BUILDING AN E-COMMUNITY OF IRANIAN NGOS

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ABSTRACT
The Iranian Civil Society is developing very fast. Hundreds of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are engaged in a process of socio-organizational networking, which is mainly coordinated by two resource centers in Teheran. The paper presents experiences with the technological support of this networking process. The introduction of an Iranian NGO Community System (based on a groupware system BSCW) is described referring to a process model of integrated organization and technology development (OTD). Training measures and efforts of socio-organizational and technological developments are analyzed and mechanisms of coordinating the networking e-community are presented.

KEYWORDS
Civil Society, e-Community, Community Systems, Computer Mediated Communication, Integrated Organization and Technology Development

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper presents a project aimed at supporting the community building of Iranian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In this project an approach of integrated organization and technology development is used for the participatory design of a community system. This task was defined before the background of a politically widely isolated Islamic state which is characterized by a very fast growing civil society. Even more dynamics is brought in the process by the ongoing and rapid increase of technological infrastructure and the exploding number of internet accounts in Iran. These conditions make the building of an e-community of Iranian NGOs a very challenging process. Concerning the introduction of a technological community system, the development nearly starts from the scratch.

Furthermore, the actual conflict between parts of the western democratic states and Iraq influences the political stability of the whole region and affects the most middle eastern countries. Without being able to discuss all implications of this political background, in this paper the ongoing process of Iranian NGO community building will be analyzed as a hopeful development for the very lively Iranian civil society.

2. BACKGROUND: IRANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

In Year 2000 for Iran were counted 1,500 to 2,000 traditional community based Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), 5,000 women cooperatives, 1,500 modern NGOs, and for about 3,000 easy credit funds (cf. Namazi 2000). These Non-Governmental Organizations are building the basis for the Iranian civil society.

The large number of traditional Iranian community based organizations has a very long history and strong affinities with people. They are sustained by community funds, focus on the most pressing needs of the people, and have survived pressures of both the monarchy regime and constraints of the Islamic Government. The growing number of so called modern NGOs in Iran is directed towards the fields of women questions, youth and children interests, health and population matters, sustainable development and environmental protection.
2.1 State of the art of national NGO networking

In 1997 and 2001 two national conferences of Iranian Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) took place in the cities Busher and Mashad. At the Mashad conference in September 2001 more than 120 participants from NGOs, scientists, government delegates and representatives of the UN were engaged (cf. Hamyaran 2001). The meeting was organized by the Hamyaran NGO Resource Center in Teheran, which was registered officially as an NGO at the Iranian Government in March 2001 and which is coordinating the ongoing networking process of Iranian Non-Governmental Organizations. The next national NGO conference is planned for spring of 2003.

These conferences mark important points for the NGO networking in Iran, which is driven quite far already in many areas. National women NGO networks, environment and development NGO networks, youth organizations, and health/population umbrella organizations are already existing.

In the beginning of 2000 a study on Iranian NGOs, which was funded by the Ford foundation and the Iranian Population Council analyzed the situation of Iranian Non-Governmental Organizations as characterized by two areas of conflict: (i) differences between rural NGOs and urban organizations which are located centrally in Teheran and the (provincial) capitals and (ii) the significant distinctions between so called “new” NGOs and traditional community based organizations of the third sector, which are mainly focussed on relief work (cf. Namazi 2000).

The recent networking process is shaped mainly by the integration of these different NGOs, which are segmented by origin, style of work, and organization.

2.2 State of the international NGO networking in Iran

In the Year 2000 only nine official secretaries of international Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were located in Iran (Anheier et al. 2001: 284). These international organizations have got 932 registered members living in Iran (ibid.: 288). Both statistics prove that related to the international average the Iranian civil society is characterized by a very low degree of organization. This is due to the far reaching international political isolation of the Iranian state and the repressions by the Iranian regime.

2.3 Challenges for the technological support of NGO networking

The Yearbook of Global Civil Society 2001 documented for the years 1999/2000 that only 11.2% of the Iranian population has got access to telephone, 3.2% to personal computers, and only 0.2% of the population is able to access the internet (Anheier et al. 2001: 256). The illiteracy-rate decreased for about 12% during the 1990s, but is at 25% in 1998 (ibid.: 277).

Although both statistics should have been improved during the last years (esp. the number of internet accounts and providers is growing rapidly, but official numbers are missing), the lack of internet access for private households and NGOs as well as the illiteracy are the most important barriers for the national NGO community especially in rural provinces and regions of Iran.

