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Building Social Capital in an Iranian NGO Community System

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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 centres in Teheran. The paper presents experiences with a socio-technical support of this networking process. The concepts of “social capital” and “communities of practice” are applied in a framework of socio-technical interventions to foster social capital among NGOs. The introduction of an Iranian NGO Community System 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. Furthermore, mechanisms of participatory system design and of coordinating the networking e-community are presented. First results of the process are evaluated.

1 Introduction

The paper presents a project aimed at supporting the community building of Iranian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Such a support of the Iranian civil society has to be seen in the context of the democratic transition of state and society. In this project an approach of integrated organization and technology development (OTD) is used for the participatory design of a community system

which supports the NGO community building process. The project took place in a politically widely isolated Islamic state which is characterized by a fast growing civil society. Further dynamics is brought in the process by the ongoing and rapid increase of technological infrastructure and the exploding number of internet accounts in Iran. Concerning the introduction of a technological community system, the development nearly starts from the scratch. These conditions make the building of an e-community of Iranian NGOs a real challenge.

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

In the following chapter the concept of civil society and specific information about the state of the art of the ongoing Iranian NGO networking will be introduced. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of the project and the case study. The fourth chapter describes the action research approach taken, its measures, and achievements. Chapter 5 presents the results of the process and a first evaluation. In the last section of the paper implications of the empirical findings for the theoretical approach and for further research will be discussed.

2 The Iranian Civil Society

The following sections present an introduction of the concept of civil society and the state of the art of NGO networking in Iran.

2.1 Civil Society: Definition and Discussion of a Concept

In our study we consider NGOs to be the actors of civil society. Thus, we use the terms Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) synonymous. Nevertheless dealing with the concepts of civil society and NGOs, there is no formal and universal definition of both. According to the very broad definition of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations NGOs are „all not-for-profit actors who are not governmental or intergovernmental” (cf. <http://ngls.tad.ch/english/pubs/hb/hb4.html>). Broad definitions like the presented one do not differ between “good” or “evil” organizations and therefore enfold not primarily social oriented organizations like e.g. the US-american National Rifle Association or even criminal syndicates, insurgent militias, and terrorist formations. Thus, the “dark side of civil society” is included (Roth 2003).

Therefore, most democracy theorists refer to a normative concept of civil society and NGOs in which tolerance, fairness, and civic engagement for public goods are most important characteristics. Furthermore, NGOs should be focused

on communicative action and the exclusion of illegitimate forms of physical violence (cf. Lauth and Merkel 1997). In their situation analysis of Iranian NGOs, Iranian experts (NGO activists and political scientists) defined a NGO as “an independent, non-government, non-profit, voluntary association of a group of citizens, rallying around a common community cause, and accountable to the clients they profess to serve” (Namazi 2000: 18). Nevertheless, even the normative approaches and more limited definitions of civil society include a real wide range of different organizations, social movements, networks, pressure groups, and others.

Most approaches to structure this quite fuzzy area of civil society are based on the positioning of NGOs between the sectors of the market and the state. NGOs represent intermediary organizations in a “third sector” of solidly action or a “value driven sector” (Fowler 1992: 22). In contrast to national policies and particularistic interests, NGOs are advocacy organizations which promote general public goods. Categorizations of NGOs refer to the origin of the organizations in a global civil society and differ between north (European and US) and south NGOs (developing countries). Others are referring to different organizational structures and the degree of institutionalization (networks of autonomous movements vs. professional and hierarchic interest or pressure groups) or thematic issues (environment, development, women’s rights/gender issues, peace, health asf.) (cf. Rohde and Klein 1996: 7).

Concerning international NGO networks and the discourse of a “global civil society” (cf. Anheier 2001), recent developments of CSOs show a trend towards the establishment of umbrella organizations and professional well-organized associations. Concerning the trends of institutionalization and internationalization, two problematical effects have to be taken into consideration: the risk of corporatism and cooptation. Corporatism means that the high-institutionalized international CSOs might take filter functions and therefore equalize the specific characteristics, issues, and activities of different NGOs. So the autonomy of single NGOs is at risk. Cooptation is a threat which results from narrow relationships to Governmental Organizations such as new forms of cooperation, partnership, and coalition. Cooptation might cause a loss of autonomy and of specific principals such as participation, or social and cultural embedding. Furthermore, increasing management requirements (e.g. resource allocation, public relations, international campaigning etc.) might rise the pressure to adapt to the logic of Governmental Organizations. NGOs might loose their specific characteristics by adapting themselves to traditional organizations, their structures and management problems (cf. Rohde and Klein 1996: 7pp).

Concerning the role of civil society in a global world, Benjamin Barber (1996) identifies two processes as main threats for democracy: the economic globalization, mass media entertainment, and commerce on the one hand (“McWorld”) and ethnic/religious closures and fundamentalism on the other hand

("Jihad"). These opposing trends of globalism and tribalism mark a development which might lead to a "clash of civilizations" (cf. Huntington 1998). Barber (1996: 294) expects solutions for these conflicting trends from transnational cooperation among NGOs in a global civil society rather than from international conventions and resolutions of the United Nations.

Civil society takes a very important role in processes of democratic transition. A comparative analysis of civil society development in several transition countries comes to the conclusion that this role and the function of civil society is most important during the stage of liberalization, at the start of transition processes, and at the stage of democratic consolidation (cf. Rohde and Klein 1997: 3pp). Since the Iranian society is in a stage of liberalization, we expect the CSOs to take a very important role in this process of transition. Therefore the project presented was supposed to play a role in strengthening the Iranian civil society.

2.2 Background of the Iranian Civil Society

In this section some demographical data are presented to describe the background of the development of the Iranian civil society. The state of the art of (national and international) networking of Iranian NGOs will be sketched and some preconditions for a successful community building will be discussed.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a total population of 66 million people (in 2001), 49% female and 51% male population, only 39% living in rural regions, 61% in urban regions. The population growth is at 1.7 percent, 33% of population are children and youths under 14 years of age. The unemployment rate was 14% in 1999. Iran accommodates 2 million refugees (Namazi 2000: 13). In tertiary education (and in university studies) women account more than 35% of pupils/students (in 1996; cf. Anheier et al. 2001: 277).

