Research article

The relationship between ENGOs and Government in Iran

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ABSTRACT

The mottos of scholars of environmental protection movement have turned to “think globally, act locally”. For this reason, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) that have received significant attention in all societies are operational approaches towards protecting the environment and realizing sustainable development. Analysis of the nature of ENGOs’ activities reveals that the main function of ENGOs is “participatory, voluntary and supportive”. This function can be facilitated through the development of communication of these organizations with governments for the exchange of ideas in order to improve the implementation of developmental projects and approve new environmental laws. Given the fact that ENGOs act as civil societies in the public domain, it can be said that the operational environment for ENGOs is a special political space that should be provided through governments’ assistance and support. That is why the present study investigates the relationship between Iranian ENGOs and government agencies. To this end, in-depth interviews are conducted with environmental experts in environmental protection organization and forests, range and watershed management organization in Iran and members and managers of Iranian ENGOs. Also, a questioner is designed and then, completed by managers of Iranian ENGOs. It is found that there is too little communication between Iranian ENGOs and governmental agencies. ENGOs don't discuss various environmental issues with government as advocates. Finally, the principles governing the relationship between NGOs and government is also discussed.

Research findings indicate that the type of regime and maturity of NGOs affect the relationship between ENGOs and government agencies.

1. Introduction

Governments can't carry out all activities and that is why NGOs come to existence. NGOs are usually funded by governments, national and international networks of NGOs or large corporations. Generally, donor organizations try to determine the philosophy and methodology of NGOs for providing their benefits. On the other hand, NGOs should be managed towards public interest. They should coordinate goals and missions in order to maintain credibility, accountability and growth. Public relations clearly play a vital role in this regard (Bhati, 2013). Governments and NGOs have mutual dependency. Governments need NGOs to provide services and NGOs need governments to get financial, cultural, other facilitation supports, and resources (Asad and Kay, 2014). European Union has accepted participation of NGOs in policy and decision-making not only as a necessity, but also as the need of democratic systems (Lee and Rwanda, 2006). ENGOs, as a kind of NGOs that work on environmental conservation and sustainability, are potential partners in the “iron triangle” relationship between the legislature, bureaucracy and interest groups. However, all environmental policies are not affected by the performance of these organizations (Zywicki, 2002; Shapiro and Gottschall, 2011).

On the first view, environmental movements are seen as defenders of wide criticism of political and social systems (Milbrath, 1984), but there are different views about how environmental groups affect officials and environmental policies. These views range from environmental movements that challenge social paradigms by violence and protests to those movements that attempt to reform policies through conventional political channels, such as political discourse and lobbying (Dalton, 2003).

For example, treadmill of production theory has a negative attitude towards the sustainability of production in capitalist societies. In this view, ENGOs put pressure on the governments to preserve ecological sustainability through protest and other tactics. It should be considered that protest is not a tool for marginal political groups. Protest is more common among older groups with more employees. Generally, protest is used in advanced industrial countries, not in developing countries, where political access and democratic sounds are more limited (Dalton, 2003).
But ecological modernization theory has optimistic view on the relationship between ENGOs and government. This theory considers ENGOs and the private sector as partners of government and considers trend to green environment as a result of this relationship (Tindall and Stoddart, 2016). An environmental group identity has a great impact on the choice of the political tactics.

Groups that have challenging ideologies, such as Greenpeace and friends of earth, will most likely resort to protest. Conversely, groups that adhere to traditional principles of the environment and don’t challenge the economic boundaries paradigm are more likely to work with conventional political channels. In other words, the combination of various activities from different groups emphasizes that the variety of actions are consistent with their environmental identity. In addition, group resources are important stimulants for actions. Regardless of the mode of operation, groups with more members, employees and budgets are more likely to be more active. At the same time, it suggests that even protest activities require planning, coordination, membership and organizational skills to succeed (McCarthey and Zald, 1977; Zald and McCarthey, 1987).

Four Cs model classified the relationship between NGOs and government into four types based on their goals and means for achieving them. These four Cs are Cooperative, Co-optative, Complementary and Confrontation. There might be both cooperative and confrontational relationships at the same time within the same relationship (Najam, 2000; Teamey, 2010) (see Table 1).

