

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Civil Society in Crime Prevention within Iran's Criminal–Legislative Policy

1. Sayyed Heydar Hoseyni[✉]: Department of Law, Ki.C., Islamic Azad University, Kish, Iran

2. Saleh Abdinezhad^{✉*}: Department of Law, Ki.C., Islamic Azad University, Kish, Iran

3. Alireza Shekarbeigi[✉]: Assistant Professor, Department of Law, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

*Correspondence: salehlawyer29@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as one of the most significant institutions of civil society, has gained a special position in modern criminal policy in recent decades. Public participation through these organizations not only strengthens the sense of social responsibility and civic solidarity but also plays an effective role in crime prevention and the reform of criminogenic contexts through education, social supervision, civic advocacy, and cooperation with formal institutions of criminal justice. In Iran's criminal policy, although the legislator—especially in higher-level policy documents and development laws—has emphasized the necessity of public participation and the utilization of NGO capacities, the existing legislative system still lacks the coherence and efficiency required to institutionalize such participation. Weak legal frameworks, the absence of supportive enforcement guarantees, the security-oriented attitude toward civic activities, and the lack of coordination between governmental and non-governmental institutions have prevented the full realization of the potential capacity of these organizations in crime prevention. This article, using a descriptive–analytical method, examines the position of NGOs in the theories of civil society and participatory criminal policy, analyzes the legislative situation of Iran in this regard, and finally offers suggestions for revising the country's criminal–legislative policy to strengthen the role of NGOs in crime prevention.

Keywords: non-governmental organizations, civil society, crime prevention, criminal policy, Iranian legislation

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1. Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are voluntary, human-centered entities that emerge organically from within society and operate through non-profit and voluntary activities aimed at resolving social problems and providing public services. Their greatest distinguishing feature is their independence from the government. These organizations are established through the voluntary participation of motivated citizens, forming structured and coherent entities with the goal of promoting social welfare, development, and empowerment without any governmental dependency (Emami Sadr & Gholami, 2021).

According to the definition, NGOs are not equivalent to civil society itself; however, similar to civil society, they function independently and are considered an integral part of it. In the absence or weakness of civil society, the operational field for NGOs significantly declines and, even if established, such organizations fail to maintain sustainability. In line with this view, NGOs are perceived as non-profit entities independent of governments and international organizations, with financial resources typically supplied through voluntary public donations. These organizations operate across a wide range of fields—charitable, political, religious, cultural, and developmental—and their global diversity is vast. The total number of NGOs worldwide is estimated at about four million, with Russia, India, and China hosting the largest numbers (Mohinuddin, 2017).

NGOs have played a significant and influential role in shaping international law and institutions. The 1864 Geneva Convention, the Global Anti-Slavery Treaty, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and the 1997 Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines are among the many treaties influenced by NGOs. Since the 1990s, both scholars and international organizations have increasingly supported the notion that the participation of NGOs in the development of international law enhances the democratic legitimacy of such laws. This participation occurs through the processes of norm creation and institutionalization. NGOs influence international lawmaking by defining issues, providing data and expertise, mobilizing public opinion, lobbying, directly engaging in norm formation, and monitoring the enforcement of principles and norms by governments (Bejnum, 2018).

The NGO sector in every country, as a vital part of an evolving civil society, remains dynamic and continuously active. New organizations are formed regularly, and international institutions increasingly view NGOs as crucial partners and actors, treating them as bodies that reflect citizens' perspectives and social orientations (Koceryavaya, 2016).

