

True to SFP methodology, understanding was not merely theoretical, but practical. Participants gained firsthand acquaintance with villages affected by environmental injustice, and projects that aim to correct it. This allowed them unfiltered access to divergent and critical opinions that constitute the political reality in Israel and the west bank straight from the source, and a glimpse at the actual challenges Palestinians face when vying for equality. In retrospect, some of the participants and facilitators said that the excursions were a highlight, since they clarified the tangible bite of environmental injustice in Palestinian communities. **One participant said that the excursions also “inspired practical ways to promote environmental justice.”**

The course syllabus, curated by Prof. Rabinowitz, took on an ambitious breadth of topics, all of which salient to the interdisciplinary field of environmental peacebuilding. Lectures and discussions tackled themes as varied as environmental injustice, industrialization and responsibility for carbon emissions, Israel’s post-colonial culture, and the history of the Nakba. An emphasis was set on environmental injustice in present day Israel and potential solutions, but the discussion was couched in a background understanding of the global climate crisis.

Prominent examples of injustice were divergent access to transportation, clean water, sanitation, and energy. As became clear, these are often caused by biased policymaking, which, for Palestinians, aroused feelings of alienation and resentment, and for Jews a sense of disillusionment. But we can happily report that, despite reasonable difficulty, the process resulted in stronger empathy and understanding.

The first meeting (06/11/2021) centered around an introductory lecture by Prof. Dan Rabinowitz on the practical and theoretical aspects of sustainability, climate change, and environmental and climatic injustice. The lecture served to introduce the conceptual framework used throughout the course, and was followed by a multi-faceted bi-national discussion.

The second session (1-3/2/2021) was an immersive weekend workshop that consolidated the group both socially and professionally. Prof. Rabinowitz continued his in-depth introduction to environmental and climatic justice, with a riveting talk about the “post-normal climate situation,” and its expected effects on Israel and the Middle East. On a more clearly political note, Dr. Adel Manna, Palestinian historian of the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, spoke about the Nakba: combining his harrowing personal story with historical record.



Prof. Rabinowitz lecturing on the "post normal climate situation"

In the final part of the workshop, participants experienced the complex and often daunting responsibility of discussing the thorny heart of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict: Israel's national identity, the question of security, and resource management. At the end of a 3-hour discussion, in which participants showed inspiring bravery, accountability, and empathy, we arrived at a partial agreement on some issues, but were also left with many unanswered questions, and unprocessed insights which we would continue to develop throughout the course, and well after it has ended. **For many, this was a humbling experience, in which they were forced to face the difficulty of trying to resolve an ongoing traumatic conflict, with its myriad of perspectives and harsh realities. But it was also the first step towards cooperation.**

The main keynote talk in the third meeting (13/8/2021) was given by city planner and professor of political and urban geography at Ben-Gurion University, Prof. Oren Yiftachel, who discussed the relationships between the state, the real estate market, and the environment. In particular, he showed how a biased regime can produce partial policies that can cynically use the issue of environmental concern as a pretext to curtail Palestinian development. The lecture was followed by both national and bi-national discussions which were challenging, thought provoking, and fruitful. **As Harb Amara, the Palestinian facilitator, pointed out, "laws that supposedly protect the environment are often just means of exercising control over Palestinians."**

The fourth session (13/8/2021) consisted of the first of three planned excursions. A tour was organized by co-founder and general manager of Comet ME, Elad Orian, and deputy manager, Asmahan Simry. Comet Me is a bi-national environmental justice and peacebuilding organization founded in 2009, that is dedicated to providing ecologically and socially sustainable infrastructure solutions for off-grid disenfranchised communities: e.g., solar panels and clean water solutions. Today, Comet Me serves about 10,000 people between Hebron and the Jerusalem area, and were the perfect guides for our tour.

Respecting the Covid restrictions of the time, we left for the village of Jubbet ad-Dhib in the West Bank neighboring Jerusalem. Our local guide was Mrs. Fadiya um-Ibrahim, the leader of an all women association founded in the village. **She and her two sons graciously invited us into their home, and she told us the story of her village: a gut-wrenching tale of infrastructure poverty, obtuse local authorities, and the destabilizing effects of Jewish settlement strongholds continually encroaching on nearby lands.** It was both inspiring and moving to hear her speak with glazed eyes and a dash of humor about how the men of her village failed for decades to secure essential amenities: such electrical or water systems and paved roads. **About 8 years ago, a group of women began to participate in the village forum, and with the assistance of several NGOs, they founded a women's association dedicated to convincing Israeli authorities to take their plight seriously.** Slowly but surely, the village began to transform, and welfare began to improve.

The day continued with an astounding demonstration of the electrical system built and maintained by Comet ME, that serves the 200 residents of the village. After a delicious lunch prepared by our generous host, Mrs. un-Ibrahim, we managed to squeeze in a visit to another environmental project in its infancy, led by one of the Palestinian participants in the course, Leon Mizawe. He and his partners are in the process of founding an urban hydroponic agriculture project that is impressive both in concept and execution.

