



# The Relationship Structure Between Iranian NGOs and the Government

Sima Saghravani<sup>1\*</sup>, Seyed Mohammad Moghimi<sup>2</sup>

1. Postdoctoral Researcher of Public Administration, Faculty of Management, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

2. Professor, Faculty of Management, University of Tehran, Tehran Iran

(Received: November 25, 2020; Revised: June 30, 2022; Accepted: August 22, 2022)

## Abstract

This study investigated the status of Iranian NGOs in the political-administrative and sociocultural context of Iran, using the grounded theory methodology. The data analysis in this method involves extracting categories from the data and then identifying the relationship between the categories. The data derived from semi-structured interviews indicated that the Iranian NGOs' status is intertwined with the government's policies. In this respect, the relationship structure between these two sectors is mapped at the macro level in a seesaw model, which revealed an asymmetrically balanced relationship. That is, while the relationship is in a critical and unfair situation (asymmetrical), the government is alive and holds power (balanced). However, the research findings demonstrated that all elements of society are capable of changing this critical situation and the unfair order of the country. Discovering the relationship structure between NGOs and government in a different context like Iran can open new horizons for policymakers and researchers around the world.

**Keywords:** NGOs, nonprofit organizations, grounded theory methodology, government-NGOs' relationship structure.

## Introduction

In the last two decades, the phenomenon of NGO has been introduced to the Iranian political literature as part of the concept of "third sector" and one of the main pillars of the a "civil society." It has been incorporated as a prerequisite to democracy in the Iranian political-administrative structure. However, regardless of how much a phenomenon is useful, justified, and inherently positive, it cannot be expected to bear fruit unless it is implemented in the appropriate context. NGOs are no exception. While NGOs play a major role in fostering democracy, it would be naive to believe that the larger the number of NGOs, the stronger the civil society and the higher democratic development. This assumption has proven to be valid only in some contexts, acting in reverse in the others and undermining the civil society. Therefore, what we need is a more context-based approach rather than empty words (Mercer, 2002). In this regard, although there are many NGOs in Iran, a true civil society has not been created. According to the 2021 Legatum Prosperity Index, "Personal Freedom" in Iran has been ranked 165<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries (Legatum Institute Foundation, 2021).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze this phenomenon in the Islamic Republic of Iran through a context-based approach focusing on the interrelationship between government and nonprofit NGOs with the intention that it can offer a solution to the domestic and international

---

\* Corresponding Author Email: sima.saghravani@ut.ac.ir

problems along with research in other countries and open new horizons for practitioners and researchers.

### **NGO: A Complex Phenomenon in Different Contexts**

An NGO is such a complicated concept that its underlying theme, the third sector, entails complicated, confusing, and abstract concepts in the political and social discourse (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016). Several factors contribute to the complexity of the concept of NGO. Firstly, there is a heterogeneous terminology for this concept and its mother theme, the third sector, including voluntary sector, civil society, independent sector, nonprofit sector, charitable sector, social economy, etc. (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016), while NGO is recognized with different terms including civil society organizations (CSOs), community based organizations (CBOs), grassroots organizations, faith-based organizations (FBOs) (Brass et al., 2018), civil society organizations (CSOs), non-profit organizations (NPOs), and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) (Vakil, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, lexical diversity is not meant for accurate description or analysis (Lewis, 2010). It also confuses practitioners and scholars. The obfuscation is worsened by equivalents of other languages for this concept. For example, in Persian, the official language of Iran, various equivalents have been used and defined in administrative codes and legal regulations and if one wants to translate all these terms into English, one finds different terms compared to those used with regard to NGOs. For instance, *Sazemanha-ye Mardom Nahad* is the main official equivalent of NGOs in Persian. However, it translates is translated as to People-Based Organizations.

Secondly, the history of the emergence and evolution of NGOs is also subject to controversies. Most people see the origins of NGOs exclusively in the West, Western liberal order, or American hegemony after World War II, whereas some believe that this phenomenon is deeply rooted in all continents and many countries (Davies, 2018). Moreover, one cannot provide a linear explanation for the historical evolution of NGOs, as it will be very different depending on the aspect that is focused upon, e.g., their number, membership, partnership, financial resources, and global impacts or accomplishments (Davies, 2018).

Thirdly, numerous formal and academic definitions and classifications of the phenomenon of NGO (Malena, 1995; Salamon & Anheier, 1992; Vakil, 1997, 2018; UN et al., 2008; United Nations Statistics Division, 2003) add to the complexity of this concept and confuse people. Adding legal definitions of each country, we will have a complicated puzzle to grasp. Therefore, while the academic body of work on this subject is continually expanding, NGOs are still considered a rather terra incognita.

In conclusion, the considerable complexity of this concept in the sociopolitical literature is determined by the heterogeneous lexical and terminological diversity, different views on history and evolution, and multiple definitions and classifications on of the concept of NGO. However, the complexity increases significantly when the phenomenon is formed in different contexts, because, as mentioned before above, despite the positive nature of an NGO, its performance in different contexts is different various and sometimes reversed. Therefore, understanding NGOs requires analyzing them in different contexts without solely relying on the studies in some countries, especially given that most scientific studies on NGOs are limited to certain countries and often to the United States (Brass et al., 2018; Ma & Konrath, 2018; Shier & Handy, 2014; Smith, 2013). Although these studies might be useful, but cannot be generalized to all contexts; therefore, further research is required in other contexts to gain a

---

1. NGO is the most common term used in most languages (Martens, 2002).

deeper understanding of existing processes and civil society-related requirements as well as NGOs. This will pave the way for solving many global and international problems. In this vein, the present study analyzed this concept in the unique context of the Islamic Republic of Iran to gain a better insight into the current situation, predict the future, and reduce some of the ambiguities mentioned above.

