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Engaging Youth in Civic Participation

Innovation: School Mayors Project, Iran

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What was the problem?

Engaging young people in Iranian politics is an urgent priority for community activists. According to the last census, conducted in 1996, 67.9 percent of Iran's population is between the ages of 0 and 29 years old. It is well-documented that middle childhood and adolescence are the most important age groups for civil education programs. Yet, despite the size and developmental significance of this demographic, prevailing structural and institutional mindsets dictate that children and youth are usually ignored as far as participation in society's affairs is concerned. Youth have been, and still are subject to marginalization in many cases, even by parents. The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s leant further urgency to the engagement of youth in civil development; in the wake of war, citizenship, and sustainable development became the most important demands of the Iranian people. In order to redress the perceived dearth of youth engagement in developing Iranian civil society, innovators in youth participation programs designed an initiative called "School Mayors of Iran."

What was the innovation?

At the beginning of each academic year, municipal schools inform students of the School Mayor and School City Council Elections, elections and distribute easy to read booklets which describe the main objectives of the project, its organization, and its procedures. All students are eligible to participate. If any adult intervenes in the election during any phase of the process, the school is automatically excluded from the project. Depending on the size of the school, each school in a given municipality is allowed to elect seven to eleven representatives. The student who receives the most votes becomes School Mayor, while the remaining representatives becomes the School City Council.

The School Mayors Project was first initiated with 20 boys and girls between the ages of 11 to 14 representing several middle schools in Tehran in 1994. A unique element of the program was that the jurisdiction of a school's elected representatives included not only the school grounds but also its environs, up to 500 meters away from the school. The School Mayor and City Council remained responsible for projects within this area.

What obstacles did innovators encounter?

Resistance to participation in local communities is a continuing problem in Iran. Reformers have identified Iran as a context where individuals are defined in terms of their ties to family, clan, and tribe. Civil society and associational life has remained weak and limited. As public spaces are constantly under surveillance by the government, their social and communal meaning is reduced; people often regard spaces outside the home as hostile. Outside the walls of the home, the government is viewed as the only responsible institution for all society's affairs, forming a pervasive non-participatory mindset. This resistance to secular community participation is an obstacle to youth engagement programs like the School Mayors Project.

What were the planned versus actual results?

The School Mayors project has now been executed both officially and unofficially by many schools throughout Iran; at its height, over one thousand schools were involved in the project in some way. It was the first project of its kind in Iran, and was initiated at a time when it was not regarded favorably by the state administration. Despite its potential political ramifications, it should be noted that the School Mayor project was regarded as a non-political project, a position it repeatedly reaffirmed. The Fourth Congress of Educating Cities in Chicago selected the School Mayors of Iran project as an International Model Project in 1996.

Parviz Piran is a faculty member in the Department of Social Research at Allameh Tabatabaee University; he is also a visiting professor in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. Dr. Piran has served as a senior consultant to United Nations Agencies since 1996. His numerous publications include two books in English, *Poverty Alleviation in Sistan and Baluchistan: The Case of Shirabad* (UNDP 2002), and *Socio-economic Factors and Reproductive Health: The Case of Rural Communities* (UNFPA, CWP 2005). He has also designed and executed a number of participatory research projects in addition to the School Mayors in Iran program, including Neighborhood Councils in Iran, now active in all neighborhoods of Tehran and several other cities. In 2003, Dr. Piran was the recipient of a United Nations Development Program Award for his contributions to community development and poverty alleviation.