



**WORKING TOWARD A FREE AND INDEPENDENT  
MEDIA THROUGH NGO CAPACITY BUILDING**

*DIGITAL FILM PRODUCTION WORKSHOP  
REPORT*

**SUBMITTED TO THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY  
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**THE NATIONAL IRANIAN AMERICAN COUNCIL**

**PROMOTING IRANIAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION  
AT ALL LEVELS OF AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE**

[www.niacouncil.org](http://www.niacouncil.org)

## **SUMMARY**

On January 20 and 21, 2004, representatives from the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) held a two-day digital film production workshop in Tehran, Iran for five Iranian non-governmental organizations with funding provided by the National Endowment for Democracy. Through partnership with Hamyaran, a capacity-building NGO, that serves the Iranian NGO community by connecting them with international partners and funders, NIAC successfully organized and carried out a workshop that provided the basic knowledge and tools to key NGO staff on the documentation of their work through the medium of digital film.

## **BACKGROUND**

A grant in the amount of \$25,000 from the National Endowment for Democracy (effective June 7, 2002, Grant # 2002-362) to the National Iranian American Council was made in 2002 to facilitate a workshop to help strengthen Iran's civil society through practical training in visual media production to non-governmental organizations. The workshop was planned to be carried out in early 2003, but due to political developments inside Iran, the decision was made to postpone the workshop until the situation was deemed calmer.

Iran's fluid and changing political environment since the start of country's movement toward reform requires organizations who wish to work with Iranian civic groups to make continuous and ongoing assessments of the feasibility of such work with donors and organizations from within the United States. The sharp crackdown on students, the free press, and the death of Canadian-Iranian journalist Zahra Kazemi led to a tense environment in Iran which became a cause of concern by NIAC for its staff in late 2002 and 2003.

During 2002 and 2003, NIAC established communications with Iranian NGOs and worked to lay the groundwork for partnership on this project. NIAC also met with Iranian government officials who provided information about official channels to carry out the project. In the Fall of 2003, NIAC met with the Executive Director of Hamyaran, Baquer Namazi, in Washington D.C. and agreed that the two organizations would begin collaboration on NGO capacity-building and human exchange, starting with the visual media workshop.

## **A PARTNER IN HAMYARAN**

As one of the only internationally-funded organizations operating in Iran (funded by the Population Council's Egypt Office), Hamyaran was well-placed to serve as NIAC's main partner in Iran. Years of Iranian isolation, poor U.S.-Iran relations, and the Iranian government's fear of a growing civil society have contributed to a lack of basic working knowledge by Iranian and American entities about the other's legal structures, working

relationships, and organizational culture and norms. Iranian NGOs have very little knowledge of the structure and culture of non-governmental organizations in the United States. Similarly, US organizations are unfamiliar with Iran's grass-roots, but state-dependent NGO culture.

Led by a former UNICEF Resident Representative, Hamyaran's leadership and staff are professionally trained in the United States, and the organization continues to attract students and project staff from the United States. The organization is unique in that it straddles the world of Iranian NGOs with that of international and Western NGOs.

Most importantly, Hamyaran operates independently, but with the implicit permission of the Iranian government. Its mandate and mission to work within the Iranian NGO sector as well as with outside groups, has been allowed by the government. On the other hand, most other Iranian NGOs, although led by highly qualified and dedicated individuals, lack the international experience and connections to provide enough incentive to work directly with U.S. organizations and donors, particularly in a fluid and uncertain political climate. Most are unwilling to directly partner with a US-based organization.

NIAC's assessment on working inside Iran and within the Iranian NGO community was that working through Hamyaran for this initial workshop was the most effective path toward establishing relationships with other groups. A partnership with Hamyaran allowed us to utilize the group's extensive reach and expertise inside Iran, while giving time for confidence-building between NIAC and other Iranian NGOs, who may at first be hesitant to collaborate.

## **PARTICIPATING NGOS**

Hamyaran worked with NIAC to identify the appropriate NGOs to invite as participants to the workshop, and helped us organize the logistical aspects of the workshop. Five Iranian non-governmental organizations were chosen to participate—representing the various types of NGOs in Iran, including environmental, child, research, and health. NIAC and Hamyaran agreed that it was appropriate to not include women and student NGOs, as these two types of NGOs are viewed to be the most politically sensitive.

While a dynamic and growing part of Iranian civil society, NGOs that serve women and the youth, two of Iran's most disaffected populations and the source of criticism of government policies, are feared by the Iranian government. Any international partnership or collaboration with student and women's groups could attract unwanted attention and possible repercussions by the Iranian government.

