



**Bam and Beyond:  
Building Alliances Between Iranian and Iranian Diaspora NGOs,  
Universities, and Private Sectors**

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**Bam and Beyond Seminar:  
Building Alliances Between Iranian and Iranian Diaspora NGOs, Universities, and  
Private Sectors  
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*Bam and Beyond*, an international seminar held at Columbia University on November 12, had the twin aims of discussing lessons learned from the disaster relief efforts in the Iranian city of Bam following its 2003 earthquake and planning for effective future relief efforts in Iran. This seminar was the first gathering of concerned representatives of Iranian and diaspora non-governmental organizations (NGO), international relief organizations, private sectors, and academics since the earthquake in Bam. Representatives provided reflections on the response to the 2003 earthquake, engaged in debate on the proper role and focus of diaspora organizations in responding to disasters in Iran, and registered concerns about the lack of cooperation in relief efforts and the problems presented by the US OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) sanctions. Present at the seminar were twenty-three representatives from American, European, and Iranian NGOs, as well as several academics from US-based institutions.

This report outlines the main discussions that took place at the *Bam and Beyond* seminar, looking at the key challenges that NGOs faced in Bam, and concludes with proposed solutions. The main topics discussed include:

- Emphasis on long-term, sustainable projects in Bam.
- Improved networking and ability to share information across NGOs.
- Increased collaboration and pooling of resources among NGOs.
- Focus on the types of assistance not subject to governmental limitations.

## **Challenges:**

### **Needs Assessment**

In evaluating the response to the earthquake, many NGOs present at the seminar voiced concern about the need to focus on qualitative responses rather than quantitative responses in the event of future disasters. One participant argued that, rather than spending large sums of money to transfer goods from abroad to Iran, many items, such as blankets, could be purchased for a fraction of the cost in Iran itself (Isfahan's major blanket manufacturing company was listed as an example), relieving a significant percentage of fundraised money for other needs.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it was argued that allocating money for qualitative differences which can ensure sustainable, long-term projects is perhaps equally if not more important than distributing immediate relief. While immediate relief is clearly needed, it is akin to applying a band-aid to the problem, rather than fulfilling a long-term mission.

Some lessons learned from large INGOs concluded that not all organizations need to rush in on the first day. One representative present at the seminar relayed the experience of doing extensive research, creating a long-term plan of working in Iran, and starting work months after the earthquake rather than rushing in to do relief work, as relief is not their organization's expertise. Other participants also voiced concern over the rush by many concerned citizens of the diaspora to create small NGOs following the earthquake, rather than putting forth a concentrated, unified effort.

It was generally agreed that more needs assessment should be undertaken by organizations responding to natural disasters in order to better serve the communities affected.

### **OFAC**

A major obstacle voiced by all participants of the seminar was the OFAC sanctions that the United States government placed on Iran following the hostage crisis. In the aftermath of the Bam earthquake, short-term OFAC licenses were granted to numerous US-based non-profit organizations to provide rescue and relief work in Bam. However, when these licenses expired in late March 2004, US-based non-profits were left with no options with which to legally operate in Iran. The OFAC sanctions have made illegal virtually any service and activity on the part of US organizations in Iran.

As an example of the widespread and inhibiting nature of the sanctions, one participant at the seminar authored a book on the architecture of Bam and held a successful conference in Fall 2004 regarding the Bam earthquake and the creation of sustainable architecture in the reconstruction of the city. This participant's book and architectural plans (created to demonstrate earthquake-proof buildings designed with Iranian architectural traditions in mind), are not allowed to be sent to Iran as they would be in violation of OFAC sanctions. This example is only one of many that attest to the severe limitations and obstacles in place hindering sustainable relief work in Iran.

