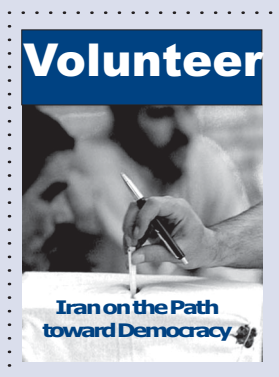


# Volunteer

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## **Iran on the Path toward Democracy**



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# Iran on the Path toward Democracy

Dr Sohrab Razzaghi



1- Iranian society is undergoing a spectacular rapid transformation. This transformation has shown its potential to change social, political discourses and groupings. The rate of transformation in thought schools as well as social and political behavior is so high which make it difficult, at times, to draw a logical picture of underlying causes and foresee eventual outcomes. Some concepts and beliefs which were once viewed as sacred and transcendental, now are referred to as secular belong to history. However, two main forces, whose characteristics can be found at the core of transforming political and social forces, have emerged. The first are forces that seek to redefine those concepts and traditions historically deemed as sacred as concepts embedded in customs and tradition. The second theme seeks to redirect totalitarian

forces by introducing concepts of democracy. In any event, these transformations and developments, at a minimum, demonstrate that Iranian society, in its transition to democracy has entered a new political and social phase, fraught with questions, concerns, ambiguities, but still one that enjoys a broader and more open perspective.

2- Ultimately, the move toward the strengthening of civil society and the "movement to achieve democracy" will indeed be the ultimate result of the political struggles and transformations that characterize today's Iranian society. The quest for democracy is indeed the most significant movement characterizing today's Iranian society-a struggle that has been at the core and a main ideal of many social movements in Iran



since the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary Iranian movements for democracy have witnessed many upheavals, and as a result, have not been successful at ensuring the dominance of democratic discourses. Developments surrounding the elections of President Khatami in 1997 and the emergence of the 2nd of Khordad movement are noteworthy as they represent a sharp shift in Iranian political and social thought and behavior as well as the dominant discourse. Certain defining characteristics set this Iranian movement to achieve democracy apart from other contemporary democratic movements. These characteristics include some of the following:

- This movement is indeed a human rights movement and as such, it emphasizes the importance of civil rights and human dignity.

- This movement tends to be opposed to the use of force and violence in social campaigns and struggles, choosing instead to employ peaceful means and solutions toward the realization of democracy.

- The concept of freedom is the inspiring element of this movement and activists fight for the acquisition of "negative freedoms."

- The Movement is not based in ideology, and as such it is inclusive of a wide spectrum of social forces. Those within the Movement have put forth a non-orthodox interpretation of religion and emphasize the humanistic side of religion.

- The Movement is pluralistic and promotes transparency.

- The Movement is not centralized. This is significant in the fact that historically the Iranian state has tended to be authoritarian and centralized.

- The Movement, while seeking to retain its Iranian identity, strives to think globally.

- The Movement, in an attempt to achieve a strong civil society and to achieve democracy in Iran, strives to promote social participation and an institutional orientation toward society.

- The Movement rejects meta-narratives and emphasizes micro and community-level narratives.

3. The movement to achieve democracy, despite facing political and social resistance, can boast significant

achievements in political and social thought as well as in terms of "real" gains.

The most significant achievement this movement can boast is its ability to infuse democratic principals, and promote the concepts of civil society, and political development within collective social thought. The past five years have been an exceptional and somewhat unique period in Iranian contemporary history, as this period has witnessed a shift in the thinking of political actors and intellectuals. While in the past, movements to achieve democracy and institutionalize the concepts of civil society were fraught with impossibility and reservation today these issues are of foremost concern and priority areas for intellectuals and political actors.

The second achievement of this movement has been its ability to transform political discourse. The past few years have witnessed a reinterpretation of concepts within a new framework that promotes reform, and the concepts of democracy. While in the past reinterpretation of concepts were couched in more violent terms, depicting struggles and fighting, for the first time in Iranian history, political actors are critiquing the concepts of violence in all its dimensions. This is significant because in the past certain forms of violence were perceived and thus defended as sacred acts. This transformation has created a space within which the discourse of democracy is dominant and the discourse of violence marginalized.

The emergence of democratic theories among political actors is yet another achievement of the movement to achieve democracy. The main theme of the movement to achieve democracy is intended to promote peaceful means in pushing forth social agendas. In essence, the emergence of democratic theories among political actors signifies a significant shift in political behavior and thought.

Yet another achievement of this movement is the reinterpretation of the concept of the Islamic Republic, and represents again a shift in thinking. This reinterpretation puts forth a democratic interpretation of the Islamic Republic, as compared with the second decade following the Revolution of 1979 which witnessed an orthodox and totalitarian interpretation overshadowing the more democratic concepts and principals associated with the concept of "republic."



Besides the impact it has had on political and social thought and discourse, this movement has managed to achieve "real" social and political gains as follows:

The last five years have witnessed the emergence of a public sphere within the political arena, which a variety of actors have strived, often transparently and blatantly, to consolidate. The movement to achieve democracy has served as a catalytic force in dismantling the hold that an elite ruling oligarchy had with respect to discourse and expression relating to public issues, creating an opportunity for other actors, holding a variety of view points, to express their ideas and engage in public discourse.

The expansion of the political realm has allowed for the participation of an expanded polity, some of whom were previously marginalized, to enter the realm as new actors. Besides the expansion of the political realm, today's Iran is witnessing significant developments and growth, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in its civil society sector. Another example includes the implementation of the chapter of the constitution, delayed for over twenty years, calling for the creation of Islamic councils at the city and village levels. These councils hold great promise as centers of democracy and in institutionalizing the concepts of democracy and democratic participation in Iranian society, and as such, their impact should be assessed over the long term. Increasingly too we are witnessing the formation of alliances between political actors and groups. Alliances, a necessary component of effective decision-making and political representation, are a fairly new concept in Iranian politics. The political landscape of Iran, historically, because of an unfavorable political environment and tendencies toward political obstruction, has served to discourage the formation of alliances between political actors and groups. After the Presidential elections in 1997, favorable grounds encouraging the formation of alliances among political actors and groups have been created.

A transition from mass political participation to more organized forms of political participation, a decreased sense of alienation from the political process, increased political transparency and the formation of a new social base, allowing for greater participation and political competition, both among the younger generation of Iranians and the older more disillusioned and politically passive generation of Iranians, are other achieve-

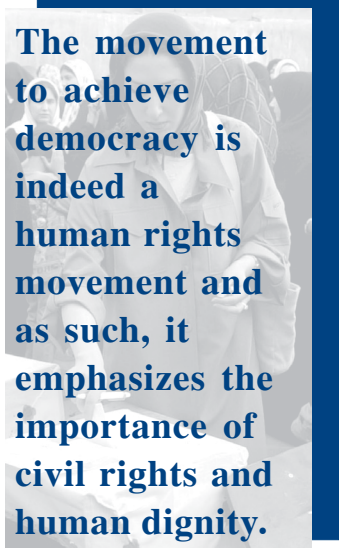
ments that the movement to achieve democracy in Iran can boast.

4. While this movement can boast many achievements, its greatest failure has been its inability to harness and to take advantage of invaluable opportunities for the realization of democracy. These opportunities were most available to Iranian society, when the world experienced the fourth wave, a new process of democratization, which pushed Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Latin America toward democratization. Unfortunately the movement to achieve democracy in Iran has been unable to tap into the international experience in pushing forth its own agendas for the purposes of promoting democracy in Iran.

In order to better understand the failures and shortcomings of the Movement to realize democracy in Iran, Iranian thinkers and political actors need to evaluate and rethink their strategies for achieving democracy. The most significant failures that the leaders of the Movement to achieve democracy in Iran have faced can be summarized as follows:

Failure to understand and critique the past has been one of the reasons why the movement to achieve democracy has fallen short of its goals. This critique is not intended as a rejection of the past, but more so intended to promote an understanding of the underlying forces that lead to deadlocks and crises, as experienced in the second decade following the revolution. An understanding of the past, and rethinking of approaches should serve as the first step, for those at the helm of the Movement in defining future strategies.

Another failure on the part of those leading the Movement has been an attempt by some to transform the concepts of democracy into ideology. While democracy should be seen as a tool or process for promoting social order, some have used democracy and its related discourse as a meta-narrative, to meet their own political ends. The keywords these actors have used have their basis in ideology, seek revenge from their opponents, breed hostility and their general discourse is intended to disclose the actions of their op-



**The movement to achieve democracy is indeed a human rights movement and as such, it emphasizes the importance of civil rights and human dignity.**

ponents and ultimately scandalize them.. Dialogue and negotiation are seen as concepts that are taboo in this ideological framework and all-encompassing narrative. The mistake that these actors have committed stems from their lack of understanding of the concept of reform, which at its core strives to move past a discourse of "disclosure" to a discourse of "enlightenment". Critical thought and criticism are the main elements of the discourse of enlightenment. This discourse, instead of revenge, promotes the concepts of amnesty and forgiveness and reconciliation. The discourse of enlightenment also places great emphasis on the transparency of words.