In general, surveying the structure of the relationship between the government and NGOs in the context of different countries can be a foundation for new theories as well as comparative studies between countries. It can also be a source for new theories in public administration studies and a basis for comparative studies between countries.

### **The Government-NGO Relationship**

The relationship between governments and NGOs is an inevitable one that can provide considerable opportunities or cause serious threats for both parties (Salamon & Toepler, 2015). This collaboration leads to experiencing simultaneously benefits and risks (Xu & Kim, 2021). On the one hand, this relationship could be beneficial for the two parties, and on the other hand, it could make them subject to competition and conflict. Thus, different types of relationships are formed, such as collaborative, parallel, and, adversarial as three types of government-NGO relationship (Toepler & Abramson, 2021) or government-centered and civil society-centered as two types of organizational hybridity (Min, 2021). This relationship could be constructive or destructive.

This highly complex relationship can lead to severe problems and conflicts, especially when the viewpoints of the two parties are opposite (Salamon & Toepler, 2015). This conflict may be due to incompatible institutional logic between governments and civil society organizations. An institutional logic refers to various values, beliefs, norms, interests, and identities (Min, 2021)

NGOs are being controlled by a regulatory environment that has a direct effect on them. For example, where some governments repress civil society, NGOs face severe limitations on their ability to act as agents of progressive social change (Banks et al., 2015). Governments mainly monitor NPOs based on institutional processes that control their operations and less on their performance outcomes and achievement of long-term goals (Nwauche, 2021).

Furthermore, in recent years, many governments have passed laws that restrict the acceptance of funds from other countries for local nonprofits. The motivation for these confinements may be found in the attempt to preserve national sovereignty (Shnurbein et al., 2021).

Thus, the pressures of the legal environment and the political conditions force NGOs to form alliances with governments to receive the necessary services. As a result, NGOs become merely recipients of services, which shifts them away from social mobilization and limits their transformative potential. It also prevents them from innovating (Banks et al., 2015).

In this regard, Salamon and Toepler (2015) assert that there are four potential dangers that do not necessarily lead to full and close cooperation between governments and NGOs. The first is the potential loss of NGOs' autonomy that makes them independent. It could be due to their heavy dependence on government support. Financial dependency on and being controlled by governments reduces the ability of nonprofits to set their missions, goals, preferences, and priorities. The second is playing the role of vendors by NPOs (vendorism). This means NGOs continuously and permanently follow government's contracts without considering their own social purposes. The third is the bureaucratization or over-professionalization of nonprofits resulting from government programs and accounting requirements. It causes them to pursue administrative procedures for requesting and managing

government budgets rather than aligning themselves with public sector values. The final point regards the stunting of advocacy activity in order not to endanger public funding streams.

In addition to mentioned problems, nowadays we are facing the phenomenon of “governmental NGOs.” Vakil (2018) firmly believes that GONGOs have occupied the territory of true NGOs. Such organizations are not only deceptive but also can be dangerous if equipped with military equipment.

To sum up, today countless threats are targeting NGOs, so “the end of charity” is envisaged (Morgan, 2015). Nevertheless, Davies (2018), reviewing the history of NGOs from ancient times to the present day, concludes that there were also times when there were severe restrictions on civil society and NGOs that opened up new opportunities for them. Thus, the decline of NGOs is unlikely (Davies, 2018).

### **The Phenomenon of NGO in Iran**

It is more than two decades that the phenomenon of NGO has been included in the political-administrative structure of Iran. Practical experiences of entering NGOs into the political-administrative context of the country and the membership of more than one million Iranians in these organizations have shown some adverse and unintended consequences, such as numerous crimes and financial abuses. These include money laundering by NGOs, public skepticism about civic activities, and lack of social credibility of many NGOs (Lotfikhachaki & Imani Jajarmi, 2020 ); politicization of NGOs (Yaghoobi et al., 2021); ineffective communication and cooperation between NGOs (Yaghoobi et al., 2021); the abuse of the NGOs by government officials and establishment of “Governmental NGOs”; wasting volunteer human resources in fake “NGOs”; and so on.

For example, unfortunately, most powerful NGOs in Iran have been established by government officials to use economic rents or to attend international forums merely due to the demands of the government. Therefore, true NGOs in Iran have limited power and their social impact is negligible.

Most of the mentioned dysfunctions are due to the lack of appropriate context and profound knowledge about the phenomenon of NGO. The government has not provided an appropriate context for NGOs’ activities (Yaghoobi et al., 2021). For example, regarding the legal context of NGOs, there is not any coherent legal framework (Lotfikhachaki & Imani Jajarmi, 2020). Reviewing the laws and regulations relating to civil society indicates that there is considerable ambiguity about the nature of this phenomenon because some of them are contradictory. In this regard, in the administrative law of Iran, several terms refer to the concept of NGO, which has led to great confusion over it. In addition, no law has been passed in the parliament of Iran that is exclusive to NGOs. The lack of a comprehensive legal framework has led many institutions such as the “State Welfare Organization of Iran,” municipalities, and other organizations to issuing NGO permits without following a specific and integrated legal system (Yaghoobi et al., 2021).

Moreover, regarding the social context of NGOs, there is a lack of necessary social capital (Yaghoobi et al., 2021). Based on the 2021 Legatum Prosperity Index, “social capital” in Iran is ranked 89th of 167 countries (Legatum Institute Foundation, 2021). Therefore, there is a poor context for this phenomenon.

### **Methodology: Grounded Theory**

This study employed grounded theory (GT) methodology to map the current and possible future status of NGOs in the political-administrative and sociocultural context of Iran. It is

believed that grounded theory outperforms all qualitative methods for its conceptualization of social models (Glaser, 2002). It presents unique advantages for the researchers because it has a high capacity for complex interpretations, which provide researchers with more freedom to analyze any given field and concept (Jones & Alony, 2011).

In the GT, sampling is conducted via theoretical sampling methods. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 45) stated:

Theoretical sampling is the process of collecting data to generate a theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his theory as it emerges.

