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Building Organisational Capacity in Iranian Civil Society: Mapping the Progress of CSOs

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 1

1 Introduction and Research Methodology 3

2 Background to Iran 5

2.1 Demographics 5

2.2 Political System 7

2.3 Economics 9

2.4 Religion 10

2.5 Situation of Women 10

3 History and Evolution of Civil Society in Iran 13

3.1 Pre Second World War 13

3.2 Post Second World War 14

3.3 The 1979 Islamic Revolution 15

3.4 The War with Iraq (1980–88) 17

3.5 Refugees and INGOs – The 1980s and 1990s 18

3.6 The 1990s 19

4 The Current Context and Characteristics of Iranian Civil Society 24

4.1 Diversity and Funding of CSOs in Iran 24

4.2 The Environment in which Civil Society Operates in Iran 26

4.3 Impact of Civil Society on Development, Rights and Welfare 30

5 Key Capacity Building Issues for Civil Society in Iran 32

5.1 The Meaning and Purpose of Capacity Building in Iran 32

5.2 Capacity Building Issues in Iran 33

5.2.1 Internal Organisation 33

5.2.2 External Relations 37

5.2.3 Programme Performance 40

6 Summary of Priority Needs and Current Issues for Organisational Capacity Building Practice in Iran 42

7 Conclusions 43

Bibliography 44

Appendix 1: Legal Forms of Registration of CSOs in Iran 46

Appendix 2: Interview Format 48

Appendix 3: Respondents 49

Appendix 4: NGO Resource Centres in Tehran 50

Appendix 5: Acronyms 51

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By Catherine Squire

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Executive Summary

Iran has a vibrant, firmly established, and well-supported civil society, which has developed with strong roots in local traditions and communities, and is virtually entirely funded from local resources. New social problems in the 1990s, greater official support for the work of CSOs, and a huge rise in the number of young educated people, fuelled a large expansion in the sector in the last ten years, and recent exposure to international CSOs has resulted in new skills, ideas, and methods being enthusiastically adopted by Iranian organisations.

CSO support organisations are relative newcomers: most were established in the last 5 years. External support has been crucial to their development, with funding either from the UN or INGOs. In that time, a great deal of experience has accumulated, and the approaches of CSOs are evolving constantly. However, learning from experience is largely undocumented and formal evaluations are rare.

Capacity building has a strong emphasis on creating an environment in which civil society can flourish. Most capacity building in Iran has been aimed at promoting the concepts of democracy, rights, and citizens' participation and has taken the form of workshops, seminars, and translations of books and articles in official media. The other main form of capacity building has been training courses for individuals in skills such as project planning, proposal writing, and partnership working. In addition, a few organisations have started to work on *organisational* capacity building. Of the CSO support organisations in Iran, Noavaran has started developing an organisational capacity assessment tool, and Markaz Karvarzi and Hamyaran[1] are working with grass roots community groups (see Appendix 4 for details of NGO support organisations). However, this work is still in its initial stages.

[1] Hamyaran Iran NGO Resource Centre is a registered organisation focused on capacity building of NGOs and is an initiator of community empowerment projects countrywide. It has played a leading role in providing capacity building services to CSOs, carrying out research, and supporting the development of networks of NGOs across the country. See www.hamyaran.org

The greatest challenge facing civil society is how to work effectively in the difficult climate created by the changes of government and political uncertainty. Some groups have developed the skills to build alliances with key government organisations, communicate effectively with government partners, and identify areas where government needs the support of CSOs in order to have an impact. Although much has been learned, there are no structures in place to help civil society organisations, both old and new, to learn from each other, disseminate good practice, reward achievements, or learn from successes. CSOs are still in the process of developing a culture of sharing and mutual support that would strengthen their effectiveness.

There is, at present, little consensus regarding whether or how the process of capacity building has led to the strengthening of CSOs in Iran. Although capacity building activities (such as training workshops, seminars, and publications) are not undertaken within the context of organisational capacity building initiatives and are aimed more at individuals and staff within organisations, there has been indisputable growth in the capacity of Tehran-based CSOs. This growth in capacity has shown itself in the way that CSOs have pushed the boundaries of what they are able to do, now addressing a range of issues which previously were taboo, while also engaging government agencies in the process through debate, discussion and even partnerships.

1 Introduction and Research Methodology

INTRAC's Praxis Programme aims to enable Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to more effectively fulfil their mission through increased generation, access to, and exchange of, innovative and contextually appropriate practice and research in the field of organisational capacity building. This Praxis Paper is one of a series of geographical reflections framed by the topic: *Recognising and Responding to Culture and Context.* Previous papers within this series have examined contextual influences on capacity building in France (Praxis Paper 1 '*Capacity Building from a French Perspective*')[2] and Spain (Praxis Paper 5 '*NGO Capacity Building: Perspectives from the NGO Sector in Spain*').[3]

Within this topic, Praxis aims to explore how the notion of capacity building is understood and applied in practice to strengthen CSOs in different cultures and contexts. These explorations recognise that culture and context are dynamic and varied over space and time, and are influenced by politics, age, gender, religion, class, environment, economics, history, etc.

This Praxis Paper explores the origins and practical applications of capacity building approaches in Iran. The aim was *not* to deliver a fully representative description and analysis of capacity building of CSOs in Iran but to provide an exploratory insight into organisational capacity building issues facing some CSOs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), focusing specifically on those based in Tehran. The paper begins with background information regarding Iran (Section 2), following which the history and evolution of civil society in Iran is charted (Section 3). Section 4 outlines the current context and characteristics of Iranian civil society, highlighting ways in which this affects and influences capacity building efforts, and Section 5 focuses on the key capacity building issues for civil society in Iran This is followed by a summary of the priority needs and current issues for organisational capacity building practice in Iran (Section 6) and final conclusions (Section 7).

The Paper uses the CIVICUS definition of civil society: 'the sphere of voluntary action between the market and the state'.[4] Thus, the term 'civil society organisation' (CSO) is used within this paper to cover the whole spectrum of associations, charities, guilds, credit unions, non-governmental organisations, and community based organisations (CBOs) that exist in Iran today. The term non-governmental organisation (NGO), on the other hand, is used specifically to refer to the more recently evolved organisations that address development and social issues.

The timing of the research undertaken for this study coincided with President Ahmadinejad taking office and announcing his Cabinet. This was a turning point for

[2] Sorgenfrei (2004).
[3] Hursey (2005).
[4] Heinrich (2004).

civil society as it marked the end of the relatively open period for the sector under President Khatami and the start of an uncertain time, with new personnel appointed at many levels within government departments and new NGO regulations and controls issued and applied. Many of those interviewed were reflecting back on the last 8 years and had already begun to think about what the changing context meant for their work. It was therefore a good time to take stock of the experience of capacity building in Iran, and to look to the future to assess how this experience could be built upon.

The research for this paper was carried out during August 2005. A semi-structured interview format was used with each interview lasting about 1–1½ hours. Questions focused both on the informants' own experience of capacity building and the wider lessons of capacity building generally in Iran (mainly but not exclusively in Tehran). A total of 10 interviews were carried out with people from a range of organisations: five from NGO support organisations,[5] two from NGOs, two from embassies that support capacity building activities, and one from a United Nations agency that was also involved in capacity building.

A second stage of the research was a 2-hour focus-group discussion conducted with an additional 10 participants from different strands of civil society, including senior staff and board members of NGOs, a journalist, a member of a cooperative, a freelance trainer, and a volunteer from an environmental NGO. The purpose of the focus group was to explore basic concepts such as: What is civil society in Iran?; How does it relate to other sectors?; and What is meant by capacity building? In addition to the interviews and focus groups, this paper draws on information in reports from various agencies that were collected and reviewed, as listed in the bibliography along with other published documents used.

Due to the nature of the research topic and the limitations of gaining information via questionnaires, it was felt that interviews and focus-group discussions were the most effective data collection method. I knew most of the respondents personally from my work with NGOs in Iran from 1993 to 2003. However, the facts presented here are based on statements from those interviewed and/or published sources in order to avoid introducing my own opinions and views.

[5] Usually referred to in Iran as NGO resource centres.

2 Background to Iran

This section provides an overview of the history and background of Iran, focusing on a number of aspects that are especially significant in the context of civil society: demographics; the political system; economics; religion; and the situation of women. These have probably been the most important motivating factors in the development of formal and informal organisations leading to the current complex tapestry of civil society in Iran. This section provides an outline of the context in which to analyse the emergence and development of civil society and the environment in which it operates today.

2.1 Demographics[6]

The demographics of Iran are staggering. The population rose by 34 million to 60 million in the 30 years leading up to 1996. As a result, during the early 1990s the Ministry of Education had to provide places for one million extra school-aged children per year, and sixty per cent of the current population are under the age of 25. These young people are literally children of the revolution, many born as a result of the policies promoting large families in the early years of the Islamic revolution after 1979.

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has emphasised creating opportunities for education for the whole population, particularly in rural and deprived areas, and for girls and illiterate adults. Although there are still great disparities across the country, overall literacy rates for women and girls rose from 35 per cent in 1976 to over 80 per cent in 2005 and girls are increasingly staying on longer in education than boys: in 2003–4, 48 per cent of primary school students were girls, but due to a higher proportion of boys dropping out of secondary school, 53 per cent of university students were women.

The high overall levels of education and the better access women have to it, however, does not necessarily translate into access to jobs: according to UNICEF, the unemployment rate of young women aged 15 to 24 rose from 26.8 per cent in 1996 to 40.6 per cent in 2001 and amongst young men rose from 20.5 per cent to 35 per cent. Unemployment thus constitutes a major challenge and the UN estimates that 500,000 jobs a year need to be created to absorb the new entrants to the job market – double the current rate. Unemployment for young people is probably one of the drivers behind the significant brain drain of educated young people, with tens of thousands leaving every year as migrants to the US, Canada, Australia and other countries.

[6] All figures unless otherwise stated taken from Iran Statistical Yearbook, 2005.

The youthful population of Iran may partly explain why it has one of the fastest growth rates of Internet use in the world, and is second only to Israel in the Middle East in setting up widely available Internet services. World Bank figures for Internet use show a rise in use from 2,500 people in 1995, to over 1 million in 2001, and 4.8 million in 2003 (in a population of 66 million).[7] The high levels of Internet use is a significant factor in Iranian civil society, with both traditional CSOs and newer NGOs using the Internet to promote their activities, communicate with each other, and make international contacts.[8]

Although Government figures state that 99 per cent of the population is Muslim,[9] it does not provide figures regarding the numbers of Sunnis and Shiites; however, the majority of the population is Shiite. The single largest group ethnic group are the Persians and there are significant minorities of Kurds, Turkmens, Azeris, Baluchis, Arabs, Lurs, Armenians, and Assyrians (see Figure 1 below). According to some accounts, the majority of children starting first grade do not speak Persian[10] as their mother tongue.[11] Of these ethnic groups the majority is predominately Shiite; however, the majority of Kurds and Baluchis are Sunni. Other religions with significant numbers of adherents include Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews. Each of these minorities has its own registered community organisations, including women's groups, youth groups, and associations that manage various endowments such as hospitals, libraries, and schools for their communities.[12] Nomadic tribes have been encouraged to settle; however, there are still officially over 200,000 nomads in the country, and some estimates are as high as 2.5 million.

[7] www.worldbank.org/ir
[8] See for example www.emdad.ir(website of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation), and www.greenfront.org(website of the Green Front of Iran).
[9] Iran Statistical Yearbook 2005.
[10] Persian is known as 'Farsi' in Iran.
[11] Quoted in Howard (2002) p. 87.
[12] Iran NGO Resource Centre (2002) .

