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Facilitators of improving the function of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Iran's health system

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Iranian health nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) could play a variety of roles at many levels of Iran's health system, but their participation in the health sector is far from ideal. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify practical solutions for increasing the role and function of NGOs in the Iranian health system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: This qualitative study was conducted between 2020 and 2021 in Tehran, Iran. The data for this study were gathered through 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 managers from the Ministry of Health as well as from Iran and Tehran universities of medical sciences and 21 Chief executive officers and directors of health NGOs. Data were analyzed by the content analysis approach using the MAXQDA 10 software.

RESULTS: The facilitators for expanding the function and roles of NGOs in Iran's health system are classified into two groups of legal and structural mechanisms. "The existence of mandatory laws," "government support for NGOs," "the formulation of standard strategic planning and goals," "the establishment of a database and a network of NGOs," and "the establishment of independent organizational units as the connectors and coordinators of NGOs' affairs in the public sector" are the critical facilitators for the improvement of NGOs' roles in Iran's health system.

CONCLUSION: According to the findings of this study, only limited measures and efforts have been made to improve NGOs' roles and participation in the Iranian health system; at the same time, NGOs' participation in the health sector is far from ideal. Iranian health NGOs are at the beginning of this route, and they would inevitably require various legislative and structural mechanisms to succeed.

Keywords:

Healthcare sector, nongovernmental organizations, Iran, public-private partnership

Introduction

A healthy human being is the bedrock of sustainable development, and as such, efforts to preserve and enhance health are always a top priority for all governments.^[1] With the advancement of societies and the proliferation of concerns and challenges associated with health systems, governments are no longer able to manage the health demands and expectations

of people on their own.^[2-7] As a result, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been acknowledged as a source of health care providers in many countries, particularly low- and middle-income countries.^[8]

As in other countries, to alleviate and resolve people's issues, the Iranian NGOs collaborate with the public sector to provide various social, legal, health, gender, and environmental services and act as a facilitator between the people and government officials to empower social

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forces.^[9-11] The Iranian NGOs have grown from 2,000 in 1997 to more than 200,000 in 2016.^[11]

NGOs could play a variety of roles at many levels of health systems in terms of service delivery, financing, human resources, health policy, and planning. However, the results of Iranian research indicate that the NGOs' participation in the Iranian health system has not been adequately considered owing to the reluctance of the healthcare-related public sector, the unfamiliarity of the public and policymakers with NGOs, and NGOs' challenges.^[8,12-16] According to Iranian studies, the NGOs' most significant obstacles to participation in Iran's health system include limited financial resources, poor and insufficient communication with the public sector, mistrust between NGOs and the government, and non-transparency of the laws governing NGOs' activities.^[8,12,17]

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, 75% of health issues fall outside the purview of health system management.^[18] Therefore, the involvement of NGOs in the health sector is viewed as an opportunity that can be leveraged through the various capacities and capabilities of these organizations to eliminate shortcomings, resolve issues, and respond to the needs of diverse population groups. It also allows profiting from human resources, information resources, financial aid, and advocacy of NGOs to advance the health system's goals.^[12,19,20] As a result, the establishment and development of infrastructure to boost the role of NGOs in many facets of the health system should be viewed as a means of achieving the goals of the Iranian health system.^[21]

Considering that the previous Iranian studies have focused on identifying the challenges of NGOs' participation in Iran's health sector; therefore, it seems that to better understand the factors affecting the effectiveness and development of the role of NGOs in the health sector, more studies are needed. Therefore, the current qualitative study was conducted using the opinions and experiences of the key informants to identify practical solutions for increasing the role of health NGOs and to find mechanisms for expanding the function of NGOs in the Iranian health system.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

This qualitative study was conducted between 2020 and 2021 in Tehran, Iran, aiming to identify the facilitators of improving the function of NGOs in the Iranian health system.