Theoretical saturation is the termination criterion in theoretical sampling, which occurs when the researcher is sure that no further data can be found (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In this study, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews based on theoretical sampling to the extent of theoretical saturation. It should be mentioned that interviews were conducted with experts at different scientific, practical, and empirical levels of Iranian civil society to collect more data.

Accordingly, 20 semi-structured in-person interviews were conducted with NGO experts between January 09, 2018, and July 08, 2019. The interviewees were academically or administratively experienced people who were selected using snowball sampling. There included high-ranking government officials, brilliant scholars, experienced NGO founders, or social activists. The interviews lasted from 40 to 90 minutes. They were all recorded and transcribed using Maxqda2018 software. The interviews focused on the experiences of participants with NGOs in the Iranian context. Interviewees were asked various questions to reveal their viewpoints on the status of this phenomenon, such as what follows:

- 1) In your opinion, what is the biggest legal vacuum about civil society in Iran?
- 2) In your opinion, which organizations do not represent NGOs, but are introduced as NGOs in Iran?
- 3) What do you think is the biggest obstacle and problem for the activities of NGOs in Iran?
- 4) What do you know about the motivation of people in Iran to establish an NGO?
- 5) How do you define the concept of corruption in Iranian NGOs?

Moreover, more detailed questions in the context were asked.

It should be mentioned that freedom of speech is limited in our country, and it is the main limitation of our research. Therefore, our interviewees may not provide comprehensive data.

Data analysis was conducted through the Glaserian approach because this approach is in line with the methodological foundations of GT and focuses on the emergence of the theory from data rather than imposing the theory on them. Moreover, the Glaserian approach provides us with a broader variety of platforms for data integration (Saghravani et al., 2014). This approach was employed in two main coding steps in three phases:

1. Substantive coding (with open coding as phase 1 and selective coding as phase 2)
2. Theoretical coding (phase 3)

In this process, the abstraction degree of the research data is increased gradually to convert data into codes, codes into concepts, and concepts into categories. The categories are then integrated to form the final research model, and the theory emerges based on the data.

Regarding trustworthiness of theory, there are four criteria in Glaserian approach: Fitness, Work, Relevance, and Modifiability (Glaser, 1978). These criteria are inherent in the design of the study. "Fitness" means that the theory must fit the data. Since most of categories of grounded theory are generated from the data, the criteria of fitness are automatically fulfilled. "Work" means that the emerged theory should be able to interpret and explain what is happening or happened and make a forecast of what will happen. This is achieved by

systematic social research. “Relevance” is arrived when core problems and processes are emerged without any force to pursuit the preconceived theories. To achieve relevance, the researcher should be assertive. Finally, “Modifiability” means that the theory can be modified constantly by new incidents or literature review (Glaser, 1978).

#### *Step 1, Phase 1: Open Coding*

The significant segments of interviews are coded in the first phase. In this phase, the data are handled in an open manner (Locke, 2001), and coding continues until the core category emerges. This is so that in the next phase, i.e., selective coding, coding can be directed based on the core category, and the theory is born around that. “The core category explains how participants express and resolve their primary concern on the issues raised by the researcher” (Glaser, 1978). In this study, the core category that emerged after the first five interviews was “undesirable relationship between Iranian NGOs and the government.”

#### *Step 1, Phase 2: Selective Coding*

In the second phase, the coding process is limited to variables around the core category so that it can direct the theoretical sampling, memoing, and coding in the subsequent steps (Glaser, 1992). In this study, theoretical sampling and coding tasks were performed around the core category of “undesirable relationship between Iranian NGOs and the government.” Subsequently, 553 codes (with a frequency of 979 data segments) emerged from the coding process of interviews.

In the following and higher level of abstraction, the resulting codes were integrated, and 14 concepts with three categories emerged. Table 1 displays resulting codes, categories, and concepts.

In the following lines, some examples of direct quotes and the codes assigned to them at a higher level of abstraction are presented:

“One of the disasters is that an NGO is founded for business purposes and financial profits. As a result, we would involve in regretting affairs. Achieving these wrong purposes like earning profits and coming to political power have devastating effects. So, they follow wrong goals by doing political activities and making money for their personal achievements.”

Assigned codes: “Mundane and non-public incentive in NGOs”

“Activities of some NGOs with political goals”

“Having work experience in many years, I’ve understood that the regulations relating to NGOs are not explained clearly at all.”

Assigned code: “vague and ambiguous rules and regulations about NGOs”

“There was no clear law in the field of NGOs. It is a real issue that hinders the development of NGOs in Iran.”

Assigned code: “gap in the law about NGOs”

“After investigating an established NGO, you will understand that it has no coherent structure, while It’s one of the major indicators of a modern organization.”

Assigned code: “Having no coherent structure in NGOs”

“Not all NGOs are bad. Many are honorable, they are still working honorably.”

Assigned code: “useful and humanitarian actions of some NGOs”