The international NGO Human Rights Watch reports violations against human rights concerning the lack of freedom of expression and association, disappearances and extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, torture, and discrimination against minorities (Anheier et al. 2001: 264).

Nevertheless, Iranian society is characterized by a very fast growing sector of Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organizations: In year 2000 for Iran were counted 1.500 to 2.000 traditional community based Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), more than 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 and the Islamic Government. The

growing number of so called modern NGOs in Iran is directed towards the fields of gender issues, youth and children interests, health and population matters, sustainable development and environmental protection.

2.3 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). Actually, communication and cooperation between these different types of Iranian NGOs are quite weak. It is one of the challenges to overcome this lack of cooperation.

According to the mentioned situation analysis of Iranian NGOs, the recent networking process is shaped mainly by the integration of these different NGOs, which are segmented by origin, style of work, and organization. The Hamyaran NGO Resource Center reports that the emerging NGO movement tends to neglect the significant role of the traditional organizations, although these have very strong community ties, a very deep knowledge of civil engagement, and many experiences from which the “new”, modern NGOs can learn and benefit (ibid.).

Another challenge for the Iranian NGO networking is the relationship between non-governmental and governmental organizations: During the last years, the reform oriented Iranian Government with its President Mohammad Khatami officially fosters the Iranian civil society, the NGOs, and their networking process. Nevertheless, Iranian NGOs still face a lot of difficulties: “Khatami and his Government declare progressive policies everyday. Old legal and procedural

forms, however, are still in place. Even worse is the negative attitude of senior officials in the executive, judicial and legislative branches that need to be overcome” (Namazi 2000: 7). Nevertheless concerning this necessary cooperation with governmental organizations, the mentioned risk of has to be taken into account carefully.

2.4 State of the International NGO Networking in Iran

The Yearbook of Global Civil Society 2001 reports statistics on international tourism concerning Iran as an indicator for international civil networking: In the years from 1988 to 1998 the inbound tourism increased about 5.5 percent, which is quite much in international comparison, while the absolute number (1,008,000 in 1998) is pretty low. Outbound tourism increased about 2.2 percent but again is very low in absolute numbers (1,354,000) (Anheier et al. 2002: 245).

Concerning International NGOs (INGOs), the Yearbook reports only 3 (in 1999) resp. 9 (in 2000) first level secretariats (principal national level, no regional secretariats) of INGOs in Iran (ibid.: 284). For about 932 INGOs got registered members (no count how much) in Iran in 2000 and the number of Iranian leaders of IGOs and INGOs decreased from 5 in 1996 to 2 in 2000 (ibid.: 294).

Both statistics indicate that related to the international average the Iranian civil society is characterized by a very low degree of international organization. This is due to the far reaching political isolation of the Iranian state and the restrictions by the Iranian regime. Thus, the project presented had to take this international networking of Iranian NGOs into consideration.

2.5 Challenges for the Technological Support of NGO Networks

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 significantly (for about 12%) during the 1990s, but it is still at 25% in 1998 (ibid.: 277). Both statistics might underestimate the actual development in Iran. According to UNDP, the youth literacy rate is at 93.7 percent in 1999 (http://www.undp.org/hdr2001/indicator/cty_f_IRN.html).

Although the number of internet accounts and providers is growing rapidly especially in urban regions (but official numbers are missing), the lack of internet accounts (for private households as well as for NGOs) and the illiteracy are important barriers for the networking of the national NGO community in rural provinces and regions of Iran.

Among other barriers for the development of the civil society, the Hamyaran NGO Resource Center stresses internal management and resource problems. Iranian NGOs face problems “such as lack of respect for professionalism, and for

open and participatory management systems, weak technical and financial capabilities, and insufficient affinity with the community. Information and data is scarce and unreliable. The culture of transparency, accountability and experience sharing is very weak” (Namazi 2000: 7). So it is another big challenge for the project of an Iranian NGO community system to cope with such a culture of lacking transparency, experience sharing, and cooperation.

3 Theoretical Framework

Concerning the mentioned challenges, the so-called “modern” Iranian NGOs defined as one of their central requirements the introduction of a communication system to foster the NGO cooperation and the exchange of information and experience. In the ongoing process of social networking this technological support is looked upon as a appropriate means to improve transparency and participation.

Concerning these requirements of the Iranian civil society organizations (CSOs), we refer to the approach of “Integrated Organization and Technology Development” (OTD; Wulf and Rohde 1995), which was introduced to combine the interwoven processes of socio-organizational and technological developments. In the intellectual tradition of socio-technical systems approaches and action research methodologies, the OTD approach was developed to introduce technical systems, especially groupware, into organizations. Nevertheless, the approach does not focus on civil society organizations.

So we augmented our framework, by considering the theoretical approaches of “social capital” (cf. Bourdieu 1983, Coleman 1988, Cohen and Prusak 2001, Putnam 1993) and “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). In our interventions during the project we tried to make these approaches fruitful for the practical support of community building processes.

In the following section these three approaches are shortly described to sketch the theoretical background of our practical work and the framework for our action research.

3.1 Integrated Organization and Technology Development (OTD)

In our project, we focus both on organizational change and technological development, which are linked together very closely. Organizational structures and practices are the context and the background of development and usage of information technology and define the requirements for technological development. On the other hand, technological developments influence cooperation, practice, and therefore, organizational processes. Thus, we have suggested to integrate concepts of evolutionary organization development with user-centered software engineering in an approach of integrated “Organization

and Technology Development” (OTD, cf. Wulf and Rohde 1995). OTD was developed in the tradition of the “Socio-technical Systems” approach which is focused on the relation between non-human and human systems (Emery and Trist 1960, Ropohl 1999). In this perspective, processes of organizational change can be characterized by interwoven technical and social developments.