Based on Clark (1992), the relationship between NGOs and government depends on the type of regime and NGOs’ services. Generally, there are three types of regimes under which NGOs can operate. The first regime is liberal democratic that is known as freedom of association. In this system, NGOs are theoretically an integral part of civil society and stimulate the hostility against the government. The second type is single-party regime that may tolerate NGOs, especially if projects of NGOs are complementary of governmental development philosophy.

The greatest problems of NGOs are in the third type of regime, i.e. military and dictatorship.

The nature of the relationship between NGOs and government also depends on the type of services provided by NGOs. Welfare NGOs probably experience the minimum conflict with government. They remove burdens of state through humanitarian aids and don’t intend to challenge governmental policies. Those NGOs that are engaged in issues such as human rights and advocacy experience hostile reactions from governments. Dealing with public policies is a key feature of these organizations (Clark, 1992). In this regard, three types of regimes and three activities of NGOs are shown in Table 2. The best type of communication occurs when NGOs deliver welfare services under the liberal democrat system (++) and the greatest hostility can be expected when NGOs act as advocate under dictatorship system. Between these two modes, there can be positive (+), neutral (0) or negative (-) types.

According to Kim (2011), regime type and degree of maturity of NGOs affect the relationship between NGOs and the government. In democratic systems, NGOs tend to be independent of government and influence policies; but in nondemocratic systems, NGOs are more controlled by the government.

In democratic countries, NGOs that have more experience can keep their safety in terms of financial resources and organizational structure (Kim, 2011). Also, the position that political systems give to ENGOs is important (Hrabanski et al., 2013).

| Table 1. The four Cs model of NGO-government relationship. |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Goals           | Types of regimes |
|                 | Liberal          | Single party     | Military   |
|                 | democrat         | state            | Dictatorship |
| Similar         | ++               | +                | 0          |
| Disimilar       | +                | 0                | -          |

For this reason, ENGOs in developed countries can put pressure on their governments and private sector. Even in developing countries, they can cease environmental degradation proceedings through various activities, such as promotional activities (UNDP, 2000). For example, countries such as France and Switzerland are pioneers in this field, so that the status of these organizations has been legislated for more than a century. In France, the formation of NGOs follows the law of July 1, 1901. This law systematizes the formation and establishment of non-profit organizations (LegiFrance, 1901). In France, many nongovernmental organizations are active in a variety of areas, including the environment. This reflects the importance of environmental issues as well as the existence of a well-defined and legal framework for the formation and establishment of these organizations. In addition to the 1901 act, other laws, such as the French environmental act of 2005, directly address the role of environmental conservation organizations and prescribe their participation in environmental issues and administrative bodies (LegiFrance, 1901).

In Iran, NGOs have legal rights to complain about environmental crime based on the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition, executive regulations on the establishment and activities of NGOs approved by the Ministers on May 28, 2005 allow them to complain about public interest. Also, agenda 21 has also been highlighted as one of the most important environmental documents on the key role of ENGOs in the field of environment. But, despite the existence of these rules in Iran, ENGOs avoid such actions and dialogue and confrontation with the government and government bodies. For this reason, the present study has tried to evaluate the current relationship between ENGOs and government based on exiting theories. It also identifies major factors and challenges that affect their relationship and provides suggestions to strength it. Therefore, it is necessary to first analyze the conditions existing in Iran for the implementation of successful and sustainable partnerships between ENGOs and government for the realization of sustainable development.

2. ENGOs- government relationship in different countries

Social movements in industrial societies often face a binary choice between fundamentalist activities and practical and pragmatic activities (Rochon, 1988; Tarrow, 1994). Choosing protest and confrontation as a tactic reinforces the anti-institutional identity of the movements and makes it impossible to carry out some activities (Dalton, 2003). Also, the ideological beliefs of environmental movement’s challenge the norms and practices of capitalist economies (Lipsky, 1968; McAdam, 1997).