The tour left participants and facilitators alike with a renewed sense of hope in changing reality, and a concrete vision of effective environmental activism. We learned much about the practice of environmental initiatives, and received a first-hand account of the challenges that plague Palestinians who live beyond the “green line” under Israeli occupation.

The fifth session (10/9/2021) brought us back to Wahat al Salam-Neve Shalom. We started by allowing participants to air out their impressions of the previous tour. Participants had so much to express that we unfortunately had to cut the discussion short to avoid delays. **We proceeded to hear a third lecture by Prof. Dan Rabinowitz on climatic inequality, immigration, and conflicts in the Middle East.** The lecture presented new, and somewhat alarming, perspectives on existing conflicts, and introduced ones that are likely to erupt due to impending resource scarcity. **The climate disaster is threatening to escalate conflicts, further blurring the lines between climatic concerns and political agendas.**

The lecture was followed by an entrepreneurship workshop guided by Ms. Shahira Shalaby. In it, we began to examine participants' interests in terms of activism. At the end of a dynamic workshop, participants were asked to reflect on whether they prefer to start their own initiatives, or join existing ones. The idea was that being honest with oneself and others about the role we desire to take as activists - assuming they are all valuable - makes cooperation easier and more natural, facilitating collaboration on a basis of shared interests, and availability. We parted ways excited to see what might bloom of the seeds of activism we sowed that day.

The sixth session (15/10/2021) brought us back to something of a macro perspective on climate change. Dr. Orly Ronen of the environmental department at Tel Aviv University gave a talk on carbon footprint and sustainable cities, citing examples of what it would take to function sustainably. The talk was followed by national and bi-national forums, in which participants responded, asked questions, and debated the delicate balance between tackling climate change and mitigating energy poverty.

The seventh session (29/10/2021) saw the second excursion of the course. This time, we drove south into the Negev to receive tours of two relevant environmental projects. Our first stop was the Wadi Atir project: a sustainable farm that combines the traditions of the Bedouin people with contemporary agricultural techniques. **Our guide was project director, Mrs. Lina Alatauna: a strong and confident woman who spearheads an exceptional organization, in both local and global standards.** The scale and quality of the project were remarkable, including herbal and traditional medicinal plant departments that employ the most rigorous standards, and are pesticide free. The plants are then dried on-site, and used to make various teas and soaps. The project also satisfies the social function of providing employment and structure for many of the area's teenagers and women.

After the tour, we met PhD applicant Haneen Shibli, who talked about energy poverty, and the negative impact that energy inequality has on the unacknowledged villages in the area, such as weakening communal fortitude and endangering public health. The lecture gave participants much food for thought, and added to our understanding of the harm of energy poverty. It ended with a deep bi-national discussion on the ways the conflict curtails resource fairness, and a Q&A with Shalbi.

After a lunch break of local delicacies prepared by Wadi Atir's cooks, and an opportunity to shop for local produce, we went to visit Mr. Ali abu-Shkheita of the El-Karian village, neighboring Wadi-Atir and the town of Hura. Mr. abu-Shkheita hosted us in his humble shack, and told us his personal story as a resident of a village that has not been acknowledged by the state of Israel for the past 70 years. It was a story of frustratingly long battles with the state, local authorities, and other organizations. Surprisingly, he recounted it with humor, optimism, and hope.

El-Karian's story showcased the opacity of the governmental system, suggesting that its policies lack any intention of finding worthy and humane solutions for ending the conflict. Mr. abu-Shkheita's account of his people's difficulties in secure access to the most basic services left us enthralled and aghast for the better part of an hour and a half. **We were left speechless and grateful that people like Ali abu-Shkheita exist, who refuse to succumb to injustice, and fight for their right for land and home.**

The keynote talk for the eighth session (12/11/2021) was another lecture by Prof. Dan Rabinowitz about transportation as an instance of environmental and climatic injustice in Israel. The talk showed disparities in access



Mr. Ali abu-Shkheita telling his personal story

to transportation and road infrastructure across national lines, and explored the ways it deepens conflictual sentiments and alienation.

The talk was followed by both national and bi-national discussion groups, which roused stimulating discussions that challenged participants to find ways to mitigate injustice, and process the ambivalence that follows a better understanding of it.

For the ninth session (26/11/2021), we invited another guest speaker to What al Salam-Neve Shalom, Prof. Amal Jamal of the social sciences department at Tel Aviv University, who gave a haunting talk on post-colonialism and the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. **The image of Israel as a post-colonial culture touches on the most painful points which we at the SFP believe need addressing for meaningful change to flourish.** The lecture was followed by both national and bi-national discussion groups, in which participants could share their feelings, thoughts, reservations, and disagreements. Both Jewish and Palestinian groups were challenged to deal with their roles as oppressors and oppressed respectively, and address their own and one another's views.