Organization development can be understood as an initiated, long-term, organization-wide process of change in the behavior, attitudes and abilities of its members as well as its structures and processes (cf. e.g. French and Bell 1990, Pieper 1989, Wulf et al. 1999). Organization development in this understanding is performed in an evolutionary, cyclic process of collection of data about the organization and its problems, presenting and discussing these data within the organization, planning of interventions to overcome the problems, and performing the intervention within the organization. With this iteration of data collection, feedback, intervention and new data collection we refer to the tradition of *action research* methodology.

This evolutionary, cyclic approach was transferred to software engineering processes. Thus, software development takes place as a process of cooperation among software developers and users. According to the iterative cycle which was shortly described above, the appropriation and use of a system and its evaluation are important aspects for the redesign of the system. In order to keep pace with environmental changes, it assigns an iterative development process establishing a revision as soon as the system's functions do not match anymore with the requirements of the users (cf. [Boehm 1988](#), [Floyd et al. 1989](#)).

The OTD-process, which tries to integrate both concepts, is characterized by the concentration on parallel development of organizational and technical systems, on the management of (existing) conflicts by discursive and negotiative means, on qualification and training measures, and on immediate participation of the organization members affected (cf. Rohde and Wulf 1995).

Regarding our case study of Iranian NGOs, we do not focus on a traditional organization but on a network of organizations (or even networks itself) which shows basic characteristics of a “virtual organization” (cf. Davidow and Malone 1993, Nohira and Berkley 1994, Strausak 1998, Travica 1997). We assume that networks of NGOs have more in common with virtual organizations than with traditional organizations. The virtual Iranian NGO community can be characterized by

- “absence of traditional organization structures and principals which imply a formal definition of internal order,
- transboundary amalgamation of organizations or enterprises;
- temporal instability of the virtual unit which affiliates, changes fluidly, expands or reduces itself, and disappears after achieving its purpose;
- non-simultaneity of collaborative processes and acceleration of organizational development;

- spatial distribution, and
- modern ICT as a precondition for the existence of the (virtual) organization” (Rohde et al. 2001: 3, cf. Mambrey et al. 2003).

Especially the introduction of a community system to support the NGO networking by technical means will probably emphasize this virtual character. Nevertheless, there are no reasons for the assumption that the integration of organizational and technological developments might not make sense for virtual networks or communities. In this context the application of OTD to virtual organizations and networks means a further development of the approach, concerning innovative types of organizations and new fields of applications. But since the OTD approach was refined mainly for traditional working groups and organizations, it has to be evaluated whether it is useful to apply it to virtual organizations and networks.

In case of the Iranian NGO network we deal with an emerging “community” of civil society organizations. Thus, to cope with specific requirements of communities we refer to the theoretical approach of “communities of practice” which will be presented shortly in the following section.

3.2 “Communities of Practice” (CoP)

In the theoretical approach “communities of practice” (CoP) identity theory, theories of practice, and theories of situated experience are integrated (Wenger 1998: 12). In their research work on situated learning, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) focus on common daily practice, active membership, and ingroup awareness. The most important inclusion mechanisms concerning these communities are processes of collective learning, and the production of shared meaning and collective identity.

The authors analyzed processes of learning in organizational units. Their findings characterize processes of learning as engagement in the social practice of groups and networks. Thus, for “community of practice” not organizational structures are constitutive but (mostly informal) working and cooperative relationships: “These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise” (Wenger 1998: 45).

Learning of individuals is situated in processes of social participation in these CoP. Individual learning in a CoP is mainly based on “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 1991). During the participation process, an individual might enter the community as newcomer at the periphery and could gain a more centered position over time by acquisition of “cognitive apprenticeship”. Therefore, this acquisition process means an intensified inclusion into the social practice of the community. The communities of practice themselves can be seen as a “shared histories of learning” (Wenger 1998: 86).

The development of a common practice integrates the negotiation of meaning among the participating members as well as the mutual engagement in joint enterprises and a shared repertoire of activities, symbols, and artefacts. This practice of a community is inseparable from issues of (individual and social) identity which is mainly determined by negotiated experience of one's self in terms of participation in a community and the learning process concerning one's membership in a CoP (Wenger 1998: 145ff).

These processes of identification are subject of social psychological theories on social identity (cf. Tajfel 1978 and 1982) or social categorization (cf. Turner et al. 1987). Both approaches postulate that people tend to categorize themselves as a "group" if the salience of perceived differences between these individuals is minor relative to the perceived differences to other individuals. Thus, perceived similarities between different persons concerning attitudes, beliefs, norms and values, a common task or a shared history, a shared perception of threats or common enemies etc. are significant conditions for social identification and group cohesion. Although Lave and Wenger do not refer to these social psychological theories and therefore to the specific conditions under which identity building takes place, processes of identification are pivotal for their CoP approach.

In this sense the CoP approach combines the "two sides of the medal" of community participation: the social practice of the community as a collective phenomenon and the (social) identification of its members as an individual one.

Nevertheless, neither OTD nor CoP are focused on Non-Governmental or Civil Society Organizations. OTD was developed concerning processes of introduction of technical systems mainly in business organizations, small and middle enterprises, and public administrations. It deals with organizational changes and technological developments regardless of the profit or non-profit character of the organization. CoP have been analyzed mainly in the professional daily practice of profit organizations. We assume that the main findings of both approaches are true for non-profit organizations as well. However, since we focus on non-profit oriented civil society organizations, we refer to another social scientific approach of social capital asking what communities or social networks binds together. The social capital approach provides another perspective on community building which is described in the next chapter.

3.3 The Social Capital Approach

For societal and political networking processes, the paradigm of social capital gained prominence. During the last years the social capital approach is increasingly adapted for the analysis of cooperation in (NGO-) networks as well as of collaboration in companies and working groups. Nevertheless, the concept of social capital is not defined universally and is used by various authors in different ways.