The third failure has been brought about due to the fact that many actors involved in the movement to achieve democracy in Iran, have chosen to engage in highly political activities as well as journalistic activities. The energies of these thinkers and leaders could be better utilized if they were to address the theoretical framework as well as real foundations for achieving and implementing and institutionalizing a democratic system of governance in Iran.

The fourth failure of those at the helm of the Movement was that they were quick to take certain positions with respect to reform, without a full assessment of the existing social capital in Iranian society. Strategies for achieving democracy should be based on a true assessment of social capital, otherwise, commitments to reform, not proportionate with the capacity for implementation, including social capital, may lead to losses for which there exist no compensation. Another significant mistake by those at the helm of the movement to achieve democracy has been the adoption of a strategy which has sought to "conquer the government"-first in the form of the executive branch and second in the form of the legislative branch-where the center of gravity for the Movement should have been focused on civil society institutions. In order for civil society to be strengthened and to gain a dominant position in Iranian society, those at the helm and supporting the movement to achieve democracy should focus their energies on a strategy designed to "conquer civil society" seeking to strengthen it in a manner that ensures its independence from government.

tendency to recruit activists based on partisan politics, while it should have focused more on recruiting technical experts, managers and planners. Any country experiencing a time of crisis has to rely on a strong team of managers and planners to address and prevent further crises.

Another criticism of those at the helm of the movement to achieve democracy is their weakness and inability to organize their supporters as well as their weak relationship with civil society. The leaders of the Movement have been unable to create the structures and institutions necessary to address and respond to the needs of the public, while they could have utilized bodies such as the parliament, and councils, to facilitate the growth and development of civil society institutions and as such avert and address the crises created by those opposing the Movement.

Another critique of the leaders and actors in the Movement to achieve democracy is their inability and reluctance to fully evaluate the capabilities, strengths and weaknesses of their opponents. This lack of evaluation has had a high cost for the Movement as a whole.

5- In conclusion, Iranian society, as it has entered the new millennium, has had to pay a high price in its strive to achieve democracy. The path taken thus far has created an environment filled with pessimism, and concern as well as hopes, opportunities and challenges. The future of the Movement and its success depends in great part on the decisions and actions taken by the elites leading it and also on the formation and strength of civil society organizations.

The gravity point for all those countries, which have successfully transitioned to democracy, has been a set of strong policies and strategies devised by the elites leading such movements. What these policies and strategies have managed to accomplish as a necessary foundation, has been to establish a comprehensive and extensive dialogue based in reason among elites and civil society leaders in realizing the goals of their movements.

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The Iranian NGO Sector at a Glance

# Forging New Partnerships

Sussan Tahmasebi★

Recent developments in Iran have paved the way for the strengthening of civil society institutions. The expanding platform that the media has provided for the voicing of a multitude of opinions including the opinions of activists, the increased numbers of active media outlets and student movements are examples of a growing civil society sector in Iran, which have received great international attention. Little international attention, however, has been given to developments in the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector. The Iranian NGO Sector is possibly the fastest growing and most vibrant sector within Iran's new and emerging civil society. In fact, this sector is at a critical and exciting stage in its development.

Despite setbacks in reform efforts, government programs have specifically addressed the need to engage the cooperation of civil society organizations and in particular NGOs, in addressing the many issues facing Iranian society. As a result, there is greater focus on the role that NGOs can play in development efforts as well as addressing other issues of concern. NGOs are becoming increasingly active in addressing the social issues that face today's society and also in advocacy efforts designed to impact policy, especially policy pertaining to the rights of vulnerable populations and policies, which impact the NGO sector as a whole.

Volunteer  
December 2002

Unfortunately, the Iranian NGO sector has not benefited sufficiently from international knowledge and information on development issues. In fact, since the revolution of 1979, international cooperation with Iran was limited at best and the absence of the international development community is still quite noticeable. Because of Iran's isolation from the international community, the development of the NGO sector in Iran can be largely classified as "homegrown." While this sector continues to have much to learn from the international experience, it offers many lessons for NGO counterparts, especially those working in Muslim societies.

Iranian NGOs are generally classified into two groups: 1) Modern NGOs; and 2) Traditional Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).<sup>(1)</sup> Exact figures for the numbers of NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) across Iran are not available, but these organizations are estimated to number at around 10,000-12,000 across Iran (the number of CBOs across Iran are estimated at 5,000) these figures do not include Community Charity Funds (Sandoq-e Qarz-ol-Hassaneh), which are estimated to number around 10,000.

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### 1. Modern NGOs

Modern NGOs in Iran have largely been formed as a response to global trends, as well as growing national interest. Iran's increasingly active participation in global events sponsored by the UN in which Iran's government has had an active role, has significantly contributed to the development of the modern NGO sector. Some modern NGOs predate the Islamic revolution and are still active in a variety of fields, but these NGOs tend to be very limited in number. Though modern NGOs tend to employ modern methods and seek to address root causes, they have been criticized for lacking a constructive relationship with the communities they serve and in which they work, and have been characterized as being, for the most part, in the infancy stages of

their development as organizations. Nevertheless, there exist outstanding examples of modern NGOs in Iran that have been successful in addressing social needs, conducting advocacy efforts, raising public awareness and conducting educational activities and tackling tough social issues, with extensive community participation.

Many of the modern NGOs have also been criticized for being too closely associated with government officials, and for getting too much support from the government. While the close affiliation of some of these organizations with the government leaves room for scrutiny and concern, the nature of these close relations must be better understood within the context of Iran. Many of the early modern NGOs characterized as government-initiated or controlled in Iran have largely been formed by persons with government affiliations, sometimes of high ranking, and/or by persons seeking to advocate the state's Islamic and at times hard-line ideology. However, these NGOs, while reaping certain benefits because of the elite status enjoyed by their founding members, were not created by direct order of government agencies and they do maintain a level of independence from government. Indeed because of the elite status their founding members enjoy within Iranian society, these NGOs have enjoyed some level of success in pushing forth their agendas.

Some government officials who have started up NGOs have been greatly influenced by their participation in international conferences, mainly UN conferences in the late 1980's and early 1990's, when they came to realize that they were limited in their capacity as government officials to address critical social issues facing Iranian society. Many chose to set up NGOs because they felt it provided them with a more open forum to discuss sensitive social issues and push for more progressive policies. In fact, many of the early modern NGOs spearheaded by government officials were critical forces in establishing and beginning the dialogue on the need for a viable civil society in general and the specific role that NGOs could play in development efforts in particular. These NGOs and their directors often played key roles in pushing forth progressive agendas



through the third sector, and at times pushed the envelope on sensitive social issues, such as family planning, women's rights, women's access to education, human rights, drug treatment strategies, etc. In fact, one could go so far as to claim that because of their contacts in government, these NGOs and their directors have served as catalysts in engaging the government in a dialogue with the NGO sector on sensitive issues.<sup>(2)</sup>

Recent so-called "NGO friendly" policies put forth by government agencies have given rise to a new set of government affiliated NGOs. These policies are in part designed to increase the social participation of Iranian citizens through NGOs and in other part seek to reduce the role of government in development efforts and the administration of social programs. Unlike their predecessors, the intents of these newly formed NGOs, as a whole, tend to be much less pure. While some at the helm of these newly formed organizations, are truly seeking to impact social developments through their NGOs, others are attracted to the sector because of the increased funding that is being directed toward the sector, using their government connections to secure contracts and grants. Further, some see NGOs as a potential future force in decision making, capable of impacting policy, and want to ensure that they secure a space for themselves in this new form of governance.

As the NGO sector has begun to strengthen and take on a more active role within Iran, the debate on the legitimacy of government-affiliated NGOs and their level of independence has become a heated issue. As the Iranian NGO sector moves toward adopting ethical standards of conduct, and widely agreed upon terms of operation and begins to define the types of relationships that NGOs can appropriately have with government organizations, those organizations which do not exhibit true NGO characteristics and independence from government organizations, will be forced to adopt a more transparent and accountable approach and those with questionable affiliations with government will be marginalized. However, it should be noted that while the government affiliated NGOs as they exist in today's NGO landscape in Iran, may be

limited in their ability to oppose government on sensitive issues, they remain much more flexible in doing so than the truly independent modern NGOs and they can still play a vital role in pushing the envelope on sensitive social issues, as they would come under less scrutiny than independent NGOs. In fact, it would be a mistake to dismiss the catalytic role that some of these NGOs have played in bringing recognition to the NGO sector within Iran and bringing much needed attention to issues for which there did not previously exist a forum for discussion.<sup>(2)</sup>

Favorable government policies have also allowed for an exponential growth in the number of modern NGOs. These NGOs are engaged in a variety of activities, but mainly they fall into the following categories:

- Women's NGOs;
- Children and Youth NGOs;
- Environmental NGOs;
- Health NGOs;
- Cultural NGOs;
- Science and Technology NGOs; and
- Human Rights NGOs (though they are limited in number, these organizations are on the increase).

The most active and significant sectors, having received greater government attention in the form of policies, which encourage their expansion, are:

- The Women's NGO sector (predominantly identified as women led or initiated NGOs, but also includes NGOs that deal with women's issues);
- The Youth NGO sector (predominantly identified as youth led or initiated NGOs, but also includes NGOs working on youth issues and with youth); and
- The Environmental NGO sector.