Study participant and sampling

In this study, 32 participants were recruited from both the public and nongovernmental sectors. 11 managers and

specialists from the Ministry of Health (MOH) as well as from Iran and Tehran Universities of Medical Sciences represented the public sector, while 21 Chief executive officers (CEOs) and directors of health NGOs represented the nongovernmental sector. They all had at least three years of expertise in the field of health NGOs and were chosen using a purposive sampling technique to ensure maximum variety. The letter "P" with a number refers to comments from a specific participant.

Data collection tool and technique

The data for this study were gathered through 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews using an interview guide form prepared based on the study's goals and a review of the literature.^[12,20,22] The interviews by telephone and in-person began in the second half of 2020 and lasted into the first part of 2021 in Tehran until the saturation of the data. The interview questions focused mainly on the barriers, facilitators, and methods for expanding the role of NGOs in the Iranian health system [Table 1].

Five pilot interviews were done to ensure the validity of the interviews. The accuracy of these interviews was assessed by the research team who made appropriate modifications during the interview process. Guba and Lincoln criteria^[23] (credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability) were also employed to confirm the reliability of the study.

Before the beginning of the interviews and after negotiating the time and location of the interviews with the participants, interviewees were explained the study's aims, the confidentiality of the interview content, and obtaining permission to record the interviews. The duration of in-person and telephone interviews individually averaged between 25 and 100 min. While conducting the interviews, the interviewer documented the topics and dialogues that occurred during the session. The interviews were written in the Word software immediately following the end of each session and before beginning the next one.

Data were analyzed by the content analysis approach using the MAXQDA 10 software. The interview content

Table 1: Interview questions

#	Question
1	What are the current functions of the health NGOs in Iran's health system?
2	What are the opportunities for the participation of NGOs in Iran's health system?
3	What are the barriers, problems, and weaknesses in the way of this participation?
4	What is your suggestion and strategy for developing and expanding the role of NGOs in Iran's health system?
5	If you have another point about methods for expanding the role of NGOs in the Iranian health system, please state it.

NGOs: Nongovernmental organizations

was reviewed several times to develop primary codes and to have a complete overview of the obtained information. By comparing the primary codes the codes that implying similar concepts were assigned to sub-categories, which were then studied and compared conceptually and thematically. The sub-categories implying a common subject were grouped in the main categories.

Ethical consideration

In this study, strategies such as sampling with maximum variety, conducting pilot interviews, spending sufficient time for each interview, continually comparing the acquired data, and delivering the final coding table to some of the participants were utilized to enhance the accuracy of the research. All ethical considerations, including obtaining a code of ethics (IR. IUMS.REC.1397.1330) from the ethics committee in the Iran University of Medical Sciences, obtaining informed consent from participants, individuals' right to participate or not participate in the interview, obtaining permission to record the content of the interviews, maintaining the confidentiality of interviewees' personal information, and refraining from interfering with the researchers' personal opinions during data collection, analysis, and reporting, were observed in this study.

Result

Based on the analysis of data obtained from the interviews, the facilitators for improving the roles and function of NGOs in Iran's health system are classified into two groups of legal and structural mechanisms [Table 2].

Legal mechanisms

The legislation governing NGOs' activities

The legislation approved on the activity of NGOs is a fundamental and critical step in the growth of NGOs' impact on the Iranian health system. The approval, notice, implementation, and careful monitoring of this law are the first practical steps toward the further involvement of NGOs in various sectors and levels of the Iranian health system. With the approval and execution of the legislation governing NGOs' activities, the public sector and health NGOs' will better understand their respective obligations and responsibilities, which will

increase more structured and effective collaboration between these two sectors. It may generally be asserted that more effective engagement of authorities in the health system necessitates administrative and legal safeguards.

"If key public sector and health NGOs leaders convene, conduct meetings, and form synergies to prepare, approve, and proclaim a law, it will extremely enhance and develop the health NGOs' participation in the health system." (P4)

"The absence of a law on the actions of NGOs results in subjective confrontations between government organizations and NGOs, making these groups very vulnerable." (P1)

The formal attendance of the NGOs' legal representatives at the MOH meetings is another legal solution that contributes to developing and expanding the NGOs' position in the health sector.