3. THE PROJECT IRANIAN NGO COMMUNITY SYSTEM

In 2002 the International Institute for Socio-Informatics (IISI) concluded a contract with the Department for International Cooperation of the German political foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung on a research and development project which aims to support the community building and networking of Iranian NGOs. Within the Year 2002 IISI provided the cooperation platform “Basic Support for Cooperative Work (BSCW)” in order to support the networking process by technical means. The BSCW System was developed by the Fraunhofer Institute FIT (cf. Bentley et al. 1997). IISI organized the introduction of BSCW to the Iranian NGO network, consulted an integrated process of Organization and Technology Development (OTD; cf. Wulf and Rohde 1995) referring to the Iranian NGO Community System, and realized a train-the-trainer programme for members of Iranian NGOs, which focused not only on technical trainings but was directed to community building, cooperation trainings, and project development also.
This project started in March 2002 and ended with a delegation visit of leading Iranian NGO members and civil society experts in Germany in December 2002.

3.1 Project approach

The project called “Iran NGO Community System” aimed at the support of the socio-organizational community and network development as well as of the technological networking of the Iranian civil society. Therefore, IISI followed an approach of Integrated Organization and Technology Development (OTD), in which these socio-organizational and the technological networking is looked upon as interdependent and combined in a participatory process (cf. Wulf and Rohde 1995).

It was planned that in the long run a total of about 500 NGOs with around 25,000 members in the regions of Tehran, Khuzestan, Lorestan, Fars, Sistan and Baluchestan should be able to benefit from the project’s outcome. Therefore, the project (which duration was limited to 8 months) focused on an approach of sustainable development and consulting, that means Iranian NGO practitioners have to control and to continue the process themselves after the project’s end. This participatory approach is necessary to take the Iranian NGO members as experts of their own NGO networking.

3.2 Project outlines

During the first stage of the project the institute provided expertise for the development of the networked cooperation between Iranian networks of women NGOs, health NGOs, school building philanthropists, youth NGOs and environmental NGOs. Most of these cooperation partners were one-issue networks or umbrella organizations. Thus, the project was directed towards a 'networking of networks’.

First, a defined group of facilitators within the NGO network was to enable to (tele) cooperate with each other via the so-called “NGO community system”. During the next step these facilitators had to be trained in order to work as trainers themselves for their colleagues and other NGO members.

The project aimed at developing adequate basic structures for
- tele-communication and -cooperation
- virtual communities of practice (cf. Wenger 1998)
- project development and management
- expertise sharing, community learning, and knowledge management (cf. Ackerman et al. 2002)
- preparation of national meetings (e.g. the planned Mashad+2-meeting)
- and process evaluation.

During the year 2002 in three expert visits to Iran IISI trainers conducted workshops in which Iranian NGO members were trained in the use of the NGO-CS as well as in the theoretical basics of the development of socio-organizational structures that enable expertise sharing, community learning, and project development.

3.3 Technical support

In the project the BSCW System (cf. Appelt 1999) was used for the development of structures for networked communication and the dissemination of national and international information among the Iranian NGO community. On the technical basis of this BSCW System and with help of the IISI experts, the Iranian users set up a NGO community system (NGO-CS). The NGO-CS requires internet connectivity. The NGO-CS provides workspaces for different kinds of working groups, NGO-networks, topics/issues etc., which are to be set up by the users themselves. That means, IISI supported a process of participatory design in which members of Iranian NGOs defined their own spaces and activities, selected the members addressed, defined groups, invited new members, sent group-mails, and started discussions on topics chosen by themselves.

Furthermore, the system supports them by a version-management-system for co-authoring, by features that allow storing and exchanging of most of usual document types, and by the possibility to set links to external web sites. The system provides a lot of awareness features to inform about activities and events within the NGO-CS (cf. Figure 1).
3.3.1 Advantages of the technical system BSCW

BSCW is a cooperation platform with rich groupware functionality and is developed as an open web based system (cf. Bentley et al. 1997, Koch and Appelt 1998, Appelt 1999). That means one only needs an internet account and any usual web-browser to access the system. No installation of additional software is needed. In 2000 the system was used by more than 80,000 users worldwide.

The use of BSCW is free of charge for not-for-profit purposes and scientific research projects at universities. Each user of the system got 10 MB Webspace for free. Only if there were specific requirements for server hosting and system administration (security aspects, system performance, etc.) in Iran, it would be necessary to buy a server licence which usually costs the amount of 16,850 € for more than 1,000 users (3,500 € for more than 300 users) per year.

