

Desert Days of the Forgotten



A Report on Migrant Shepherds in Kuwait

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1. Overview:

This report highlights the work of the Desert Days of the Forgotten Project (Desert Days), a community initiative aimed at examining the lived realities of low-income migrant workers employed as shepherds in Kuwait. The project's objectives were to document shepherds' living and working conditions as well as design a dwelling prototype as a potential solution to the challenges this population faces in the form of the extreme weather conditions of Kuwait's desert.

This report presents the data collected by the Desert Days team on a range of topics including employment conditions, access to food, healthcare and basic amenities relevant to this subset of Kuwait's non-citizen population. Building on the experiences of the project team, it also provides actionable recommendations to other civic initiatives and researchers looking to work with agricultural workers, or other marginalized demographics, in Kuwait in the future. The prototype shepherd housing component of the project is beyond the scope of this report.



[Figure 1. This image shows the living conditions for one of the migrant shepherd employees. Image taken by DDofF Team Member August 2021]

Desert Days of the Forgotten

2. About

Desert Days is one of three community projects to emerge through the BUILD program, implemented by the en.v initiative and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Between 2019-2021, BUILD supported the development and implementation of innovative and user-centric initiatives effectively improving the lives of vulnerable migrant communities in Kuwait. The program aimed to strengthen collaboration and provide civil society organizations (CSOs), community groups and advocates working to improve the lives of migrant communities in Kuwait with the tools, networks and resources needed to develop initiatives that can lead to lasting behavior and systems change.

A week-long ideathon in November 2020 brought together different community stakeholders to identify and design solutions to some of the most pressing everyday challenges faced by low-income migrant communities in Kuwait. Three of the most relevant and best designed initiatives were then awarded subgrants to implement their ideas. Desert Days was one of them.

The project team comprised 12 local volunteers, both non-citizen and citizen residents, with combined expertise in community outreach, migrants rights, urban design and sustainability.



3. Agricultural workers in Kuwait:



[Figure 2. This image shows the harsh living conditions of the migrant shepherd employees. Image taken by DDoF Team Member, August 2021]

According to the most recent data available through the Central Statistics Bureau, there were over 38,000 agricultural workers in Kuwait as of 2019. This figure includes those working in both the Jahra and Ahmadi governorates and accounts for a range of agricultural holdings including vegetation, livestock, poultry, sheep, honey bees and landscaping¹. Roughly 8,800 of these workers were employed by agricultural holdings classified as dealing primarily in poultry, sheep and other livestock products². Besides this, we do not have an exact or more recent estimate of those who are in fact working as shepherds.

Reports by migrants rights organizations and in local blogs indicate that this subsection of workers is particularly vulnerable to labor rights violations and unsafe working conditions, specifically with reference to the extreme climatic conditions in the desert areas where they reside. In 2015, popular local blog 248am run by Mark Makhoul, shared the migration journey of a Ghanaian teacher who'd been forced to work as a shepherd herding sheep in Jahra's desert³. In 2017, Migrant-Rights.org reported on shepherds' poor living conditions in the country revealing instances of deceitful recruitment, low wages, physical abuse by employers, limited or no health care access, social isolation and shabby accommodations ill-suited to protect against high temperatures⁴. Similar issues have also been reported in the context of other GCC states⁵.

Yet, within the broader context of migrant workers rights in Kuwait, this population has remained largely under-studied in comparison to other vulnerable groups such as domestic and construction workers. Even amongst local civil society groups advocating for improved migrant workers' rights there is limited understanding of the lived experiences of these workers and the specific challenges they might face within the agricultural sector. There is little information on the legal conditions of their employment, their relationship with employers and their everyday lives in the desert, the places where they live and work and the policies that determine their contracts and rights. This reality should be a cause of concern for all those seeking to advocate for improved migrants' rights protections in the country. Hence the motivation for the Desert Days project.

1. Central Statistics Bureau State of Kuwait, Annual Agricultural Statistics 2019. Available at https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics_en?ID=42&ParentCatID=4

2. Ibid.

3. Mark Makhoul, "From Ghana to Kuwait: One man's story," 248am.com, 2015, <https://248am.com/mark/people/from-ghana-to-kuwait-one-mans-story/>

4. "Where goats are kind and men suffer," Migrant-Rights.org, 2017, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2017/11/where-goats-are-kind-and-men-suffer/>

5. Hana Buhji, "The Forgotten Farmers of Bahrain," Migrant-rights.org, 2009, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2019/09/the-forgotten-farmers-of-bahrain/>

4. Objective and Methodology:

The research component of the Desert Days project sought to systematically gather first-hand data on shepherds' living and working conditions to better inform community action in support of this subsection of workers. The objective was to understand lived experiences, challenges, and potential vulnerabilities from workers themselves.

