

HAMYARAN: THE IRANIAN NGO RESOURCE CENTER
An Interview with Baquer Namazi, Director of Hamyaran
By Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr

The Iran NGO initiative was established in 1998 as a result of a workshop held in Bushehr, Iran, in which 50 participants active in various Iranian NGOs, ranging from fields such as health and population, women and development, as well as environmental protection and sustainable development felt the need to create an NGO umbrella organization “to strengthen the role, capacity and effectiveness of NGOs in Iran.” At the beginning activities of members in this NGO initiative were based on voluntary work by members of a steering committee selected from NGOs working in different areas in order to follow up on the recommendations of the meeting. However, the importance of a structured organization became more and more obvious soon thereafter. Thus, the first Iranian NGO resource center was created in March 2001 with a name that summarizes its goal at once: Hamyaran (i.e., the Supporters) seeking to provide NGOs all over Iran with skills enabling them to work more effectively in their fields. Workshops (such as on proposal writing and NGO management) have been organized to meet training requirements of NGOs identified through a participatory needs assessment study. The offered workshops aim to enable the Iranian NGOs to maximize their resources. Hamyaran is also actively involved with the government. Its initiative to promote – in cooperation with active NGOs – reforms in NGO laws to provide more freedom for the NGO activities has been one of its major tasks.

The Population Council and the Ford Foundation have been among the main supporters of Hamyaran. While international NGOs and UN agencies have provided the majority of funding, the effort has been largely an Iranian initiative supported by international partners. The interventions have been developed through a consultative process and the initiative strives to mobilize support around the collective wisdom of Iranian NGO leaders. The transnational financing of this NGO movement has facilitated cooperation between Iranian and non-Iranian NGOs and organizations. For example, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a German foundation, organizes seminars on teaching computer and Internet skills to members of Iranian NGOs. Dutch NGOs have facilitated the exchange of ideas and experiences between women NGOs, while the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Search for Common Ground have co-sponsored knowledge and experience sharing between environment NGOs of US and Iran. Likewise, British and Iranian NGOs have exchanged ideas in the field of children in joint meetings organized by Hamyaran.

Mr. Baquer Namazi, the current director of Hamyaran, had worked with the UN and UNICEF as its representative in Egypt before retiring and returning to Iran. He was encouraged by the previous president and the current regional director of the Population Council to promote cooperation in Iran. After preliminary studies it was decided that the most useful work needed in Iran was to cooperate in strengthening the NGO sector. There was considerable demand for linking up NGOs with the international community. But first, preparations had to be done at the local level. The agenda for the local work was defined in the Bushehr meeting. The creation of Hamyaran is partly the result of these ideas and activities.

Baquer Namazi has written extensively on various aspects of NGOs¹ and has taken part in international conferences on subjects related to the roles of NGOs in promoting a better understanding of developments

¹ Baquer Namazi has authored, among others, the following publications: *Partners in Action: UNICEF's Experience of Building Strategic Alliances with NGOs in Egypt* (Cairo, June 1988); *Capacity Building of Iranian NGOs* (Cairo: Population Council, 1997); *NGO Capacity Building in Iran* (Cairo: Population Council, WANA Regional Office, November 1997); “Role of NGOs in Combating Poverty in Egypt: A Proposal to SFD, UNDP, MOSA” (Cairo, 1997); “Role of International Agencies in Meeting Needs



in Iran and opening up a new people to people cooperation through the Iranian civil society. As part of this agenda Iranian and US civil society organizations have undertaken cooperation such as a conference called "Dialogue and Action between the People of Iran and America," co-organized with the Center for World Dialogue in Cyprus, which was founded by an Iranian businessman in 1995. Alton Jones Foundation funded this conference and the participant pool consisted of 28 civil society leaders from American and Iranian NGOs with an interest in "improving civil society relations between the two countries."²

In a phone interview, Baquer Namazi and myself discussed the influence of Mr. Khatami's election on the activities of the NGOs as well as, how NGOs can provide for peace and security within their national borders. I also asked him about the possibilities for establishing networks between Iranian NGOs and Iranian professionals in the diaspora.

RSE: Would you please give a short history of the establishment of NGOs in Iran after the revolution in 1979? Debates on the importance of a strong civil society have been associated mainly with the reformist movement in Iran. How has the election of president Khatami in 1997 influenced the activities of the NGOs?