**Table 1.** Resulting Codes, Categories, and Concepts

Categories	Concepts	Concept description	Samples of codes of a concept
The Government's attitude to NGOs	Government's negative attitude to NGOs	Mistrust of the government towards the phenomenon of NGOs, putting them under security pressure	- Not trusting the NGOs with the pretext of enemy infiltration - Government considering NGOs as bothersome - Limiting the rights of NGOs in the Iranian legal system, ...
	Government's positive attitude to NGOs	Trust and support of the government towards the phenomenon of NGOs	- Government granting projects to NGOs - All NGOs are having the right of suing instead of only NGOs elected by the judiciary and other authorities, ...
Negative characteristics of NGOs and current context	Corruption in political-administrative system	Devious and immoral activities by public agencies and political systems	- Government using NGOs in a demonstrative manner - Developing NGOs for international display - Granting governmental rents for some familiar NGOs - Establishing NGOs endorsed by the government, ...
	Weaknesses of political-administrative system	Structural problems and backwardness in governmental organizations, political systems, and regulations	- Not using modern science in dealing with the phenomenon of NGOs - The problem of rapid replacement of individuals in governmental institutions - Officials discriminating between NGOs - Lack of legislation on NGOs
	NGOs' corruption	Devious and immoral activities by NGOs	- Mundane and non-public incentives in NGOs - Fake and unclear statistics provided by some NGOs - Intelligent rents of some NGOs for being granted public projects, ...
	NGOs' incompetency	Structural problems and backwardness in NGOs	- Lack of organizational structure in NGOs - Weak accountability by NGOs - NGOs' lack of information on NGO-related regulations
	Sociocultural weaknesses	Inappropriate social and cultural actions and views	- People's assumption about the infectivity of plans such as Baby Steps - Increasing attention to personal issues rather than social ones - Unorganized accountability demanding by the people, ...
Positive characteristics of NGOs and current context	Honesty in political-administrative system	Honest and moral intentions and efforts in governmental organizations and political systems	- Government's attempt to create a ranking system for NGOs - Attempts for identifying NGO problems using databases, ...
	Strength of political-administrative system	Appropriate structures and development in governmental organizations, political systems, and regulations	- Government's educational needs assessment using NGO databases - Establishment of associations under essential rights of the people in the Constitution, ...
	NGOs' honesty	Honest and moral intentions and efforts of NGOs	- Public service intentions for the establishment of some NGOs - Noble activities of some NGOs
	NGOs' competency	Appropriate structures and development in NGOs	- The success of some NGOs in helping society - The success of some NGOs in gaining international credit, ...
	Sociocultural strengths	Appropriate social and cultural actions and views	- A long history of social activities in the country - Emphasis of Islamic teachings on associations, ...
Asymmetry in the relationship structure between NGOs and government	Current critical situation	Critical unfair situation and underdevelopment in relationship structure between NGOs and the government	- Very few numbers of real NGOs in Iran - Occurrence of sociocultural crises - NGOs' preoccupation with gaining government's trust, ...
	Change necessities	Necessity of severe changes in relationship structure between NGOs and the government	- The necessity of developing scientific theories on NGOs - The necessity of preventing notoriety of NGOs and charitable entities - The necessity of using the services of experts and professors in the field of NGOs, ...

### Step 2, Phase 3: Theoretical Coding

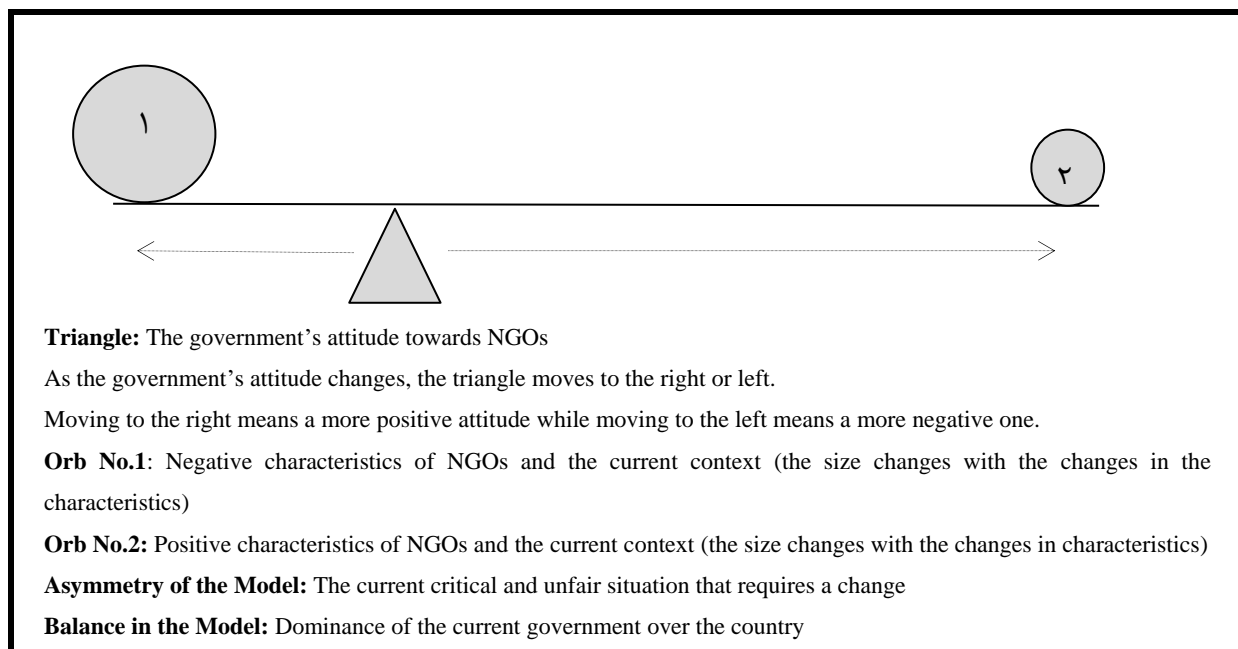
The third phase refers to the combination of concepts with a relationship model (Locke, 2001). Theoretical codes are abstract models that combine resulting concepts in line with a theory (Glaser & Holton, 2005). In the Glaserian approach, the researcher is free to integrate data and create a “theoretical code.” This approach revolves around the belief that the researcher creates the model. However, during its development, the three primary sources of the Glaserian approach have provided researchers with possible types of theoretical codes as follows:

Eighteen theoretical codes in theoretical *Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978); nine theoretical codes in doing *Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 1998); and twenty-three theoretical codes in the *Grounded Theory Perspective III: Theoretical Coding* (Glaser, 2005).

In the third phase of this study, the resulting concepts were integrated based on the theoretical code of asymmetry to develop a model called “asymmetrical balance in relationship structure between Iranian NGOs and government.”