These sectors also have national level networks that work as membership organizations, providing capacity development services for NGOs in their respective sectors and conducting information sharing activities.

**Many of the modern NGOs have also been criticized for being too closely associated with government officials, and for getting too much support from the government**

Modern NGOs are involved in a variety of activities, including the provision of services, information sharing and educational activities, and limited lobbying and advocacy efforts. Because many of these NGOs have been formed in recent years, their capacities as organizations tend to be weak and at times there seems to be little knowledge among their founding members about the role of NGOs in general, creating, at times, conflict of interest issues, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability. However, to address organizational development issues, several NGO support organizations have been created in recent years and those NGOs with greater experience, which have been in existence for a

longer period of time, are actively engaged in conducting capacity building efforts and trainings of NGOs, signifying the growing awareness that exists among NGOs and NGO leaders as to the important and vital role this sector of civil society can play in shaping Iranian society as a whole.

The operating budgets of modern NGOs come through contributions of their members, their founders, their boards, membership dues, and in a more minimal capacity through contribu-

tions from the public. Also, increasingly these organizations have begun to tap into government funds, which are on the rise. This includes grants from government agencies, contracts for conducting services, including the provision of social services and other activities like organizing conferences, conducting research, and implementing projects. Also modern NGOs have begun slowly to tap into international funds from the UN, foundations, and foreign governments, including development aid agencies and embassies. It should however be noted that funds from international and foreign sources provide a minimal contribution toward the operating budgets of modern NGOs. The lack of access to international funds and resources is largely due to Iran's isolation from the international community, a se-

curity oriented approach by the state toward NGOs, which prohibits and at times severely punishes NGOs for tapping into international resources (at a minimum this security oriented approach creates a culture of mistrust and discourages NGOs for seeking international funds) and lack of professional expertise within the NGO sector in seeking, securing and managing international funding.

## 2. Traditional Community Based Organizations (CBOs)

The traditional community based organizations of Iran, which have strong roots in the communities they serve and a long history of activities, are often characterized as Iran's true NGOs. The past twenty years have provided a fertile ground for the growth and development of these organizations and they have taken on an active role in administering relief and charity efforts. The ideological basis for the existence of these organizations is rooted in the Iranian and Islamic tradition of charity work and these organizations have increasingly exhibited a great tendency to become involved in development efforts by adopting strategies that seek to address root causes of social problems.

The spontaneous development of these organizations, in the absence of the international development community in Iran, and the expansive safety net they provide for vulnerable populations is noteworthy. In other Islamic countries within the region and in Iran, traditional community-based organizations have been criticized for their tendency toward relief and charity work, which create dependence. These organizations have also been criticized for the religious orientation of their work, which is viewed by many, especially women's rights activists, as less than progressive. However in Iran, some of these CBOs have started a spontaneous move toward addressing root causes by adopting innovative strategies and preventive methods of service delivery<sup>(4)</sup>. In addition, these organizations have begun, in part because of the changing nature of Iranian society and the changing demand for social services, to provide services and programs, which would be labeled as progressive and in line



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with an agenda that promotes women's rights as well as the rights of other vulnerable and disenfranchised populations.

In fact, these organizations have been key in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations and almost single-handedly, with minimal support from government programs, have provided a major social safety net for vulnerable populations. For example, these organizations have played a key role in filling the gap in services to female-headed households. Official estimates place the number of female-headed households at 1,300,000 <sup>(5)</sup> (with unofficial estimates as high as 3,000,000). CBOs are actively involved in providing services to these populations as well as refugee populations.<sup>(6)</sup>

Some CBOs have been extremely progressive in the design of their programs in responding to the needs of the communities they serve. For example, increasingly CBOs are engaged in providing legal counseling for women in situations of domestic violence, seeking divorce, seeking custody of their children, and seeking to cope with spouses who are drug addicted or incarcerated. In fact, these CBOs have increasingly exhibited frustration with the legal system and the inadequacy of laws and protections pertaining to vulnerable groups. CBOs, because of their religious orientation and strong roots in the community, are in an extremely good position to act as catalysts in creating change in areas which have traditionally been deemed as sensitive, such as family law, women's rights and children's rights.

Other examples of innovations demonstrated by these organizations include some of the following:

- CBOs have exhibited an interest in adopting modern management techniques and tend to very open to adopting new forms of management;
- CBOs have begun to make a move toward conducting research and analysis for better impact, much of which has been spearheaded by their networks;
- CBOs exhibit a desire to learn and tend to be

much more open than the modern NGOs in seeking knowledge and adapting innovative methods of service delivery within their own organizations. They also are increasingly linking with the Iranian expatriate community for support and with their counterparts in the West and other Islamic countries to share information and to adopt innovative practice standards;

- While men tend to be at the helm of CBOs, within their ranks women have a strong and majority presence. However, women led CBOs are on the rise and these organizations tend to exhibit a more progressive approach toward their work; and

- CBOs are also beginning to organize in the form of coalitions for the purposes of better communication, information sharing, and a more focused and directed approach toward addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. They have also begun to set up data banks, for better coordination between various CBOs engaged in a specific sector.

The activities of the traditional community based organizations, involved in the provision of services, can be classified into the following sectors <sup>(7)</sup>:

- Service delivery;
- Health; and
- Education.

Both the health and education sectors of the traditional community-based organizations have strong networks. The network of health CBOs is a Tehran-based organization in design, but works nationally to provide services to health CBOs. This network enjoys a close partnership with the Ministry of Health and works with the Ministry to approve the registration application of health CBOs. Also, the Network is works to guide health CBOs toward establishing programs which respond to exhibited need, based on research and needs assessments conducted by the Ministry of Health.

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Health CBOs are involved in building and administering health facilities, including charity hospitals and clinics and some seek funds to cover treatment costs for vulnerable populations faced with health problems. Most charity hospitals and clinics provide low cost services to those in need, and/or when patients do not have the capacity to pay for their medical treatments these organizations provide services at no cost. Charity clinics number at around 350 across the country (120 in Tehran alone) and charity hospitals numbering at 64 provide approximately 10% of the hospital beds (or 11,000) around the country. The network is increasingly advocating with its members to invest in research and prevention efforts in lieu of building and operating health facilities. This educational outreach program, the

network hopes, will move its membership from a traditional approach and orientation toward charity work to a more modern approach that at its core addresses and promotes prevention efforts.

The Network of School Building Philanthropists is a national level network with over 5400 members, and offices in every province and several cities. This network, unlike many modern and traditional NGOs, benefits from a relatively complex organizational structure that allows for a

more democratic system of governance. Most school-building philanthropists are engaged in the building of schools, which they then turn over to the Ministry of Education, though increasingly these philanthropists are becoming engaged in managing and administering their own educational facilities. The Network enjoys a productive relationship with the Ministry of Education and both bodies can be credited with innovations in establishing a positive relationship with one another to meet the expanding need for modern and standardized educational facilities. Increasingly focusing on the need for innovation in the educational system, this body can play a critical role in transforming the educational system in Iran.

network for the service delivery sector of the traditional community-based organizations. However, it should be noted that several regional and provincial level networks for these organizations do exist. CBOs engaged in service delivery are mainly involved in the following types of charity and relief services:

- Providing financial support to families in need, particularly female-headed households or those with heads of households who are incarcerated or are suffering from disabilities and/or unemployment or the elderly.
- Providing assistance in securing housing for families in need, including loans and grants.
- Providing assistance to families for marriage of their children (provision of dowries).
- Providing technical education and training to women who are heads of households, in an effort to generate employment or self-employment opportunities among these groups.
- Financing the development of schools and technical training centers.
- Administering community charity funds, which can be found throughout the country and are usually operated by these community-based organizations or independently through other types of community groups, mosques, work places, etc. These funds are made available in the form of loans to families and individuals in need without any interest.
- Providing educational assistance in the form of university scholarships to students in financial need.
- Providing financial assistance for health services to those in need.

It should be noted that many of these community-based organizations, because of religious and cultural beliefs are hesitant to share information about their activities, choosing to protect the anonymity of those individuals who seek their assistance. As such, it is important to take into account that the services provided by these traditional community-based organizations tend to be much broader than those mentioned above. However, the mentioned activities tend to be those in which these organizations are most frequently engaged. Also, it should be mentioned that these organizations tend to operate in a very transparent manner, readily providing information on their assets and expenditures to the community members who support their activities.

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Most CBOs receive their financial support from the communities in which they operate and to some degree from their founding members. The ideological basis for the existence of these organizations and the contribution of community members to the operating budgets of these organizations is rooted in religious and cultural belief that calls upon people to care for the less fortunate. As these CBOs make a move toward adopting more modern techniques, this characteristic will be the distinguishing factor between modern and traditional organizations.

While CBOs have not been given due credit for their innovations in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations by the modern NGO sector and by international bodies in Iran, the government is slowly taking notice of the potential they hold as partners in development efforts. Despite the fact that government's approach toward this sector has not always been ideal—at times seeking to utilize the vast potential this sector holds in terms of its financial and volunteer resources and its relationship with the community to its own end—the government's recognition of this sector as a potential partner has in general been a positive trend.