In contrast to this ideological structure, other theorists of social movement discuss the practical aspects of politics more than ideological considerations (McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1994). Organizational requirements must guarantee the sustainability of organizations by employing new members and demonstrating their ability to achieve the desired results. Such goals often mean working in existing political systems. For example, in spite of political criticism of the government in Western Europe, ENGOs partially cooperate with political institutions (Dalton, 1994; Diani, 1995).

According to Dalton’s studies in 59 countries, diversity of environmental movements within the nations is so great that it can be said that both strategies can be used in different political structures (Dalton, 2003). The purpose of NGOs is to shape the political discourses and
influence public policies. Their various goals require a set of political tactics. ENGOs typically carry out various activities, including putting pressure on policy makers, informing people, trying to access resources, and collecting popular donations. Some of activities may be visible in the media, but most groups tend to use different tactics at different times. However, findings show that most environmental movements have already lost their anti-regime orientation (Dalton, 2003).

According to Hrabanski et al. (2013), although apart of the decision-making power is divided between the Union European and government in France, the government keeps its organizational power for the implementation of environmental policies; therefore, the impact of ENGOs in the field of environmental policies is limited.

NGOs in China and Korea are actively involved in the political structures. They are representing the public interest and even perhaps restrict dictation of environmental policies' iron triangle. In the two countries, the interests of the government and people are considered equally (Shapiro and Gottschall, 2011). In Japan, policies are the result of coalitions between environmental groups and state officials (Stearns and Paul, 2004).

Initial environmental movement in the United States was culminated in the first Earth Day in 1970, when over 200000 Americans gathered in Washington D.C.'s National Mall along with protests across the country to express their concerns about pollutants and waste and the need to codify environmental law. The first Earth Day was a tipping point since environmental movements were involved in politics and environmental issues were put on the federal state's agenda as the result of public concerns about environment. In this regard, environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded in 1970, and fourteen environmental acts were passed from 1970 to 1977 (Rong, 2011). ENGOs in America are diverse in terms of appropriate approaches to mobilize environmental conservation and protection. Organizations, such as EDF, the NRDC, the NAS and the Sierra Club chose to report andlobbing as their main strategy to facilitate the adoption of environmental protection. The lawsuit and lobbying as their main strategy to facilitate the adoption of environmental laws and regulations, while ENGOs, such as Greenpeace, took direct action, including organizing opponents against whaling, nuclear testing and pollution caused by the business sector, and tried to attract public support by providing clear images of the protests (Rong, 2011).

NGOs in America affect the government by interacting with officials and systematic advocacy efforts. Many NGOs in America have lobbying team (Kim, 2011). In Madagascar, where the government can be considered weak owing to its limited decision-making power and restricted governments' ability to develop environmental policies, ENGOs can be powerful political entrepreneurs (Hrabanski et al., 2013).

3. Analysis of the status of environmental movements in Iran

Environmental movement in Iran has been formed since the mid-1970s, but has not yet found its own ideals for some reason. The oldest environmental NGO in Iran was “population of Ashgzar Women” in Yazd province, which began its activities to confront with flowing sand in cooperation with the government since the late 1961. The other NGO, the Association for the Protection of Animals, was founded in the mid-1970s. Also, another NGO that was called the Animal Protection Association was established in the mid-1971s. After the Islamic revolution, due to important events such as the war, the process of establishing environmental organizations in Iran was stopped until around 1991 and after the Rio Conference, ENGOs started to be established as voluntary, non-profit and independent organizations in Iran. More than 500 ENGOs participated in the national ENGOs’ conference held in Shiraz in 2003, while according to some researches, the number of these organizations was less than 100 in 1999 (Shokri et al., 2008).

Now, after more than two decades of establishing ENGOs in Iran, it can be said that there is no green movement in Iran. It seems that there isn’t still a general dissatisfaction with environmental issues in Iran; therefore, green discourse hasn’t been extended in this country.