### Resulted Model

The resultant model of this study was obtained from the integration of concepts and categories to understand the status of Iranian NGOs in interaction with the government and in the administrative, political, and cultural contexts of Iran. In this way, we introduce a new concept named “relationship structure between government and NGOs.” The relationship structure refers to the results of all types and forms of positive and negative relationships between government and NGOs in their existing context. Based on the data analysis, the Iranian relationship structure between the two sectors was mapped in an asymmetrical balance in the form of a seesaw (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Emerged Model: Asymmetrical Balance in Relationship Structure between Iranian NGOs and the Government

This seesaw model, which represents the relationship structure between the government and NGOs in the Iranian political-administrative and sociocultural context, consists of three elements:



**Triangle:**

The triangle represents the attitude of the government towards NGOs. In this model, government's attitude towards NGOs is defined in a range from mistrust and security pressure to trust and support. The triangle can move along the axis. Moving to the right indicates positive attitude of the government towards NGOs, or in other words, more trust and support, whereas moving to the left represents negative attitude of the government, i.e., mistrust and more pressure. The results of coding research data indicated that the Iranian government often has a negative attitude towards NGOs; because of 126 data segments of interviews dedicated to the "government's negative attitude to NGOs" concept in comparison to 8 data segments dedicated to the "government's positive attitude to NGOs" concept. Therefore, the triangle tends more to the left.

**Orbs:**

Orb No. 1 represents negative characteristics of NGOs and the current Iranian context (i.e., political-administrative and sociocultural systems). The size of this Orb can change with changes in negative characteristics. Its weight consists of corruption in political-administrative system, weaknesses of political-administrative system, NGOs' corruption, NGOs' incompetency, and sociocultural weaknesses.

Orb No. 2 represents positive characteristics of NGOs and the current Iranian context (i.e., administrative-political and sociocultural systems). The size of this Orb can change with changes in positive characteristics. Its weight consists of honesty in political-administrative system, strength of political-administrative system, NGOs' honesty, NGOs' competency, and sociocultural strength.

The results of coding the research data indicated that Orb No.1 is relatively large, and Orb No.2 is relatively small, implying that negative characteristics prevailed over positives ones. Comparing the number of the data segments dedicated to the concepts proved the following findings:

- 67 in "corruption in the political-administrative system" concept vs. five in "honesty in the political-administrative system" concept;
- 353 in "weaknesses of political-administrative system" concept vs. 18 in "strength of political-administrative system" concept;
- 113 in "NGOs' corruption" concept vs. 20 in "NGOs' honesty" concept;
- 58 in "NGOs' incompetency" concept vs. 30 in "NGOs' competency" concept; and
- 41 in "sociocultural weaknesses" concept vs. eight in "sociocultural strength" concept.

Therefore, the size of Orb No. 1 was bigger than that of Orb No. 2.

These three elements have created a combination that represents two features of the relationship structure:

**Asymmetry of the Seesaw Model:** This indicates that the current relationship structure is chaotic, critical, and in need of change. The reason is that negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context are far greater than positive characteristics (Orb No.1 is much larger than Orb No.2), and 2). Moreover, the attitude of the government towards NGOs tends more towards mistrust and pressure (the triangle tends more to the left).

**Balance of the Seesaw Model:** This indicates that despite the chaotic and critical status of the current situation (asymmetry), this relationship structure is still alive and moving: a structure in which the current government dominates and is in power while corruption and underdevelopment prevails.

However, the balance might be disrupted by changes in the characteristics of NGOs and the current context (changes in the sizes of the orbs) or changes in the attitude of the government

towards NGOs (movement of the triangle along the axis of the seesaw). Table 2 shows situations that gradually unbalance the relationship structure of the government and NGOs.

The imbalance of the relationship structure implies that the dominance of the government is endangered as the government loses its control. In such a situation, the imbalance in the relationship structure may result in one of the following two conditions:

**Collapse of the Structure:** This means that the government loses its dominance permanently. In other words, the current government is no longer in control, and the current relationship structure collapses.

**Temporary Imbalance:** The imbalance might be temporary, and the structure may restore its balance at a new point. For example, the government may handle any imbalance to prevent its collapse and protect itself, so it finds its balance at a new point. This means either a change in the positive and negative characteristics of NGOs and their current context (i.e., the size of the orbs), or a change in the attitude of the government towards NGOs (i.e., the triangles moves to the right or the left).

**Table 2.** Situations that Gradually Unbalance the Relationship Structure of the Government and NGOs, Endangering Dominance of the Government

propositions	Different states that unbalance relationship structures, endangering dominance of the government	How the relationship structure would be unbalanced?	Resulted events
1-1	Negative characteristics of NGOs and current context increase (orb No. 1 enlarges). 	Imbalance of the relationship structure results from an increase in the force of the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context (increasing the load of Orb No.1) <sup>2</sup>	Social chaos yields the government's loss of control and endangers the government dominance.
1-2	The government shows more trust and support towards NGOs (the triangle moves to the right). 		
1-3	Positive characteristics of NGOs and current context decrease (Orb No. 2 reduces). 		
2-1	Negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context decrease (Orb No. 1 reduces). 	Imbalance of the relationship structure results from an increase in the force of positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context (increasing the load of Orb No. 2)	Social intolerance yields the government's loss of control and endangers the government's dominance.
2-2	The government shows more distrust and puts more pressure on NGOs (the triangle moves to the left). 		
2-3	Positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context increase (Orb No. 2 enlarges). 		

According to the various possible unbalancing situations depicted in Table 2, the following propositions represent situations that endanger the dominance of Iran's government:

**Proposition 1:** Increasing the force of negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context will disrupt the balance in relationship structure between the government and NGOs by creating chaos in the society. This social chaos yields the government's loss of control and endangers the government's dominance.