The CBO sector has much to offer the modern NGO sector, especially as it relates to developing positive relations with the community and ethical standards of conduct. In fact, those working to address the many issues facing the NGO sector in Iran, like the NGO support organizations, would benefit greatly from the inclusion of CBOs in discussions and efforts on identifying strategies for strengthening the NGO sector as a whole. Unfortunately, for the most part, NGO support organizations, despite professing to be committed to the sector, have failed to engage the CBO sector in a substantive manner, and in a decision making capacity, in efforts designed to strengthen the Iranian NGO sector as whole.

Note: This article is part of a larger research project on Iranian NGOs and CBOs. For further information, or for the purpose of reproduction, please contact the author at: [sussan@schoolnet.ir](mailto:sussan@schoolnet.ir)

#### Footnotes:

1- Professional and trade associations, numbering around 200 across the country, while counted as modern NGOs for the purpose of this paper, exhibit their own unique characteristics and warrant further study. Of interest would be their

ability to serve the needs of their constituencies, especially as they relate to their ability to impact policy and act as pressure or interest groups in pushing forth agendas that pertain to the needs of their membership.

2- In fact, while the more independent NGOs are becoming increasingly engaged in advocacy efforts and in dialogue with government agencies, the NGOs spearheaded by government officials still enjoy a closer relationship with government agencies and continue to play a critical role in establishing dialogue with the government sector on issues pertaining to the development of the NGO sector as a whole.

3- Based on personal interviews with a number of women NGO representatives and government representatives participating in the Beijing Conference in 1995.

4- Reference is made only to those CBOs engaged in providing charity and relief services and not the more informal community based organizations, which are engaged in cooperative efforts at the community level or which engage strictly in religious activities, such as provision of food for mourners during the Ashura mourning festivities—a yearly event marking the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Hossein – and other similar activities.

5- Islamic Republic of Iran Census figures for 1375 (1996).

6- Iran is host to 2,500,000 refugees and at one point in the early 1990s with over 3,000,000 refugees it was host to the largest refugee population in the world. Most CBOs provide relief and charity services to populations in need, without discrimination based on national origin. Many of these CBOs, especially those in areas with large refugee populations, have provided services to refugee populations along with Iranian populations. Informal discussions with several Tehran-based CBOs place the number of refugees in their client-base at around 10-20%. It is worth mentioning that several Iranian CBOs have been formed with the sole purpose of serving the needs of refugees.

7- Community Charity Funds (Sandoq-e Qarz-ol Hassaneh) are another important sector of the traditional community-based organizations. These funds provide no interest or very low interest loans covering mostly administrative costs to those in need. Some of these funds operate formally and are registered and some operate informally and are not registered. Their numbers are estimated at around 10,000 nationally. Many charity organizations as a component of their programs administer such funds as well. For the purposes of this research these funds, their impact and their scope of work has not been documented. For more information on these funds see: Namazi, Baquer, Non-governmental Organizations in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Situation Analysis. (UNDP, The Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, 2000).

**Unfortunately, for the most part, NGO support organizations, despite professing to be committed to the sector, have failed to engage the CBO sector in a substantive manner, and in a decision making capacity, in efforts designed to strengthen the Iranian NGO sector as whole**

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Volunteer  
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Status of Iranian Youth  
and their Participation in NGOs

# Go ahead!





Over 60% of Iranian population is composed of young people under the age of 29 years old and as a result Iran has been changed to one of the youngest countries in the world. Such a young population exposes families, governmental and non-governmental organizations to various risks and creates different concerns, in a way that the manager of "Iran's Youth National Organization" has called 'youth concerns' as the most important strategic discussion of Islamic Republic of Iran while he has often tried to remind the importance of the subject by providing high ranking authorities with related information and statistics on the status of young persons. Increase in unemployment rate especially among the graduated persons, spread of narcotic drugs,

failure of governmental models in educational systems, impact of information and communication technology and new forms of social freedoms, etc. all in all have increased the level of expectations that seems to be difficult to be met by the government alone. For instance, during summer 2002, in an official statistics, it was announced that the government can fulfill only one percent of youth needs for free time. Now, this question can be raised "who in the government or which organization(s) should manage to respond the youth demands? Who should accept the responsibility?"

A study of existing capacities of young people proves various models for meeting youth needs. In this paper, "youth non-governmental organizations" are considered as new leading organizations that can meet their own expectations. Also, a review of the developments that have given such an importance to youth issues seems necessary. Here, the youth status is studied in the framework of a "social movement" so that its importance can be understood better.

One of the most important events during the Islamic revolution and the years after - which gave great shocks to the society - was the deep and expanded changes in the population pyramid of the country during the past two decades that has left noticeable effects on every aspect of life.

In fact, all the family planning policies before revolution in 1979, in the first years of revolution, were regarded unimportant and even intriguing; therefore, irregular growth of population happened in Iran, in a way that 33 million in 1977 augmented to 65 million in 1997, even with the restart of family planning policies in late 1980s, the destructive effects of this increase didn't come to an end. So since the beginning of the 1980s this unwanted wave of population created a series of crises and had an effective impact on different levels of the society. Exactly in mid 1980s with great increase of childbirth, preparing powder milk changed to one of the important challenges of the society. A little afterwards, the crisis of populated primary school and disproportionate capacity in education and training happened. Schools with three-shift classes were the result of that era which in 1990s changed to a crisis of university entrance exams and zealous students who saw existing opportunities insufficient to meet their needs. This was while the change in population composition and its characteris-

tics were not seriously considered by the authorities to identify new capacities.

If in 1985 the population was 49 million, 19 percent of them were young, and respectively in 1995 this number reached to 20.5 percent or 12 million (one fifth of the population). During this period, 78 percent had been added to the total population, the young generation increased about 93 percent in comparison to 1977. The factors that caused this growth can be mentioned such as development of high school and higher education in the country especially due to formation of the private university, being unresponsive to youth needs, hesitations to the dominant ideology to materialize these needs, obvious divide among generations and of course rejection of the presented models in social needs and more important living in conditions that were resulted due to a change in authorities' beliefs from idealism to



a positive realism in late 1970 and early 1980.

Also rapid transformations at international level such as expansion of mass media and some other factors changed the dominant revolutionary discourse in early and mid 1980s to a reformatory discourse or a thought system based on reformism.

This change in discourse, in 1997, led to the victory of Seyed Mohammad Khatami in presidential elections. That's why Khatami would never forget that the important factor of his success in the election was the massive number of young people who saw a close relation in their goals with his mottos based on citizens' rights, strengthening civil society, democracy and looking after the claims of young generation. Therefore, when Khatami sat on the presidential seat and

wanted to talk to people he went among the young people and especially among the university students to show that he would recognize the youth and their demands and knew their influential power and would try to realize it. Exactly because of this point, an intensive synergy was created among forces of the society especially during the first two years of the new reformism movement.

Khatami understood the need for an open space for this massive population and that's why he had no other way than to support an open social interaction environment. Among these young people, there were the persons who experienced this sudden situation, a part of them who were active and energetic - with some political activity records in the last decades - selected the political sphere and the rest tried to resolve the social problems with deep cultural roots through social bodies. The latter stepped calmly forward in the streets and alleys of the city to seek popular support and to organize and meet their needs and demands by themselves.

Many of the youth who selected the limited open space of politics in those days thought that this field will be more effective and efficient in comparison with other fields. So when they were faced with the first signs of resistance by the conservatives, added their efforts to continue their claims through the same channels. This trend of resistance from one side and demand-driven tendencies on the other side continued in a way that it led to the tragedy of university in 1999, and finally it found a changed fate and created an unpredictable indifference and disillusion among these young people that can be studied in a separate paper.

On the other hand, persons who came to streets to communicate to people with an aim to resolve social problems were able to find certain dark points – the points that they have never thought about. They found out that today's problems were not due to the relations of the recent years, or recent decades, instead they have roots in cultural difficulties or historical limitations. These young people gathered together and created their own groups. Thus they formed social groups. In the next years, this move was called "non-governmental organizations" passing its fetal period, and showed up itself among other social groups and institutions.

At the same time, changes and insufficient capacity of the relevant organizations showed that the society's decision-makers did not have a real picture about what is happening. For the same reason, when those at the helm of this crowded wave reached to the age that were able to express their needs and demands faced with unprepared structures, mental environment of policy-makers and authorities. Step by step this non-preparation led to create deep divides. These divides left major effects on the society that was suffering from various social problems increased due to urbanization and unemployment

A seven times more increase in urbanization among the young people in comparison to 1955 changed consumption models among youth and their needs became complicated increasingly and as a result it led to an increase in unemployment, feelings of being deprived and disappointed of future with no trust in the government and their classical education and therefore a sense of non-satisfaction. The studies of the National Youth Organization as the national center of research on young people endorsed such a gap in the society. In describing the characteristics of this gap, it says today's Iran youth forms a generation that has no effective connection with the years before the Islamic revolution.

This lack of connection caused many of the current explanations and concentrations which are used for other social groups to be calm or accept the existing status, seemed unacceptable for this "unidentified" group of young people. On the other side, the rapid changes in youth matters led to decrease the unanimity among youth in family, school and social institutions and created a gradual divide between "individual" and "family", youth and nationality, youth and the policy-makers.