BN: In general we can distinguish between two types of NGOs in Iran. Firstly, there are the charity-based NGOs, which existed before the Iranian revolution but have become more active after the revolution. They are relief-oriented and people-centered. Secondly, new types of NGOs were created after the success of the Iranian revolution. Among them is the association of the school-builders, which by now builds over 32 percent of Iranian schools. There are also many new women, youth, environmental, and human rights NGOs. With the election of Mr. Khatami, the NGOs expanded enormously in number due to the available funding from the government. For example before his election, women NGOs numbered something like 30 and now there are up to 600 of them. The environmental NGOs were about 50 then, while now there are 500 registered and still more to come. Nearly 1,000 youth NGOs have been registered and 2,000 more are awaiting registration. The quantitative expansion of these NGOs after the election of Mr. Khatami needs to be viewed critically as well. Due to the available funds some of these NGOs are not people-centered, but rather interested in the funds themselves. Mr. Khatami came to power with his slogan on civil society development. Regarding the importance of civil society during the tenure of Mr. Khatami, one should be aware of the gap existing between progressive policies that are declared and the actual practice. For example, in the past five years there has been talk on passing an NGO law to create a more enabling legal environment, for the purpose of voluntary work by NGOs. But with the new regulations that have been drafted, one sometimes feels that we are going back in time. These new regulations make one feel that any association of people is suspicious and that government has to maintain close watch and control over NGO activities. So it creates a situation in which procedures are based on mistrust and suspicion, and the heavy hand of the government can be felt all the time, even with the new and positive policy declarations drafted since Mr. Khatami's election. To sum up, government policies and plans are more NGO friendly, but structural constraints are still in place and many challenges remain to be tackled.

and Expectations of NGOs" (Paper for NGO Consultation Workshop, Bushehr, Iran, 25-26 February 1998); and *Iranian NGO's: Situation Analysis* (Tehran: Hamyaran Center, 2000).

² For more information about the conference, please see a detailed report on the website of Future Alliances International <http://www.futurealliances.com/dapia/final_report_dapia_meeting_cyprus.doc>.

RSE: How would you explain the relation between NGOs and the Iranian government? How independent are these organizations in fact?

BN: In general, you are dependent on the body that finances your activities, so the more independent an Iranian NGO is from the government funding, the more freedom it has to decide what actions to take. The charity-based NGOs in Iran rely on public support for the realization of their plans. Especially in the provinces, some 80 to 90 percent of the resources of these types of NGOs come from the people's input. The situation is different for the modern type of NGOs. They rely mostly on public and on international funding for their activities. However, an exception to this rule was the modest funding support from UNDP on the study of NGOs in Iran. The study was quite critical of the work of the UN agencies several years back. UNDP went as far as publishing the report. Usually, if you are getting most of your money from the government, then your independence is compromised. So the modern NGOs that rely more and more on public funding need to diversify their resources. But having said that, there are 20 NGOs working on children. They are all very genuine and independent NGOs, and they get resources from outside the government. There are many human rights NGOs that are independent from the government as well. NGOs in the service-delivery area are not usually involved in a confrontational dialogue and advocacy with the government, so they face fewer constraints with regard to government funding than other NGOs. Some people in the government are forthcoming and critical about government's shortcomings. This transformation is marked by huge quantitative expansions of NGOs as many government resources have become available, so in this process it is not easy to maintain independence and work as a genuine NGO. In such an atmosphere dialogue becomes even more central to the activities of the NGOs. In response to this need Hamyaran organizes yearly meetings, in which NGOs from across the country, in addition to civil servants, attend these meetings and discuss openly their concerns. Last year our meeting was in fact about the relationship between the government and the NGOs. Both parties expressed their concerns quite frankly and Hamyaran has published the result of these discussions in a book. I must say this is a very useful book because it discusses in detail the challenges that NGOs in Iran face in their relationship with the government.

RSE: Can you suggest a project in which collaboration between an Iranian NGO and a foreign NGO would be fruitful?