The three subset prepositions show three different states that increase the force of negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context:

**Proposition 1-1:** Increasing the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context will increase the force of negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context, which causes social chaos.

**Proposition 1-2:** Showing more trust and support towards NGOs by the government will increase the force of negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context, which causes social chaos.

**Proposition 1-3:** Decreasing the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context will increase the force of negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context, which causes social chaos.

**Proposition 2:** Increasing the force of positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context will disrupt the balance in relationship structure between the government and NGOs by creating social intolerance toward current situations. This social intolerance yields the government's loss of control and endangers the government's dominance.

The three subset prepositions show three different states that increase the force of positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context:

**Proposition 2-1:** Decreasing the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context will increase the force of positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context, which causes social intolerance.

**Proposition 2-2:** Showing more distrust and putting more pressure on NGOs by the government will increase the force of positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context, which causes social intolerance.

**Proposition 2-3:** Increasing the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context will increase the force of positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context, which causes social intolerance.

Given the above propositions, in each of the six situations of imbalance, the government attempts to regain its power. Therefore, it is bound to take measures, consciously or unconsciously, to protect itself. These measures are categorized in Table 3. The following propositions represent necessary actions that should be done by Iran's government to restore the balance in unbalancing situations:

**Proposition3:** If social chaos endangers the dominance of the government, following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control on the country:

- 1) Change its attitude towards NGOs and increase its pressure on them
- 2) Take measures to increase the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context
- 3) Take measures to decrease the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context

The three subset prepositions show separate situations that increase the force of negative characteristics of NGOs and current context that cause social chaos, and necessary actions should be done by Iran's government to gain its control over that.

**Proposition 3-1:** If negative characteristics of NGOs and current context increase, the dominance of the government is endangered. Thus, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control:

- 1) Change its attitude towards NGOs and increase its pressure on them.
- 2) Take measures to increase the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

**Proposition 3-2:** If the government shows more trust and support towards NGOs, its dominance is endangered. Thus, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control:

- 1) Take measures to increase the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context.
- 2) Take measures to decrease the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

**Proposition 3-3:** If the positive characteristics of NGOs and current context are decreased, the dominance of the government is endangered. Thus, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control:

- 1) Change its attitude towards NGOs and increase its pressure on them.
- 2) Take measures to decrease the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

**Proposition 4:** If social intolerance endangers the dominance of the government, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control over the country:

- 1) Change its attitude towards NGOs and increase trust and support them.
- 2) Take measures to increase the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context.
- 3) Take measures to decrease the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

The three subset prepositions show separate situations that increase the force of the positive characteristics of NGOs and current context that cause social intolerance, and the necessary actions needed to be done Iran's government to gain its control on over that:

**Proposition 4-1:** If the negative characteristics of NGOs and current context are decreasing, the dominance of the government is endangered. Thus, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control:

- 1) Change its attitude towards NGOs and increase trust and support them.
- 2) Take measures to decrease the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

**Proposition 4-2:** If the government shows more distrust and puts more pressure on NGOs, it endangers its dominance. Thus, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control:

- 1) Take measures to increase the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context.
- 2) Take measures to decrease the positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

**Proposition 4-3:** If the positive characteristics of NGOs and current context are increasing, the dominance of the government is endangered. Thus, the following actions should be taken by the government to regain its control:

- 1) Change its attitude towards NGOs and increase trust and support them.
- 2) Take measures to increase the negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context.

**Table 3.** Government Measures for Restoring Balance and Maintaining its Dominance

Propositions	Different states that unbalance relationship structures, endangering dominance of the government	Measures that the government should take for restoring the balance
3-1	<p>Negative characteristics of NGOs and current context increase (Orb No. 1 enlarges).</p>	<p>The government needs to change its attitude towards NGOs and increase its pressure on them (moving the triangle to the left) or take measures to increase positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context (increasing the weight of Orb No. 2)</p>
3-2	<p>The government shows more trust and support towards NGOs (the triangle moves to the right).</p>	<p>The government needs to try and increase positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context (increasing the weight of Orb No.2) or take measures to decrease negative characteristics of NGOs (decreasing the weight of Orb No. 1)</p>
3-3	<p>Positive characteristics of NGOs and current context decrease (Orb No. 2 reduces).</p>	<p>The government needs to change its attitude towards NGOs and increase its pressure on them (moving the triangle to the left) or take measures to decrease negative characteristics of NGOs (decreasing the weight of Orb No. 1)</p>
4-1	<p>Negative characteristics of NGOs and current context decrease (Orb No. 1 reduces).</p>	<p>The government needs to change its attitude towards NGOs and try to increase trust and support (moving the triangle to the right) or take measures to decrease positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context (decreasing the weight of Orb No. 2)</p>
4-2	<p>The government shows more distrust and puts more pressure on NGOs (the triangle moves to the left).</p>	<p>The government needs to try and decrease positive characteristics of NGOs and the current context (decreasing the weight of Orb No. 2) or take measures to increase negative characteristics of NGOs (increasing the weight of Orb No. 1)</p>
4-3	<p>Positive characteristics of NGOs and current context increase (Orb No. 2 enlarges).</p>	<p>The government needs to change its attitude towards NGOs and try to increase trust and support (moving the triangle to the right) or take measures to increase negative characteristics of NGOs and the current context (increasing the weight of Orb No. 1)</p>

Many examples, considering the situations unbalancing the structure between the two sectors in Iran (Table 2) and the government measures for restoring balance<sup>1</sup> (Table 3), can be provided, but real examples cannot be given, due to political reasons.

## Discussion

Analyzing the data of the research demonstrates that the status of Iranian NGOs is intertwined with their relationship with the government. Based on noteworthy theories – including *Voluntary Failure*, *Third-Party Government*, and *New Governance* theories – the relationship between these two sectors is inevitable (Salamon 1995, 2002). It is so important that a numbers of research have been conducted about this subject matter (Almog-Bar, 2021; Brinkerhoff, 2002; Coston, 1998; Furneaux & Ryan, 2014; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Min, 2021; Nwauche, 2021; Toepler & Abramson, 2021; Young, 2000).