Policy makers in Iran still don’t cooperate with ENGOs and even newspapers consider them as marginal issues. Today, a significant number of active ENGOs has been established throughout the country not due to the existence of a proper context for social participation and the development of civil society, but also because of increasing environmental degradation. Although, a vast majority of ENGOs not only don’t contribute to improve the environment, but also have lost their non-profit and independent identity for receiving governmental grants.

Today, Iranian ENGOs are trying to receive fund from governmental organizations rather than focusing on methods of informing and delivering important executive and educational strategies towards improving the environmental culture in society (Shokri et al., 2008).

4. Materials and methods

This study is a kind of descriptive research that was carried out in two quantitative and qualitative stages. Depth interview was the main tool for gathering the required data and information in the first phase. Sample of this step consisted of 11 environmental experts in environmental protection organization and forests, range and watershed management organization in Iran and 33 members and managers of ENGOs selected by snowball sampling method. In this stage, respondents were asked to talk about their relationship with each other. Their statements were recorded and analyzed and key sentences were converted into closed-ended questions, and then one question were added to the questionnaire.

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Table 3. Interaction of ENGOs with government.

| Interaction of ENGOs with government | Mean | SD   | CV  | Rank |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|-----|------|
| Implementation of environmental projects jointly with government | 3.54 | 1.256 | .355 | 1    |
| Demanding on the basis of scientific evidence and avoiding the creation of an emotional atmosphere | 3.76 | 1.286 | .342 | 2    |
| The ability of managers to convince government officials by lobbying power | 3.13 | .848  | .271 | 3    |
| Sustained dialogue with the government | 2.68 | .624  | .233 | 4    |
| Meetings with parliamentarians and members of the city council | 2.37 | .519  | .219 | 5    |
| Presence of representatives of ENGOs as advisors of the Ministry official in decision-making councils | 1.33 | .190  | .143 | 6    |
| Providing and broadcasting radio and television programs with governmental agencies | 1.51 | .214  | .142 | 7    |

Table 4. Ranking government’s approaches to environmental NGOs.

| government’s approaches to ENGOs | Mean | SD   | CV  | Rank |
|----------------------------------|------|------|-----|------|
| The existence of simple rules for registering ENGOs | 4.01 | 1.692 | .422 | 1    |
| Presence of a large number of volunteers to join ENGOs due to suitable political atmosphere of the country | 3.78 | 1.307 | .346 | 2    |
| Passing supportive laws for ENGOs | 2.66 | .827  | .311 | 3    |
| Positive attitude of managers, experts and government officials towards the capabilities of the ENGOs | 2.31 | .665  | .288 | 4    |
| Decentralized government system | 3.92 | 1.003 | .256 | 5    |
| The lack of rapid change of government executives and their similar approach towards ENGOs | 2.14 | .494  | .231 | 6    |
| Non-discriminatory behavior in collaboration with ENGOs and submission of various projects to ENGOs based on grading | 2.12 | .364  | .172 | 7    |
| Participation of ENGOs in the formation of environmental laws | 1.07 | .123  | .115 | 8    |
about the relationship between ENGOs and various governmental organizations including Environmental Protection Agency, Municipality, the various fractions of the Islamic consultative assembly, Agricultural Jihad Organization, Ministry of Education, Cultural Heritage Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, the Ministry of Energy, and the Water Organization. In this question, key members of ENGOs were asked to select the organizations from among the proposed options that communicate with them. The prepared questionnaire were distributed to members of key ENGOs. The statistical population of this part of the study included 596 members of key ENGOs in the 162 ENGOs in eight provinces of Iran, of which 384 persons were selected through proportionate stratified random sampling method. Questionnaire was the main tool for data collection. In this regard, 360 questioners were emailed to respondents. Out of which, 211 questionnaires were filled and returned. Also, 98 questioners were faxed and gathered and 75 questionnaires were completed through telephone call. Likert data gathered were analyzed using SPSS software and answers to one question about the relationship between ENGOs and governmental organization was drawn schematically.

5. Results

5.1. Results of the qualitative step

According to the viewpoint of most managers and members of ENGOs, government executives in Iran usually have security vision. Although some directors have participatory visions, most of them do not cooperate with ENGOs. They should understand that the environment is not a political subject, but is a vital issue.