Figure 1: Distribution of Ethnic and Religious Groups in Iran

Source: University of Texas Library website.

2.2 Political System

The guiding principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran's government is the concept of the Velayat e Faqih or the Guardianship of the Supreme Islamic Jurisprudent (usually known as Supreme Leader). Under this system, the Supreme Leader, now Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is appointed by the most senior religious judges and 'the legitimacy of all decisions and acts in the public domain depends on the approval and authorization of the supreme jurist'[13] – although this may be mediated through other bodies. He is infallible and has the same authority as the Imams,[14] being their successors.[15]

The Supreme Leader is the head of state since all the policies of the government, and laws passed by the (democratically elected) parliament ultimately must have his approval to be implemented. He also controls all the security services of the state

[13] Kadivar (2002).
[14] The 12 Imams are the descendants of the Prophet Mohammed and leaders of the Shiite Muslim community, who are believed to be perfect examples to their followers and had to be followed since they were appointed by God.
[15] Abrahamian (1993).

(army, police, revolutionary guards, judiciary) other major decision-making bodies and the radio and TV.

Presidents of Iran

- **Abolhassan Banisadr** - President from January 1980 to his impeachment in June 1981.
- **Mohammad Ali Rajai** - elected president on August 1981 in the wake of Banisadr's impeachment. Assassinated on August 30 of the same year.
- **Ali Khamenei** - elected president in October 1981. Re-elected in 1985. Became Supreme Leader after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Fulfilled the role of both Supreme Leader and President between the death of Khomeini and the election of Rafsanjani. Still currently Supreme Leader.
- **Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani** - elected president in August 1989, re-elected in 1993, served until August 1997.
- **Mohammad Khatami** - elected president in August 1997, re-elected in 2001. First reformist to hold office, served until August 2005.
- **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** - elected in a run off in June 2005, served since August 2005.

The *Velayat e Faqih* system is not compatible with a Western definition of democracy – in which ultimate power rests with the people who elect a government to serve them. Nevertheless, popular participation is very strong in the democratic processes for parliamentary and presidential elections. It was a major surprise when President Khatami was elected by a landslide vote in 1997 (with 69 per cent of votes from the voting population), as few commentators predicted him as the favourite. During the election, however, he became the preferred candidate of women and the younger generation and was dubbed the 'the captain of the ship of Civil Society'. Rather than using a Western understanding, he promoted a vision of an Islamic civil society to which Iranians could relate, based on the model of the society and government of the city of Medina under the rule of the Prophet Mohammed. In Khatami's view, this ideal society included equal rights for all citizens under the rule of law and an accountable government. This approach opened up an unprecedented debate in Iran on the role of the state and citizens, and the meaning of civil society for an Islamic state.[16]

During Khatami's presidency, the most significant government reforms passed by parliament were effectively vetoed by the Supreme Leader and, despite a growing liberalism in society (some reform of divorce laws, and more relaxed enforcement of the rules for Islamic dress for women for example), the majority of the population did not see any tangible benefits during President Khatami's two terms in office (from 1997–2005). In June 2005 public concern over high unemployment, increasing poverty, and government corruption resulted in a backlash against long-established political figures and the election of the relatively unknown conservative Mahmoud

[16] Emami (2002); Aliabadi (2000).

Ahmadinejad. He has a reputation as a simple man of the people, and is known for his strong religious beliefs and revolutionary credentials. He served for some years in the elite Revolutionary Guards and became Mayor of Tehran in 2003. In this capacity he significantly reduced support to Tehran-based NGOs funded by the previous reformist mayor. A general concern among civil society groups is that Ahmadinejad appeared to associate the modern NGOs with Western ideas and interests during the election campaign, while in contrast approving of charities and foundations.[17]

2.3 Economics

The Iranian economy is dominated by its reliance on crude oil. All oil revenues go to the State, which is therefore the single most dominant actor in the economy. Oil revenues provide 80 per cent of export earnings and 40-50 per cent of government revenue. Three other factors have reinforced the role of the state in the economy: large-scale development projects in the 1970s (such as irrigation schemes for large scale sugar production in the south west); the nationalisation of significant sectors of the economy after the 1979 revolution; and the restructuring of production during the 8-year war with Iraq in the 1980s, when many items were produced locally and by the government as a result of sanctions.[18] Borders between the public and private economy are ambiguous because of the prevalence of semi-state institutions, especially the revolutionary *bonyads* (foundations) (see box in Section 3.3 below). Many of these were set up after the revolution in 1979 to manage factories, businesses, real estate and other assets confiscated from the royal family and their circle. However, it is estimated that overall the public sector controls about 80 per cent of the Iranian economy, with 17 per cent in private hands and 3 per cent in cooperatives.[19]

A study in 1999 of the obstacles to private sector investment in Iran found that the main barriers were changing regulations and policies.[20] This is significant for civil society, as it shows that parallel problems facing CSOs (changing regulations and an insecure environment) are a feature of the Iranian state's relationships with other sectors.

Another important economic factor is high levels of consumer price inflation, which has been running on average at 15 per cent a year over the last 10 years. This inflation is a burden on the poorest parts of the population, who suffer disproportionately from the increases in food prices. This is slightly alleviated, however, by the system of basic food subsidies provided through coupons for sugar, oil, bread, and cheese, which were introduced during the war and are still in place.

[17] Christopher de Bellaigue, *Iran's Mystery Man*, The New York Review of Books, 2005/07/29.
[18] Economist Intelligence Unit, Iran Country Report 2005.
[19] Khajepour (2000).
[20] See Khajepour (2000) p. 584.

2.4 Religion

Although the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran took place in the 7th century, it was not till the reign of Shah Abbas from 1588–1629 that Shiite Islam was made the official religion of Iran. Shah Abbas' motive for this was to provide a unifying identity for the country, as part of his strategy of increasing central control over the regions, as Iran was (and still is) a vast country of diverse ethnic groups, languages, and religious traditions.

Shiite Muslims make up only about 10per cent of Muslims around the world. However, they are a majority in Iran and Iraq, with significant numbers also living in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Tajikistan. Shiites have historically been dispossessed and persecuted by Sunni Muslims, and many Sunnis do not accept Shiites as true Muslims. The key event of the Shiite tradition is the martyrdom of the Caliph Ali's son Hussain (the Prophet's grandson) by the forces of the Sunni ruler at the battle of Karbala in 680. This event is marked by a month of mourning every year in Shiite communities and is the focus of very strong community mobilisation for prayers, re-enactments of the passion plays based on the events of the battle, processions, and large-scale distributions of free meals to the whole community. Giving to charity is a sacred duty in Islam and is taken very seriously. Among both Shiites and Sunnis, the culture of giving is widespread and includes not just regular donations to religious leaders or the poor, but also giving time, skills, talents, and possessions.

2.5 Situation of Women

The situation of women under Iranian law, in politics, and in employment is particularly relevant to a discussion of civil society, as restrictions placed upon them have had specific influence on their lives and their involvement in civil society. To some extent at least, women have been driven to set up and participate in CSOs as a way of getting around the limitations and conditions imposed on them both before and since the Islamic revolution in 1979.

In day-to-day life in Iran, women are those most affected by the discriminatory laws relating to divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Men still have a unilateral right to divorce their wives and men almost always get custody of children after a divorce. In current interpretations of Islamic law (Sharia), a woman's testimony in court is worth half that of a man. She may receive half the compensation a man would receive and under Iran's blood money law (diyah) a woman's life is worth half of a man's.[21] Although not legally sanctioned, social and cultural practices discriminate against women's employment (for example, young married women are often expected to prioritise having children above finding work and pursuing their careers), and women are barred from certain official positions such as judges and the office of President.

[21] See for example ''The Road to Globalization Runs Through Women's Struggle',by Mahmood Monshipouri http://www.iranchamber.com/podium/society/040910_globalization_women_struggle_iran2.php

According to official statistics, only 10 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce is women; however, there is evidence[22] that a large number of women do work in small and medium private enterprises, where employers do not declare them in order to avoid paying tax and insurance.

However, at the same time as these discriminatory practices are exercised, the official ideology of the Islamic Republic strongly promotes women's participation in political life and society in general as promoters of Islamic values. As Ayatollah Khomeini wrote:

> *The laws of Islam are for benefit of both man and women, and women must have a say in the fundamental destiny of the country. Just as you have participated in our revolutionary movement, indeed played a basic role in it, now you must also participate in its triumph, and must not fail to rise up again whenever it is necessary.*[23]

Indeed, the positive consequences of women's participation can be seen in the progress made in women's literacy and health indicators since the 1979 revolution.[24] In addition, although only 12 out of the 290 members of the 7th Majles (Parliament) are women, their participation in local democracy has been strong. In the local council elections of 1998 (the first to be held since the revolution), 297 women were elected to city and some 484 women to rural councils – 11 per cent of all local council members.[25] What is more, in 56 cities women topped the list of elected councillors in terms of votes received, and in another 58, they came second. Women voters were key in the election of the reformist President Khatami in 1997 and 2001.[26]

In fact, women have played an active role in politics for over 100 years: they were involved in the Tobacco protests of 1891 (a popular uprising against a British attempt to control the tobacco monopoly) when they broke their husbands' water pipes and joined men and religious leaders in protest demonstrations. They were also instrumental in organising protests during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, when, 'They facilitated the strikes, lent their moral and financial support to the constitutionalists and defended them physically against the forces of the Shah'.[27] In the early years of the 20th century, women mobilised around the issues of promoting women's rights, developing girls' education, and founding health facilities

[22] Quoted in Keddie (2000) p. 427.
[23] Ruhollah Khomeini, ''Address to a Group of Women in Qum,'' 6 March 1979, quoted in Kazemi (1996) p.129.
[24] UNDP Tehran 2003.
[25] ''*A report on the measures taken by the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding women*,'' website of the Embassy of the I.R. Iran in Denmark, http://www.iran-embassy.dk
[26] Kar (2000).
[27] Afary (1996).

for women. These groups were just the first of many associations, parties, and organisations founded by women to promote their interests.[28]

In recent years, Islamic women activists have had an impact in driving changes to discriminatory practices. To give one example: Zahra Rahnavard, the wife of a former Prime Minister, was responsible in 1989 for negotiating the removal of quotas limiting the number of women who could enrol in Universities.[29] Many parents now allow their daughters to travel long distances alone across the country to attend universities allocated to them according to their placement in the entrance exams. In fact it could be said that in some ways Iranian society is ahead of the law; for example, although the minimum age of marriage for girls is 9 years of age, in practice the average age of first marriage for women is rising – from 20 in 1986 to 24 years in 2004.[30] Laws have been passed to raise the minimum age of marriage, most recently in 2001. However, these have then been quashed by the senior religious bodies who scrutinise new legislation. This issue and many others continue to be debated by civil society groups from all parts of the religious and political spectrum, who are all playing a role in pushing for legal reform from below – especially in the area of women's and children's rights.

[28] See Namazi (2000) for a detailed exposition of the history and development of women CSOs including a discussion of women in the media, and in cooperatives.
[29] Moghadam (1993) p. 187.
[30] Quoted from an expert at the Statistics Centre of Iran in Iran Daily online 11 April 2005.

3 History and Evolution of Civil Society in Iran

There have been a number of major forces driving the evolution of CSOs in Iran, including the influence of religious and cultural traditions, the need for people with common interests to work together, and responses to political changes. This section charts the evolution of the civil society sector in Iran, highlighting specific events, driving forces, and factors that have affected its development and capacity building efforts.