Here it has been found that there are various inter-organizational or inter-personal relationships between NGOs and governmental organizations, but none of them can demonstrate the precise relationship between them in a whole picture. Therefore, based on the research findings, the relationships between a government and its NGOs can be analyzed and discussed at micro and macro levels, with different indicators:

1. Micro-level: it addresses the inter-organizational or inter-personal relationship between an NGO and a governmental organization. At this level, to discover the relationship between these two sectors, the concept of “relationship type” is applicable. This relationship type can be considered as a “dyadic partnership” (Williamson et al., 2021) or as one of the simple typologies that have been presented so far, e.g., repression, rivalry, competition, contracting, third-party government, cooperation, complementarity, collaboration (Coston, 1998); adversarial, complementary, supplementary (Young, 2000); contracting, extension, cooperation and gradual absorption, partnership (Brinkerhoff, 2002); or contempt, conflict, charity, contracting, cooperation, concordance (Furneaux & Ryan, 2014). However, these typologies are only applicable to explain the relationship between a governmental organization and a nonprofit organization<sup>2</sup> at a micro-level, while failing to map the result of all relationships between the elements of these two sectors at a national (macro) level.
2. Macro-level: addresses the general relationship between NGOs and government in the context of a country as a whole. To discover the relationship between these two sectors at this level, the concept of “relationship structure” has been introduced in this research to find a big picture resulting from all relationship types in the context. This means that simple typologies that have been previously introduced to explain the relationships between the government and nonprofits organizations are unable to explain the relationship at the macro-level. The “relationship structure” is the product of the interactions (actions and reactions) of various types of micro-level relationships that occur within a black box.

In conclusion, one should not attribute and fail to differentiate the relationship types that are formed between these two sectors at a micro-level with their relationship structure at a macro-level.

---

1. This article addresses only those government measures that are taken to restore balance. It is, however, noteworthy that NGOs and other elements of the political, administrative, and sociocultural context of Iran can also play a role in maintaining, altering, or disrupting the current structure. Not all possible situations can be covered in this paper, but they all follow the same pattern.

2. We used the words NGOs and nonprofit organizations interchangeably.

In every country, there are a lot of constructive and destructive relation types between every NGO and governmental organizations, and none of them alone can show the real relationship structure. In fact, we may misjudge the relationship between a governmental organization and an NGO to the entire relationship between the sectors, i.e., government of that country and its NGOs.

Moreover, countries may only refer to some of their appropriate relationships at a micro-level to create a good image of themselves in the international arena, whereas what happens at a macro-level is inappropriate and unfair.

For instance, even though it may appear that there is a concrete relationship between a governmental organization and an NGO in Iran, yet perhaps there is not a good relationship structure at the macro-level, because numerous sets of people and organizations exist in both government and nonprofits sectors that establish various types of relationships. This study presented an asymmetric balance in the relationship structure between the government and NGOs that contain numerous positive and negative relationships between each governmental organization and each NGO in Iran. These include cooperation, concordance, collaboration, conflict, competition, contempt, and extension. Therefore, various types of relationships exist between different parts of the government and NGOs within a relationship structure.

This structure indicates that while the relationship is in a critical and unfair situation (asymmetrical), the government is alive and holds power (balanced). However, each sector can be affected by an unfair order of the government of Iran. Finally, the research findings open a new debate about the relationship between government and nonprofit organizations not limited to Iran.

## Conclusion

In the existing literature on the relationship between government and nonprofit organizations, theorists are mainly used to analyze relationships at the micro level (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Coston, 1998; Furneaux & Ryan, 2014; Williamson et al., 2021). However, the broad view of the relationship between the two sectors is a unique pattern that is different in the context of each country.

In this study, we drew this relationship structure in the unique context of Iran in the form of a grounded theory model. Conducted in the Iranian context, this study opens up new perspectives for policymakers and researchers because comprehensive studies in different contexts can provide us with a holistic perspective on the world and shed light on corners that may have been neglected by experts due to lack of experience in unique contexts of some countries. Our study contributes to the literature with novel empirical evidence that reveals the situation of NGOs in the context of Iran. However, the study can make limited claims about its generalizability to theory<sup>1</sup>. The research would help to clarify the major issues of Iran's civil society by a model emerged from the true incidents. In addition, solutions to rectify this situation lie in the model.

It can be concluded from the research findings that all elements of the society are involved in changing the relationship structure between the government and the nonprofit sector and are capable of affecting the critical situation or unfair order of the government. In fact, based on the model found in this study, asymmetric balance, which indicates dominance of the government in the current critical situation, is the outcome of the interactions between every single social element that can be sensitive to little changes as well. Therefore, each social

---

1. The main limitation of this research was the interviewees' reluctance to give obvious examples.

element can rely on its ability to establish a new order in the relationship structure between the government and NGOs.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended to NGOs and policymakers not to ignore their role in making the changes in society and to recognize that they play a significant role in creating and transforming the structure of the government or the roles they can adopt to bring about a new order in it. Subsequently, we also suggest considering the impact of international pressures on the relationship structure between the two sectors in Iran, owing to the fact that this would impact the relationship structure.