Interviewees basically stated that governmental executives believe that NGOs should not have income, while NGOs need credit to meet their goals. The Iranian government imposes tax on ENGOs.

ENGOs are not ranked and projects are delegated to them based on their relationship with government agents, not according to the set criteria. So, it can be said that governmental agencies act according to their desire.

It is necessary that the government assign public-interest projects to popular organizations and merely play the role of supervisor. People’s affair is better to be done by people. Government outsourcing and trust of government to these organizations will enhance the capabilities of these popular organizations and pave the way for sustainable development. Government should approve rules to support these organizations. Also, ENGOs are facilitators which cannot be undertaken by the government as the stakeholder.

The governments’ vision is a cross-sectional view, but ENGOs’ vision is beyond the project. NGOs have a long term vision and goals and continue working even after the time or budget is ended.

Achieving sustainable development goals is possible in the context of stable interaction and relationship between the government and ENGOs. ENGOs need to be consistent in interaction with government. Also, they should reinforce themselves as much as possible until they can convince government to meet their demands.

5.2. Results of the quantitative step

Seven items in the form of 5-point Likert scale were used to measure interaction of ENGOs with government. After obtaining mean and standard deviation (Std), coefficient of variation was calculated by dividing std into mean.

Findings showed that “implementation of environmental projects jointly with government, demanding on the basis of scientific evidence and avoiding the creation of an emotional atmosphere, and the ability of managers to convince government officials by lobbying power” are the top ranked items and “presence of representatives of ENGOs as advisors of the ministry official in decision-making councils” and “providing and broadcasting radio and television programs with governmental agencies” are ranked last (see Table 3).

6. Ranking of government’s approaches to environmental NGOs

The government’s approaches towards ENGOs were measured by seven items in the form of 5-point Likert scale (very low, low, moderate, high, and very high). As it can be seen in Table 4, “the existence of simple
rules for registering ENGOs, presence of a large number of volunteers to join ENGOs due to suitable political atmosphere of the country, passing supportive laws for ENGOs “are ranked as the most important governmental supports for ENGOs and “participation of ENGOs in the formation of environmental laws” was ranked last.

7. Determining the level of relationship between ENGOs and government agencies

In order to determine the level of relationship between ENGOs and governmental agencies, key members of ENGOs were asked to select the organizations from among the proposed options that communicate with them. These options were the environmental protection agency, municipality, the various fractions of the Islamic consultative assembly, Agricultural Jihad organization, Ministry of education, Cultural heritage handicrafts and Tourism organization, the Ministry of energy, and the water organization.

After collecting answers, the data matrix was formed in Ucinet software by 162 rows that indicated the location of ENGOs’ activity in the country and 8 columns, including governmental organizations. Then, respondents were assigned one and zero in cells of the matrix, with one indicating the presence and zero indicating the absence of relationship between the governmental organization and ENGOs.

The communication network between ENGOs and governmental organization was drawn schematically. In this communication network, ENGOs in different provinces are shown through circles and governmental organizations are represented by square symbols.

As Figure 1 shows, the density of communications around the Municipality and the Environmental protection agency is more than other governmental agencies and the lowest density is related to the communication with various fractions of the Islamic consultative assembly.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the communications’ density around various fractions of parliamentary shows that from ENGOs operating in eight provinces of the country only ENGOs that established in the four provinces (Azerbaijan, Fars, Tehran, and Markazi) have communicated with the legislature. Among these four provinces, ENGOs of Tehran province have the most communication (8) with various fractions of the parliamentary.

The results of the analysis of the matrix indicated that there isn’t much relationship and interaction between ENGOs and officials and experts of the governmental organizations.

The results of the ranking of the level of communication with these organizations revealed that interaction with municipality and environmental protection agency had the highest frequency, accounting for only 29% of ENGOs’ communication. Communication with various fractions of parliamentary with 17 positive responses was of the lowest frequency.

Regardless of the impact of ENGOs on policy makers’ decisions, only 10% of the surveyed ENGOs have been sought to pursue their demands through the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Therefore, it can be argued that ENGOs in Iran avoid talking, bargaining, and confronting policymakers and government officials and ignore their rights, as one of the vertices of the legislation triangle, as far as possible.