The data presented in this report was collected over a three month period between late-June and mid-October 2021 through desert field trips and key informant interviews, with both shepherds and their employers, conducted by the Desert Days team of volunteers. Outreach to shepherds was conducted in two ways. First by contacting farm owners and employers. Second by speaking to shepherds directly during field visits to key agricultural areas in Kuwait. During each visit, the team ensured to have at least one Hindi and one Arabic speaker to be able to communicate with workers.

Over 7 such trips, the team visited farms and shepherd camps in the areas of Abdali, Kabd, Wafra, Subhiya and Amghara and spoke to a total of 22 shepherds. Of these 15 consented to provide more detailed information to the project team over follow up phone interviews. Interview questions focused on working and living conditions including employer relations, labor rights, quality of accommodations, and access to basic amenities such as food, water and healthcare. Interviews were conducted in piecemeal format in order to build rapport with the informants. Notes and key insights from each interview were then fed into a survey by the volunteers. Interviews were not audio recorded to enable the workers to speak more candidly as well as to protect their identities.

A drawback of conducting interviews over multiple sessions however is that the data gathered from some informants are more complete than others. Only 1 employer/farm owner consented to be interviewed for the project. The findings presented below draw both from the interviews and volunteers' field trip notes.



5. Findings:

Of the workers who consented to the interviews, seven were from India, three from Bangladesh and three from Sudan. All are male and reside in Kuwait without their families. Four stated they were on an Article 18 visa i.e. employed by a private company while five said they were brought in to Kuwait on an article 20 visa i.e. as domestic workers. The remaining either did not know their exact visa type or were undocumented

Their length of residence in Kuwait also varied between 2 years to over three decades, belying common tropes about the transience of low-wage migrant workers in the country.

An analysis of the overall data collected reveals, unsurprisingly, the extent to which these workers' living and working conditions hinge upon the good will of their employers. In Kuwait, as elsewhere in the GCC, the kafala system is the central legal and socioeconomic mechanism governing the lives of the country's non-citizens population. In reference to workers' rights specifically, it is a system that has been criticized by local and international civil society for vesting the wellbeing and safety of migrant workers largely to the good will of their employers, whether corporations or individual citizens, despite protections enshrined in the labor law⁶.

This fact is evident from the data collected. Regardless of whether the shepherds are employed by a private company or individual citizen, all emphasized the need to maintain cordial relations with their employer and/or a superior employee designated to oversee day-to-day farm operations. Mohammed, an Indian camel herder who has been in Kuwait for 8 years and worked with multiple employers observed:

“It’s different with every Kuwaiti employer and depends on their behavior. Some of them, if they like your work and everything they will always be on your side and ask after your family etc. and be kind.”

Abdulkader, a Sudanese shepherd living in Kuwait since 2017, also noted that maintaining a cordial relationship with his employer, “eases the working conditions and the work becomes enjoyable.” The implications of this dependence for these workers' working conditions and labor rights as well as overall living conditions are discussed below.

6. Priyanka Motaparthy, “Understanding Kafala: A Archaic Law at Crossroads with Modern Development,” Migrant-Rights.org, 11 March 2015, <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2015/03/understanding-kafala-an-archaic-law-at-cross-purposes-with-modern-development/>

5.1 Employment rights and conditions:

Shepherds in Kuwait's desert care for a range of livestock including camels, sheep, goats and poultry. The size of the herds they are responsible for appears to vary from under 10 animals in the case of small farmsteads intended for private family use, to over 100 for commercial operations. The number of shepherds managing the larger herds also varies with some working alone and others in groups of 2-3. Although some workers reported that their working hours did change during the hotter months of the summer, the survey did not collect data on this point specifically.

Awareness of their rights as workers and residents in Kuwait appears to be limited. When asked whether they knew about the provisions of the labor law only one shepherd answered in the affirmative. Regardless of their visa type, most had not even seen their employment contracts, let alone comprehend their terms. Two of the interviewed shepherds stated they had not signed any formal contract. The one employer interviewed reported that although he understood his duties under the Domestic Workers Law, he did not know what course of action to take in case of any dispute.

Given the small sample, it is not possible to identify a meaningful average wage for this segment of workers from the data collected.