"The presence of two NGOs' members in a council, with the ability to elect their representatives, who can be heard and can influence the policies and programs of the MOH is a matter that must be defined for NGOs." (P27)

Developing an independent organizational unit linking NGOs and the government

Given that the effective role of NGOs in the health system is contingent upon the establishment of an effective relationship between NGOs and the government, the establishment of an autonomous organizational unit to act as a channel between NGOs and the government is another legal requirement to facilitate NGOs' presence and activity in the health sector. The existence of linking organizational structures modifies these connections and transforms informal interactions into formal and targeted contacts between the public sector and the NGOs, in addition to expanding the interaction and communication between these two entities. In this regard, one of the managers of MOH says:

"Another critical issue to consider is that there should be a defined relationship between NGOs and the government, with an autonomous administration and an independent unit serving as a link between the two sectors." (P19)

Table 2: Facilitators for expanding the function and roles of NGOs in Iran's health system

Facilitators for expanding the role of NGOs in Iran's health system	
Legal mechanisms	Structural mechanisms
The legislation governing NGOs' activities	Strategic plans in NGOs
Developing an autonomous organizational unit linking NGOs and the government	Evaluating and ranking NGOs
Establishment of a coordination unit of NGOs' affairs in the MOH	Creating a database of health NGOs
Government's support of NGOs	The formation of an NGOs network
	Transparency and accountability in NGOs

NGOs: Nongovernmental organizations, MOH: Ministry of health

Establishment of an organizational unit to coordinate NGOs' affairs in the MOH

Given that the MOH, as the steward of health, is responsible for specialized oversight of the health NGOs' activities, it is necessary to establish independent departments within the organizational structure of the MOH to coordinate the affairs of health NGOs.

Concerning the necessity of establishing a coordinating unit in the MOH, P6 states:

"One of the most effective approaches to attract NGOs' involvement in the health system is to establish an autonomous department within the MOH to organize and direct NGOs' affairs and utilize their engagement at various levels and fields."

Government's support of NGOs

Another strategy for expanding the function of NGOs in Iran's health system is the government's support of NGOs. The government can assist these groups by mandating that some government functions be outsourced to health NGOs. Another option for the government to support health NGOs is to provide financial assistance and facilities.

"The government must support NGOs to survive and play a bigger role in the health system. Support is not limited to financial assistance and loans. The use of public facilities and outsourcing some state activities to NGOs are all a kind of assistance and can help enhance the NGOs' position in society, particularly in the health sector." (P32)

While government agencies cannot intervene directly in NGOs' operations, they may pave the way for their growth by continuously supporting these institutions. Utilizing the educational and humanitarian facilities of government organizations by NGOs is another way for government organizations to assist these institutions. NGOs offer a variety of educational, welfare, and recreational activities to their consumers by utilizing the facilities available at universities of medical sciences and the MOH.

"We frequently planned for an NGO to utilize the conference hall or meeting room of the MOH for a training course presented to the public, such as on AIDS, neurological illnesses, or diabetes; it is supportive and enabling in a way." (P19)

Structural mechanisms Strategic plans in NGOs

Numerous Iranian health NGOs are poor in formulating goals and devising strategies to achieve them. They may establish goals for themselves that cannot reach due to available conditions and facilities, making them reluctant to provide services. As a result, it is critical

for CEOs, leaders, and specialists involved in health NGOs to understand the scientific concepts underlying goal setting, planning, execution, and monitoring of operations.

As a road map for health NGOs' operations, a strategic plan is critical in aiding the development of health NGOs' plans. With a standardized strategic plan and an understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and current opportunities and threats, NGOs may precisely establish their route by identifying short-, medium-, and long-term goals and methods to achieve them.