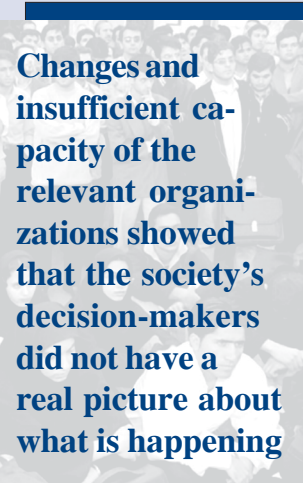
Based on all the above-mentioned points and as sociologists outline for a movement to have four factors of existence of "social divides", "a dominating discourse that denies violence as an approach", "organizations and institutes that lead this discourse" and "a complaining environment", one can conclude that there is a "youth movement" in the society. All these have given Iranian youth movement an identity. The dominating discourse of the movement of young people has serious "opposition" character due to the limitations and deprivations that the youth face, in a

way that we can consider it as a "reformist opposition discourse".

These objections consist of very small issues to fundamental and crucial ones that that step by step form the different parts of "youth movement" puzzle. The Youth National Organization by focusing on dark parts of what is called "youth issues", referred to four crises, i.e. sex crisis, spread of narcotic substances, life crisis and finally crisis in the spread of religious thoughts. The study of these crises could provide authorities with more information, however it seems they have been ignored. Youth sex issues crisis including boy and girls relations, HIV/AIDS, extensive sexual needs, run-away girls, increase in prostitution etc, is one of the four crises which nobody talks about or takes an action. The same is with the spread of abuse of narcotic drugs among young people or life problems or the issue of religious attitudes and prejudice.

Under these circumstances and in the absence of responsible organizations that could follow up the youth needs, various sub-discourses were shaped all with certain opposition nature. These young people tried other ways of objections, for instance we refer to the behavior of groups of young people after the national football match in last autumn that gradually formed a complaint. However after the violent events of July 1999 in the university that led to imprisonment of students, these complaints in 1999 expanded and in certain cases, it ended in violence. We should attribute these issues just to that time because willingness to violence and disorder has always been observed among youth groups. On the other hand, with strengthening of reformism and opening up of the atmosphere and deepening of the generation gap, it was essential for youth non-governmental organizations to find their place as serious institutions that can care for the youth demands. These groups, each with a concern, tried to resolve a problem in the society based on their own capacities.

Since members of these organizations are living in the same society and use the existing capacities of the society, they deny resorting to violence as an approach



**Changes and insufficient capacity of the relevant organizations showed that the society's decision-makers did not have a real picture about what is happening**



to achieve their ends. If a part of “youth movement” shaped students' objections that led to university violent events, the other part gradually tried to seek the support of people by following up the themes such as environment, citizenship rights, peace, human rights, finding solutions for social problems, promotion of cultural level in the families, etc and gained the confidence of the youth and their families. We should forget that the effects of elections of 23rd of May (1997) in drawing the attention toward youth and the legitimacy of their activities.

Open atmosphere of these NGOs and their activities found many supporters and very soon it caused them and senior managers of the country to sit at negotiation tables, and to gain opportunities for their activities so that today “negotiation table” becomes a symbol of applied mechanisms by youth non-governmental organizations to realize their goals. Following up youth demands by certain non-governmental organizations in recent years through effective use of media, publications for distribution among the policy-makers, avoiding secret dialogues, and taking part in political debates, all in all, helped these organizations to grow considerably. While the quantitative growth of these non-governmental organizations was more than the qualitative growth, it seems, little by little, the rate is decreasing.

Students' activities in universities only attracted the students while non-governmental organizations were supported by all people. Therefore, they can act freely without limitations that may be imposed on certain other groups.

These organizations with their activities and connections in families and relations with other institutes were able to overcome social taboos to some extent. Activities of girls and boys side by side, creation of self-consciousness and creativity among young people, establishing new culture of social activity with the presence of youth are other results of the movement. Yet the youth problems in many other areas remained unresolved. Still the referred crises are existent and moreover, the young people think differently on the issues such as social freedoms. In the past years, the government has tried to pay attention to young people but in

fact it has not been able to resolve their problems.

For this reason, it seems that if the government wants to cope with youth problems and cooperate with young people in combating these problems, inevitably it should make basic changes in their policies such as:

1. Their demands should be recognized exactly. The information related to the youth shouldn't be away from the planners and the mass media. Any manipulation of the information relevant to the youth will cause inefficiency.
2. The existing crises should be recognized and the young people should have the right to participate at different levels to resolve their problems.
3. The authorities should not regard the young people as means to reach their ends and also they should think that the youth NGOs can not participate in political and governmental affairs.
4. The young people should be invited to be present at various levels of policy making as well as to have participation in implementation.
5. Essential cultural actions should be taken in order to prevent youth to take distance from traditional and religious taboos that would postpone the resolution of their problems.
6. Iranian education system is based on individualism that doesn't promote a culture of working together. This way of education should be changed to participatory system.
7. Opportunities should be provided for youth participation in social organizations. Existing mechanisms should be reformed in a way that youth participation can be guaranteed in the society.
8. Supporting and loan giving rules to the youth should be transparent and criteria-based system rewarding excellence.
9. The creation of gender-segregated NGOs should be avoided so that the mistake happened in universities by separating women and men does not happen again in youth organizations.

On the other hand, it is recommended that young people avoid massive movements to gain their demands as an easy and cost-effective way and instead try to shape networking and associational activities, and increase their capacities to remove obstacles and cope with challenges.

Paying attention to the above mentioned points places the movement of young people in a safer position in future years to come.

**Activities of girls and boys side by side, creation of self-consciousness and creativity among young people, establishing new culture of social activity with the presence of youth are other results of the movement**



# Meet you in Cyberspace

## Some Points on Electronic Networking of Non-Governmental Organizations

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Use of the Internet has offered civil society a great deal, and non-governmental organizations are little by little taking advantage of the opportunities the web offers. NGOs can start by having an email or by they can go forward and shape a website for their organization. The website can be regarded as an electronic information platform that in one way or another is developed to support decentralized networking. They can step forward and shape a thematic networking website on a subject such as HIV/AIDS. In this way, the role of NGOs as knowledge brokers will be strengthened through its local, national and international strategic partners and organizations. By understanding its importance and embracing it as part of their organizational life, NGOs can mas-

ter the art of virtual networking and make the best connections for their success in their non-for-profit goals. Apart from NGOs, resource centers can become active in this field, and play a major role in shaping networks.

### First Things First

1- Horizontal or Vertical: Networking is a horizontal relationship that the members inside the network can send, collect, process and exchange in a relatively equal basis. There are often networks where the information is not shared among all members, especially where there are smaller networks inside a bigger one, however in general, there is a kind of an equal relationship among

members of a network.

That's a fact that NGOs have been successful in international level in combating landmines<sup>(1)</sup>, working to eliminate worst forms of child labor or in creating a permanent International Criminal Court, mostly in horizontal networks in which there are just a coordinating committee, and the participants to networks have been always contributing in advancing the goal of the alliance. The NGOs networks should be horizontal ones where all can share their experiences. The Web is a linking medium and not a means of domination! As Phar has mentioned, "social capital is not likely to increase if networking is rendered into an odious term".<sup>(2)</sup>

2- Networking happens in the context of an in-

formation society. Therefore, free movement of information should be guaranteed. In fact, networks are forms of organizational charts in an information society. As Mohanbir Sawhney and Deval Parikh have outlined, the intelligence of a network is its functionality – its ability to distribute, store, assemble, or modify information<sup>(3)</sup>. Therefore, while, the citizen privacy is respected, the freedom of expression and the free flow of information and equal access based on transparency should

be guaranteed. This is the first lesson in shaping a network.

### Some Benefits of Networking

- Working in cyberspace is easy and effective.
- Quicker information flow is an important aspect of networking in internet and also a key element of success, especially, where an urgent action is needed to be done or some informative activities should be launched.
- Networks create cooperation (it brings together organizations that share a common concern for the advancement of a cause).
- Networking helps the professional enhancement and can develop the NGOs' capacities. They also

enhance the capacities of individual members through the sharing of knowledge, skills and experiences.

- Networks can expand NGOs' influence. Especially, thematic networks can provide a focus on the related issues (NGOs or members of the network can act as a catalyst for change, since it brings together a range of expertise and experiences which are vital for preparing alternative approaches and solutions, it can offer effective responses for betterment of a situation). Some experts refer to networking as one of the most essential elements in promoting and sustaining reform, since networking acts like a vehicle to share knowledge and information and to build consensus on new approaches.

- Stakeholders network can serve as a platform for focusing action by all interested parties. The stakeholder can be non-governmental organizations, administrators, managers, practitioners, planners, policy-makers and university professor and researchers.

- Networks can facilitate and ensure NGO participation in international events, and also can assist NGOs a great deal in preparation of comprehensive reports.

- The credibility and legitimacy gained from the collective membership generally outweighs what individual member organizations can achieve

- Networks can provide protection for their members, particularly for those organizations that might be vulnerable if challenged on their own.

- Since networks are accessible for everybody, it can raise the public awareness.

- Networks can be a useful means for fundraising. The donors will assist the Network easier than the single NGOs.