The OFAC licenses that were granted following the 2003 earthquake provided for a temporary openness for relief work, but were only valid until late March of 2004. This forced Iranian-American NGOs to focus on immediate relief efforts, as they were not

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<sup>1</sup> Note: this is only a possibility given the OFAC leniency after the Bam earthquake.

afforded the time necessary to develop sustainable reconstruction projects. All US-based organizations, whether Iranian-American or international NGOs (INGOs) (i.e. Mercy Corps), had to pull out of Bam due to the sanctions, leaving long-term sustainable projects in Bam an unaccomplished goal.

In terms of development, OFAC presents an obstacle for the Iranian-American community to create and implement sustainable projects in Iran. The participants of the seminar had varying ideas of how best this issue would be addressed. Most participants agreed that Iranian-American NGOs need to build a coalition to pressure the US government to grant OFAC licenses to NGOs who are doing humanitarian work in Iran. One participant relayed his experience of pressuring the US government under the Clinton administration to grant a general license for all 501(c)(3) NGOs to work in Iran. This group came close to achieving their goal, but was defeated when the Clinton administration left power. Several participants at the seminar agreed that, when the political climate was right, a coalition of concerned citizens could and should re-open the dialogue with the US government to grant a general license for 501(c)(3) organizations.

Participants suggested two main avenues for opposing OFAC: first, Congress can pass legislation to make all 501(c)(3) organizations exempt, though it is highly unlikely that Congress would vote for such legislation any time in the near future due to the politicized nature of the issue. The second option proposed was to oppose the sanctions on a case-by-case basis. Through a coalition, various organizations can use common, solid arguments for why 501(c)(3) organizations should get deference to work in Iran. In order for the second option to work, participants felt that the coalition should use as examples the good work that US-based NGOs were able to accomplish in Iran when they were granted OFAC licenses following the Bam earthquake.

#### **Transparency and Accountability:**

Some participants, however, argued that OFAC is not the main obstacle to effective work in Iran. These participants argued that we should look to see if OFAC has indeed caused gaps with regard to assistance on the ground. Several participants argued that the situation on the ground in Bam does not reflect the responsible use of all the money raised following the earthquake. Thus, before taking on OFAC, these participants felt that it would behoove the community to demand financial records, IRS 990 forms, and other forms of accountability from organizations that raised money for relief and reconstruction work in Bam in order to identify those organizations that were either unable to properly allocate the funds in Bam, or just simply did not. In this way, donors would be able to follow their donations, ensuring that their funds went to the right place and instilling confidence in future donations.

It was commonly agreed that this type of transparency is key towards building both a stronger community and more trust in development work. In this regard, all participants agreed that each organization should have a “report card” which outlines their financial activity: how it acquires money and where that money is spent. However, a major challenge voiced in this regard pertained to holding NGOs in Iran to the same standards of accountability and transparency as NGOs in the diaspora. A few participants relayed their experiences of working with Iran-based NGOs following the earthquake. When the US-based NGO asked for financial documentation from their Iranian counterpart, the Iran-based NGO was offended at such a request, resulting in a deepening of mistrust between the two organizations. This caused a major challenge for the US-based NGO, as asking for financial documentation and proper accountability was not meant as a

matter of offense, but rather one of ensuring further trust. Additionally, NGOs abroad who worked in Bam following the earthquake were required to give OFAC the name and personal information of everyone they worked with in Iran. Once partners in Iran learned about this requirement, many declined to participate with US NGOs.

It was agreed that information needs to be shared on both sides regarding the protocols that exist for NGOs to function in their respective societies and why such documentation is important for either side. Mistrust continues to exist between NGOs in Iran and abroad and it was agreed by all present that this issue needs to be addressed. Information sharing is a major gap in the Iranian and Iranian diaspora relief community.

Participants suggested that a common code of conduct created by both Iranian and non-Iranian NGOs may encourage common expectations regarding transparency and accountability for NGOs in Iran and abroad.