"To be successful and to achieve success, NGOs must have a clear and defined strategy and establish their ideals in the form of a three- to the five-year strategic plan, and then identify the mission, vision, goals, values, and implementation of the plans to move based on the plans to be successful." (P23)

Evaluating and ranking NGOs

Evaluating and ranking NGOs is another strategy for growing NGOs' function in the health system. This identifies the NGOs that have effectively carried out their tasks and responsibilities, and government organizations can also outsource some of their responsibilities to these NGOs. Additionally, this activity may be viewed as a catalyst for enhancing the performance and developing the capability of other NGOs. Promoting the capability and empowering health NGOs enable them to improve their roles and expand their participation activities across the health system.

"NGOs should also be appraised to find an incentive to strengthen themselves, and if a partnership exists, those NGOs that adhere to higher standards and rank higher in the assessment should be appreciated and get a bigger share of participation." (P8)

Creating a database of health NGOs

The NGOs' success in carrying out their tasks and obligations is contingent upon the familiarity and trust of the public, government agencies, and scientific, medical, and research institutions with these organizations. Creating a database of NGOs is a method to introduce NGOs to many areas of society. Establishing a database of health NGOs and offering better and faster access to their information accelerate collaboration across health NGOs and various organizations.

"Creating a database of health NGOs is one of the important steps toward enhancing health NGOs' function. In addition to facilitating the coordination of NGOs' operations, this benefits scientific and research centers and numerous public and private health organizations because their own activities facilitate the identification and communication of linked NGOs." (P14)

The formation of an NGOs network

NGOs individually have limited authority and impact over policies, initiatives, and even people's behavior. In addition to ensuring that legislators and the public hear their views, developing a network of NGOs working in the same area further expands the breadth and depth of their operations and avoids duplication; these organizations may also benefit from one another's skills to attain their goals.

"The fact is that NGOs individually have little authority and capacity to affect policies, programs, and even peoples' behavior. If the NGOs working on a common field ally together and form a network, this will disseminate their message in addition to promoting their impacts and the extension of their measures, activities, and plans." (P5)

P28 states the importance of networking in the growth and enhancement of NGOs' role in the health sector:

"Networking is one of the recommendations for enhancing NGOs' engagement in the health system. Organizations can share various shared interests, resources, and facilities, so establishing a stronger voice for social effectiveness."

Transparency and accountability in NGOs

Transparency is a fundamental value and a critical criterion for enhancing the role of NGOs in society. Along with sponsors and the MOH, transparency and accountability for performance, particularly about obtaining and using financial resources, is a critical issue for the public as it builds public trust in these institutions.

"In order for the government, the public, and even sponsors to keep faith in NGOs, it is critical that NGOs prioritize transparency in their actions and not overlook this problem." (P2)

"It is critical for sponsors to know how their money is spent. As a citizen, I believe I must understand where this money comes from and how it is spent. If the government observes an NGO that acts transparently and is accountable for its own performance, of course, it attempts to further engage this NGO in executing a variety of duties." (P15)

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, the multifaceted function of NGOs in the Iranian health system is impacted by a variety of elements related to the government, NGOs, and society. Participation of the NGOs in the Iranian health system is a complicated phenomenon that will fail in the absence of facilitators. Based on the findings of this study, two kinds of legal and structural facilitators were identified as the main facilitators for improving the function and roles of NGOs in Iran's health system.

In Iran, very little research has explored the various aspects of NGOs' involvement in the health system. According to the findings of these studies, the NGOs' lack of financial and human resources, poor communication with the government, mutual distrust between the government and the NGOs, the problem of attracting capable specialists to NGOs, low public awareness of the NGOs' role in social development, a lack of formal mechanisms for government-NGO interactions, the reluctance of public organizations to cooperate with NGOs, neglecting NGOs' difficulties, divergent and inconsistent perspectives on NGOs, and a lack of mandatory regulations on NGOs' activity and monitoring their performance are the most significant challenges and problems facing Iranian health NGOs.^[8,12,17] Comparing the findings of previous research to those of the current study confirms the unquestionable role of facilitators in the development of functions and involvement of NGOs in the Iranian health system.