### Forms of Networks

There are different forms of networks. They can be in form of open networks (with membership of NGOs, individuals, media). Another form is an NGO to NGO networks in which NGOs are members of the network. Networking could happen within an NGO and members of that NGO can all freely participate in the network. Networking can also be created with stakeholders. For example, a network of environment can be even

**Some experts  
refer to net-  
working as one  
of the most  
essential ele-  
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moting and  
sustaining re-  
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shaped with participation of the related governmental bodies. Sometimes, networking with stakeholders are just built around an information platform. There are alliances on a theme such as combating HIV/AIDS; in this case, it can be an alliance on a minimum basis or a maximum basis (complete consensus on Vision/Mission and the goals).

### Main Features

The main features of a network platform can be:

- E-mail distribution lists and discussion forums or bulletin boards to create deliberations on ideas and contributions through wide consultation and information dissemination.
- Shared public libraries of documents and databases. In this way, sharing information with people with common interests and who are involved with related activities can be possible. Meanwhile we should have in mind that translating data and information into different languages and formats is necessary.
- Another possible feature of network can be offering legal advice from practitioners.
- Preparatory discussions for national and international events and workshops; these networks can offer conferencing services too.
- Links pages of this network platform can be like a portal to all stakeholders as well as an international directory of NGOs and individuals engaged in networking, communication, information activities (we should not forget that global networking is a strategic objective of most organizations).
- A best practices section can collect all action-oriented solutions that have been implemented by NGOs or other stakeholders.
- A network platform can offer limited dedicated space for the NGOs so that they can design their own website in the platform to present themselves. In this way, there are opportunities for the other NGOs to join partnerships in planning and implementation or their projects.
- A training section can provide the network members with new ideas and initiatives that can be used in their organizations.
- There should be a kind of a contract or memorandum of understanding for abusers of infor-

mation exchange or some sort of rules or procedures of information exchange. In this way, the members will decrease the negative aspects of electronic networking such as "providing unreliable or doubtful information", "stealing ideas", "damaging the image of an NGO" or any possible abuse of information.

### Networks in Remote Areas

NGOs can shape projects of electronic networks in remote areas primarily to enable them and Community Based Organizations (CBOs), as well as development organizations working in remote, rural and tribal areas to network with like minded organizations within the region and with national and international NGOs and partner organizations. Due to the lack of exposure to related literature as well as the lack of enough tools and cost-effective appropriate technologies, development organizations working in rural areas are conducting their activities through conventional practices with little or no technological tools. To overcome the above problems, electronic networks in remote areas using technologies like wireless networking wherever necessary in order to increase the capability of networking through electronic media among development organizations. In this case, it is required that non-governmental organizations create special centers equipped with computers and Internet connection so that the activists can have access to computer. We know that it can not be possible easily, however if the NGOs want, they can realize it.

**A network platform can offer limited dedicated space for the NGOs so that they can design their own website in the platform to present themselves**

### Footnotes:

- (1) The 1997 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines, a coalition of more than 1,000 NGOs in 60 countries.
- (2) Kim Beng Phar, Networking as the Foundation of Civil Society, Harvard Asia Quarterly, Winter 1998.
- (3) Mohanbir Sawhney and Deval Parikh, Where Value Lives in a Networked World, Harvard Business Review, January 2001.



# Civil Society in Iran and Germany

(a legal viewpoint)

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When we are talking about civil society, we are indicating simultaneously several elements. Firstly, we distinguish the specifications of a civilized society in comparison with an uncivilized society. In an uncivilized society you can not find an organized system of sovereignty over a certain Nation, because tribes and families are normally constructive elements of uncivilized societies. In these societies you don't need a Magna Charta as the basic and agreed document, prescribing responsibilities and rights of sovereignty and Nation visa versa because everything is determined by the decisions of rulers and in most optimistic cases, by reference to traditions or some basic paradigms or principles provided by unchallengeable



texts. I don't intend to assert that the original difference between civilized and uncivilized society stemmed from the lack or existing of the constitutional law but I believe that the most sensible difference can be recognized when you consider this criterion. Lack of Constitutional law or its insufficiencies is not the sole reason for failure in establishing a civil society but it is the indicative factor shows honestly your success or failure in setting up a civil society.

According to Article 20 of the Constitution of Germany, the basic determinations shaping the legal structure and legitimacy of sovereign power in Germany are as follows: the republic and federative form of the state, democracy and social legal state.

1. **Democracy:** Paragraph 1 of Article 20 of Constitution of Germany has not defined the Democracy conclusively; nevertheless the components of this notion have been ascertained in Constitution<sup>(1)</sup>. This Article implies the most significant element of this notion: Sovereignty of People<sup>(2)</sup>. This paragraph reads: "All state authority emanates from the people. It is being exercised by the people through elections and voting and by specific organs of the legislature, the executive power and the judiciary." The organs which are elected directly by people, like Parliament derive directly their legitimacy from people but the legitimacy of other organs depends to Parliament and accordingly to people's will indirectly.<sup>(3)</sup> The people are the German people. As we have pointed out already, the existing of a Nation based on common race, language or religion or in general, common values are one of the elementary requirements of Civil Society. In a civil society, there is a Nation who contributes actively in determining its political and social destiny and life. In other words, without democracy, the civil society is inconceivable. Is the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran democratic or not? This is a question which its response seems to be very complicated and also controversial. Paragraph 1 of Article 2 of the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran provides that the exclusive sovereignty and right to legislate belongs to God. In spite of the aforementioned Article, Article 6 reads: "In the Islamic

Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution." And on the other hand, Article 56 provides: "Absolute sovereignty over the world and man belongs to God, and it is He Who has made man master of his own social destiny. No one can deprive man of this divine right, nor subordinate it to the vested interests of a particular individual or group. The people are to exercise this divine right in the manner specified in the following articles." It seems that these Articles contravene each other. The authors of Iranian Constitution believe that the people have the right to legislate within the framework of the Islamic law and its jurisprudence. They can not go beyond the boundaries prescribed by the Islamic law. Therefore as we see, the democracy in terms of Iranian Constitution is not the same democracy as we know all over the world; at the same time it includes such distinctive elements, distinguish it from a totalitarian sovereignty. Because in theory and practice there are many factors which avoid us to regard this system as something like the sovereign regimes in Saudi Arabia or same countries.

2. **Federative form of State:** Paragraph 1 of Article 20 of German Constitution reads as follows: "The Federal Republic of Germany is a democratic and social federal state." This principle has also guaranteed in preamble and Articles 23, 30, 70, 83 of German Constitution. This principle rooted in historic experiences of German people.<sup>(4)</sup> The federative form of state has occupied such a serious position in legal structure of German constitutional law that Paragraph 3 of Article 79 prohibits any amendment in Constitution affecting the division of the Federations into States (Länder) and the principle of participation of States (Länder) in legislation. This principle can be regarded as a specific aspect of German constitutional law. Therefore we can not refer this principle for appraisal about civil society in other countries. We can see some aspects of republic form of state in the Islamic Republic of Iran but the historic experiences in Iran have



not required the federative form of the state until now.

**3. Legal State:** Execution of state sovereignty shall be legal. Homogeneity Clause laid down in paragraph 1 of Article 28 of German Constitution provides that the constitutional order in the States (Länder) must conform to the principles of the republican, democratic and social state under the rule of law within the meaning of this Constitution. Regardless of all academic viewpoints and detail discussions in this respect and formal and material aspects of this notion, according to the German Constitution, the most outstanding features and requirements of legal state can be summarized as follows: legal security, clarity of law, predictability, calculability and foreseeability of law and separation of powers. Articles 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the Iranian Civil Code have provided the procedure for publication of laws, codes and generally the enactments of the Parliament. Article 169 of the Iranian Constitution has also provided: "No act or omission may be regarded as a crime with retrospective effect on the basis of a law framed subsequently." We can see the similar rules in legal system of Iran ensuring legal security, clarity, predictability, calculability and foreseeability of law. According to Iranian Constitution, it is also possible to distinguish three separate powers as judiciary, executive and legislative powers. The problem is that Articles 107-112 of Iranian Constitution has vested such general rights to the Leader that raise him over all three powers. Article 57 reads as follows: "The sovereign powers in the Islamic Republic are: legislature, the judiciary, and the executive powers, functioning under the supervision of the absolute religious Leader and the Leadership of the Ummah, in accordance with the forthcoming articles of this Constitution. These powers are independent from each other." As we see, the legal state and rule of law in Iranian Constitution is something different in comparison with other systems of legal state. The Leadership supervises all powers but there are different views on practical and legal sufficiency of supervision over the Leadership.

**4. Social State:** Article 20 of German Constitution has ascertained that the goal of state is realizing the

social security and social justice.<sup>(5)</sup> The distinctive element of the democratic system in Germany in comparison with other liberal democracies is this aspect of German Constitution. The social state in its both forms: social security (for example in case of illness, retirement, joblessness, etc.) and social justice (legislation in such manner to protect the weak people) have similar equivalents in Iranian Constitution, especially in Preamble, Articles 3(9), 43, 46 and 48.