For the Iranian NGO CS it was very important that the system is provided free of charge and that it can be used with any internet computer. BSCW avoids high tech elements and advanced graphical features. Thus, even with low transfer speed (58 kb/sec) the performance of the system is quite comfortable.

4. RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PROJECT

During the Project Iranian NGO CS IISI experts visited different Iranian provinces three times (in May, July, and October/November 2002). In these visits several consulting services have been provided to Iranian NGOs. According to the project’s approach and the goals, a number of meetings, trainings, and workshops for Iranian NGO members was conducted.

The cooperation platform BSCW was introduced and the structure of an Iranian NGO community system was designed. This NGO CS was set up as a closed system exclusively for invited Iranian NGO members only. At the end of 2002 for about 180 members of different Iranian NGOs are registered users for this system.

The following sections describe the different measures of the project in more detail:

4.1 Train the trainer measures

16 Iranian NGO members were trained as trainers for the BSCW system in Teheran, another 14 NGO members in Urumieh in the province West-Azarbeijan, 20 persons in Shiraz and another 18 participants in Esfahan. Most of the participants had basic English language and computer skills. More than one third of the participants have been women of all ages (cf. Figure 2).

The trainings measures were conducted in English, some parts have been supported by English-Farsi interpreters. Each training course lasted two full days, containing six trainings sessions on BSCW, six practical exercises in small groups with internet access, and discussions on (tele-) cooperation and computer-mediated communication.
Furthermore there have been provided theoretical basics and scientific findings on collaborative computing, and in a reflection phase needs for adaptation of the system and specific requirements for the future visits were elaborated.

4.2. Support for self-learners and self-organized trainings

By translation of the training materials (mainly power point slides and commented snapshots of the system’s functions) into Farsi language, self-learners are supported (cf. Figure 3). These self-learning materials can be downloaded out of the system itself. Additionally several tools for planning, organizing and conducting training measures are provided to enable participants to realize self-organized training courses. Different institutions in Teheran started to provide these training measures in autumn of 2002.

4.3 Development workshops

In several workshops the Iranian NGO community system’s structure was developed, strategy and culture for the usage of the community system were discussed, the process of tailoring was started, and tasks for the system design could be defined. Furthermore specific problems of internet connectivity of (mainly) provincial NGOs were addressed, and the crucial aspects of the ongoing community building process amongst Iranian NGOs could be identified and reflected.

4.4 Facilitators and Working Group

During the second and the third expert visit there were conducted advanced training measures and follow-up trainings for the 16 participants of the first Basics training, an Iranian working group (consisting of 3 NGO network managers) for the coordination of the process was set up in Teheran, and 15 facilitators were established. In the provinces a reasonable number of trained trainers are prepared to take over this role as facilitators.

4.5 Code of Ethics

Together with the facilitators and the Teheran working group a proposal for a “Code of Ethic” concerning the Iranian NGO CS was worked out and published in the system for discussion. This Code of Ethic deals with

- criteria for membership,
- the non-hierarchical system’s structure,
- the participatory introduction and adaption process,
- the content structure,
- some rules for information and document management,
• roles and access rights,
• privacy matters,
• and some cultural aspects of cooperation and trust.

4.6 Fostering “Communities of Practice”

During the expert visits tools for project proposals, project planning and documentation were provided to Iranian NGO members, a project development workshop was conducted, comprehensive cooperation projects for the Iranian NGO community have been planned, and several practical projects were brought on their way. In our workshops most participants complained about the lack of experiences with a ‘culture of cooperation’ in Iran. To support such cultural experiences and to foster the building of “social capital” (cf. Putnam 2000, Cohen and Prusack 2001) and the collective learning of the Iranian NGO community, together with the facilitators several cooperation projects were planned to establish so called “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998).

Within these ‘communities of practice’ social construction of meaning, community learning, and collective processes of identification in sense of “social identity” (Tajfel 1982) or “collective identity” (Simon and Klandermans 2001) can be enabled and supported.

4.7 NGO delegation visit in Germany

A visit of an Iranian NGO delegation to Germany and to the European Commission in Brussels has been organized. This visit took place in December 2002. Ten leading members of Iranian NGO networks, managers of resource centers, and civil society researchers have been participants in this NGO delegation. In Germany and Belgium they met with German NGO networkers (mainly of umbrella organizations), scientists and civil society experts, politicians, EU consultants, representatives of ministry administration, and business people to exchange experiences.

Further meetings in Iran and Germany, scientific exchange, and several cooperation projects have been agreed on between the Iranian and European experts and have planned for the year 2003.