This finding suggests that ENGOs close to the Islamic Consultative Assembly have more contact with the legislature. It is clear that this level of interaction with the legislature will not affect decision making by policymakers. Since ENGOs have neglected their ability to influence political decision, many environmental issues will undoubtedly remain strong.

When the central government gives credit to ENGOs, they can easily connect with the target group and provide the necessary requirements for sustainable development.

The results of this study showed that only 10% of ENGOs tried to communicate with law-makers, this means that 90% of the studied ENGOs did not seek to engage in dialogue with government officials, while Islamic religious teachings recommends to get one’s rights. As long as these organizations do not start to negotiate with the government to claim their rights, how can be the government to contribute to the decision-making circles? Therefore, at first, it is necessary for ENGOs to know that they have the capacities to change policies and then, negotiate with government by providing evidences and documents.

Activities of ENGOs in countries, such as France, United States and in particular the representatives of the German Green movement, show that their ENGOs have been attended to decision-making bodies over a century, but in Iran, the status of these organizations is not yet clear in terms of presence in legislative assembly.

We must know the wise people in the Western countries stood up against the governments and created this right for themselves. Therefore, Iranian ENGOs should determine their approach to achieve these goals.

8. Conclusion

This paper described the situation of Iranian ENGOs and quantity and quality of their relationship with the government executives. Results showed the type of NGOs, maturity of NGOs and the position that political systems assign to NGOs are important in the relationship between NGOs and governments. According to Clark, Iranian ENGOs, as development-oriented organizations, have a good position for development activities, but it seems that the capabilities of NGOs are not well understood by the Iranian government. Results revealed that formation
of ENGOs in Iran doesn't face difficulty, because the number of ENGOs has increased in recent years, but the effectiveness of them isn't well known. In spite of the legal status of NGOs in the constitutional structure of Iran and the importance of ENGOs in Agenda 21, these organizations don't cooperate in legislative bodies and the political system doesn't allocate any role for ENGOs in the realization of the sustainable development in practice. Therefore, they don't have any impact on lawmaking and rule formulation. In Iran, there is no plan for sustainable development with the collaboration of ENGOs and government. They work in parallel and in some cases, their activities overlap. This is while there is no activity in common for the realization of sustainable development.

Based on 4Cs model, Iranian ENGOs and government co-operate with each other because they have similar goals and dissimilar means. The goals of government and ENGOs in Iran are common for the realization of sustainable development, but according to managers and members of ENGOs, governmental executives don't cooperate with ENGOs because their attitude towards ENGOs is skeletal. As was mentioned before, lack of awareness and perception about ENGOs has caused governmental executives think that all ENGOs personnel are not paid for working in these organizations and so, they don't need any support for their activities. However, funding is one of the main concerns of these organizations. ENGOs aren't regularly supported by the government without discrimination.

As was mentioned previously, mature ENGOs with more experiences, members and budget are more likely to be active and protest for their request, but ENGOs commonly work with conventional political channels. Since Iranian ENGOs have less access to fund and don't have sufficient maturity to deal with government and affect laws and policies, they are less involved in political challenges. They are more engaged in providing required fund for survival and less think about sustainable conversation with government cooperation. It is necessary that they negotiate with governmental agencies to get their rights. They shouldn't be satisfied to provide services, but they should change their role from providing services to influencing local, national and even international policies by relying on their legal rights. They can negotiate with representatives in Islamic Consultative Assembly to fulfill their demands. In conclusion, it can be said that ENGOs should identify their identity and missions and they shouldn't consider governmental organizations just as financial resources. In other words, it is necessary that governmental agencies cooperate with ENGOs for designing and implementing a common plan to realize sustainable development.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Faeezeh Hashemi: Conceived and designed the analysis; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.
Hasan Sadighi, Mohammad Chizari: Conceived and designed the analysis; Analyzed and interpreted the data.
Enayat Abbasi: Conceived and designed the analysis; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

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