The tenth and penultimate session (10/12/2021) consisted of a tour of water treatment facilities catering to Palestinian communities in the north of Israel, as well as the political complexities of the area. At the first stop, we met Mr. Liti Ganaim, an engineer and environmental advisor for the Al-Batuf regional council. Ganaim gave us a stimulating tour of al-Battauf region, explained the complicated regional land divisions between the Israeli government and Palestinian families, and the importance of the National Carrier of Israel that crosses the valley. **He told us of the challenges that Palestinian farmers meet throughout the year - flooding in the winter and draughts in the summer - and the obstacles the Israeli authorities set at the feet of Palestinian entrepreneurs who try to promote collaborative initiatives for a more fair distribution of resources and services.** The result, he says, is a general feeling of despair caused by living under a seemingly hopeless situation. Ganaim's account permeated us with frustration at seeing the well-intending actions of good people falling on the deaf ears of a system indifferent to non-Jewish citizens asking for a better quality of life.



Mr. Liti Ganaim, speaking to the group at a viewpoint overlooking the Al-Batuf region



Then, we traveled roughly 30 minutes to the Sde Ilan water waste treatment plant, to visit the Lower Galilee water management corporation, dedicated to bringing clean water to any town, plant, or municipality in the area struggling with maintaining health standards. There, we met the entire management team of the sewage treatment facility, who came in on their day off to show us around. Both Mr. Salah Nassar, corporation director, and Mr. Shadi Khuri, head engineer, were present. They told us about the facility's activity and its positive effects, as well as the story of how Mr. Nassar lifted the facility out of the financial destitution and impending bankruptcy left by his predecessor, and introduced stringent and rigorous quality control standards that made the facility a top-tier establishment. They also told us of the constant challenges they face from the state of Israel, such as the almost impossible task of warding off pollution from military bases that funnel their waste into the facility, and the costly process of mapping the sources of the water. **Mr. Nassar showed an air of positivity despite the obstacles, which lent us hope that collaborative projects can thrive and benefit real people in spite of hardship. His underlying message was that Palestinians and Jews must find a way to work together - there is no alternative.**

After the tour, the staff joined us for lunch at the Kfar Kana branch of the Café Greg restaurant chain, where we were received with a terrific meal that gave us the energy to continue our discussions over food. The tour left us full of insights and gratitude for the privilege of gaining a more intimate understanding of these extraordinary stories of both resource injustice and social collaboration for a brighter future.

The final summation session spanned over two days (18-19/3/22). Due to Covid restrictions, it has been a month since our final excursion. After initial greetings, we convened for Prof. Rabinowitz's final talk on the Middle East and its potential to mitigate the climate crisis. As usual, the talk was engaging and the discussion was fruitful. After a short break, we continued with an environmental and climatic activism panel, discussing the characteristic struggles that face projects in Israel and abroad. After the panel, we followed-up on participants' initiatives and projects with Ms. Shahira Shalaby.

The hydroponic agricultural school project in Bu'eine Nujeidat

The next morning was dedicated to a heartwarming graduation ceremony in which we handed out certificates to participants. Those who already had a concept or active initiative took turns presenting it to the group, providing a sense of satisfaction that the course managed to produce new collaborations, and bolster existing ones.

Future projects included a program for shared field trips for Jewish and Palestinian schools to locations that demonstrate environmental injustice in the north of Israel; a herder task force dedicated to preserving and protecting the natural ecology and forests; and a plan to build a park to serve the Bedouin communities in the south.

Exiting projects led by group members included a hydroponic agricultural project run by Nidal Ali Nasser, dedicated to teaching Palestinian school children (currently in Shfar'am and Bu'eine Nujeidat) how to transform plastics and construction by-products into gardening beds. Another noteworthy project is Gal Curtis Harduf's "Mahapach": a project that assigns volunteers to natural sites that need regular cleaning and upkeep.

Finally, we engaged in a closing bi-national discussion meant to allow participants to air out their thoughts and feelings on the course in an open forum. Comments were thoughtful, appreciative, and will certainly be applied in following courses. After saying our farewells, we parted ways more informed, capable, and enthused environmental and political activists, eager to promote climatic and environmental justice. **One participant summarized their experience thusly: "Personally, I feel that the course has expanded my knowledge of the society in which I live, and the ties between politics and the environment. Professionally, I have made many contacts for potential collaboration."**

Throughout the course, we felt the frustration that comes with tackling two difficult and seemingly insoluble issues simultaneously, but were happy to learn that if we adopt the lens of social justice and equality, environmental peacebuilding can provide a foundation for meaningful cooperation. It emerged that this requires that we address the disproportionate harm caused to the Palestinian minority, caught between civil inequality, institutional discrimination and the global climate crisis, as well as discrepancies in access to means of environmental activism (leisure and institutional collaboration), which Jewish privilege renders more available to the majority. However, as we have seen, significant Palestinian environmental activism certainly exists in spite of these challenges.

The sparks of meaningful activism - whether collaborative or regional - garner hope for future alliances that will overcome barriers between national groups, and promote a better, shared reality. The process is certainly slow and winding, and takes place in a harsh environment - but there are no shortcuts in the road towards a better future. We must continue to gather partners who want to transform our society into one that is more just, egalitarian, and respectful of its environment and the people within it.

We are confident that the unique deep dialogue capabilities of the SFP can foster the trust needed for significant environmental collaborations that will develop the field of environmental peacebuilding as a whole, and change our reality for the better.



Neve Shalom -Wahat al Salam