4.8 Sustainability of the process

Furthermore, for the sustainability of the process the following measures were already set up:
• the translation of the system’s user interface into Farsi language,
• the elaboration of a newsletter with information about the project, the community system, and the networking process which should be published to Iranian NGO networks in Farsi language, electronically as well as paper based,
• the design of a website (IRANngoCS.net) which is accessible for the public and informs about the NGO community and the system,
• the future development of this website into a Iranian NGO Community System “entrance portal”,
• the development of a database with information on all Iranian NGOs, their activities, and civil society practice,
• the opening of the system (or parts of the system) to Iranian Governmental Organizations and international NGOs,
• additional strategies for the national and international networking of Iranian NGOs,
• concrete projects to establish a starting point for a "community of practice" of NGOs in Iran.

5. EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The described project and the several measures have been evaluated in different ways: Every meeting, training, and workshop was evaluated by the participants by filling out a questionnaire. Additionally, several expert interviews with very engaged Iranian NGO networkers have been conducted by IISI members.
Furthermore, the activities in the NGO CS are recorded and the absolute frequencies are registered anonymously (cf. Figure 4).

Some of the results of these project activities are already visible, others will show up in the future development. At the end of 2002, for about 180 Iranian NGO practitioners in several Iranian provinces are working with the introduced NGO community system. The activity statistics shows that usage of the system is increasing slowly but continuously (cf. Figure 4). As more NGO members in several Iranian provinces are registered in the community system and as more specific cooperation projects are established, the number and range of activities will raise.

![Figure 4. Statistics on the Iranian NGO community system’s usage: absolute number of user activities per week; 37 weeks of usage; each column is a week; dark columns are training weeks; the 25th (training) week was cut at 700 but counts 1,105 activities in total.](image)

All materials for trainings, presentations and checklists are provided in English and Farsi language for trainers and self-learners. Several self-organized trainings of Iranian trainers have already been conducted. Besides our Iranian NGO CS workspace structure, there are developing several additional workspaces in the system for single NGOs and different projects. Also the new Iranian Civil Society Resource Center in Tehran is using the community system as its communication and cooperation platform.

The expert visits succeeded in planning the sustainability of the networking process of Iranian NGOs. The project and our community system were promoted in the Iranian provinces and in the broader public. After the third visit, for about 70 NGO members in four Iranian provinces are trained for the community system and for conducting own training courses in Farsi language. A working group has developed a Code of Ethics as a “living document” for the Iranian NGO community and coordinates different projects for the future.

The next steps are aimed at fostering a living culture of cooperation and a “community of practice” of Iranian NGO network practitioners. The evaluation of the training measures and the meetings with facilitators and the Teheran working group underlines that there is a significant need for further trainings on different issues concerning communication and cooperation, project management, fund raising and campaigning, IT and new media in the Iranian NGO community. Additionally, Iranian NGOs express their strong need for future cooperation with German and international organizations.

The next national NGO meeting in Iran (planned for spring of 2003) is expected to foster and support these ongoing networking activities of the Iranian civil society organizations.

The next important steps in this process should be

- intense national and international cooperation between Iranian and international NGOs, resource structures, and civil society researchers as well as
- follow-up evaluation measures concerning the further development of the Iranian NGO Community System and the ongoing networking process of Iranian civil society organizations.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper presents experiences which were made in a project fostering the networking process of Iranian civil society organizations (CSOs). To support this process by technical means, a NGO community system was introduced and an Iranian NGO e-community was brought on its way.
Nevertheless, it has to be noticed that the community building project has mainly reached urban NGOs and their members in Teheran and the provincial capitals. Participants of the trainings in these cities and urban regions got adequate language and computer skills to take part in the measures. Further activities are necessary to integrate NGO networks and members from the rural regions and provinces in Iran. Therefore, Farsi translations of training materials, the system’s user interface, and the realization of self-organized trainings were set up.

Besides this national NGO networking, the project aims at the support of international cooperation of Iranian NGOs as well. In December 2000 a delegation visit of 10 leading Iranian NGO members to Germany and to the European Commission in Brussels was organized. In several meetings these Iranian delegates exchanged experiences with German NGO practitioners and experts, with politicians and civil society researchers. This delegation visit marks a starting point for cooperations and international relationships between Iranian and German CSOs.

To guarantee a sustainable process of building an e-community, a living culture of cooperation and a "community of practice" of Iranian NGOs are needed. The future success of the system is dependent on the engagement and the activities of Iranian facilitators and supporters of the networking process.

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