That said, seven of the 13 interviewed reported monthly wages over KD 120, three between KD 100-120 and the remaining between KD 80-100. This indicates their earnings are far below the KD 269 average monthly income for male non-Kuwaiti private sector workers in the country as a whole (as of 2018)⁷

They certainly do not earn enough to be able to sponsor their families in the country and most send nearly the entirety of pay to their families in countries of origin. While most of those interviewed reported being paid their dues on time each month, the Desert Days team did encounter several shepherds during their field trips who reported late payment.

Only one interviewee affirmed that they got at least one day off every week. Others stated that a weekend was not possible as they needed to care for their herds everyday and/or there was no one to take over responsibilities on their day off. Two affirmed that they were in possession of their passport while the others stated that the document remained with their employers. Kuwait's Domestic Workers Law and a Ministerial Decision 166 of 2007 prohibit employers of both domestic workers and in the private sector respectively from withholding workers' passports unless the worker has consented⁸. The single farm owner interviewed admitted that although more senior employees such as foremen did keep their own passports, he held on to the shepherds' and other farm workers' documents for "convenience". From both the interviews and field trip notes, it appears that at least some employers do provide airfare for annual trips to home countries. Although most of those interviewed indicated that they had not been able to visit their families in recent years due to the COVID19 pandemic.

7. Arab times, "Kuwaitis, Expats, wage Difference 114.9 % in Public Sector," Arabtimesonline.com, 11 August 2019, <https://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/kuwaitis-expats-wage-difference-114-9-in-public-sector/>

8. Kuwait Society for Human Rights, "The Domestic Worker Law", 2016, http://kuwaithr.org/files/dwl/the_domestic_worker_law_en.pdf and; International Labour Organization, "Regulatory Framework Governing Migrant Workers", March 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-arabstates/-ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_776524.pdf

5.2 Daily life in the desert

Similar to other low-wage earners in Kuwait – domestic workers, blue-collar industrial workers etc. – shepherds in Kuwait rely on their employers to provide appropriate accommodations, food, healthcare access and other basic amenities. Consider the following description of a typical shepherd accommodation based on the data collected:

Out in the desert, perhaps a few hundred feet away from the road, inside a mobile trailer or a semi-permanent steel structure, there's a mattress with a blanket on the floor in one corner. In another, there's a small kitchenette with a stove top and mini-fridge. There is also a small diwaniya style seating area with an air cooler plugged in close by. Outside, there's a fuel-powered generator that whirs continuously and perhaps a portable toilet. Some trailers have solar panels hoisted on top of the dwelling. There's also a small tank which stores water both for the camels' and shepherds' use. The tank is refilled every 2-3 weeks by water tankers. The livestock are kept in a tent or enclosure just a few meters away. The employer provides his workers' with phones that have an internet connection.

There are of course variations, for better and worse. Some have a TV and functioning air conditioner in their rooms. There may even be an adjacent room or structure to host the employer's family and friends when they visit. Others live in canvas tents instead with just a generator to rely on for electricity, an ice box to store food and no sanitation facilities. The key takeaway of this analysis is that whatever the state of a worker's living conditions, they depend almost entirely on the employer's ability and willingness to provide.

Access to food and healthcare is similarly determined. All interviewees and others the Desert Days team encountered on field trips stated that they relied either on their direct employer or another of their staff to bring in food supplies every week. While many noted they were provided with a range of staples– rice, maize, khubz (bread), chicken and vegetables etc.– more data is needed to understand how food secure is this subsection of workers. The same can be said for healthcare access. Most stated that they would rely on their employers to either bring them medication or take them to the hospital. This too they would do only in the case of a severe illness or injury.

Beyond these material aspects, we also know that shepherds in Kuwait lead isolated lives. This is likely only in part due to the nature of their work. During their outreach the Desert Days team encountered numerous workers who, although willing to speak to the volunteers, refused to do so out of a fear that their employer would not approve. Besides phone calls with their families in India, Sudan or elsewhere, few reported regularly socializing even with neighboring shepherds or farm workers. All expressed a desire to be able to visit their families soon, a prospect made challenging due to the pandemic. And even though only a handful expressed a desire to visit Kuwait's urban hub, almost all stated that they would have to rely on their employer to provide them with transportation to do so. The frequency of employers' visits themselves too can vary, from daily to a couple of times every month. Others visit more frequently in the winter to take advantage of the temperate weather. And so a phone is likely the only connection to the outside world that the average shepherd enjoys.