## Participating NGOs:

### Boom Iran

*Boom Iran is one of Iran's leading environmental NGOs. The organization is currently working on documenting Iran's wild cats, including the extinct Caspian Tiger. It is also working with NGOs and governments of other Caspian littoral countries on controlling pollution in the Caspian Sea.*

### Cultural Research Bureau

*One of Iran's most prestigious private think tanks, CRB is an independently-run multi-disciplinary research center and publishing house that works within a broad range of fields, including education, cultural heritage, visual media, information technology, youth, urban development, environmental issues and governance. The CRB is contracted by the Iranian government as well as private Iranian commercial sector. CRB is considered a private NGO and in the past, particularly after the Iranian revolution, it was the target of government reprisals for its work in documenting Iranian pre-Revolutionary history and culture. NIAC's Digital Film Production Workshop was held at the Artists Forum, which is house and run by the CRB.*

<http://www.iranculturestudies.com/>

### The Family Planning Association

*Established in 1992, and a member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, FPA provides reproductive health education and services to Iranian families around the country. FPA was the lead NGO that worked closely with the Iranian government and other NGOs in implementing Iran's highly successful population control strategy in the mid-1990s.*

<http://www.fpairi.org/en/>

### Hamyaran

*Serves as a lead NGO umbrella organization with the mission of capacity-building for the Iranian NGO community. Funded by the Population Council in Egypt, Hamyaran works with to identify Iranian NGOs and their needs, help them collaborate and share knowledge domestically, and connect them to international resources and expertise.*

### Children's Book Council of Iran

*Recognized as the oldest Iranian NGO, established in 1962, the Children's Book Council serves to document and publish Iranian children's mythology and literature to aid families and schools in the cultural education of Iranian children.*

<http://www.schoolnet.ir/~cbc/>

## **PREPARATIONS AND THE BAM EARTHQUAKE**

The devastating December 2003 Earthquake in Bam, Iran provided an important window of opportunity for NIAC to go to Iran and conduct its workshop. The Iranian government, in need of international assistance, permitted hundreds of organizations from countries around the world to enter Iran and aid the Iranian people. Assistance from the American government was warmly received with well-publicized accounts of affection displayed between Iranian and American relief workers.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, NIAC took a leadership position in the Iranian-American community in raising money, acting as a legal intermediary in transferring money, and providing education about the legal and most affective methods of assistance, given US sanctions on Iran and distance from the country. NIAC also participated in a successful lobbying effort to temporarily waive sanctions for monetary assistance to Iranian charities and NGOs doing relief work.

NIAC raised \$200,000 from Iranian Americans and the general American public, and partnered with three American relief organizations that went to Bam. In the meantime, NIAC began preparations with Hamyaran for its digital film production workshop to be held in Tehran. The NIAC team used the opportunity while in Iran to go to Bam and report back to Iranian-American donors the progress of its partners' relief efforts.

## **CUTTING THROUGH US SANCTIONS: LOGISTICS AND MATERIALS**

Hamyaran provided a letter of invitation for NIAC representatives to carry with them to Iran, specifically stating that NIAC would be partnering with Hamyaran to conduct a workshop for Iranian NGOs. After receiving specific instructions and workshop materials from NIAC, Hamyaran organized the event in Iran, including its communications with NGOs, publicizing the event, translating and producing the documents needed for the workshop, as well as providing for the venue and refreshments during the two-day workshop. NIAC and Hamyaran worked together to assemble the required technical equipment, including digital cameras, laptops, and software. Hamyaran provided some basic equipment, while the more sophisticated equipment was provided by NIAC.

One of the more difficult considerations when collaborating with Iranian entities inside Iran is navigating US Sanctions. Sanctions prohibit the expenditure of money originating from any U.S. entity with the exception of individual lodging and food. NIAC could not spend any money in Iran for renting equipment, venue, or even providing refreshments for the participants. Hamyaran covered all of these expenses in exchange for NIAC's expertise. NIAC was required to bring into Iran the equipment which was not available in Iran, (including two equipped laptops, software, and two digital cameras) but we were required to take this equipment back to the United States.

NIAC Board Member Hadi Ghaemi and NIAC Executive Director Dokhi Fassihian arrived in Iran on February 17 and 18, respectively. They met with Deputy Director of

Hamyaran Reza Sheikh on February 19 and finalized preparations, including visiting the site of the workshop and set-up of equipment.

Equipment used:

Three computers—one PC and two laptops  
Projector and screen for Power Point presentation  
Two extension cords  
Five converter plugs  
Two digital camcorders  
One TV set  
One VCR

**DIGITAL FILM PRODUCTION WORKSHOP—JANUARY 20-21, 2004**

A two-day digital film production workshop was held from 9:00-5:00 pm on Monday, January 20 and Tuesday, January 21 at the Artists Forum in Tehran, Iran (215 North Iranshahr Avenue). Instructor Hadi Ghaemi provided a mix of theoretical and practical instruction on developing and producing a documentary video using digital technology.