Social capital is defined by Putnam as the sum of networks and social contacts, the trust (respectively trustworthiness), and reciprocity relations a person owns. Putnam highlighted the importance of voluntary associations and organizations for the creation of social capital and comes to the remarkable conclusion that “social capital makes democracy work” (Putnam 1993 and 2000). Nevertheless, Putnam’s definition focuses predominantly on an individual perspective of social capital. This leads to the critical objection that Putnam’s approach is concentrated too much on personal contacts, face-to-face networks, and very near located neighbourhood relationships (cf. Hellmann 2002: 50), like e.g. a communitarian perspective would probably focus on (cf. Etzioni 1993).

To deal with social capital of collective actors (like groups or organizations) and of more distributed networking processes, the concept has to refer to the network contacts, the *generalized* trust, and the *norms of reciprocity* the collective subject has established. To analyze the social capital of societal communities, Francis Fukuyama (2000) defines social capital as an indicator of mutual trust in societies. It is based on self-generated ethical conventions and mutual commitments concerning activities and behaviour and it results in solidarity. [Coleman \(1988\)](#) introduces social capital as a resource available to actors but not by focusing on individuals but on social actors, e.g. interrelated individuals in groups and networks. Therefore, in his understanding social capital is a public good.

Bourdieu defines social capital as the actual and potential resources which are based on ownership of sustainable networks, of (institutionalized) relationships, and mutual respect (cf. Bourdieu 1983). He analyzed the relation of social capital and economical, symbolic, and cultural capital and describes social capital as the (individual and social) reputation which is needed to enter the “good society” and the political sphere. In this perspective social capital is a mechanism of political inclusion/exclusion.

To adapt the concept for collaboration processes in companies, Cohen and Prusak conclude: “Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behavior that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible. (...) Its characteristic elements and indicators include high levels of trust, robust personal networks and vibrant communities, shared understandings, and a sense of equitable participation in a joint enterprise - all things that draw individuals together into a group” ([Cohen and Prusak 2001: 4](#)). The authors refer to the concept of social capital mainly to analyze and support information and knowledge management within companies, departments, and working groups.

Concerning processes of gaining and fostering social capital, the approach assumes that it is accumulating when it is used (productively), otherwise it is decreasing. In this sense social capital tends to be self-reinforcing and cumulative.

People gain connections and trust by successful cooperations, and these achievements of networks and trust support good cooperation in the future. To gain and foster social capital, Cohen and Prusak suggest the following (organizational) investments in trust building processes: According to their suggestions, social capital can be gained (1) by being trustworthy, (2) by being open and encouraging openness, (3) by trusting others (ibid.: 45f).

In the case of Iranian NGO networks which mainly cannot be characterized by traditional organizational structures or by a common practice which has been established for a long time, we therefore assume that social capital and mutual trust are very basic concepts for the community building process.

4 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 foundation “Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung” on a research and development project which aims at the support of community building and networking of Iranian NGOs. The Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FEF) was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Germany's first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert. It is committed to the ideas and basic values of social democracy and aims at political and social education in the spirit of democracy and pluralism, and at contributing to international understanding and cooperation. According to its mission, the FEF sees its activities in developing countries “as a contribution to:

- promoting peace and understanding between peoples and inside the partner countries,
- supporting the democratisation of the state and society and strengthening the civil society,
- improving general political, economic and social conditions,
- reinforcing free trade unions,
- developing independent media structures,
- facilitating regional and worldwide cooperation between states and different interest groups and
- gaining recognition for human rights” (http://www.fes.de/intro_en.html).

In defining the Iranian civil society, we refer to the understanding of the Iranian NGOs themselves (Namazi 2000) (without any further categorization). That means urban and rural NGOs are included as well as grassroots movements and institutionalized organizations or “new” NGOs and traditional community based CSOs. Although we cooperate very closely with “new” or modern NGOs, no Iranian NGOs should be excluded.

On the other hand, to cope with the described risks of cooptation and corporatism, we are focusing exclusively on the requirements of Non-Governmental Organizations not on their relationship to Governmental

institutions. This exclusion of Governmental actors (esp. from the cooperation system) should improve mechanisms of identity building and foster the building of trust within the Iranian NGO network. This does not mean that we avoid the dialogue with Iranian Governmental organizations but to create a space of exclusive internal interaction within the community first. Moreover we will have to treat all organizations as equals, disregarding their organizational structure or their degree of institutionalization. This is due to the intention not to exclude any NGO from communication and cooperation.

Furthermore, besides the national NGO networking we will have to take international networking and cooperation into account, to overcome political isolation and to enable adequate responds of Iranian NGOs to global causes and problems. According to the presented assumptions, to strengthen the Iranian civil society is a contribution to the ongoing process of transition in Iran.

The Iranian NGO Community project has been developed on the basis of a situation analysis of Iranian civil society which was conducted by scientists of the Hamyaran NGO Resource Center in Teheran and a pre-study carried out by IISI which aimed at the analysis of the specific requirements of Iranian NGOs. This requirements analysis has been realized in spring 2002 by a detailed questionnaire which was answered by Iranian scientists and NGO experts. This questionnaire includes questions on the number and type of Iranian NGOs involved, the ICT infrastructure and internet connectivity, computer and language skills, requirements concerning technical support and trainings, state of the art of socio-organizational networking, constraints and limitations concerning the process. Based on this requirement analysis, the project plan has been set up.

Within the year 2002, IISI provided the cooperation platform “Basic Support for Cooperative Work (BSCW)” to Iranian NGOs in order to support their networking process by technical means. The BSCW System was developed by the Fraunhofer 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 did not focus 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.

4.1 Project Approach

As it was mentioned above, the project “Iranian NGO Community System” (NGO-CS) followed an approach of Integrated Organization and Technology Development (OTD), in which socio-organizational and technological networking

is looked upon as interdependent and combined in a participatory process (cf. Wulf and Rohde 1995).