3.1 Pre Second World War

From time immemorial rural communities in Iran have organised cooperative ways of managing the two big threats they faced: the scarcity of water supplies on the Iranian plateau and oppression by despotic and arbitrary rulers, bandits, and invaders.[31] Until the end of the 19th century, the central government had little direct influence on the lives of ordinary citizens, but growing dissatisfaction with the despotic, corrupt, and negligent rule of the Qajar kings led to a series of revolts around the country at the turn of the 20th century. Associations of reformers, merchants, and Freemasons played a major role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, alongside leading clerics who wanted to re-establish Iran as a strong Shiite state. In 1906, for the first time, the king was forced to accept a constitution ensuring the equality of all before the law and a national assembly to share power with the king.

Photo: A nationalist council at Rasht during the constitutional revolution (Source: Iran Chamber Society website)

This period also saw a rise in women's activism. Women were directly involved in the protests and some acted as couriers for the Constitutionalists – hiding messages and arms under their veils. During the last weeks of the revolution, several hundred

[31] Nahid Motiee, "Introduction to the Traditional Community Organisations of Iran," quoted in Namazi (2000) p.17.

women protested against Russian interference in front of the parliament building.[32] Associations were set up including for example the Association for the Freedom of Women (1907), advocating for women's rights; and the Secret Union of Women (1907), advocating for the poor. While these groups were centred around an elite in Tehran, women's groups and societies were also set up in provincial towns, for example the group set up in 1907 in Azarbaijan to combat 'ancient traditions that are harmful and contrary to progress.'[33]

3.2 Post Second World War

The years following the Second World War saw the power of the monarchy and the military establishment strengthened. It is widely acknowledged that these years saw independent political activity driven underground and CSOs were given little room to operate.[34]As an American commentator on US foreign policy in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s noted 'the Iranian state ... operated without the kind of societal input that is often provided by such mechanisms as legitimate political parties, popularly elected legislatures, a free press and local level political activity.'[35] Despite this, the post-war period was a significant time for the formation of professional, trade and craft associations such as The Iranian Midwifery Society (1944), the Society of Professional Women (1941), the Iranian Writers Association (1968), and the Iranian Medical Association (1969) and other associations, such as the Jewish Women's Organisation (1947), and the Charity Association of Armenian Women of Tehran (1961). However, strict limitations and restrictions were imposed on these associations by the Shah's administration to restrict their ability to set independent agendas.[36]

The major exception to the state's interference was in religious structures where the influence of the state was weak. Thus traditional religious institutions and CSOs were able to continue to work and even expand their activities into the political sphere during the 1960s and 1970s. The oldest form of charity fund is the *vaqf* – or religious endowment – which flourished during this period. Women's religious gatherings (*sofrehs* and *jalasehs*) became engaged in political debates and in some cases have evolved into formal organisations for training and lobbying in the public sphere.[37] Another example is the *sandogh-e quarz-ol-hasaneh* or interest-free loan funds (see box).

[32] Mackey (1996) p. 154.
[33] Janet Afary (1966).
[34] Nezam Mafi (1995).
[35] Quoted in Kazemi (1996) p. 121.
[36] Spellman (2005).
[37] Monir Amadi, personal communication, 23 August 2005 – see case study below for more details.

Interest-free loan funds (*sandogh-e quarz-ol-hasaneh)*

The first ***sandogh-e quarz-ol-hasaneh*** was created in a mosque in a poor area of Tehran in 1970, with the aim to provide a safety net for those who became unemployed as a result of the political movement against the monarchy. By 1979 around 200 funds had been created and the numbers expanded exponentially after the revolution. In 1988 it was estimated there were 3,000 interest-free loan funds and their number continues to grow, with some estimates as high as 10,000 now (e.g. see Tahmasebi). The funds have a strong Islamic basis and are often based in mosques and supported by local bazaar merchants. They provide short-term, interest-free loans to members of the community and are guaranteed by local leaders. Loans are given for relief, education, marriage, dowries, and sometimes for small businesses. The funds are popular with poor people both as a source of credit and as a trusted place for keeping their own savings.

3.3 The 1979 Islamic Revolution

In the modern period the State was assumed to take care of the needs of citizens through the various Ministries. The Islamic revolution of 1979 was a turning point for civil society because at its core was an ideology of mass mobilisation and participation by citizens in the affairs of the country. The revolution largely took place on the streets of the big cities and involved people of all ages, backgrounds and political persuasions and was a popular mass movement: on one day, a month before the fall of the Shah, 2 million people are estimated to have demonstrated in Tehran.

Following the revolution, once the new government was established, citizens were urged to get involved in reconstruction, development, mass literacy campaigns, and later in mass vaccination campaigns under the tutelage of various quasi-governmental groups. The problems of the country (especially the neglect of the rural poor) were blamed on the policies of the Shah. It was therefore easy for the new government to call for citizens to participate in addressing these issues, as there was no implication of a failure of its own policies.

For example, barely 5 months after Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979, he created the Reconstruction Crusade (*Jihad-e Sazandegi*). This was a movement that became a major force for involving people in community development in rural areas, recruiting young people for construction of clinics, local roads, schools, and other facilities in villages.[38] It also had an explicit ideology of promoting people's participation in the affairs of the country (see box).

[38] *Jihad Striving for Development and Construction*, Jihad-e-Sazandegi, Quarterly Magazine, Summer 1993 http://www.netiran.com/?fn=artd(2499)

People's Mobilization through the Reconstruction Crusade (*Jihad-e Sazandegi)*

Ayatollah Khomeini stated in founding the *Jihad:* 'Let's name this *Jihad* (striving), *Jihad-e-Sazandegi* (striving for construction and development) in which the people from all walks of life, men and women, the old and the young, university students and professors, engineers, experts, villagers and town-dwellers should collaborate to reconstruct Iran…'

The aims were:
1. To convey the message of the Islamic Revolution to villagers.
2. To pave the way for the extensive presence and participation of rural people in the Revolution's arena.
3. To give priority to rural areas as sources for production, agriculture, and development axis.
4. To put an end to deprivation of rural residents and provide them with health services and educational facilities.

Funding for government led rural development projects after the Revolution rose from 9% to 26% of total development expenditure. In its first 14 years of work the *Jihad* connected 5,500 villages to the national grid (more than doubling the number), and built water systems for 3,700. They also built roads, public baths, irrigation systems, bridges, and other infrastructure. The movement was institutionalised as a Ministry in 1983; nevertheless, it continued to work in an innovative way, leading the way in the use of participative processes such as Participatory Rural Appraisal and working in partnership with NGOs such as Cenesta (a rural development NGO).

A particular feature of the civil society sector in Iran is the *bonyads* (foundations). Although they have a long history, they took on a new importance after the revolution when several very large new *bonyads* were formed from the confiscated assets of the Shah and his court. Controlling vast economic empires, assets of billions of dollars, and employing tens of thousands of people, the largest *bonyads* are key institutions of the Islamic Republic. While all *bonyads* claim to be not-for-profit, some are certainly run on a profit-making basis. Large or small, they are established as non-governmental bodies for activities that promote certain causes with perceived communal value. Their public-benefit activities cover a huge range including: promotion of Islamic education, dissemination of revolutionary ideology, relieving poverty, cash grants for health care, and providing loans for economic and commercial ventures. Several million people a year are directly helped by money from these foundations.

There are three categories of *bonyads* as follows:

- Charitable Islamic endowments set up by private individuals. The largest are associated with major Shiite shrines, and their assets come from regular and extensive donations by pilgrims. Tens of thousands of smaller ones also exist – to endow water channels, schools, and hospitals, for example.

- Newly formed private foundations created after the revolution to commemorate the events and messages of the revolution. These were set up by various religious groups, and also played a role in mobilising political support through networks of patronage.[39] For example, the *Panzdah e Khordad* foundation was sponsoring 471,886 households in 1991 and also offered a $2m reward for the assassination of Salman Rushdie.
- Government-sponsored public foundations set up for various reasons including helping the families of soldiers killed or wounded in the Iran–Iraq war (the Martyr's Foundation or *Bonyad-e-Shahid* – said to have assets of $3.3 billion in 1985), and supporting poor and handicapped people (*Bonyad-e-Mostazafan va Janbazan* – see box).

Foundations (*Bonyads*)

The *Bonyad-e-Mostazafan va Janbazan* (Foundation for the Dispossessed and Handicapped) was set up with the confiscated assets of the Shah and the court. It claimed a turnover of $3.5bn in 1998 including 5-star hotels, companies, mines, property and industrial enterprises. It controls 28% of the textiles, 42% of cement, and 45% of the soft drink markets in Iran. Some of the resources generated by this huge industrial complex are used to fund medical centres, educational establishments, and cultural and artistic organisations as well as workshops and income-generating projects. At least 120,000 families received pensions, health, education, and housing services from the foundation. Similarly, the endowment associated with the *Shrine of Imam Reza* in Mashhad has assets of some $2 billion and controls huge industrial complexes and large amounts of land. The endowment supports tens of thousands of destitute families, providing money for marriage, loans, medical care and distributing food for the poor.

Source: Kazemi (1994). Ghandour (2002) and World Bank (2001)

3.4 The War with Iraq (1980–88)

The years immediately following the Islamic revolution of 1979 were dominated by the war with Iraq (1980–88), when Iraq invaded Iran. Mobilisation during the war led to significant draining of Iran's resources and people's participation movements became crucial to the survival of the country. During this time, citizens' groups mobilised behind Government initiatives such as the Construction Crusade for rural development, and the Literacy Movement (see box) and there was little space for the development of independent civil society groups. Men and boys of all ages volunteered for active service at the front; women mobilized to sew uniforms and flags, and support the troops; and basic rations of consumer goods were distributed equitably through cooperative organisations. Most of these mobilization movements eventually became institutionalised as ministries or government bodies, but their

[39] See Kazemi (1996) p. 144.

impact has nevertheless been significant in terms of raising awareness of how people can (and should) get involved in national development.[40]

The Literacy Movement Organisation (LMO)

Following the revolution, the Literacy Movement started as a volunteer movement to tackle the high rates of illiteracy especially among rural women. Classes were held in tents, houses, clinics, prisons – anywhere that they were requested and needed. This was such a high priority that even during the war with Iraq, huge numbers of people were mobilized. In 1986 (six years into the war) there were over 1.3 million people enrolled in classes. At its peak in 1991 the movement served nearly 2 million students in 27,000 villages, taught by 78,000 teachers (70% women). Female literacy rose from around 25% in 1970 to over 80% in 2003.

Source: Statistical Centre of Iran (2005).

3.5 Refugees and INGOs – The 1980s and 1990s

In the early 1980s two waves of refugees flowed into Iran: from the east, Afghans fleeing from the Soviet invasion of 1980 and from the west, Shiites ejected by Saddam Hussein from Iraq. Initially these refugees were warmly welcomed and given free access to education, health care, and subsidised food stuffs on equal terms with Iranians.[41] However, by the end of the 1980s the government of Iran was supporting several hundred thousand internally displaced people as a result of the war with Iraq, as well as an estimated 2.5 million Afghans and half a million Iraqis (mostly Kurds and Shiites). This provided the impetus for an official appeal to INGOs to come to Iran to provide relief.[42] In response, in 1993 a small group of mainly Scandinavian NGOs set up a coordination office in Tehran, the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran (ICRI), through which small amounts of funding were channelled and INGOs were helped to set up programmes.