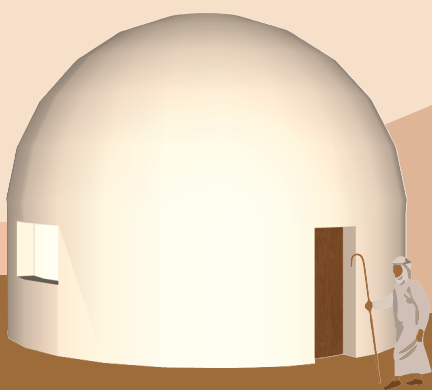


[Figure 5. An image showcasing the daily lives and views of the migrant shepherd employees. Image taken by DDofT Team Member, August 2021]

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The discussion above provides just a preliminary glimpse into the lived experiences of one of Kuwait's most vulnerable non-citizen communities. It is evident that much work -- by employers, civil society, researchers and government authorities--needs to be done to improve the living and working conditions of these workers. Key areas of concern are employment rights and protections; access to basic amenities i.e. healthcare, water and food; as well as social isolation and mental well being. It is also necessary to examine how climate change impacts on Kuwait will specifically affect this category of workers and others like them whose work requires them to spend extended periods outdoors .

Reflecting on the experiences of the team working on the Desert Days initiative the following set of recommendations provide practical guidance to others interested in studying the lives of and advocating for shepherds in Kuwait, and low income migrant workers more generally.



A Ask if you have the right skills:

The Desert Days' team comprises individuals with a diverse set of locally-relevant expertise including in community outreach and migrant rights advocacy. However, when reflecting on the data collection experience, several team members noted a key gap that impacted their work, namely limited experience in conducting community research. Unlike the conversations and debates we may have with our friends, families, and co-workers around various social, cultural and political issues, any form of research requires a specific set of skills.

Particularly when working with vulnerable communities, ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Have I been trained to engage with vulnerable populations in a research context?
- ◆ Have I been trained to conduct research on this subject area?
- ◆ Do I have the skills to identify the appropriate data collection tools and questions?
- ◆ Do I understand the ethical and safety considerations of my project that may impact my narrators, myself and the wider community?
- ◆ If not, how do I acquire those skills? How does this gap affect the work?

B Ensure outreach to all relevant stakeholders:

The Desert Days project initially planned to speak with both employers and workers to be able to collect data that would realistically feed into the planned dwelling prototype to be created. This would also ease the testing and implementation of any design. Yet as noted above, only a single farm owner was ultimately interviewed. That said, future researchers and community initiatives working on this subject should endeavour to incorporate the perspectives of other relevant stakeholders so as to be able to better understand challenges and identify solutions.

C Language matters:

Besides research skills, language is another important practical consideration. Those conducting outreach and interviews should preferably be able to carry out this work in languages that the interviewees' are comfortable in. This not only helps build rapport more easily, it also ensures that interviewees are able to express themselves accurately. For example, if a Bangladeshi shepherd speaks some limited Arabic or even Hindi, that may allow for some basic survey data collection. However, if one were interested in conducting an in depth interview, fluency in Bangla would be necessary. It is also helpful, if possible, to allow the interviewee to choose the language in which they wish to engage with the project. This is not to say that an absence of particular language skills within the project team should exclude certain research subjects or topics but the limitations of the data collected should be noted in any ensuing analysis.

D Listen and don't assume:

The Desert Days team were surprised by the eagerness many of their interlocutors showed to share their story and experiences. They decided to lean into that enthusiasm by consistently trying to ask better open-ended questions that would keep in check the volunteers' own assumptions about shepherds' lives in Kuwait. While this proved to be a learning curve for some team members, this kind of active listening is crucial for any community research and advocacy work that aims to center the affected communities and individuals in designing sustainable solutions. Given the imbalance in power dynamics between the volunteers (who hail from middle class backgrounds and include Kuwaiti nationals) and the workers, this approach was key to obtaining more honest and in-depth responses from the shepherds.

E Commit to the work:

At the beginning of any community project, it is important for the team to develop a work plan outlining the scope of work, timeline, and division of responsibilities. Individual team members should also reflect on the amount of effort and time they are able to commit to the project. As all members are volunteers with full-time jobs, the Desert Days team struggled to coordinate field trips and ensure the potential interviewees had periodic touch points with the team. Though all of this is important from a purely project management perspective as well, it is doubly crucial when the work hinges upon building strong relationships with vulnerable or marginalized individuals.