The process of socio-organizational networking of Iranian NGOs was already running several years before the project started. Thus, the planning of the Iranian NGO-CS did not start in a social or organizational vacuum but had to cope with the requirements which had been formulated before during the ongoing organizational NGO networking. To support the Iranian NGO networking by technical means, the introduction of BSCW and the participatory design of the NGO-CS had to be embedded in the longer lasting networking process. Additionally, the effects of the NGO-CS and its usage for the socio-organizational process had to be evaluated and cycles of technological (re-) design and management of organizational change/development had to be provided.

According to these preconditions, the following strategy for the project was chosen:

Requirement analysis: Based on process documents written by the Iranian NGOs and a pre-study in which Iranian NGO experts were involved, the requirements of the Iranian civil society organizations concerning the technological support were analysed.

System introduction: In a first expert visit in Teheran the technical platform BSCW was introduced to a group of leading Iranian NGO members.

System design: Together with Iranian NGO practitioners a structure of the Iran NGO-CS was developed, BSCW was adapted to the NGOs' needs, and first content was loaded up to the system (cf. chapter 4.3.3). This system should be aimed at the support of the already running and ongoing socio-organizational process of NGO networking. Thus, a computer induced process of organizational development was not intended. Instead the introduction of the technical system should have a catalyst effect on an already ongoing process. A special focus was to bring together people and organizations in the different Iranian provinces regardless of time and location.

Qualification measures and trainings: In several training measures Iranian NGO members were trained to use the system and to train other Iranian civil society practitioners by themselves (cf. chapter 4.3.1). Additional measures were taken to strengthen social capital and communities of practice (cf. chapter 4.3.6).

Socio-organizational interventions: In several meetings and workshops the establishment of a common practice was supported by initializing collaborative projects. Therefore, tools for proposal writing and for project management were offered (cf. chapter 4.3.6). Furthermore, adequate methods had to be used to foster trust building and social capital within the Iranian NGO network. According to the theoretical approaches presented above, the basic presumption is that the participatory development and the common work in collaborative projects should support trust building within the Iranian NGOs, strengthen the network relationships, and therefore foster social capital. Furthermore, these shared

experiences with collaborative tasks should enable the establishment of a common practice as a vital characteristic of the new Iranian NGO CoP.

Evaluation and redesign: Each measure and intervention was evaluated with questionnaires and expert interviews. Furthermore, the system's usage was evaluated by means of anonymous log files. During two follow-up visits in Iran, additional trainings and workshop meetings have been conducted and the system was redesigned for further use. These two visits have been planned due to the cyclic approach of the project. Moreover, in the second and third visit the process was broadened and thus trainings and workshops in Iranian provinces outside Teheran were conducted.

International networking: In addition was decided to support the international networking of Iranian NGOs by fostering international exchange of experiences, mutual visits, and common research projects. This additional focus on international networking is due to the far reaching political isolation of the Iranian state and civil society which should be overcome in the future. Especially if the global character of many problem causes e.g. related to environmental pollution or development problems is taken into account, this international NGO networking is necessary.

At the beginning of the project, it was planned that in the long run a total of about 500 NGOs with around 25.000 members in all Iranian provinces should be able to benefit from the project's outcome by accessing the system, being trained, and getting involved in the ongoing (re-) design process. Therefore, the project (whose financial support by FEF was limited to 8 months in a first phase) focused on an approach of sustainable development and consulting, that means Iranian NGO practitioners had to take ownership of the process themselves (after the project's end). This participatory approach is based on the belief that the Iranian NGO members are the real experts of their own NGO networking.

Thus, the project has been set up in a very close cooperation with Iranian partners, the Hamyaran NGO Resource Center and (little later) the newly founded Iranian Civil Society Organizations Resource Center (ICSORC), both located in Teheran.

According to the presented approach, during the first stage of the project IISI 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 enabled to (tele-) cooperate with each other via the NGO-CS. During the next step these facilitators had to be trained in order to work as trainers themselves for their colleagues and other NGO members.

Furthermore, the trainers conducted workshops in which Iranian NGO members were trained in the theoretical basics of the development of socio-organizational structures which enable project development, expertise sharing (cf. Ackerman et al. 2002), and community learning.

4.2 Technical Support

According to the results of the pre-study concerning the requirements of Iranian NGOs which was conducted in spring 2002 by IISI, one central demand of Iranian NGO practitioners was the technological support for the dissemination of information. Iranian experts expressed their need for an enabling technology for cooperation projects and the exchange of relevant data. The desired technology had to be very easy to use even with old computer systems and low data transfer speed. Furthermore, the system should be accessible for Iranian NGO members only for internal communication and collaboration. Based on these requirements, it was decided to use the BSCW System (cf. Appelt 1999) as the basis for the Iranian NGO community system.

BSCW is a web-based groupware system with extensive functionality to support cooperation. So one only needs an internet account to access the system with any usual web-browser. No installation of additional software is needed (cf. Bentley et al. 1997, Koch and Appelt 1998, Appelt 1999). In 2000 the system was used by more than 80,000 users worldwide; in March 2003 there are counted more than 100,000 users.

The use of BSCW is free of charge for not-for-profit purposes and scientific research projects at universities. Each user of the system gets 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. 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-enabled computer. BSCW avoids advanced graphical features. Thus, even with low data transfer speed (58 kb/sec) the performance of the system is quite comfortable.

In the project the BSCW System 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 and 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).