Until that time, few INGOs were working in Iran and those who did, for example CARE and Peace Corps during the 1970s, appear to have had virtually no impact on the Iranian civil society sector. In 1996 MSF established medical teams in Afghan refugee camps and settlements and in 1997 Ockenden International began some small-scale income generation programmes with Afghans living in the outskirts of Mashhad. Significant resources were also contributed from INGOs in response to the influx of 40,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees in 1996, two earthquakes in 1997, and the Bam earthquake of 2003 (for example, Handicap International (HI) spent over 800,000 Euros on building rehabilitation centres, providing equipment and training local staff).[43]

[40] Nezam Mafi (1995) p. 2.
[41] UNHCR estimated there were 4.5 million refugees in Iran in the mid-1980s (mostly from Afghanistan). During the 1990s the figure fell to about 2.5 million – still double any other country hosting refugees.
[42] During the 1980s there were over a hundred INGOs working in Pakistan with about 1 million Afghan refugees, but none in Iran.
[43] http://www.handicap-international.org/esperanza/site/onglet1/chapitre3/pays/iran.asp

However, despite this presence, INGO operations have remained on a small scale, and the large flows of financial assistance that the government hoped for never materialised. Two factors account for this: (a) the lack of availability of significant funding from international donors for programmes in Iran; and (b) the difficulties in running operational programmes in Iran or establishing links with local NGO implementing partners. These difficulties stem mainly from a lack of government understanding regarding the ways in which INGOs operate. Problems for NGOs included delays or failure to get visas for foreign staff, lengthy processes for obtaining project agreements, and difficult access to project areas. In 1998 the government Ministries concerned were only just starting to discuss a legal framework which would enable international NGOs to work in Iran[44] and, despite these efforts, in 2004 ICRI closed its office in Tehran citing continuing 'difficulties and obstacles in securing permits for continued operations.'[45]

3.6 The 1990s

During the war with Iraq there was little space for Iranian civil society to become involved in addressing social issues with an agenda independent of the state. At the end of the war and during the early 1990s many new social problems began to emerge, including increasing drug abuse, rising numbers of street children, prostitution, environmental pollution, and the impact of large numbers of people displaced by the war.

In the mid to late 1990s, encouraged by President Khatami's[46] rhetoric of citizen's participation and a relatively free press which highlighted these issues, thousands of new groups were set up to address these problems.[47] As a result there were many opportunities for NGOs to start work if their agendas matched those of the government. Khatami recognised that the government could not tackle all the problems of the country alone and called on civil society to play its part.

For example, a burning issue at the beginning of the 1990s was the huge increase of population. The FPA is an interesting early example of an NGO established at this time (see box below) and the fact that it had close links with the government did not prevent it becoming a strong and independent force in civil society. In fact, a number of organisations were created by individuals with government positions, who realised that they had much greater scope outside of official government structures for setting up progressive programmes to address issues facing Iranian society. Another good example of this is Aftab, an NGO that provides support for drug addicts and their families, which was started by a prominent right-wing MP, Marzieh

[44] Squire (1998).
[45] http://www.icri-ir.com/lastword.htm
[46] President Khatami was elected in 1997.
[47] A directory of civil society groups compiled by the Family Planning Association, lists several thousand groups, most established in the late 1990s – most are not formally registered.

Sadighi, with the support of President Khatami.[48] These NGOs with close government links have played a key role in pushing progressive agenda in fields as varied as women's rights, drug treatment, family planning, and human rights. It can be said that because of their contacts in government, these NGOs and their leaders have served as catalysts in engaging the government in a dialogue with the NGO sector on sensitive issues. Independent NGOs, however, have to work harder to build government trust and come under much more critical scrutiny.[49]

At this time, many other CSOs were formed who were quite independent of government. While there is little information about the numbers, size or activities of these, many were small groups of concerned individuals who participated in conferences and raised awareness in their communities, but were not formally registered and did not have funding to actually implement projects. These CSOs have also carved out a niche for themselves in policy areas neglected by the government, particularly environmental issues, HIV/AIDS awareness and treatment, and participatory methods for rural development.

The Family Planning Association of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FPA/IRI)

During Iran's war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988, a large population was viewed as a comparative advantage, and Khomeini pushed for more children to bolster the ranks of 'soldiers for Islam,' aiming for 'an army of 20 million.' By the end of the 1980s the impact of huge population growth and high unemployment prompted a government U-turn and free universal contraception was made available through the extensive network of primary care clinics. In 1993 promotion of family planning became law and the TV and radio were at the forefront of the campaign.

In early 1994 the FPA was formally registered with the mission of promoting public education and research on family planning. Its board of directors consisted of 7 people all of whom were closely linked to the government: employees of the Ministry of Health, Members of Parliament, and University Professors.

The FPA/IRI is an extremely successful NGO: it has over 2,000 members based all over the country and 7 paid employees. FPA has links with the IPPF and the Population Council who have provided long-term organisational development support. UN agencies in Iran have funded a number of educational projects through FPA such as family planning leaflets for young people. The experience of working or volunteering with the FPA has created a pool of skilled people who have gone on to lead other NGOs, train volunteers, lead conferences on civil society, and carry out research on CSOs.

A major impetus to civil society during the 1990s was given by the participation of CSOs in UN-sponsored world conferences, which catalysed the process of the development of a more formalised civil society. The Beijing World Conference on

[48] Howard (2002) p. 114.
[49] Tahmasebi (2003).

Women in 1995 is a particularly good example. Although those participating had strong government connections,[50] their exposure to the ideas and to other groups at the Conference provided them with a completely new vision of the role of civil society that has carried over into their work in Iran and it also opened the door for some more independent NGOs to get involved through consultation meetings. Soheila Baba Moradi notes that the number of women's CSOs identified by the Bureau for Women's Affairs increased from 55 in 1995 to 337 in 2003 and attributes the growth of women's CSOs to the awareness generated after the Beijing Conference.[51] These CSOs however, are not only working on women's issues, but also focus on the environment, health, culture, development and many other fields, and therefore have had a broad impact on the growth of a new generation of CSOs.

In 1998 in the southern town of Bushehr, a meeting of CSOs was organised by the leadership of the FPA, with funding form the Population Council. This was the first time that different actors in the civil society arena, including key Government figures (such as MPs), academics, and representatives of different clusters of CSOs (i.e. those focused on health, women, environment, and development), had been brought together to discuss issues facing CSOs in Iran. The main issues raised and the action plans drawn up from this workshop (see box) have since driven much of the work regarding the engagement of the Government in civil society and directing NGO capacity building work.[52] Follow up meetings involving government officials, universities and CSOs, were organised by Hamyaran (a Civil Society support organisation) in almost all provinces in Iran, which have served to start a process of expanding the space for CSOs as a result of the feeling of strength of numbers and recognition amongst local officials of their existence and role in supporting social and economic development work. The organisation of these meetings is now done annually by a group of NGOs from different parts of the country, with active participation from government officials. The theme in 2006 is likely to be around 'Confidence Building between People, NGOs and Government' and will involve over 200 participants.

[50] Monir Amadi, personal communication 23 August 2005.
[51] Baba Moradi (2005).
[52] Family Planning Association (1998).

Main Recommendations of the Bushehr Workshop, 1998

1. Information and Communications:
   a. Setting up an Internet-based communication system for Iranian NGOs.
   b. NGOs networking system set up based on experience of women's NGOs.
   c. Researching a database of information on all NGOs.
2. Training, Management and Capacity Development:
   a. Comprehensive plan of action for training and capacity building to be drawn up. Also included were various specific training programmes such as proposal writing, high performance, operations research, and organisational transformation. Cooperation with the UNFPA funded training package with the Presidential Centre for Women's Participation was also envisaged.
   b. Future Search Conference to be organised by UNICEF to plan NGOs activities
3. Training in environmental issues. Law Reform:
   a. Preparation of a new law for NGOs through reviewing existing laws, consulting with NGOs, gathering information on laws in other countries, and conducting a public dialogue. This was to be supported by the women MPs who attended the Bushehr workshop.
   b. Preparing guidelines for registration of NGOs (coordinated by the Ministry of Interior's representative at the meeting).
4. Community-based action Programmes:
   a. Support for the four NGO clusters (poverty alleviation, population, environment, women)
   b. Holding annual NGO consultations to review progress
   c. Extending NGO consultations to the provinces
   d. Disseminating the results of the Bushehr meeting all NGOs and relevant government departments.

Source: Final Report: Iranian NGOs Consultation Workshop, Bushehr, 26–27 February 1998, FRP/IRI.

Building bridges with the government has started to produce results. There are many instances now in which government agencies approach NGOs and, NGOs take the lead in NGO-government partnerships. For example, the Ministry of Construction Jihad now works in partnership with the groundbreaking NGO Cenesta[53] in promoting rural development using participatory methods such as PRA. Independent NGOs such as Cenesta have played a catalytic role: they have started to work in small communities to help local groups access the government services (electricity, schools, etc.) to which they are entitled by lobbying and getting officials and local people to work together. This is an effective role for them as, although they do not have the funds that the traditional charities draw on, or the contacts that the government NGOs play upon, they do have skills in participatory methods and advocacy.

[53] For more information see http://www.cenesta.org/About.htm

Since 2000 there have been a number of visits by INGOs to Iran with the specific purpose of supporting the development of Iranian CSOs. In particular the Frederich Ebert Foundation has been supporting an Iranian NGO web-based information exchange network, an exchange programme between Iranian and Egyptian NGOs, and a number of other initiatives with its local partner, Hamyaran. Other INGOs have been involved through UN-supported initiatives.

4 The Current Context and Characteristics of Iranian Civil Society

So what is the current situation of and climate for civil society within Iran? And how does this affect and influence capacity building efforts? This section focuses on three dimensions: the diversity and type of CSOs in Iran (their size, components, and funding); the environment in which civil society operates (legal and political); and the impact of civil society on development, rights, and welfare.[54] This provides the context in which capacity building takes place.

4.1 Diversity and Funding of CSOs in Iran

There is a large number of CSOs in Iran, covering a range of issues and geographical space including both rural and urban areas. Civil society is a significant force, which controls vast resources. In observance of religious traditions a majority of Iranians donate on a regular basis to charity, get involved as volunteers and participate in community activities, often belonging to different kinds of associations or groups (local, religious, recreational, trade-based, etc.). The resources generated by traditional groups are large both in terms of money and time spent on voluntary work.

The strong culture of giving and community action is a huge asset to CSOs, particularly the more traditional ones. CSOs have no difficulty in mobilising significant funds for charity, to relieve poverty and help orphans, widows and others whose needs are highlighted in religious teachings. Even quite radical projects tackling issues such as drug addiction and HIV/AIDS have been successful at raising funds when they have the backing of trusted community leaders with religious credentials, although newer NGOs mainly addressing social issues such as drug abuse find getting public support and funding more difficult. The significant public spirit can be seen in the response to the Bam earthquake where millions donated money and thousands went in person to help the people of Bam. Due to the large numbers of volunteers, and the expectation that people will give their time free for charitable work, there are very few CSOs with professional staffing structures.