## References

- Almog-Bar, M. (2021). Civil society organizations in collaborative governance: Cross-sector partnerships as a test case. In N. Sher-Hadar, L. Lahat, & I. Galnoor (Eds.), *Collaborative governance* (pp. 217-240). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Banks, N., Hulme, D., & Edwards, M. (2015). NGOs, states, and donors revisited: Still too close for comfort? *World Development*, 66, 707–718.
- Brass, J. N., Longhofer, W., Robinson, R. S., & Schnable, A. (2018). NGOs and international development: A review of thirty-five years of scholarship. *World Development*, 112, 136-49.
- Brinkerhoff, J. M. (2002). Government–nonprofit partnership: A defining framework. *Public Administration and Development: The International Journal of Management Research and Practice*, 22(1), 19-30.
- Coston, J. M. (1998). A model and typology of government-NGO relationships. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 27(3), 358-382.
- Davies, T. (2018). The historical development of NGOs. In A. Kellow, & H. Murphy-Gregory (Eds.), *Handbook of research on NGOs* (pp. 15-34). Edward Elgar Publishing
- Furneaux, C. W., & Ryan, N. (2014). Modelling NPO–government relations: Australian case studies. *Public Management Review*, 16(8), 1113-1140.
- Gazley, B., & Brudney, J. L. (2007). The purpose (and perils) of government-nonprofit partnership. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 36(3), 389-415.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Emergence vs forcing: Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussions*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2002). Conceptualization: On theory and theorizing using grounded theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 23-38.
- Glaser, B. G. (2005). *The grounded theory perspective III: Theoretical coding*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Holton. (2005). Staying open: The use of theoretical codes in grounded theory. *The Grounded Theory Review*, 5(1), 1-20.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Transaction.
- Jones, M., & Alony, I. (2011). Guiding the use of grounded theory in doctoral studies – An example from the Australian film industry. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 6, 95-114.
- Legatum Institute Foundation (2021). *The Legatum Prosperity Index*™. <https://www.prosperity.com/globe#IRN>
- Lewis, D. (2010). Nongovernmental organizations, definition and history. In H. K. Anheier, S. Toepler, & R. A. List (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of civil society* (pp. 1056-1062). Springer.
- Locke, K. D. (2001). *Grounded theory in management research*. Sage Publications Limited.
- LotfiKhachaki, B., & ImaniJajarmi, H. (2020). Study of obstacles against social problems familiarization in non-governmental organizations. *Quarterly of Social Studies and Research in Iran*, 9(1), 131-160.
- Ma, J., & Konrath, S. (2018). A century of nonprofit studies: Scaling the knowledge of the field. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 29(6), 1139-58.
- Malena, C. (1995). Working with NGOs: A practical guide to operational collaboration between the world bank and nongovernmental organizations [working report # 15013]. *World Bank*. <https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/814581468739240860/working-with-ngos-a-practical-guide-to-operational-collaboration-between-the-world-bank-and-nongovernmental-organizations>
- Martens, K. (2002). Mission impossible? Defining nongovernmental organizations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 13(3), 271-285.
- Mercer, C. (2002). NGOs, civil society and democratization: A critical review of the literature. *Progress in Development Studies*, 2(1), 5-22.

- Min, B. H. (2021). Hybridization in government-civil society organization relationships: An institutional logic perspective. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 32(3), 1-20.
- Morgan, G. G. (December 9, 2015). *The end of charity?* Valedictory lecture, Sheffield Hallam University.
- Nwauche. S. (2021). An evaluation of the effectiveness of government-non-profit organizations partnership in the delivery of social services. *Development in Practice*, 32(5), 1-17.
- Saghravani, S., Mortazavi, S., Lagzian M., & Rahim-Nia, F. (2014). Forcing theory on data or emerging theory from data: Theory building in humanities using grounded theory methodology [In Persian]. *Foundations of Education*, 4(1), 170-151.
- Salamon, L. M. (1995). *Partners in public service: Government-nonprofit relations in the modern welfare state*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Salamon, L. M. (2002). *The tools of government: A guide to the new governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Salamon, L. M., & Anheier H. K. (1992). In search of the non-profit sector I: The question of definitions. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 3(2), 125-51.
- Salamon, L. M., & Sokolowski S. W. (2016). Beyond nonprofits: Re-conceptualizing the third sector. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(4), 1515-45.
- Salamon, L. M., & Toepler, S. (2015). Government-nonprofit Cooperation: Anomaly and necessity? *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 26(6), 2155-2177.
- Shier, M. L., & Handy, F. (2014). Research trends in nonprofit graduate studies: A growing interdisciplinary field. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(5), 812-31.
- Shnurbein, G. V., Rey-Garcia, M., & Neumayr, M. (2021). Contemporary philanthropy in the spotlight: Pushing the boundaries of research on a global and contested social practice. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 32(2), 185-193.
- Smith, D. H. (2013). Growth of research associations and journals in the emerging discipline of altruistics. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 42(4), 638-56.
- Toepler, S., & Abramson, A. (2021). Government/foundation Relations: A conceptual framework and evidence from the U.S. federal government's partnership efforts. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 32(2), 220-233.
- United Nations Statistics Division (2003). *Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts*. United Nations Publication.
- United Nations, European Commission, International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development, & World Bank (2008). *System of national accounts 2008*. United Nations.
- Vakil, A. C. (1997). Confronting the classification problem: Toward a taxonomy of NGOs. *World Development*, 25(12), 2057-2070.
- Vakil, A. C. (2018). A return to the classification problem: Revising a framework for studying NGOs. In A. Kellow, & H. Murphy-Gregory (Eds.), *Handbook of research on NGOs* (pp. 95-113). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Williamson, A. K., Luke, B., & Furneaux, C. (2021). Ties that bind: Public foundations in dyadic partnerships. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 32(2), 234-246.
- Xu, C., & Kim, M. (2021). Loss or gain: Unpacking nonprofit autonomy-interdependence paradox in collaborations. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 51(4), 308-324.
- Yaghoobi, E., NooshirvanBaboli, P., Mohammadi, S., & Khanmohammadi, H. (2021). Analysis of the impact of the most important issues of NGOs in Iran. *Journal Strategic studies of Public Policies*, 11(40), 74-101.
- Young, D. R. (2000). Alternative models of government-nonprofit sector relations: Theoretical and international perspectives. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 29(1), 149-172.