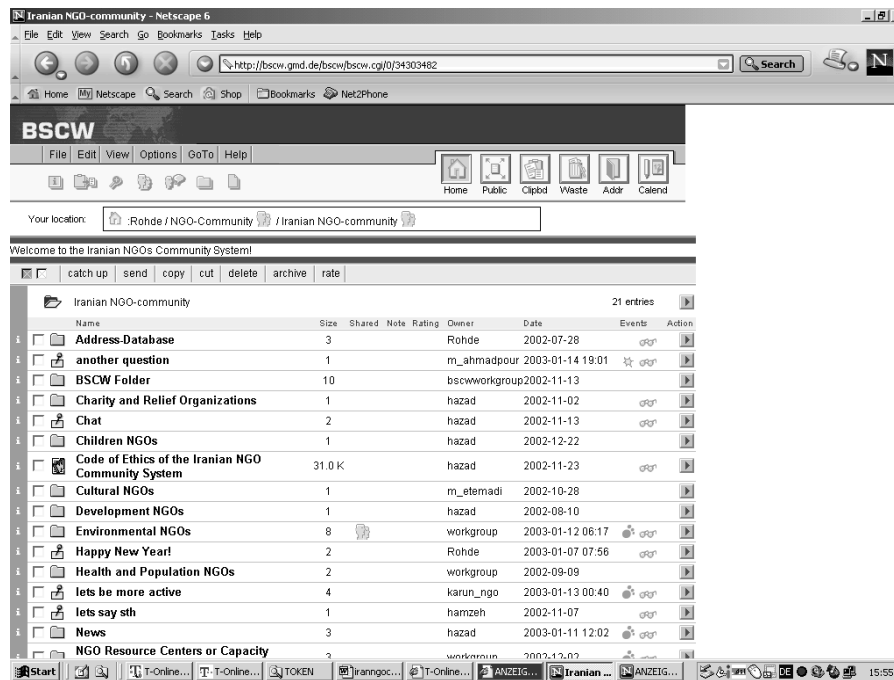


Figure 1. Snapshot of the Iranian NGO Community System

4.3 Measures and Achievements of the Project

In May, July, and October/November 2002 two IISI experts visited different Iranian provinces three times. During these expert 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 have been 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 members of Iranian NGO. This restrictive access policy was chosen by the Iranian NGO members due to the mentioned risk of cooptation by Governmental organizations and the risk of corporatism concerning international NGOs (cf. chapter 3.1). In May 2003 about 195 members of different Iranian NGOs are registered in the system.

All trainings and interventions were based on the theoretical approach of the project and accord to the assumptions which have been introduced above. Several design and redesign cycles have been planned, participation and sustainability have been supported, and continuous evaluation measures have been conducted. The following sections describe the different measures of the project in more detail.

4.3.1 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 and tailoring of the system and specific requirements for the system design were elaborated.

4.3.2 Support for Self-Learners and Self-Organized Trainings

By translation of the training materials (mainly power point slides and commented snap shots of the system's functions) into Farsi language, self-learners are supported (cf. Figure 3). These self-learning materials can be downloaded from the system. 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.



Figure 2. Training participants in Urumieh

Figure 3. BSCW training slides,
translated in Farsi

4.3.3 Design Workshops

By means of several workshops, the Iranian NGO-CS 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.

4.3.4 Facilitators and Working Group

During the second and the third expert visit there have been conducted advanced training courses and follow-up trainings for the 16 participants of the first basic 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.

Working group and facilitators have been established to promote and coordinate a sustainable and self-organized development process after the project's end. Both groups are no "closed shop" that means that new member can join the groups and work as coordinators or facilitators of the community building themselves in the future.

4.3.5 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 adaptation 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.

This Code of Ethics was developed as a "living document" which should be discussed on and modified if necessary. According to the OTD approach (Wulf

and Rohde 1995), the project combined the participatory system development with socio-organizational development processes. The mediated discussion and negotiations on the Code of Ethics concerning the community system's usage are an example for this integration of technological and organizational matters.

Especially the statements concerning the criteria for membership and the system's structure as well as the rules for information management, access rights, and privacy have been established to support the building of trust within the electronic community by technical means. According to the assumptions of the social capital approach (Bourdieu 1983, Coleman 1988, Putnam 1993, Cohen and Prusak 2000), we focused on the creation of far reaching transparency and binding commitments concerning the usage of the system. Some transparency mechanisms are offered by the system's awareness functionality. Furthermore the members should offer some personal information about the NGO they belong to, their profession, voluntary engagement, and work. Additionally some structured context information about uploaded documents should be given by the author (type of document, file size etc.). Well-known netiquette standards are integrated in the code of ethics. Furthermore there are several rules concerning morally and politically incorrect postings, personal attacks and insults, and the deletion of documents. The transparency as well as the commitments which have been agreed on by the community members should contribute to the building of trust/trustworthiness and social capital within the Iranian NGO network.

The discussion on this Code of Ethics within the system means a process of negotiation between the community members concerning the common practice of system usage. Thus, it should support the process of establishing a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

4.3.6 Facilitating joint projects and a common practice

During the expert visits tools for project proposals, project planning and documentation were provided to Iranian NGO members, project development workshops have been 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 (cf. Namazi 2000). To support such cultural experiences and to foster the building of "social capital" (cf. Putnam 2000, Cohen and Prusak 2001), several cooperation projects were planned to establish "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998).

These projects have been planned during the workshops using the provided tools for developing proposals and for professional project planning. They deal with the production of an Iranian NGO database, the publication of a newsletter which should be distributed electronically and paper based as well, the planning

and conducting of training measures, the design of a web portal for Iranian NGOs, and the translation of the system's user interface and training materials into Farsi language. In each project it was planned that members of different NGOs are working together conducting face-to-face meetings as well as using the community system to fulfil the project tasks. The mode of division of labour was discussed and personal responsibilities have been defined.

Besides the training of project development and planning activities, tools and artefacts for common use have been presented. By establishing these shared tools and common enterprises, the basics for the development of communities of practice have been worked out together in participatory practical trainings.

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) should be enabled and supported. This process of social identification seems to be important for the Iranian NGOs which lack of a tradition of collaboration and expertise sharing (cf. Namazi 2000).

4.3.7 NGO Delegation Visit in Germany

As it was shown in chapter 3, international networking of NGOs is necessary to cope with effects of globalization and with the threats of tribalism for democracy. According to these assumptions and the requirements of the Iranian NGOs, 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 centres, 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 been planned for the year 2003.