### **Networking**

Associated with proper transparency and accountability, one of the main problems that exist for NGOs in Iran, the diaspora, and INGOs, is lack of knowledge about one another. The INGOs present at the seminar voiced concern about how to better identify NGOs in Iran who do good work. According to one representative, disaster relief INGOs “come in big and ready to go and it takes us time to locate the local NGOs who are doing good work on the ground.” Community-based work that engages local resources with outside assistance in a leveraged manner is key, but the process of finding good partners can be challenging. This feeling was reiterated among other participants and it was agreed that the gap in networking with one another is a major concern.

In addition, some participants argued that until NGOs abroad spend some time in Iran doing research, they will not be able to find good partners: “Nothing can replace coming and getting first hand knowledge.” This feeling was reiterated by another participant whose NGO has been active in Iran for years. The participant mentioned that their NGO has found that working with local authorities and also collaborating with INGOs on the ground with more experience was the key to success for their projects. However, they felt that had they spent more time on the ground from the outset, they would have found even more useful ways of working.

While networks of NGOs exist in each province in Iran<sup>2</sup> which can aid INGOs and NGOs abroad to find local partners, not all NGOs in these networks are efficient. Though with enough research good partners on the ground can be found, without a central location to discuss and highlight the good partners, this research can prove to be time-consuming and inefficient. One way of aiding in this endeavor is the creation of a web portal which would allow NGOs from Iran and abroad to learn more about one another. This web portal could give information on NGOs both in Iran and abroad, their capacities, their mission and goals, and their work to date. The web portal will be discussed further below.

### **Transfer of Knowledge**

One NGO consultant from Iran voiced particular concern about the lack of proper materials in Persian for training NGOs in Iran. This participant emphasized the need for

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<sup>2</sup> One such network is Shahab, a council for the coordination of crisis, which brings together civil society and the private sector.

materials taught in workshops abroad to be catered to Iranian cultural needs and translated into Persian. Another participant agreed that Iran needs the transfer of “know how” more than the transfer of funds. Materials regarding proper methods, good practices, techniques, and knowledge in various fields, especially relief and reconstruction work, need to be transferred to Iranian civil society.

The diaspora can be key in transferring this knowledge back to Iran, without strings attached, to open the communication between the two communities. A suggested solution was to create a web portal with information about basic standards that NGOs must abide by in order to retain their standing in Iran. Interaction.org was cited as a website which includes information on basic standards that all certified INGOs must abide by when doing relief work. It was suggested that this information, and material from others like it, could be translated into Persian and posted on a central web portal for all NGOs. Additionally, it was suggested that Iran-based NGOs receive training to provide similar standards across borders.

In this way, an effective Disaster Response Plan can be created for Iranian NGOs, NGOs in the diaspora, and INGOs who work in Iran. This web portal could disseminate information on which NGOs have expertise in which fields and outline the real capacities of each organization.

#### **Summary and Conclusion:**

The seminar addressed the issues of OFAC restrictions, transparency, accountability, lack of networking across borders and across NGOs, and the need for more transfer of knowledge to NGOs in Iran. In doing such, the main topics of discussion included: an emphasis on long-term sustainable projects in Bam; an improved network which would allow information sharing across NGOs; increased collaboration and pooling of resources among NGOs; and a focus on the types of assistance not subject to governmental limitations, whether in Iran or the US.

The suggested web portal will address four of the five issues discussed, with the OFAC sanctions remaining the biggest challenge for US-based NGOs. Participants agreed that mapping out the actual capacities of organizations, rather than their aspirations, would be most helpful for future disasters. This portal could provide information about which organizations are working in which fields of response and what their call for need and support is, thus decreasing the amount of duplicated work. With this information in hand, future responses can be more strategic ones.

An unexpected effect of this seminar was that the represented NGOs were brought together in one room for the first time since the earthquake. The fact that the conversation regarding relief and reconstruction work in Bam had not taken place since December 2003, speaks to the lack of trust and networking among the NGOs working in Iran. IAAB hopes to further address this problem by organizing a sister-seminar to *Bam and Beyond* in Tehran, Iran in January 2006. The seminar in Tehran will address the same issues discussed in New York, in the Iranian context.