In line with the results of this study, Damari *et al.*^[12] suggested a special credit in the government's annual budget, introducing NGOs to the community, and approving resolutions that require the government to cooperate more with NGOs as strategies to develop the role of these organizations in promoting community health. Khodayari-Zarnaq *et al.* introduced supporting laws for the activities of NGOs in health, government financial support from health NGOs, and creating a framework for interaction between the government and health NGOs as strategies to improve the position and role of NGOs in health policy-making. The results of the study by Khodayari-Zarnaq *et al.*^[8] confirm the findings of this study.

Damari *et al.* and Khodayari-Zarnaq *et al.* in their studies^[8,12] only reviewed NGOs, but Ebrahimi *et al.*^[17] by surveying both the government and NGOs identified the challenges of health NGOs and introduced more trust in NGOs, the adoption and implementation of the law on NGOs' activities, and familiarizing the community with health NGOs as their suggestions for solving the challenges of health NGOs. The results of the study by Ebrahimi *et al.* are in line with the findings of the present study and confirm them.

One of the cases identified in this study as facilitating the role of NGOs in the Iranian health sector was government support from NGOs. In this regard, Lewis addresses this issue in his book, saying that the role of NGOs develops in different societies when governments tend to involve them in various social programs.^[24] Rouvinen-Wilenius *et al.*^[25] have introduced strategies and criteria for promoting health equality by NGOs. According to the results of this study, these criteria are significant issues that NGOs can notice to achieve their

goals. Adequate information about the NGO's goals and activities, transparency and accountability in NGOs, and evaluation of NGOs' performance are some of these criteria that are in line with the results of the present study and confirm the findings of our study.

In accordance with the results of the present study, studies conducted in developed and developing countries indicate that adequate financial resources, a standard strategic plan, communication and building trust between the government, NGOs and society, the government's interaction with NGOs, the recognition of NGOs by society and scientific centers, and transparency and accountability are all recognized as the factors affecting NGOs' capacity and successful and effective performance.^[22,26-32] The findings of the present study also emphasize the need for these factors in the effective and successful NGOs' participation in Iran's health system.

As organizations formed from the heart of society, NGOs have a strong potential to eradicate and minimize social concerns.^[12] By participating in different health-related initiatives, they may play a role as active participants in the whole health system, from the lowest to the highest levels. Consequently, it is critical to improve and expand the function of NGOs in the health sector. Despite their strengths and capacities, the expansion of NGOs' function in the Iranian health system requires paying attention to strengthening many legal and structural facilitators since disregarding these elements will lead to failure in improving the role of NGOs in the health system.

Limitation and recommendation

The most important limitation of this study is the limitation in internal studies, which makes it difficult to compare the results. In other words, most studies have focused on the challenges of NGOs and have provided few solutions to address these challenges.

In this study, using the opinions and experiences of experts in the field of NGOs in the governmental and nongovernmental sector, the mechanisms and solutions for developing the role of NGOs in the Iranian health system were identified. In previous studies, only the views of the government or NGOs were examined to identify the challenges of the Iranian health NGOs, but in the present study, the views of both sectors were considered to solve these challenges.

Conclusion

The Iranian health NGOs, as one of the sectors contributing to the achievement of the health system's goals, are at the beginning of the path to playing a role and they would inevitably require various mechanisms

to succeed. There are still no executive and legal mechanisms to develop the role of NGOs in the Iranian health system, and at the same time, NGOs' participation in Iran's health sector is far from ideal. In this study, using the experiences of NGOs and the public sector, solutions and facilitators were presented to develop NGOs' participation in the health system. Managers and policymakers in the health sector and other social sectors of the country can use the findings of this study to help strengthen the position of health NGOs in society and the health system.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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