Private sector support for CSOs is very significant, although again, it is mainly concentrated on charity organisations. Generally, it is not companies but individuals who make donations to CSOs. Many businessmen in the bazaars are significant supporters of CSOs through their donations to religious groups, to charities and to major community festivals of mourning such as *Ashoura*. The bazaar merchants take their religious obligations of giving alms very seriously. Private sector companies have played virtually no role in the development or support to the newer NGOs so far. The small size of the private sector in the economy is probably a factor and the

[54] These dimensions are based on the CIVICUS framework of the dimensions of civil society as described in CIVCUS' Civil Society Index see Holloway, 2001 and Hienrich (2004).

lack of development of the ideas of corporate social responsibility means that there are few companies with budgets to support community initiatives. Environmental NGOs have been successful at fundraising from the private sector, but they have been criticised for accepting money from companies that often have poor environmental practices.[55]

Iranian CSOs face the challenge of very limited access to international donor funds because Iran's relative affluence (classified as a middle-income country by the UN) means that it does not qualify for aid budgets for poverty relief or development programmes. There are several European countries with (sometimes very significant) funding for the promotion of political freedoms, democratisation, women's rights and human rights in Iran, but take up of these funds has been limited in the past. There are obvious problems for Iranian NGOs who, even under President Khatami, felt vulnerable to government sanctions if they received direct funding from European embassies. Funding for NGO programmes can come through UN agencies (e.g. legal reform on children's rights issues through UNICEF) with the full consent of a Government Ministry. This is being done successfully through UNDP's Small Grants Programme, which distributes about $400,000 a year to community based projects for environmental protection and sustainable development. In this case, projects are approved by a steering committee made up of government officials, NGOs and academics.[56]

Efforts at self-regulation of NGOs have not gone far, although codes of conduct are being developed. Although CSOs have tended to work independently of each other in the past, there has been a growing trend over the last ten years for organisations to form networks. These are starting to be a significant force and communication between CSOs through workshops, seminars, publications and meetings is extensive. Modern and traditional CSOs, however, have not had much dialogue due to perceived cultural differences (modern CSOs feeling that traditional ones do not address the causes of poverty, while traditional groups believe that modern CSOs do not have the 'right' i.e. Islamic values[57]). This is changing slowly as modern CSOs increasingly appreciate the strength of traditional groups[58] in their close links with deprived communities and their ability to fundraise and provide practical help to people.

Six civil society support organisations have been set up in Iran. Each has a different focus and area of expertise. They are expanding their work but an evaluation of their impact has yet to be undertaken (see Appendix 4 for more details of these organisations). There are also networks of NGOs at both national and local levels. At national level there are networks for environment NGOs, women NGOs, and children and youth NGOs and other networks are in the early stages of being formed. The

[55] verbal communication: group discussion on NGO capacity building concepts, Noavaran, 28 August 2005.
[56] B. Namazi, personal communication.
[57] Motee (2005).
[58] Baba Moradi (2005).

networks mainly function as a way of exchanging information through regular meetings and newsletters, and have yet to take on a significant role in representing NGOs or lobbying.

As discussed above, INGOs are not a significant presence in Iran and their involvement is mostly in the context of emergency response to disasters such as the Bam earthquake and channelled through government ministries. For example, Handicap International in Bam worked mainly with the Social Welfare Organisation, and Save the Children Fund with the Ministry of Health and the Iranian Red Crescent.[59] Although both organisations did manage to also work on a small scale with local NGOs, in general INGOs find that access to visas and operating permits is conditional on having a governmental partner for the bulk of their operations. Thus the impact that INGOs have on capacity building with local CSOs is limited as most of their time and funds are spent with government partners, who only approve small-scale cooperation with local NGOs.

There is also a general feeling of separation from other CSOs in the region, caused by Iran's strong individual identity (Persian, not Arab; Shiite, not Sunni; 'civilized', not 'backward', etc.).[60] This affects the context in which CSOs work and can result in a reluctance to fully engage with regional CSOs or to learn and share experience with them. Models and experiences from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, etc., are sometimes dismissed with: 'We are not like them because...' or 'Their experience is not relevant to us because we are different.'[61] However, regional workshops organised by Hamyaran or the UN, for example, have started to break down these barriers, enabling learning and approaches to be shared more widely.

The absence of well-established permanently based INGOs (and their donors) in Iran has meant that indigenous NGOs have had space to evolve and develop their own ideas for projects and structures which fit the Iranian context. The disadvantages of not being exposed to models and experiences from abroad have been mitigated by (a) visits, training programmes, and emergency interventions in Iran by international NGOs; (b) exchanges with NGOs in Holland, the UK, and different Asian countries supported by the UN or by various government agencies; and (c) the enthusiastic take up of Internet resources and contacts by young people in NGOs all over the country.

4.2 The Environment in which Civil Society Operates in Iran

The key factor in the context for civil society in Iran is the climate created by the government. An uncertain political climate, government bureaucracy, unclear laws, and restrictions on political participation are perennial problems facing civil society.

[59] http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk_cache/scuk/cache/cmsattach/1342_IranStatementFeb.pdf
[60] See for example Alessio Loretti , *'More authentic, or less?'* in The Iranian www.iranian.com/Opinion/2002/August/Identity/index.html
[61] Personal observation.

Despite fears of a clampdown on civil society after the departure of Khatami as President in July 2005, this has not happened on a broad front. There were early signs that the situation for CSOs was becoming more difficult, especially with more controls on freedom of association and a regional Civil Society Forum on the Information Society for the Middle East and West Asia was unexpectedly banned by government authorities in August 2005 for example.[62] The key post of Minister of Interior (which registers, regulates and oversees CSOs) has been given to former Deputy Intelligence Minister Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi. This was widely commented on in the Iranian press as marking a significant change to the government's approach. Cuts in government funding to CSOs, new regulations especially regarding foreign funding, detailed scrutiny of activities, and requirements for re-registration and vetting by the security ministry are all pose challenges to the work and development of CSOs.

However, despite this, the government's policy focus on anti-poverty, job creation, and de-centralisation does provide clear opportunities for CSOs in the medium term. The role that NGOs will be able to play depends on them building trust, understanding and opening channels of communication with the newly appointed Government officials at local levels. Considering that 10 years ago CSOs were not a factor in government planning, CSOs see the government's recognition of a role for CSOs such as the inclusion of CSOs in the 4th Development Plan as positive. [63]

Recent (early 2006) observers of civil society say that the situation remains fluid. There is some continuity in policy: a cabinet decree on civil society groups drafted by the Ministry of Intelligence during the last weeks of Khatami's government was officially approved and communicated by the new government in August 2005. One CSO support organisation notes that 'compared to international norms it falls short in many instances, but compared to the procedures regulating government control in middle eastern countries, and compared to the previous situation, it forms a major step forward'.[64] Other recent trends show that the government is still interested in cooperating with NGOs. One example is the Ministry of Health, which has called on health NGOs to form a network and cooperate with the ministry in addressing gaps in services saying that NGOs' independence is an advantage in their work. Another government body, the National Disaster Management Task Force, has also invited the cooperation of NGOs.

However, little has changed in the bureaucratic processes. Despite the supportive environment of the last few years, the state bureaucracy remained largely unmoved by Khatami's positive rhetoric on civil society organisation. The current Government

[62] http://www.iris.sgdg.org/actions/smsi/hr-wsis/list/2005/msg00097.html
[63] Verbal communication – focus group discussion 28/8/05.
[64] B. Namazi, personal communication, 5/2/2006.

continues a highly security conscious approach to dealing with CSOs generally.[65] CSOs highlight the problems of bureaucracy and difficulties in registration that government bodies put in their way, and endless conferences, papers, and seminars have been devoted to this, with little apparent practical effect. Meetings can be cancelled, publications banned, and foreign partners denied visas. Leading activists have been imprisoned or barred from foreign travel in the past.

The application of laws can be unpredictable for CSOs, especially regarding registration procedures, which are neither consistent nor transparent. Appendix 1 provides an outline of the different forms of legal registration and procedures for CSOs in Iran. Tax laws are not very flexible and many CSOs do not benefit from tax breaks.

Dr. Elaheh Kolaie (an MP up until 2004) summarises the main difficulties:

> *The most important problems between the government and the NGOs is the lack of current laws in this area, the existence of old and outdated structures, severe monitoring system, the contradictions of laws, issues around registration of organisations, and being able to obtain the relevant documentations, lack of financial support, …*[66]

Although the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran specifically states that people are free to form parties and associations:

> *Article 26: The formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted…*

It continues:

> *… provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic republic. No one may be prevented from participating in the aforementioned groups, or be compelled to participate in them.* [67]

This provision waters down the protection of freedom of association by making it subject to undefined Islamic criteria, and to the government's interpretation of a violation.[68] One example of the 'severe monitoring system' is that contained in the main law governing CSOs. This is the 'Law of Parties, Societies, Political Associations, Unions, and Islamic and Other Recognized Religious Minorities' Activities' adopted in 1981. The code of conduct it contains includes regulations prohibiting: 'a) Any

[65] See for example Ebadi (2005).
[66] Kolaie (2005).
[67] http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-3.html
[68] Kazemi (1996) p. 127.

activity which endangers the independence of the country; b) Any type of relation, contact, exchange of information, secrecy or conspiracy with foreign embassies, representatives or governmental agencies at any level and in any way which jeopardizes the freedom, independence, and national unity and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and c) Receiving any type of financial or physical assistance from foreigners...'[69] (see Appendix 1 for further details).

Many NGOs feel these regulations are very restricting and unnecessary, and illustrate the point that '...the legal system is based on suspicion of all gatherings and associations...'.[70] However, these regulations took on a new resonance recently with President Bush's high profile allocation of $3m for Iranian CSOs[71] announced in April 2005, which was specifically for the promotion of democracy and human rights. It has complicated relations between CSOs and the new government, which now perceives that it has concrete confirmation that the US could use CSOs to influence social change in Iran. This makes building trust between the government and CSOs even more difficult. Even among CSOs there is a tendency to '...create disputes and discussions where some organisations blame others of being part of the government, or those who are closer to the government may accuse [the] other side of being dependent to foreign policies [i.e. foreign powers].'[72]

Many CSOs invest time in getting government officials and policy makers to understand and support the work they do, and this dialogue is one of the most important activities of CSOs. Direct government support to CSOs tends to be through organisations with the closest ideological or personal links to the government. Trust is a big factor in CSOs: many people will donate to groups because they trust the leaders or its reputation.

A pragmatic approach to getting around obstacles and making things happen is a characteristic of the most successful CSOs in Iran. A good example of this is the approach taken by the Nobel Peace Prize-winner Shirin Ebadi, who has been working inside Iran on human rights for a decade, and set up the Society for Protection of Children's Rights in 1994. As she candidly says:

> *Working with human rights, you're taking a bomb into your hands and walking round the streets with it. I couldn't really go and start up a human rights NGO, but through children's rights I believe that you can work for everyone's rights. Instead of banging my head against a closed door, I'll become like water and run under the door...*[73]

[69] Nezam Mafi (1995).
[70] Namazi (2000).
[71] See: http://www.state.gov/g/drl/44464.htm
[72] Abbasgholi Zadeh (2005).
[73] Quoted in Howard (2002) p. 77.

CSOs are seen as a political force by the Iranian government and therefore come under the same legal framework as political parties and unions. There are in fact numerous examples of CSOs being the vehicle for social change as an alternative to political activism. An example is given by Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh, an activist in a women's NGOs, who predicted that following the parliamentary elections of 2004 when many reformist women MPs lost their seats some of these MPs would turn to women's CSOs as an alternative to politics[74]. Women MPs were already heavily involved with CSOs especially with those dealing with newer issues such as refugees, drug abuse and the environment. Dr. Kolaie, one of these ex-MPs, believes that the close association between the MPs and civil society has '...opened up a way forward for civil society activists that is not going to get sealed up.'[75] There is much anecdotal evidence too: young people often state that their motivation in joining a CSO is that they want to get involved in changing their country but since they can't participate in politics they want to work in CSOs.