Among the above mentioned principles, the democracy and legal state are the most controversial topics which distinguish the genuine form of civil society from what is now called as civil society in Iran, nevertheless as have already mentioned, this discrepancies can not lead us to justify that the existing system in Iran is total beyond the boundaries of a civil society; It would not be reasonable to disregard the progress taken place in Iran within the recent years in legislation and also interpretation and execution of the law. In spite of all these realities, it deserves to be pointed out that as far as the present contradictions in Constitution have not been removed, the establishment of a civil society will be impossible. Nevertheless, the amendment of Constitutions is not normally the start point of reforms. In most cases this stage will be achieved in result of basic changes. It is obviously clear that Iranian Society has put itself forward in this direction.

**Note:** Mehrdad Molaei has born in 1979, graduated in International law (Master) on 1997 from Shahid Beheshti University (Tehran) and now continues his studies at PHD level in International Law at Humboldt University Berlin. He has cooperated with several Iranian NGOs and also reformist dailies in Iran.

### footnotes

1-Grundzüge des Verfassungsrechts der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Hesse Konrad, 19. Aufl. Heidelberg 1993, §5, vor I, RNrn.127-129.

2-Staatsrecht I, Degenhart Christoph, 10.,neubearb.Aufl., Heidelberg, 1994, §1, RNrn.

3- Ibid.

4- Staatsrecht, Ibid, §1, RNrn. 82.

5-Das Staatsrecht der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Stern Klaus, Band I, 2.Aufl. München 1984 ,§21 I 5.



# Private Sector in Iran

During the past several months, the Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center" (ICSORC) held a series of "social dialogues" between civil society organizations, the private sector, United Nations agencies, and government officials. Each of the groups present discussed potentials for better cooperation and improved relations, identified opportunities, obstacles and challenges to increased cooperation between the sectors. The relationship between civil society and the private sector, was one of the main topics which emerged during these meetings. In response, Mr. Beheshti, the Chairman of the Confederation of Iranian Industries, in a letter addressed to Dr. Razzaghi, director of the ICSORC, provided further details about the Iranian private sector. Below, is a translated version of the full text of his letter, which should serve as insight into developing better relations between the private and voluntary sectors.

Dear Dr. Razzaghi

As a follow-up to the meeting held by ICSORC on November 4, 2002, and your speech during the event, I thought it would be useful for me to provide you with information that could help in developing more cooperation between our sectors. We hope the productive cooperation that is forming between our respective organiza-

tions, will help to achieve a stronger civil society in Iran.

In your report of the Second Social Dialogue among Civil Society Organizations, you have identified appropriately a set of challenges and opportunities for better cooperation between our respective sectors and government, and have also outlined appropriately the roles that each sec-

tor can play in this improved relationship. It is worth mentioning that in your report, on par with the mentioning of civil society, you have also mentioned the private sector. This is noteworthy, because usually the private sector is mentioned in a profit seeking and profit making context. When we examine more closely the laws that govern the private sector, either laws which were established prior to the Revolution, of those which were established after, we realize the Iranian private sector has been deprived from many basic profit making activities which are customary in most parts of the world. For example, in the case of land ownership, in most countries, owners hold the right resources on their property, including mining rights. But, in Iran, this does not hold true, and restrictions for harvesting and farming one's own land exist.

Another example of the limitations placed on the private sector is in the area of trade. While historically trade has served to meet the needs of the various countries engaged in transactions, and serves as a source of income for the private sector, a law dating back to 1928 allocates a monopoly on trade to the government. To enforce this monopoly, an tariff on imports has been established, backed with a fee referred to as the "commercial profit" which is meant to offset the cost incurred by the government for agreeing to forego its right of trade in that instance.

Prior to the Revolution, the private sector in Iran was developing into two distinct branches, one engaged in the service industry, the other in industrial endeavors, and was transitioning out of its traditional shape into a more modern sector. After the Revolution, this direction changed almost completely, and the private sector was dominated by the government. Examples of the transfer of private sector ventures into government's control include some of the following: adoption of laws to nationalize the banking system and the insurance industry; creation of commercial centers by the government; nationalization of transportation systems (Railways, airways, the shipping industry, etc.); nationalization of heavy industry and the metal industry; and the transfer of the consumption industry to the government. Besides imposing innumerable losses to the private sector, these policies imposed heavy costs on consumers.

One of the results of these policies was to create and strengthen the black market, which engaged mostly in illegal trade practices and smuggling, placing the greatest burden on low income and middle income consum-

ers, who have moved further down the income scale. These traffickers are the enemies of the private sector, because not only are they our competitors, but they import goods illegally, which could otherwise be produced nationally by the private sector. The actors engaged in illegal trade, which make up the black market, cannot fairly be classified as the private sector. Additionally, these groups, because they are acting illegally and are fearful of persecution, do not invest their heavy profits for the purposes of production and the delivery of services. As such, they launder their money, by transferring their income to other countries, causing a double drain on national resources. Many countries, which benefit from money laundering schemes, have adopted laws which allow for anonymity of foreign investors, encouraging the practice further.

Considering the discussions we had during the meeting hosted by ICSORC and the analysis provided above, it is not a wonder how pseudo private enterprises, connected with the government, such as banks, insurance companies, social security organization, etc., have gained control of privatization initiatives.

Of the 320,000 industrial companies, documented in 1996, only 11,000 thousand agencies are active and employ more than ten workers. Now if we were to examine more closely the industrial sector in Iran, based on a general definition that industrial units must employ more than 200 workers, then we reach the conclusion that if not all, but at least 90% are governmentally operated units. There are no exact numbers for better analysis, but based on the points provided above, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need for civil society organizations in partnership with the private sector, begin a process to establish alliances in support of consumer rights. This alliance can be extended to efforts which seek to address economic issues and policy, as well as social capital and social responsibilities vis-à-vis the government.

The Confederation of Iranian Industries is committed to fostering effective partnerships and alliances between the private sector and civil society. Taking into account the fact that both the private sector and civil society are weak in terms of their capabilities in Iran, and alliance between these sectors will provide both with great benefits, this is a logical strategy.

[...]

With Best Regards,

Morteza Beheshti

Chairman

Confederation of Iranian Industries



A Report of the Seminar on Rebuilding Iranian Society:

# A Shared Responsibility

Tehran, 31 August 2002

*Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center in cooperation with United Nations Information Center (UNIC-Tehran) held a Seminar entitled "Rebuilding Iranian Society: A Shared Responsibility" on 31 August 2002 in Tehran with presence of more than 100 Iranian NGOs from different cities of Iran. The seminar had five workshops under the titles of: "Rule of Law and Good Governance in Iranian society", "Promoting Social Services: priorities and challenges", "Rebuilding Economy: Towards Sustainable Development", "Integration and disintegration in Iranian society", and "coalition for peace". The result of discussions held in the working groups led to a statement.*

## Dr Razzaghi's Speech

We have learnt through universal experiences that civil society organizations can cooperate with each other to lead the society and they have been able to promote democracy and the quality of human being's lives. In this dynamic world, each society needs to continuously deconstruct and reconstruct itself to survive.

Rebuilding Iranian society is an important topic in the social discussions because the Iranian society has many cracks on its crust and if we do not repair the cracks it can make unavoidable damages to the foundations of the Iranian society. That's why I would like to refer to certain achievements and concerns in rebuilding the society.

The formation of the democracy movement is one of the most important changes happened during the past decade and for the first time, the Iranian society looks at democracy as a final and the last way to save its political and social life and therefore this topic has been the focus of the debates in the society. The result of such move was to extend the participation networks and formation of democratic bodies throughout the country.

Another change in Iranian society has been the emergence of a movement to gain citizenship rights with an emphasis on human rights. This is a significant movement in the society since the social pow-

ers have never paid due attention to the rights by now, while realization of citizenship rights is one of main goals of this movement.

The next important change has been a transition in the social-political behavior of Iranian society. While violence has been persistent, and even in certain discourses has been considered as a "sacred affair", as a result of the emerged changes, this thinking has been marginalized, and now the dominant discourse has been a democratic discourse based on non-violence. Violence is regarded as an unpleasant way not only in talks but in deeds too. Therefore, we are witnessing a revision of words and meanings in this field and we are experiencing an associational and civil life in the framework of civil society discourse.

Beside all above-mentioned achievements, the Iranian society is still facing with tensions, challenges and crises. One of the most important issues which has been reproduced in the past decade is the phenomenon of "clientalism". While this is a pre-modern phenomenon, it is still visible in all levels of Iranian society and in the areas such as politics, society and culture. Clientalism is still the most important obstacle for the society to realize democracy in Iran.

The second challenge in Iran is the unbalanced development which has been resulted in disfiguration

and breakdown of the society in a way that we are now witnessing the growth of problems such as brain drain (migration of intellectuals), addiction, prostitution, human trafficking, etc.

The third crisis in Iranian society is the reduction of social capital. As you may know there is a direct correlation between social capital and economic development. This reduction has led to a social mistrust, disfiguration of society and cynicism during the recent years. If this culture becomes institutionalized, the social trust collapses and people will always look for their personal interest and the public sphere will be completely weak if the social mistrust rises. In one word, the social disbelief could put the society in a state of decay.