BN: It depends on what kind of NGO collaboration we are talking about. Iran has considerable experience in community work. To cope with disasters, considerable pioneering work has been done, and the international community can benefit from these good practices. Iran can also benefit from the wealth of new knowledge that has been created by the international civil society. We are not so much in need of financial support; rather we need access to new science and technology knowledge and we need people who can convey the benefits of modern science to the grass roots-level through non-governmental organizations. With the high unemployment rate among the youth in Iran, we need to acquire the know-how perhaps from other NGOs working on a community level to learn how to create work for young unemployed people. And, of course, Iran has some good experiences in that field. Staff training of volunteers would also be a useful area. When I think of collaboration, I am not thinking of transfer of financial resources, but rather of sharing knowledge and expertise, and of bringing the Iranian NGOs up to date with state-of-the-art technology. I would also like to see foreign NGOs work on a community level with local NGOs; that would in fact be a good pilot project in which expatriate Iranians could then join in with their expertise. I imagine the expatriate community to be more interested in such community level activities rather than in sitting at conferences and just talking about NGOs on an abstract level.

Examples of such collaboration have been, among others, the “Scientific and cultural exchange program between Iranian and the international researchers.” [You can view a detailed description of this and some other collaborative projects at <http://www.iranngos.org> under the rubric “Reports.”]

RSE: Diaspora Iranians are a strong financial and intellectual force, and many of them have interest in the welfare of Iran. Hamyaran took part in a meeting with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2002 in which the important role of the Iranian diaspora in “Sustainable development process in Iran” was discussed. How successful has been the implementation of these ideas, and how can foreign NGOs help in this regard?

BN: Since I have been back in Iran, and especially after the Bushehr meeting in 1998, we recommended that the government help to open up Iranian civil society to international experience for them to see both the positive and the negative developments in Iran. Because the outside world is tuned to see the negative things that are happening in Iran, we wanted it to see the positive developments in the field of community-based initiatives in Iran, but also to bring in the expertise of Iranian diaspora communities to help expand our activities. At the beginning much of the interaction was with US-based organizations – for example, we had a large conference in Washington organized by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. Our environmental group met with American environmental watchdog organizations. We interacted with US civil society activists in a broad-based meeting held in Cyprus. In Iran, we hosted several meetings, one about two years ago on “Urban Management and Environmental Protection of Tehran,” where German, Egyptian, and many other international experts participated. I have to say that at the outset the government didn’t always seem to feel comfortable with Iranian NGOs setting up contact with the international NGOs, but we realized that we didn’t need a university or a government to serve as an umbrella to organize international NGO meetings. At present the new policies of the Foreign Ministry have a more facilitating role and direct cooperation of Iranian NGOs with international counterparts is smoother and easier. We invite government officials to participate, and several have come to do so. The government’s professional staff has welcomed such initiatives.

To come back to the question of the Iranian expatriates, the Foreign Ministry has been encouraging us to reach out to the Iranian experts in the diaspora, either individually, or in a more institutionalized form such as through Iranians working at the World Bank. So in terms of policy, the trend is becoming more positive, and the regulations are being made easier, there is verbal encouragement, but there are also the banal problems such as getting visas *et cetera*. But generally the government is positive towards the NGOs networking with the expatriate professional Iranians who are working in Europe and in America.

RSE: Many activities of NGOs and state organizations around the world contribute to peace and security in their own countries, sometimes even contributing to the security in other countries. In your view, how do Iranian NGOs contribute to peace and security in Iran and in the region?

BN: Iran is a country that promotes the concept of the dialogue of civilizations globally, but I believe we need to learn how to have a civilized dialogue locally, so that is a big dilemma we face. Regarding the peace movement we have two networks in Iran: one is the network of women NGOs and the other are the NGOs working with children and youth. These networks, although loose coalitions, promote attitudes favorable to peace and tolerance. As the most independent NGOs, they do some advocacy work and produce school material, which they then distribute in schools for peace education. Professional government people attend their meetings, so there is cooperation between these types of work and the government. We specially have to target children, because their minds are more receptive towards a peace attitude. Civil society cooperation between Iran and other countries, particularly in the West, is critical. The

diplomatic avenue often does not do justice. The Western media often show bias. International cooperation at the level of the people facilitated by NGOs can create better understanding and promote goodwill. In the period of transition Iran is experiencing, the greater the presence of the outside world, bereft of the double standards associated with modern diplomacy, the smoother this transition and the more favorable the local and international climate will be for realizing the aspiration of the Iranian people to move forward toward the goal of a more democratic society.

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