4.3 Impact of Civil Society on Development, Rights and Welfare

It is the area of social need in which civil society has had the biggest impact, and charity organisations have always had a major role in relieving poverty and providing health care. This is both their strongest asset and their major weakness. Traditional NGOs, foundations, endowments, and prayer groups devote vast resources to providing relief to the poor in the form of handouts, money and medical care. But they have yet to move away from relief programmes to find other ways of helping the poor.

Newer CSOs are developing a role as catalysts for change (for example, by helping mobilise small communities to lobby for the services they need such as schools, clinics, or electricity) and the interest-free loan funds have played a pivotal role in providing capital for small businesses on a large scale to some of the most deprived communities. Civil society contributes to building social capital by providing opportunities for people to work together for a common goal, for example, tree planting campaigns, cleaning up mountain litter, and street plays to raise children's awareness of environmental issues.

CSOs are extremely responsive to new issues and crises: within hours of an earthquake, people are mobilized and donations begin to be collected. Less immediate issues are also addressed such as the diversion of water from Isfahan's river which threatened the fabric of the historic city. CSOs were also among the first to raise the alarm over the spread of HIV/AIDS and the increasing numbers of street children.

[74] Abbasgholizadeh (2005).
[75] Kolaie (2005).

One of the strongest areas of civil society is the promotion of gender equity. A large number of groups are involved in promoting women's rights in society, and women's involvement in different fields including protecting the environment and education. The impact of these groups is again not documented, although the huge progress in women's access to education and health care over the last century, and particularly in the last 20 years, can at least in part be attributed to the campaigns, writing, and organising of women's groups.

The influence of civil society on public policy is also difficult to assess. Lobbying, training, involvement and dialogue go on continuously at many levels between CSOs and government bodies. Information on the impact of this work is difficult to find, but there is anecdotal evidence of CSOs having influenced government policy on children's rights, on HIV/AIDS and on the reform of divorce laws, for example. On broader issues, the participants in the focus group discussion felt that newer NGOs in particular have had a significant role in raising awareness in society at large about issues of human rights, democracy, and women's rights. They felt that, although this awareness may not have a practical effect now, it will have a long term impact on Iranian society.

5 Key Capacity Building Issues for Civil Society in Iran

This section of the paper focuses specifically on issues relating to capacity building of civil society in Iran, outlining the meaning and purpose of capacity building within the Iranian context, and capacity building issues in Iran described by the CSO support organisations interviewed as part of this research.

5.1 The Meaning and Purpose of Capacity Building in Iran

Most respondents within the research for this paper and recently published articles[76] on civil society in Iran refer to capacity building in two ways:

- as 'consciousness raising', mainly with reference to the concept of civil society and CSOs/NGOs, but sometimes to democracy, citizenship, and human rights; and
- as increasing the knowledge and skills of individuals in a certain area (such as proposal writing, project planning, etc.).

The purpose of capacity building is seen as 'deepening civil society,'[77] and 'building the infrastructure of democracy.'[78] Sometimes this also refers to developing an environment in which civil society can flourish, for example promoting an understanding of the role and work of civil society with the public, the media and among government partners. This capacity building at the level of society is often referred to as the greatest success of capacity building programmes so far. For example, one Iranian NGO resource centre website says: 'The efforts of CSOs have been so significant, that indeed civil society actors have been able to sketch a new power structure and have taken noticeable steps in promoting democracy and concepts of democratisation.'[79] A majority of respondents commented on the fact that much work has been done to disseminate basic concepts about civil society, democracy and human rights and that there is now a lot more information and awareness of these issues (especially among young people) than there was ten years ago. Others say though, that the concept of capacity building is not very clear even to those in the media who have written about capacity building programmes.

An interpretation of capacity building at the organisational level is given by Shirin Ebadi, who says that 'The most important objective is that these NGOs have reached a level of understanding that they believe themselves.' However, the other most common use of the term capacity building is in relation to the training of individuals working with NGOs and CSOs. Indeed, even in instances in which the purpose of a

[76] Memarian (2005) and http://www.irancsos.net/english/about_us/index.htm
[77] Memarian (2005).
[78] Focus group discussion 28/8/05.
[79] http://www.irancsos.net/english/about_us/index.htm

training programme is to strengthen organisations, the approach often taken is to train individuals form a range of organisations, rather than to assess and address the needs of a particular organisation as a whole.

Ten years ago there was practically no material on civil society, NGOs, or capacity building available in Persian. In fact much of the language and concepts of civil society had no widely understood translation in Persian. One of the most important aspects of NGO resource centres' work has been the translation, discussion and dissemination of these concepts through articles, books and training materials. Noavaran's experience in this work been considerable, and their trainers have invested a lot of time in developing an understanding of concepts in English, and testing them in pilot courses, before creating the new vocabulary needed for the concepts in Persian. The civil society support organisation 'Volunteer Actors' has been active in publishing theoretical texts on civil society and democracy in Persian.

5.2 Capacity Building Issues in Iran

This section outlines a number of capacity building issues faced in Iran, which were highlighted during the research. It is divided into three sections focusing on capacity building in relation to organisations' internal functioning, their external relations with others both within and outside the civil society sector, and their programme performance and effectiveness.[80]

5.2.1 Internal Organisation

Three formal ***training needs assessments and situation analyses of CSOs*** have been undertaken within Iran by: Noavaran 2000; Namazi 2000; and UNODC 2005. Meetings of NGOs also sometimes draw up lists of capacity-building needs, for example see box in Section 3.6 above regarding the Bushehr workshop. Several NGO support organisations interviewed for this research referred to 'knowing' what the NGOs need because they are constantly in touch with them. They have evolved in their approach to capacity building – from mass trainings (in one case a course was run for 1,500 people) to gradually more focused training: smaller numbers of people and more specific groups e.g. women's groups or youth groups or community based organisations.

Developing the skills and knowledge of those working in CSOs has been the main focus of the six CSO resource centres now based in Tehran (there is also one in Ardebil, North West Iran). These support organisations all have a different focus and most are deliberately evolving their work so that they do not duplicate work done by other groups.[81] The Markaz Karvarzi focuses on women's rights, for example, while Hamayan focuses on community development groups, and Noavaran on youth

[80] These sections are based on INTRAC's three circles model of Organisational Capacities.
[81] See Appendix 2: List of NGO Resource Centres in Tehran, with comments on their areas of activity.

organisations. They are relatively new organisations, and all but one have been founded since 2000. Most have a small permanent staff of 2–4 people and a number of part-time staff or consultants who work on specific projects. Their funding is mainly project based, and comes from three main sources: INGOs who want to support the development of CSOs in Iran, UN agencies in Iran, and contracts from government bodies.

All the CSO resource centres identified ***skills training*** or awareness raising through seminars or workshops as the most frequent type of capacity building they undertook. For some organisations this is done with the aim of building capacity in society at large and is aimed at anyone working or volunteering with an NGO, and also Government partners (e.g. Hamyaran's seminars around the country to discuss the role of civil society). For others, there is a specific aim of influencing policy makers in public bodies; for example, with the work of the Institute for Women's Studies and Research. And sometimes the training is done in a general context of organisational development for example young staff coming into the Markaz Karvarzi with no NGO background are sent on courses run by other support organisations.

Other organisations that have been involved in capacity building include UN agencies (UNICEF, UNODC, and UNDP), municipalities, the National Youth Organisation, the Environment NGO Network, the Welfare Organisation, and some of the more experienced NGOs working with community groups.

Several people interviewed highlighted that in the past they had no choice over the people who were nominated for training. For example, participants on Markaz Karvarzi's gender courses were chosen by the provincial governor's offices, and individuals for a trainer of trainers course run by Noavaran were chosen by the National Youth Organisation. This resulted in some people attending training with no idea of what the training was about or why they were there; consequently, they had little motivation to put what they had learned into practice. This is just one area where ***CSO support organisations have learned from experience*** and now ensure that they have their own direct contacts with groups and individuals in the regions to be able to select trainees more appropriately.

Most training done by the resource centres is undertaken by local consultants and ***all training is done in Persian,*** since English is not widely spoken. Foreign consultants are used occasionally; for example, for topics where local expertise is weaker, where an outside perspective can open up a different world view, to model new training techniques, or to help participants to feel in contact with the outside world. For example, the Institute for Women's Studies and Research (IWSR) used an outside consultant to run a workshop on 'Lobbying for Women's Groups'.

Although ***no formal large-scale evaluations to measure the impact of training*** have been done, many respondents commented on the large pool of young

people who have now been trained in various aspects of CSO/NGO work and in training and facilitation skills. These trainees now make a significant contribution as independent trainers, staff or volunteers with CSOs, and activists around the country. However, some respondents commented on the fact that some poor quality training is also being done – in some cases people who have attended a training have then set themselves up as 'experts', using handouts to run courses but without a deeper understanding of the materials.

Noavaran took a 'bottom-up' approach in offering training in 'Democratic Skills for Small Groups', which included communication, decision-making, and facilitation skills. ***An evaluation of this course provided examples of effective partnership working*** between some of the CSOs involved, and other CSOs who had not been involved. This was attributed to the skills the participants had learned and the relationships of trust that had been formed during group work over the nine months of the course. This illustrates that far from collaborative work being impossible in Iran (as some of those interviewed commented) it can in fact be done effectively if the right conditions are created.

However, ***inappropriate training courses*** have also been run. For example, respondents felt that courses on strategic planning and management which have been imported from large NGOs in other countries not fit with the structure and scale of the majority of Iranian CSOs. European-style capacity building is sometimes perceived as 'very technical' in wanting to evaluate and measure impact, and there is some feeling that European capacity building organisations look down on Iranian organisations for not being 'scientific' enough in their approach. CSO support organisations are therefore more comfortable with Asian groups who have a more activist background and are more focused on change, on values and on changing perspectives rather than measuring and categorising. One CSO resource centre has nevertheless taken the lead in ***piloting the use of an organisational capacities assessment tool***. Using a model taken from Pact in South Africa, Noavaran first adapted and translated the tool with the involvement of a group of experienced volunteers from different NGOs. They focused on making the categories of assessment (e.g. Governance, Management, Human Resources, etc.) relevant to Iranian NGOs, for example there was originally no mention of management of volunteers in the tool. As a second stage, in 2004, a group of about 20 young leaders of organisations from around the country were trained in the use of the tool and applied it to their organisations. The results have yet to be documented and followed up, but this is the only example found of an organisational approach to needs assessment being taken rather than focusing on individual staff members.

The ***growth in the number of educated young volunteers in CSOs has posed challenges*** for organisations in terms of using their skills effectively, managing their work, and channelling their energies appropriately. As most CSOs are run and

staffed exclusively by volunteers this is a significant challenge for many organisations and an area where capacity-building interventions should perhaps be channelled.

A personal journey of capacity building – Mrs. Monir Amadi, Director, Institute for Women's Studies and Research (IWSR)

'Imam Khomeini was the first to put forward the idea that women are important and should participate in society, and have the right to go out of the house without their husband's permission. However this *fatwa* was not put into practice after the revolution, so I wrote to the Imam to tell him 'Our situation is worse than under the Shah'! I had a dream then, that the Imam told me to start and organisation to do something about this.

There was a small group of us who ere all interested in deepening our understanding of Islam and particularly of what Islam tells us about the role of women in society. We knew each other from the time of the Revolution. There was Mrs. Gordji, Mrs. Ebtekar, myself and some others...

We started having meetings and seminars on this theme and published a book based on our readings of what the Q'oram has to say about women. The in the early 1990s we organised some bigger conferences with the help of UNFPA. But the turning point for me was the 1995 Beijing Conference.