4.3.8 Sustainability of the Process

According to the cyclic approach of OTD, further steps of organizational network development and technological adaptation of the community system are necessary in the future. Therefore, together with the working group and the facilitators several activities were planned which should be coordinated by Iranian NGO members themselves as 'experts of their own'. In the following section the measures are described which have been set up to support the sustainability of the process:

Members of three Iranian NGOs have been delegated for the translation of the system's user interface into Farsi language. The German BSCW developers supported this translation.

A newsletter with information about the project, the community system, and the networking process has been established which should be published to Iranian NGO networks in Farsi language, electronically as well as paper based. The Hamyaran NGO Resource Center in Teheran took responsibility for this newsletter.

There was set up a project to design a website (IRANngoCS.net) as a NGO community portal which is accessible for the public and informs about the NGO community and the system. This 'entrance portal' should allow access to the community system only for Iranian NGO members. For the future, it is planned to add content for Governmental Organizations, potential donors, and international public.

In cooperation with both resource centres in Teheran, the development of a database with information on all Iranian NGOs, their activities, and civil society practice in Iran is planned. This Iranian NGO database should be accessible for all Iranian NGOs via the Iranian NGO community system.

During the Iranian delegation visit in Germany and in meetings with German scientists, NGO networkers, and politicians, additional strategies for the national and international networking of Iranian NGOs have been developed. These plannings include mutual visits, common proposals and projects, scientific exchange, workshops and conferences on civil society topics, and the establishment of international fellowships for female scientists.

5 Evaluation of the Project

In the following some short-term results for the social capital building will be presented. Some results of our project activities are already visible, longer-term effects will have to be evaluated at a later moment.

5.1 Methods

The project has been evaluated in a variety of different methods: Every official meeting, training, and workshop was evaluated by the participants. They rated content and performance by means of a structured questionnaire. Furthermore, the participants were asked to evaluate the measures in open format also suggesting further activities. Additionally, several (semi-structured) interviews with experts from the Iranian NGO community have been conducted. All meetings with Iranian experts, facilitators and the working group, workshops, and discussions in trainings sessions have been documented in written reports. The documentation of these measures (including appendices) contains 275 printed pages in total. Mail

communication between the Iranian NGO community members and IISI has been stored, as well. Furthermore, the activities in the NGO-CS are recorded in the log file and the absolute frequencies of accesses are registered anonymously (cf. Figure 4).

The first interventions took place nine months ago. Since the last training in October/November 2002 four months have passed. Most of the intended effects like trust building or the establishment of a common practice can not be expected to show up after this very short time but need additional evaluation after a longer period. However, this short evaluation period allows to observe first indicators of developments as hints for the further process.

5.2 Usage of the Community System

Concerning the usage of the Iranian NGO-CS, some data are already available: In March 2003 about 210 Iranian NGO practitioners in several Iranian provinces are working with the introduced NGO-CS. The activity statistics shows first hints that usage of the system is increasing slowly (cf. Figure 4). The highest absolute numbers of activities are registered during the weeks of BSCW trainings in Iran. This result is not very surprising since in each training measure 15 to 20 members participated in practical exercises with the system. Outside these training weeks the access rates are lower and oscillate weekly between more and less activities in the system.

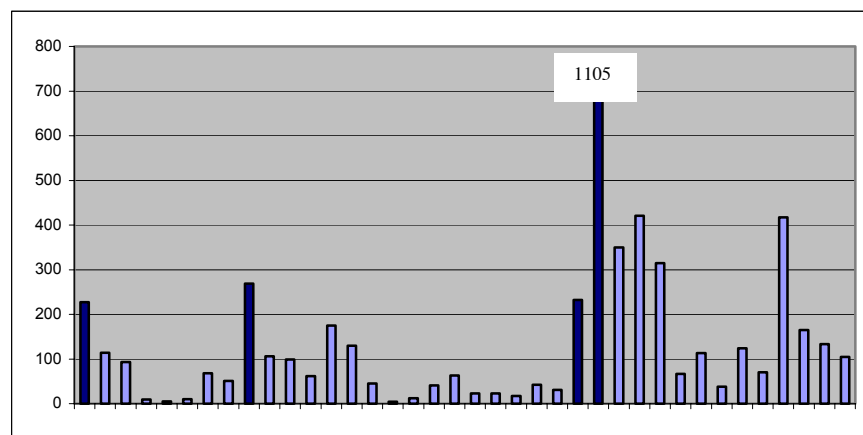


Figure 4. Statistics on the Iranian NGO community system's usage: absolute number of user activities per week; 37 weeks of usage; each column is a week; dark columns are training weeks; the 25th (training) week was cut at 700 but counts 1105 activities in total.

We expect that the number and range of activities will rise, as more NGO members in several Iranian provinces are registered in the community system and as more specific cooperation projects are established. The trainings took place in Teheran and three other Iranian province capitals (Urumieh, Shiraz, Esfahan).

Therefore, mainly urban NGO members joined the courses. These participants have been trained to work as trainers themselves to provide additional courses for Iranian NGO members. These self-organized trainings should include participants from rural NGOs as well. The Iranian working group has agreed on supporting trainings in rural regions. In May 2003 the working group provides training materials in Farsi language and support for the organization of trainings for rural NGOs. Several self-organized trainings of Iranian trainers have already been conducted in different provinces of Iran. According to reports of Iranian users, other trainings are planned already. Thus, we hope that the number of trained and experienced users will rise to a “critical mass” which might be needed to foster a regular use and a living exchange in a virtual community.

At the time being the system is mainly used to upload basic information about the work of NGOs and to download training material. Furthermore, new members are invited to the system. Concerning collaborative use of the system, only few documents related to the management of projects are shared, for about six discussions on several topics (e.g. the code of ethics or the Iran NGO CS website) have been started but communication is very low. To sum up the observations, the system is barely used for cooperation, active exchange, collaborative planning activities, and communicative interactions. According to the interviews, some of the registered and trained users reported that the management of their NGOs do not support the usage of the system. Because the management of some NGOs is not convinced of the benefit for the NGOs work, the trained activists are not allowed to use NGO-CS during their working hours or to conduct trainings for their colleagues. Furthermore, the low rate of interactive activities might be due to the above mentioned lack of cooperative culture and experiences in Iran and to the fact that most of the planned cooperative projects are not running yet but in stage of planning or applying for.

