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## **The NGOs are collapsing: “A national disaster is at our doorstep.”**

No one will be able to fill this void: More than 3000 NGOs have halted their operations, others are on the verge of collapsing, but more people need them than ever. The Coronavirus crisis is threatening to shatter the voluntary sector while the government is in deep denial.

Written by Tse'ela Kotler Hadari

At-risk youth, who are supported by ELEM, are at a greater risk than ever before these days. Some of them spend the night on the beach, others seek refuge at random makeshift dens, avoiding quarantine. With boarding schools and other institutions currently shut down due to the Coronavirus, these youths find themselves in a clear and immediate danger. “We see more roaming the streets, we see an increase in sexual violence. We meet way more extreme cases in the field than we do during normal times. There’s an escalation,” says ELEM’s CEO, Inbal Dor Kerbel. “These teens were put under immense pressure when the isolation instructions were declared, the feeling of rejection is getting stronger and with that, so do the suicidal thoughts.”

According to the data ELEM has, 2000 of these youth (ages 18-21) will be left homeless in a few weeks time. Their random, occasional jobs are now shut down, and they’re left with no money to pay rent. “Who’s going to be there and provide for them?” Dor Kerbel asks, but she knows the answer. The voluntary sector organizations that, to this point, were there to fill the void left by the government, are on the verge of collapsing due to the Corona crisis. All at once, the virus gave the already shaky sector a major blow.

“We were supposed to launch a big donations campaign after Passover, but the market is collapsing and we had to cancel it,” Dor Kerbel notes. “The public is pre-occupied with survival, and businesses who usually match donations to our government sponsored programs can’t help right now, either. We’re estimating a 50% decrease in income in the next three months compared to last year, and that’s during a period when we have more at-risk demographics that need us. We put many workers on unpaid leave, and took salary cuts, but it’s just not enough.”

ELEM is one disheartening example among many. Israel had 13,000 active NGOs. According to Civilian Leadership, Israel's voluntary sector umbrella organization, 50% of Israel's NGOs limited their operations and put thousands of workers on unpaid leave. 25% have ceased operations altogether. The numbers are just as scary with 3000 NGOs currently inactive, in the midst of a major crisis no less, and if things go on as is, there's a real concern that these NGOs will remain permanently shut down. One of these NGOs treats drugs and alcohol addicts who were left all at once with no support system, which might make the pressure they're under even bigger, Dor Kerbel explains.

Ridiculously enough, this reality doesn't stop the municipalities, the Home Front Command, the Ministry of Welfare, and the Ministry of Social Equality from reaching out to these NGOs and ask for their help during the crisis.

"Municipalities that put employees who work with at-risk youth on unpaid leave are forwarding us lists of youths and are asking us to locate them and give them assistance, since the municipalities reps aren't in the field," Dor Kerbel tells us. "So on the one hand they don't provide us with support or form an assistance fund for the NGOs, and on the other, it's on these NGOs to keep it together when it comes to everything that's happening on the streets. After all, the community platforms are also shut down. So it's all coming out of our constantly-dwindling budget."