Another challenge that must be discussed is "bad governance". This issue has been a main characteristic of Iranian society for years and has caused high financial and human loss. Rise of sub-cultures that are being antagonist with the dominant culture, inefficiency of ideological system in the process of sociability, generation gaps and the growth of marginalization are all the results of bad governance.

Another crisis is the "poor movement" that has been caused due to the anomic condition of the society, unbalanced development, wrong economic planning and therefore, the rise of populism has strengthened the "poor movement".

Finally another problem that has involved our society is the ghost of violence and war that is roaming the region.

Nostalgic trends, Bonapartism, peaceful dictatorship and fascist reading of national or religious identity all try to offer their solutions and introduce themselves as the ways to get out of these crises. While, we believe that the only way to get out of such situation is to rely on democratic and civil solutions that you, representatives of civil society, are a reflection of that solution.

In the end, I would like to mention two points regarding the challenges of Iranian society that is about the civil society organizations. To guarantee the implementation of great ideas, the society needs powerful leaders. Therefore, if the civil society or-

ganizations would like to play a major role in rebuilding the society, they need to develop powerful leaders.

The second thing that civil society organizations should pay attention is their coherence and organization. To realize a national mission, they should shape a comprehensive coalition to reach to peace, democracy and sustainable development. It is hoped that civil society organizations can realize such a mission.

### Final Statement of the Seminar on Rebuild-



### ing Iranian Society: A Shared Responsibility

1- Rebuilding Iranian society is a national shared responsibility. Although over one decade has passed since Iran-Iraq war and great endeavors have already done to reconstruct the war-stricken society, reconstruction is the first and the most important issue in the agenda of government, private sector and the civil society, due to this fact that eight-year war has incurred material and human losses and damages on the society. Let's profit the opportunity and while reviewing the achievements of the last decade, recall the duties and responsibilities of the civil society organizations and announce their viewpoints about rebuilding Iranian society.

2- Rule of law and good governance has been one of the most important demands of civil society during the recent years. The civil society organizations appreciate the significant steps taken during recent years in guaranteeing rule of law,



however believe that the achievements have not been in accordance with endeavors and still many political, economic and cultural fields of society are not covered by law. Also, the laws themselves are not in accordance with the social progress and today's requirements. Therefore, there should be some serious revisions in laws related to justice and legislation. Also, the inequalities in gender and ethnic issues should be considered. In the field of civil and political rights, the civil society organizations believe in removing the obstacles in candidacy and establishment of parties and political institutions can lead to promotion of civil society and can be regarded as effective steps in good governance.

3- Social security for all is the second important issue that should be considered by the civil society organizations. Social security is an important factor in guaranteeing human rights and their dignity. The challenge that Iranian civil society is facing in maintaining human dignity, has been the lack of hope in future. The civil society organizations while appreciating the government's endeavor in designing and approving the comprehensive system of social security and welfare, requests the government the prompt implementation of the project and the civil society organizations announce their readiness in expanding the social justice and eliminating poverty from Iranian society in the field of housing, labor, intellectual security, education, health through social services and presence of groups' representatives in social system, periodical timings, preparing protocols and regulations, informative and research system.

4- Economic reconstruction with an approach

based on sustainable human development is another concern of Iranian civil society organizations, in which the people have to be the goal and the means of development. Iranian civil society organizations believe that one of the lost chains of the first, second and third national development plans have been a lack of such an approach based on sustainable human development. A solely classic approach based on economic growth without paying due attention to social capital and its indices has led to a slow progress in indices of sustainable development. Therefore, the civil society organizations recommend the government to do any planning - from developing to implementing - should be done in cooperation with stakeholders and civil society with an aim to reach sustainable development.

5- The move towards integration and avoidance from disintegration is one of the responsibilities of civil society organizations since Iranian society is suffering numerous gaps that can lead to violence and conflicts in society, if they become active. Therefore, while recognizing the pluralism in society, these organizations should marginalize the factors of disintegration and strengthen the factors of integration. In this way, to prevent the disintegration of the society, there should be a new interpretation of identity that can include all differences in values while respecting personal or social beliefs of others.

6- At the end, the civil society organization would like to express their concern about the ghost of war and violence that is roaming in the region and also in our country, since we have suffered serious human and material damages during the past years.





Therefore, today, the civil society organizations only think about peace, a peace based on equal rights of human beings and nations. To realize such sustainable peace, one of the most important approaches, is a dialogue among the social groups, and between social groups and the government. To cope with violence and war, the civil society organizations consider the "coalition for peace" as a main item in their agenda and therefore recommend all groups to play their vital role in this field. To institutionalize peace, we should mobilize the triangle of family, school and society parallel to the global civil society through various mechanisms. 7- The Iranian civil society organizations believe that despite the attempts and decisions made in

recent years to develop and promote the status of Iranian women and girls and despite the fact that some women and especially girls could reach high positions in different fields of activities, but there are still discriminations against women that put a tremendous pressure on them. Unfortunately, women's and girls' weak presence in decision-taking, decision-making, policy-making and management make the condition worse than it must be. The country will not reach a balanced and sustainable development unless all major groups of people, disregarding sex, race, class and ethnic groups can enjoy equal human rights. In this regard, the only way is to consider gender perspective in the process of development planning.

### Call for Papers

## Seminar on Social Capital and Iranian Civil Society

To strengthen the civil society and democracy in the Iranian society, the Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Centre (ICSORC) in cooperation with civil society organizations is holding a seminar entitled "Social Capital and Iranian Civil Society" on the 13th of January, 2003 in Tehran.

#### A. Objectives

Social capital is the fundamental element in consolidating democracy, sustainable development and the dynamism of the civil society. Also the amount of social capital can be regarded as the facilitator of the democracy process and the establishment of civil society. With attention to the importance of the amount of social capital in the growth and strengthening of democracy and the civil society, this seminar will study the social capital situation in the Iranian society and opportunities, challenges and future prospects.

#### B. Time and place

Time: Monday, the 13th of January, 2003. 9am - 5pm.

Place: The conference hall of the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs (Vali-e Asr Avenue, before the Parkvay Junction)

#### C. Main Subjects

- Definitions, methods and opinions of social capital;
- The social capital situation in the Iranian society;
- Opportunities and challenges;
- Future prospects.

#### D. Paper submission

The papers should be submitted in A4 pages, not more than two pages, and must be sent to the seminar secretariat's address before 21st of December 2002. In the event that an article is accepted the full article must be sent to the secretariat of the seminar by the 5th of January 2003, and in no more than 20 A4-pages.

#### E. Registration

We invite all interested lecturers, intellectuals, thinkers, professors and those active in civil society organizations to take part in the seminar. Interested persons who would like to take part in the seminar without sending a paper must apply in written to the secretariat of the seminar by the 21st of November 2002.

#### F. Secretariat address

Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Centre (ICSORC)  
3rd Floor - No. 36 Jahansooz St. - Larestan St. - Motahari Ave. - Tehran 15985, Iran

Tel. and Fax: +98 21 880 44 46 / +98 21 896 62 07

Email: [info@icsorc.org](mailto:info@icsorc.org)

Website: <http://www.icsorc.org>

# The Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center

## Introduction

In the recent decades, the world has been witnessing a growth of civil society organizations, and with Iran's developments during the 1990s, the grounds have been prepared for the growth and promotion of civil society organizations. This development has been caused by a change in paradigm of development, in which, the main actors of development are civil society organizations. Although, these organizations are playing a major role in different social contexts, there are a lot of challenges and obstacles in their way, among which, we can refer to a lack of literature, legal grounds, and organic relations with government, private sector and international organizations, etc.

In this regard, a series of talks shaped between the UNDP office in Tehran, the government of Islamic Republic of Iran, and certain non-governmental organizations, and as a result, a two-year project was initiated under the title of "Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center" that started its activities since May 2002.

## Objectives

Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center has been created to realize the following objectives:

- To increase the operational capacity of civil society organizations through promotion of their access to information, resources, and technical knowledge;
- To provide human resources and management capacity-building to promote their efficient and effective functioning and implementation of their programs and activities;
  - To exchange experiences among the civil society organizations in Iran and other countries;
- To empower civil society organizations through various methods such as holding training courses, meetings and seminars as well as offering legal consultancy.

## Activities

- 1- Creation of an information system by an internet network and establishment of a "coffee-net";
- 2- Creation of a databank and a specialized library;
- 3- Creation of a website for the Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center;
- 4- Holding training courses and workshops;
- 5- Conducting research projects and studies;
- 6- Offering legal consultancy;
- 7- Holding meetings between civil society organizations in Iran and also among such organizations at regional and international level, as well as meeting between government, private sector and civil society;
- 8- Publication of bi-weekly newsletter and also books and articles.

## Steering Committee

The Center has a steering committee that makes policies, facilitates the implementation of project, monitors the activities, evaluates the project and mobilizes more resources for center. The steering committee is composed of representatives of United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Organization of Management and Planning, City Council of Tehran, Network of Environmental NGOs; Network of Youth NGOs, Network of Women's NGOs, Network of Charities, three representatives of the provincial non-governmental organizations.

## Financial Resources

The initial budget of the center has been provided by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the government of Islamic Republic of Iran. It is intended to guarantee the sustainability of the project by offering consultancy and training services, publishing and accepting gifts, donations, membership dues, etc.

## How to contact us

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# ICSORC

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