5.3 Further Promotion

Nevertheless, besides our Iranian NGO CS workspace structure, there are developing several additional workspaces in the BSCW system, e.g. the new Iranian Civil Society Resource Center (ICSORC) in Teheran is using the community system as a communication and cooperation platform for its own internal purposes.

All materials for trainings, presentations and checklists are provided in English and Farsi language for trainers and self-learners. The trainings have been rated very positively by the participants in the questionnaire survey. At scales of six the participants rated their overall satisfaction with the training course quite high. At each scale, the outcome, atmosphere, environment, organization, and concept were rated between 5 and 6 (Mean Score). However, some of the participants complained about the dominant English language in the trainings.

The expert visits aimed at the sustainability of the networking process of Iranian NGOs. The project and our community system have been 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 with 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 (cf. 4.3.5) and coordinates different projects for the future which are in stages of project development and proposition (cf. 4.3.8).

5.4 Sustainability and International Networking

The next steps are aimed at fostering a living culture of cooperation and a "community of practice" of Iranian NGO network practitioners. The questionnaire 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.

In different questionnaires as well as in interviews training participants stressed that the physical meetings during these social events had positive effects on the networking itself. Besides the use of technical systems it seems to be very fruitful just to initialize and intensify personal contacts by meeting physically. This observation has been made even in provincial capitals in which members of different NGOs are working without knowing each other personally. In so far the realization of interorganizational meetings, trainings, and collaborative projects are a pivotal support for the Iranian NGO networking.

Concerning the international networking, the Iranian delegation visit in Germany and at the European Union marked a starting point of cooperation between Iranian and German/European NGOs. Several very concrete project ideas have been developed. At the time being various proposals are written collaboratively by Iranian and German NGOs. Furthermore, the NGO members agreed on mutual follow-up visits in the near future. According to interviews with the Iranian delegation members, the visit has been evaluated as very productive and as a platform for further cooperation.

6 Discussion

Concerning the networking of Iranian NGOs, a project was described which aimed at the support of community building and technical networking.

With regard to the theoretical presumptions, we have to conclude that social capital building as well as the establishment of communities of practice within the

Iranian NGO network are at their starting point but significant results are still missing. Both processes – trust building and social identification with a shared enterprise and common practice – need more time than half a year to show results. As Wenger (1998: 45) states “These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created *over time* by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise”. It can be expected that social trust and common practice need a longer period of shared experiences to establish stable relationships. Furthermore, the measurement of effects of social processes is a methodological problem: Which criteria should be measured to evaluate social capital or social practice? An appropriate evaluation of trust, social capital, and identification with a common practice therefore should integrate qualitative and quantitative methods investigating communication and cooperation over a longer period.

In our case study the trainings and workshops have been evaluated as networking events fostering the social capital within the community. Furthermore, the individual ratings of the measures in the questionnaires have been very positive. Both results could be due to the attractivity which foreign experts might have for Iranians which have been isolated internationally for a long time. Additionally, a free computer system which was introduced and the provided computer trainings might have caused positive ratings. Especially for NGO practitioners who are volunteering in civil society activities, these offers and trainings mean a personal benefit.

On the other hand the rate of activities in the community system is not very high, especially related to the number of 195 registered members. Regarding the establishment of communities of practice, we found first indicators of a shared practice in several joint projects. However, according to the online activities in May 2003 the common practice in the established projects is not very pronounced. This might be due to the reported lack of cooperative culture in Iran (cf. Namazi 2000). Contrary to the traditional community based charity organizations, the “new” Iranian NGO movement has not developed a tradition of collaboration and teamwork. Additionally, the establishment of mutual trust and trustworthiness will be more complicate and difficult in a society which faces violation of human rights by a restrictive regime.

Last but not least, the establishment of a common practice, the negotiation of meaning, social identification and the building of trust and social capital are not processes which can be manipulated directly by treatments in trainings. The successful establishment of social capital and communities of practice are based mainly on (personal and collective) experiences, shared history, and common activities. Thus, the presented project could provide only a socio-technical infrastructure to enable these social processes and create supporting conditions. In the future a more intensively used community system may support these social processes by technical means.

One shortcoming of the presented study is that only short-term effects could have been evaluated. Due to the fact that the last socio-technical interventions took place only some months ago, middle- and long-term effects could not show up. Therefore, a re-evaluation of the projects achievements is planned for the second half of 2003.

Concerning the processes of community building and establishing a common cooperative culture and a shared practice, we hope that the socio-organizational interventions will show middle- and long-term effects. The ongoing development of a vital civil society in Iran can play an important role in democratic transition. Furthermore the establishment of stable and sustainable transnational cooperation should be an important contribution to overcome the international isolation of the Iranian civil society. This international cooperation of civil societies is even the more important since official political relations are getting problematic in times of the Iraq war and public classifications of Iran as a part of an “axis of evil”.

7 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.

According to the (short-term) effects which are evaluated in this chapter, the trainings measures, official meetings, and workshops have supported the socio-organizational networking of Iranian NGOs. The evaluation questionnaires and interviews showed that communication and interaction in physical meetings have been evaluated as positive improvements for the social networking. The introduction of the technical community system and the related training courses have been rated very high by the participants but a quantitative evaluation of the user activities in the system shows that it does not play a very important role in this networking at the time being. The main results of the project can be seen in the social effects which brought together Iranian NGO activists in different trainings and workshops. Technical support by the community system played a role as an attractor for the participation in these meetings, the exchange of experiences, and common project development. Nevertheless, the ongoing processes of participatory system introduction and of system development as well as the self-organized trainings mark starting points for further socio-organizational and technical networking among Iranian NGOs.

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 all 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 several meetings Iranian delegates exchanged experiences with German NGO practitioners and experts, with politicians and civil society researchers. The delegation visit marks a starting point for cooperation 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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