Workshop instruction was organized according to the following objectives:

1. To demonstrate ease, availability, and low cost of digital equipment needed to produce documentaries. NIAC provided complete sets of equipment to the attendees.
2. To provide a comprehensive overview of documentary-making methods including formulation, research, presentation, and implementation techniques.
3. To emphasize the importance, utility, and power of video presentation for NGOs. This included discussion of how the NGO community can rely on video presentation for public education, advocacy, and fundraising purposes.
4. To demonstrate technical aspects of film-making including use and functions of cameras, computers, editing software, and related equipment.
5. To provide hands-on training for workshop attendees to learn and practice the above skills. The attendees were able to gain first hand knowledge of this process by working through each step of film-making in small teams composed of three persons.

The workshop was broken up into two sessions. Session 1 on the first day was spent providing interactive instruction about message development and communication, planning and pre-production, and introduction to using a digital camera. NGO participants took part in this discussion and were encouraged to think about their missions and activities and choose and develop messages. The second half of the first session, participants broke into three groups and began developing and writing a script.

Session 2 on the second day was spent on producing the film based on the script. Due to limited time, participants chose to make one short film about the workshop, itself, which would then be used to help NIAC report back to our funders.

## **SESSION I: Developing message, pre-production, and how to use a digital camera**

### I. Introduction:

- Video Documentary as a tool for communicating your message and for outreach:
  - Importance of public awareness of your mission
  - Building organic links with your community
  - Public advocacy of specific issues
  - Reaching out and educating government officials
- How to plan for making a video documentary
  - As a device for introducing your organization
  - As a public relations campaign for a specific cause
  - As an educational resource
- Developing the concept for a documentary
- Identifying your target audience
- Focusing on your primary issues
- Articulating the importance and relevance of your product
- Deciding on a methodology and framework

### II. Pre-production

### III. How to use a digital camera

## **SESSION II: Production and Post-production**

Session two on the second day was spent on putting into action the documentary film plan and script developed the day before. Participants took part in conducting interviews, choosing settings in and around the grounds at the Artists Forum, and shooting footage.

The second part of the second day was spent learning how to use the editing software, Premier. Each individual participant was given the opportunity to use the software and edit the footage taken. Individual attention by the instructor was given to each participant.

By the end of the workshop, participants took part in every step of producing a digital film product from message development and communication, writing a script, shooting footage, and editing the footage into a film product.

## **Evaluation**

NIAC's original proposal included two objectives. The first objective was to strengthen the capacity of civic organizations and independent media makers to gain access to television broadcasting. The second objective was to improve the technical skills of civil society activists and members of civic organizations in video production and computer technologies.

The video production workshop accomplished the second objective by providing participants valuable instruction in video documentary making using digital technology. Key staff from NGOs gained useful conceptual and technical skills such as developing and communicating messages, using a digital camera, shooting footage, and editing footage using one of the market's most popular softwares. Participants all took part in independently producing a film product, each receiving individual instructor attention and hands-on opportunities.

The workshop was successful in achieving this objective. The participants gained a comprehensive knowledge of and training in various steps involved in making a digital video. By focusing on a specific project and carrying it out, the participants were able to gain both a theoretical and practical understanding of this process. The workshop enabled the participants to plan and use this technology for their future work.

Due to limited time, the NIAC workshop did not cover capacity building with regard to accessing Iranian television airtime. This topic was left to be covered in the future when partnerships are secured with Iranian media experts. Also left for future follow-up workshops is training in writing funding proposals. Participants expressed much interest in increased exposure and outside funding, but a dearth of knowledge and know-how coupled with external and internal restrictions have left Iranian NGOs without access to international funding.

Feedback from participants was generally very positive. Participants said they felt the instruction was well-balanced in that it provided practical and hands-on training versus theoretical training. Participants said they needed extra time to be able to practice the new skills they learned and ask the instructor questions. They proposed a week-long program if the workshop was to be held again. All said they would be interested in a follow-up workshop that was more comprehensive and provided more time to practice.

NGO representatives expressed interest in increased exposure for their activities, their publications, and opportunities for outside collaboration and funding. Most did not have the ability to connect effectively with funders and like-minded groups internationally, though some worked on the regional level like BoomIran. This lack of know-how and connected-ness has been the result of years of isolation between Iranian and Western and international organizations.

In addition to their own government's periodic intimidation, groups suffered from a lack of the following capacities, which future workshops should address:

- Organizational and non-profit management;

- Technical skills, particularly web management skills (most groups outsource website management and don't have the internal resources to keep active websites)
- Knowledge of international funding processes and legal restrictions