There were 100 people who went to Beijing from Iran. There were ten women representatives of the government, and another ten men who were our 'minders'. Then there were ten journalists, and the other 70 people were NGOs of which seven were real NGO people and the rest were women form various religious groups. The real NGOs were basically Mrs. Taleghani and her entourage. The organisers had cleared out the whole embassy and all of us slept there so that they could keep an eye on us better. They were afraid of what we might do and say! None of us had ever attended a conference like this before.

This was capacity building for me because I realised that there what NGOs were for the first time. I understood a world of new things from the Beijing Conference'

Authors note:
The women referred to here are all prominent Islamic feminist activists and politicians:
Massoumeh Ebtekar was spokeswoman for the students who took 52 diplomats hostage in the American Embassy siege of 1979. In 1997 she rose to be Vice President under President Khatami.
Azam Taleghani is an outspoken political activist and highly influential figure in civil society. She comes from a leading religious family and is involved in an Islamic women's party. Elected to Parliament immediately after the revolution, she presented herself for election to the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but was not allowed to stand.
Monireh Gorji is a member of the Islamic Republic Party and was the only women at the Assembly of Experts when the new constitution was drawn up after the revolution.

5.2.2 External Relations

Relationships are a key factor in the life of CSOs in Iran and were mentioned more than any other issue by interviewees during this research, in relation to many different contexts. The most significant relationships are with government agencies, with other CSOs and with international contacts.

Personal relationships are the main medium through which CSOs successfully manage the challenges of working within the shifting sands of government policies. ***Including key people from government institutions in training programmes*** has helped to promote a better environment for civil society/ government partnerships. This is, and will be, an ongoing aspect of capacity building and is undertaken mainly by CSOs themselves but also by the UN. For example, Hamyaran ran workshops for 22 director-generals (out of 28 provinces) to expose them to ideas around civil society and challenge them to explore how they can work more closely with CSOs in their provinces. One respondent pointed out that training by CSOs for government partners can have other beneficial effects: for example, impressing them with new techniques such as strategic planning, which makes them see CSOs as technically competent.

CSOs are also trying to find ways of working with government bodies on ***government priority issues*** and on issues for which the government needs the help of CSOs. CSOs have already identified areas of common ground with the new government, which include:

- Support for the development of community based organisations
- Decentralisation of government services to the regions
- Employment generation
- A focus on youth, i.e. employment, training, sports facilities
- Focus on deprived groups and regions
- Narcotics control

How CSOs work pragmatically with government

In August 2005, days after the appointment of the new conservative cabinet, one NGO activist summed up the situation:

'It's all about words and vocabulary. From the government and media's point of view these are 'bad' words: gender, equity, capacity building, civil society, empowerment; so now we have to use the new 'good' words which are: entrepreneur, micro-credit, social justice, poverty, anti-prostitution, vulnerable groups, job-creation, millennium development goals. It doesn't mean we have to do anything different!'

With regards to relationships, two themes come up repeatedly in NGO fora: the lack of effective coalition-building between CSOs, and the need for traditional and newer

CSOs to work closer together and to learn from each other's strengths. Given the difficulties CSOs face in their relations with the government many people highlighted the ***need for a united front*** and for good working relations among themselves. This is definitely a challenge and CSOs have not yet shown a strong capacity to support each other, share meaningful information, or act in common, and this ***lack of cooperative work has hampered cross-organisational learning***. New methods for critical self-evaluation and learning need to be found which are not threatening, especially to leaders and boards of NGOs. It is difficult to learn from past experiences in a context where mistakes or problems are not handled as learning opportunities but rather used as ammunition for blame and conflict. Baquer Namazi has suggested a system of awards for good practice in CSOs, for example.

The divide ***between 'traditional' and 'new' CSOs*** weakens civil society as a whole. Whilst, the 'traditional' CSOs have a lot of credibility in the country at large and with the government, the 'new' CSOs have skills and knowledge of dealing with new social problems, which would have a vast impact if applied on the large scale that traditional organisations operate. Nahid Motee is one of many commentators calling for more cooperation between these different groups,[82] in order for them to share best practice and experiences.

Traditional organisations rely on public trust and the reputation of one or two leading individuals in the organisation to attract funding. In this regard their relations of trust with their donors take the place of elaborate systems of openness and transparency that NGOs in other parts of the world rely on to show their honesty in using the funds entrusted to them. This is a particular problem for CSOs working on new issues such as the environment and drug abuse because they have not yet built up the trust and strong public support of groups working in poverty relief such as the *Comite Emdad* (local mosque committees). The problem is particularly acute for CSO support organisations that rely heavily on contracts with the UN and foreign donors. Some Ministries and government bodies under President Khatami have funded training programmes for capacity building (e.g. the National Youth Organisation) run by CSO support organisations, but most respondents in this study predicted that funding would dry up under the new government. Many organisations, in particular CSO support organisations who have a limited support base, would probably not be sustainable without this funding, which would have negative consequences with regards to the provision of organisational capacity building support and expertise.[83]
Several of the CSO Support Organisations have had very good relationships with INGOs who have funded them over a number of years, within a flexible framework of support to civil society development. This has given the support organisations wide scope to implement a variety of projects, learn from what they felt worked well (or less well) and evolve their work in a way which they needed to in order to learn.

[82] Motee (2005).
[83] Abbasgholi Zadeh (2005).

This ***flexible external support has played a key role in the development of capacity***.

Relations between CSOs and foreign embassies who have funding available are made very difficult by the regulations making such funding illegal, and by the emphasis of the embassies on funding for human rights. Some embassies have become more pragmatic, and adopted a similar approach to that of the NGOs themselves: focusing on areas in which the government welcomes civil society involvement such as poverty alleviation and narcotics control. Since many people working in CSOs are involved in different organisations, supporting a women's NGO working on environmental issues will also build the capacity of the individuals in that NGO who are active in other kinds of women's groups. Overall though, the safest form of foreign funding for NGOs is through the UN.

Some ***support for networking*** has come from the UN and government departments (e.g. funding for the Environment NGO network from the UNDP and the Women's NGO Communications Network from the President's Office). However, financial support has not been sufficient to enable networks to function in an effective and democratic manner and controversy and conflict in the networks have overshadowed their work. Hamyaran has supported the formation and development of networks by organising workshops (e.g. for 15 organisations working with street children), and carrying out evaluations (e.g. for the Women's NGO Communications Network). The fact that the networks have yet to find a significant role for themselves has hampered the development of initiatives on self-regulation, law reform and other issues which depend on CSOs acting together.

A few respondents commented on the ***weakness of civil society links with academic institutions*** in Iran. Although there are academics interested in the field, they tend to gather information to use in academic papers but not to feed back to CSOs in a way that could inform good practice. It would therefore be useful for civil society support organisations to engage with academics regarding how they could collaborate more effectively.

Several examples have shown already the important ***catalytic role played by Iranian NGOs' participation in international conferences*** and exchanges. The small number of international consultants who have been brought in for specialist training (e.g. training for the FPA by the IPPF on focus group discussions; UNICEF consultants from Bangladesh running Future Search Workshops) have also had a significant impact. The take up of new ideas is extremely enthusiastic: a small number of people have disseminated these and other experiences widely through putting new skills into practice through articles, trainings, and presentations at workshops.

The lack of international donors and funding has meant that ***civil society in Iran has developed its own models*** and from its own roots. The majority of the work of civil society does not depend on any outside funding, and even the newer NGOs have significant local support in the form of volunteers and donations in kind. The challenge for civil society is to find ways to draw on the wealth of experience of CSOs around the world despite the obstacles they face in having international contacts - and meld this with the rich experience already available in Iran.

5.2.3 Programme Performance

Programme performance is an area which is not well documented. This study found no examples of NGO support organisations in Tehran who had carried out evaluations of the longer-term impact of their work in a systematic manner – either on their own organisations or on the effectiveness of the CSOs that they work with (other than evaluating individual training programmes).

Respondents made it clear that they had ***learned a great deal from their experiences*** of the last few years however, and they were changing their practices as they went along. Some examples have already been given above. However, they did comment that they did not often get the chance to reflect on or document their experiences nor the 'better practices' which they were evolving, in a more formalised manner.

A number of ***long-established NGOs are acting as capacity-builders to newer groups working in the same field***. For example, Tavaniab is an NGO in Tehran which supports and promotes the rights of handicapped people. Tavaniab has been working with a number of self-help organisations of disabled people (most notably in Bam, following the earthquake), where they are helping organisations to develop advocacy and lobbying skills specifically for disabled people. As an example, they have taken up the case of a disabled woman in Bam who was trained in computer skills and was employed by a local company, which did not declare her for social security and insurance on the grounds that she wasn't a 'real person'.

As another example, Markaz Karvarzi is focusing on the development of capacity building for community groups who want to advance women's rights in practical ways. They are finding ways to tackle the problem of the long hours worked by young girls on carpet weaving in a small village; or working with girls who have become addicted to opium and are heavily stigmatised. The rural development NGO, Cenesta, has pioneered the development of community organisations through a PRA approach. They have focused on developing facilitators, promoting participatory methods and organisational skills, as well as providing small-scale funding for community groups.

The experiences of these groups have highlighted the diversity of capacity building needs between the different regions of Iran and between organisations working in different thematic areas. This is another example of how capacity building methods have evolved from the days when off-the-peg training courses were used to train very diverse groups.

Almost all the respondents felt that there was a ***need for more opportunities for systematically learning from their own experiences*** and also for sharing experiences. There is also a desire to learn from the experiences of other countries regarding best practice, lessons learned and innovations with regards to organisational capacity building.

6 Summary of Priority Needs and Current Issues for Organisational Capacity Building Practice in Iran

1. Capacity building for the new political context in Iran
   - The need to budget for resources/time spent by NGOs at all levels in capacity building for government partners, maybe up to 20–25%, of their time/places on training courses, etc.
   - Partnership working and networking: especially in the context of low security for NGOs – how to work together for greater impact in a difficult environment
   - Lobbying, influencing and advocacy skills especially with the government
   - Working with the media

2. Developing the Capacity for Organisational Learning
   - Drawing out and valuing the experiences of the last few years (especially documenting and disseminating own good practice, e.g. through case studies)
   - Sharing learning between 'traditional' and 'new' CSOs
   - Developing models for following up and assessing impact after training or other capacity building interventions
   - Providing recognition for good work done

3. More effective donor support for capacity building
   - Need for Western partners to let Iranian organisations build *their* (i.e. INGOs or Western donors) capacity in understanding them better and listening more to their needs
   - Move away from the focus of capacity building for donors' own needs, i.e. proposal writing, reporting, financial accounting – and move towards recognising the needs of CSOs in the context of Iran
   - Role of UN in providing a secure umbrella for CSO work through project agreements – to enable continued capacity building through 'doing'

4. Developing appropriate tools for measuring the impact of capacity building including:
   - Researching the impact of capacity building on programme performance
   - Documenting and following up the use of organisational assessment tools
   - Developing practical models of organisational capacity building to fit the Iranian context

5. Continued Skills Development
   - Leadership skills; and building social movements
   - Management, programming, evaluation, networking - appropriate to the Iranian CSO context.

7 Conclusions

The evidence for change in the evolution of capacity building practice in Iran is mainly based on how the key players see the evolution of their experiences. According to them, they have learned a great deal – sometimes in a life-changing way. They are evolving in terms of what they are doing as CSO support organisations and as NGOs and having a significant impact on their society. This is backed up by a wide range of commentators in the recent literature (see bibliography) who share the view that the progress made by civil society in Iran is irreversible. This is particularly the case in two areas: the space that civil society occupies, and the way that CSOs are learning to engage more effectively with the State.

