

NIAC Development assessment 2003-2004

NIAC's exponential growth has continued in the year of 2004, both in financial terms and in terms of its activity level. NIAC played a key role in the fundraising for the earthquake victims of Bam, in late 2003. While NIAC is not a relief organization and commands limited resources, the organization's leadership quickly realized that its vast network could be instrumental in aiding the victims of Bam. Hours after the quake, NIAC agreed to assist the American Red Cross (ARC) to raise money targeted for Bam through the NIAC website.

Working closely with the relief organizations Mercy Corps, the ARC, Earthquake Relief Fund for Orphans, Child Foundation, Children of Persia, and Relief International, NIAC helped raise over \$100,000 directly through its website and transferred 100 percent of these funds to be used by these organizations for relief work for Bam. An additional \$150,000 was channeled to those relief organizations through web links posted on NIAC's site.

NIAC's efforts in this regard won the praise from the Center for International Disaster Information. The CIDI's Director, Suzanne Brooks, noted that NIAC "has been instrumental in helping get the donations message out to the community. NIAC clearly has an understanding of the economic, cultural and political issues involved in this response. I was pleasantly surprised by how professional and efficient the NIAC staff has been in response to this emergency. Their web site was a wealth of information – even for the CIDI, as we were able to target our donations message by television and radio to the cities where many Iranian Americans live. This census information actually came from a comprehensive NIAC report on Iranian Americans living in the United States, available on their web site."

During 2004, NIAC devoted much to its energy and resources on significantly increasing the participation of Iranian Americans in the upcoming US Presidential Elections. The NIAC 2004 Elections Project encompassed educational material on the US electoral process, a national voter registration campaign, customized Iranian-American voter guides on Presidential and Congressional candidates, and in-depth information about Iranian-American candidates running for public office around the country. NIAC coordinated an army of volunteers nationwide to organize and conduct voter registration drives utilizing "NIAC's Guide to Organizing a Successful Voter Registration Drive."

In addition, NIAC produced several public service announcements urging Iranian Americans to vote. Prominent members of the Iranian-American community delivered a non-partisan message of participation which aired on Iranian satellite TVs and radios in the months of September and October. The PSAs helped create an atmosphere in the Iranian-American community in which not voting became socially unacceptable.

In 2004, NIAC continued to offer its "Demystifying Democracy – The Seven Ingredients of Influence" workshop in major Iranian- American population centers. The workshops serve to advance the participation of Iranian Americans in American civic life,

particularly the political process. They demonstrate the characteristics of influential individuals and communities, and train Iranian Americans both on how to adopt these behaviors and how to communicate effectively with decision makers.

NIAC received a remarkable amount of media attention for its civic participation, anti-discrimination, and humanitarian work in 2004. Featured extensively on the Internet and in major newspapers, TV, and radio stations across the nation, NIAC utilized this extensive media coverage to advance its goals.

Following the earthquake in Bam, Iran, NIAC's fundraising work on behalf of victims was covered by several major newspapers such as the Houston Chronicle, the San Francisco Chronicle, and The Washington Post. Post coverage, including a second front-page article, focused heavily on NIAC's earthquake relief efforts, the temporary waiving of sanctions to aid victims, and the explosion of activity by local Iranian Americans after the earthquake. NIAC representatives were interviewed by CBS Channel 9, Fox Channel 5, NBC Channel 4, and CNN International. NIAC has been quoted in such prominent US magazines such as Forbes and OC Metro, and its recent civil liberties activities have been featured in Pacifica News and the New York Post. NIAC's activities have also been extensively featured in the Persian-language media. In an effort to reach out to the Persian-speaking members of our community, articles and press releases have been published in Persian, as well as English, in such newspapers as Pezhvak of Persia, Pardis, Iranians of Washington, and Javanan. NIAC representatives have been interviewed by Persian-language television and radio stations such as 670-AM KIRN, Rang-a-Rang, Voice of America, and Radio Farda.

Financially, NIAC increased its revenues from Iranian-American individuals, businesses and non-profit organizations with 289% between July 2003 and July 2004. NIAC nearly doubled its membership in that same period as well. Increasing the Iranian-American sources has been of particular importance to the organization since it indicates the legitimacy and support it enjoys in the community, which is of pivotal importance for NIAC's long-term success.

NIAC's key challenge over the next few years is to sustain its growth level. NIAC remains an organization with an \$800,000 per year activity level, but with a \$250,000 per year budget, i.e. a significant portion of its activities are undertaken by volunteers. This gap between the organization's real and official cost must be bridged through increased support from the Iranian-American community itself.

NIAC's Media Workshop for NGOs in Iran

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.

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.

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.

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.

Finally, the 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, with the participation of five leading Iranian NGOs (Boom Iran, Cultural Research Bureau, the Family Planning Association, Hamyaran, and the Children's Book Council of Iran). It was very successful and a firm foundation has now been established for future cooperating with these and other Iranian NGOs.

The key challenges from NIAC's end in collaborating with Iranian NGOs remain the volatile political climate in Iran, US sanctions on Iran, walking the fine line of attracting the attention of the NGOs but not that of the government, making the NGOs in Iran feel comfortable with collaborating with a US entity, as well as ensuring the safety of both the NGO personnel and the NIAC team member.

However, a crucial insight was gained through the process of setting up and conducting the workshop in Iran. While a lot of hesitation exists among Iranian NGOs to cooperate and work with US NGOs or receive funding from them, the NIAC team quickly realized that this hesitation is not the key obstacle preventing US-Iran NGO-to-NGO collaboration. At a more fundamental level, the Iranian NGOs are prevented from initiating and expanding collaboration with US NGOs and foundations due to the lack of awareness about these opportunities, as well as lack of awareness regarding the avenues and procedures to seek support from US entities.