Capacity building has not followed established Western models by focusing mainly on organisational development. Instead the emphasis has been on creating an environment where CSOs can function: discussing the basic ideas of civil society in training programmes, seminars, and workshops within the sector and with other parts of society. The space for CSOs to work in has expanded due to debate on the role of civil society, its relation with democracy, how it should relate to government, how it can be funded, and the dissemination of these debates through publications, press articles, and the Internet. In the process, CSO support organisations (resource centres) have grown in strength and experience. The medium-term core funding from INGOs, which allowed them wide scope in doing and learning, has been critical to this process.

This poses some challenges to the established view of the importance of organisational development (OD) and raises many questions. The effort that CSOs have put into changing the context of their work has helped them to build up their capacities. What is the role of OD then in a society where the context is all important in shaping the work of civil society? How can the CSO resource centres be supported in the future to continue to develop their work? The experience of the last few years might point to a few key factors: evolving their work within their own cultural context, being able to learn from experience, and having access to flexible funding arrangements have all been significant.

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Appendix 1: Legal Forms of Registration of CSOs in Iran

(Adapted from Nezam Mafi, 1995)

The following summarises the main categories of CSOs in Iran based on legal definitions used and registration procedures.[84]

Public **Non-Governmental Institutions and Organisations** registered or created under a law of 1992/3. These organisations are founded and in some cases partly funded by the government but are not under its direct control. They include:

- Municipalities
- The Red Crescent Society of Iran
- A number of large foundations including the *Comite Emdad*, and *Bonyad Mostazafan*.
- The 'Free' University (*Daneshgah Azad Eslami*)

Corporations registered as non-commercial organisations. Many CSOs are registered under this procedure, as it is the least troublesome. They include all kinds of organisations and institutions including scientific, literary, charitable, etc. They can use the title of 'institute', 'society', 'agency' or 'group'. They can in fact be profit making, which can be determined by looking at their constitution which is published in the 'Official Newspaper' on registration. They are subject to tax on any profits made.

Organisations registered under the 'Law of Parties, Societies, Political Associations, Unions and Islamic and other Recognised Religious Minorities' Activities', ratified in 1981/2. As indicated by the title of the law, organisations registered under this are founded by a group of people with a common ideal or objective. The registration process is geared towards screening for security-clearance through the Ministry of Interior, which often makes the process very lengthy. Organisations include:

- Associations (*anjoman)* which began to be set up in the second half of the 19th century. Some were set up by Freemasons; others were founded by merchants, intellectuals, reformers and modernizers usually to promote political or social change.
- Professional associations – (e.g. the Writer's Association) to promote the interests of their members, sometimes including political activities e.g. letters of protest when their members are jailed or killed for their work (e.g. most recently journalists). Funded by members' subscriptions.
- Modern NGOs based around the new social issues of environmental damage, women's rights, civil rights, drug addiction and street children. Many have applied for registration but the process is taking years to complete and many find themselves still 'pending'.

[84] Nezam Mafi (1995).

- Government-sponsored NGOs: often among the few that have completed all the government registration processes for full NGO status; sometimes founded by civil servants in order to gain contracts using funds allocated by ministries for NGOs. Ministries make is easy for the UN to work with these groups. One example is the World Relief Foundation, which was set up in 2000 by staff of the Ministry of Interior's department for refugees and was funded on occasion by UNHCR.
- Scientific and medical associations
- Guilds and Chambers of Commerce
- Some Charities and non-profit organisations
- Political parties

Organisations registered with a Ministry: this type of registration was easier for a few years. Examples include: environmental NGOs registered with the Environment Protection Organisation, the Women's Communications Network registered with the Ministry of Cooperatives, and professional associations registered with the Ministry of Labour.

Other groups, which do not seek legal registration. These include:

- Many of the religious groups run by small groups of individuals (including religious foundations, and women's prayer groups) who give services, money or goods to poor or vulnerable people.
- In rural areas, groups set up to cooperate in food production and management of resources. Production of milk, fruit-growing, livestock and crops are all organised collectively in many villages all over the country and special names are given to the collective groups. Responsibilities of group members include drawing up rotas, collecting payments (e.g. for water), maintaining accounts, and providing labour.
- Community-based charity groups providing services to the poor. Participants in a group discussion on civil society estimated that charities account for at least 75 per cent of the activities of CSOs.[85] Baquer Namazi's study of NGOs in Iran in 2002 listed 64 charity hospitals providing 10per cent of hospital beds nationwide and another study listed 350 dispensaries across the country.[86] There are in addition many hundreds of charities supporting education, children, and religious minorities. The scope and scale of their work is generally agreed to be huge but largely undocumented.
- Universities, mosques, and seminaries could also be said to be part of civil society and have their own legal status.

[85] Held at Noavaran on 28 August 2005.
[86] Tahmasebi (2003).

Appendix 2: Interview Format

Own Organisation

1. When was your organisation / research programme / NGO support started?
   - By whom?
   - What was the need / impetus?
2. What are your main capacity building priorities now? How have they changed since you first started capacity building work?
3. What capacity building work are you focusing on? (use 3 circles / onion models)
   - After they've answered ask about the following:
     i. Individual skills development
     ii. Organizations' procedures & policies
     iii. Developing clear objectives / mission
     iv. Projects development
     v. Project / programme evaluations
     vi. Fundraising skills
     vii. Organizational management
     viii. Developing external relations
4. How are you doing this? (e.g. research, training, translation/information, seminars, travel abroad, etc.)
5. Who / which organizations to you provide services to mainly (e.g. Tehran/regions, women's groups, networks, people you know, open invites, etc.)
6. How do you provide capacity building services: own staff / outside consultants in Iran / foreign consultants?
7. Have you tried to measure the impact of your capacity building work so far?
8. What kind of capacity building have you done in your own organization?

Capacity building with NGOs in Iran generally

9. Who in Tehran are the main actors in capacity building for CSOs (donors, supporters, media)?
10. How are capacity building needs being assessed?
11. What aspects of capacity building services/approaches over the last few years in Iran have been most successful? Why?
12. What capacity building has had least effect? Why?
13. What capacities will be important for Iranian NGOs in the future?
14. Are you aware of any evaluation of capacity building that has been done by any organization or research group?
15. What do you see as a need / priority in this area?

Key concepts of capacity building and CSOs in Iran: to be explored in a round table discussion

1. What is civil society in Iran?
2. What role do CSOs play in Iran?
3. How do CSOs relate to government / business?
4. How has civil society changed in the last 10 years / 50 years?
5. What do you mean by 'capacity building'?
   - Individual, organizational, sectoral, environmental

Appendix 3: Respondents

Key Informants

Name	Organization	Role
Dr. Razaghi Executive Director	Koneshgaran Daftalab	NGOSO / capacity building provider
Mr. Baquer Namazi Chair of the Board	Hamyaran	NGOSO / capacity building provider
Mrs. Massoumeh Shambayati Chair of the Board	Noavaran	NGOSO / capacity building provider
Mrs. Mabobeh Abbasgholizadeh Director	NGO Training Centre	NGOSO / capacity building provider
Mrs. Ahmadi	Institute for Women's Studies and Research	NGOSO / capacity building provider
Mr. Khosro Mansourian Director	Society for the Protection and Assistance of Socially Disadvantaged Individuals	NGO
Mrs. Fatemi Farhangkha Director	Society for the Protection of Handicapped Children and Youth	NGO
Mr. Ahmad Salari Programme Officer	UNDP	capacity building supporter
Ms. Sarah Mannell Second Secretary	British Embassy	capacity building supporter
Ms. Anneke Schutter First Secretary	Dutch Embassy	capacity building supporter

Participants in Focus Group Discussion on Civil Society

Name	Organization	Role
Ms. Parastoo Dokouhaki	Zanan Magazine *('Women')*	Journalist
Mr. Ardalan Khoshbakht Marvi	Environmental NGO	Co-founder
Ms. Khadijeh Moqquadam	Taavoni Negah e Sabz (Green Outlook Coop.)	Member
Mr. Hessam Naraqui	Ge Pe Sabz (Green Front of Iran)	Volunteer
Mr. Massoud Nasseri	Shourak Ketab e Koudakan (Children's Book Council)	Member
Ms. Massomeh Shambayati	Noavaran	Chair of the Board
Dr. Sheikh	Hamyaran	Managing Director
Ms. Mansoureh Shojaie	Markaz Farhangi Zanan (Women's Cultural Centre)	
Dr. Tajlili	n/a	Freelance Facilitator / Trainer with CSOs

Appendix 4: NGO Resource Centres in Tehran[87]

Organisation Name	Website / Email / Tel	Foundation Date	Specialities / Focus	Contact Person
Hamyaran	www.hamyaran.org info@hamyaran.org +98 21 22 01 96 96	2000	Poverty Alleviation; Work in the regions; Traditional CSOs	Mr Baquer Namazi
Noavaran	Noavaran@kanoon.net +98 21 22 85 23 75	2000	Participatory methods; facilitation; dissemination of civil society concepts and good practice; development of Farsi training materials; CB/OD with youth organisations	Mrs Massomeh Shambayati
Koneshgaran Daftalab (Volunteer Actors)	www.irancsos.net info@irancsos.net +98 21 88 55 56 84	2004	Research into civil society in Iran, NGO law, and regional comparisons; promotion of democracy and citizen's rights; translation and publication of English language texts.	Dr Sohrab Razaghi
Moassesseh Motaleat-e Zanan (Institute for Women's Studies and Research)	www.iwsr.org info@iwsr.org +98 21 22 05 06 94	1984	Women's issues in the context of Islam; advocacy for women's rights; influencing policy-makers in government	Mrs Monir Amadi
NGO Training Centre	www.ngotc.org info@ngotc.org +98 21 88 32 20 90	2002	Women's rights and community development	Ms Mahbobeh Abbasgolizadeh
Markaz Tavanmand Sazi (Iranian CSOs Resource Centre)	+98 21 88 89 66 83			Mr Nemati

[87] This is the term used in Iran, rather than 'CSO/NGO Support Organisations'.

Appendix 5: Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
CIVICUS	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FPA	Family Planning Association
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICRI	International Consortium of Refugees in Iran
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Foundation
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IWSR	Institute for Women's Studies and Research
MP	Member of Parliament
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OD	Organisational Development
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Praxis Paper No. 8

Building Organisational Capacity in Iranian Civil Society: Mapping the Progress of CSOs

By Catherine Squire

Iran has a vibrant and firmly established civil society, which has developed with strong roots in local traditions and communities, virtually entirely funded from local resources. A large expansion in the sector in the last ten years, and recent exposure to international CSOs has resulted in new skills, ideas, and methods being enthusiastically adopted. CSO support organisations are relative newcomers: most established in the last 5 years, with external support crucial to their development. In that time, a great deal of experience has accumulated, and the approaches of CSOs are evolving constantly. However, learning from experience is largely undocumented, formal evaluations are rare, and there are no structures in place to help CSOs to learn from each other, disseminate good practice, reward achievements, or learn from successes.

This paper outlines the various capacity building approaches and activities undertaken within Iran: from promoting the concepts of democracy, rights, and citizens' participation through workshops and seminars etc; to training courses for individuals in skills such as project planning, proposal writing, and partnership working; to capacity building at the organisational level, through for example organisational assessments. The paper details key civil society capacity building issues in relation to organisations' internal organisation, external relations and programme performance, and provides a summary of priority needs relating to organisational capacity building practice.

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