NGOs also play a critical role in documenting and disseminating evidence of alleged human rights violations. Various organizations, including the United Nations, rely on NGO-provided information regarding human rights abuses. The Charter of the United Nations recognizes NGOs' capacity to provide consultative input to the Economic and Social Council, which extends to human rights concerns. However, in the original philosophy of the UN, NGO intervention in sensitive matters such as peace, security, and disarmament was not initially accepted, as political issues were regarded as the exclusive domain of intergovernmental cooperation. Conversely, economic, social, and human rights issues were open to NGO participation through consultative roles. Today, however, this dichotomy is no longer valid; the UN Secretary-General, in his annual report, explicitly acknowledged the constructive role of NGOs in peacebuilding. In summary, NGOs have two major functions: (1) providing expert advice or specialized recommendations on issues within their competence and (2) reflecting public opinion across diverse countries. In other words, their contribution arises from their dual nature—expertise and representativeness (Van Boven, 2015).

The participation of NGOs in setting human rights standards is largely a modern phenomenon. Nevertheless, some NGOs have long been active in international campaigns against slavery and the trafficking of women and children, creating a favorable environment for international treaty formation. One of the most notable examples is the Anti-Slavery Society, which has been active for more than a century and a half. Likewise, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has played an influential role in the development of humanitarian law standards.

2. Characteristics of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are often portrayed in opposition to national and local governments; however, this dichotomous perspective prevents a nuanced understanding of the nature of the relationship between them, which can range from latent tension and overt hostility to cooperation and synergy. Depending on the nature of governments and the mission or functional orientation of NGOs, these two entities may collaborate toward shared goals, such as delivering essential social services to citizens. Conversely, in certain cases—especially when NGOs operate in the field of human rights and challenge governmental performance—states may adopt a hostile stance toward them. Therefore, the relationship between NGOs and governments varies across countries and regions worldwide (Banks & Hulme, 2012).

NGOs hold several advantages over governments. Their flexibility, their ability to identify problematic areas globally, and their participatory approach to development are among their main strengths. Additionally, NGOs possess an innovative spirit, and their members exhibit strong motivation to serve people and the poor, making them often more effective alternatives to

state institutions (Ibrahim, 2017). NGOs can also compensate for the deficits governments have in terms of legitimacy and democratic representation. They link local levels to global governance structures and, because they are often organized transnationally, they can mitigate deficiencies in governmental citizen representation. Given their personal organizational structures and vast social networks, NGOs can amplify minority voices and represent marginalized groups. In this way, they address democratic deficits not only within states but also across international human rights and institutional systems (Bignami, 2018).

When the United Nations granted consultative status to NGOs, the underlying rationale was that these organizations could represent the voices of the world's citizens more effectively and comprehensively than states. Thus, beyond formal state representation, NGOs were informally assigned a representational role on behalf of the global populace (Van Boven, 2015).

NGOs are characterized by the following features:

- They are non-profit, voluntary, and service-oriented organizations.
- They are composed of private individuals committed to specific social principles and act to promote societal development.
- They are developmental organizations aimed at empowering individuals and enhancing social welfare.
- They consist of groups of individuals acting autonomously—without external control or supervision—toward achieving defined goals for the betterment of a community, region, or situation.
- They are independent of political parties and operate under a philosophy of public assistance for societal well-being.

Another distinguishing feature that separates NGOs from governments and intergovernmental organizations is their dynamic and adaptive nature. The objectives and focal areas of NGOs typically reflect the interests and orientations of their founders. The founders of an NGO generally determine not only its mission and goals but also its guiding perspective and operational approach. However, over time, as the NGO grows and evolves, it may deviate from its founding principles and priorities. The degree to which it adapts to changing political conditions and the priorities of financial supporters can significantly influence this transformation (Brophy, 2020).

3. Classification of NGOs

NGOs can be categorized according to two main criteria: their *orientation* or their *level of operation*.

By Orientation:

1. **Charitable Orientation:** These NGOs focus on meeting the immediate needs of the poor and underprivileged—providing food, clothing, medicine, education, and housing. They also engage in humanitarian relief during times of crisis or disaster.
2. **Service Orientation:** These NGOs provide services such as healthcare and educational development.
3. **Participatory Orientation:** These organizations are centered around self-help activities where local people contribute money, materials, land, and labor.
4. **Empowerment Orientation:** The aim of these NGOs is to help marginalized populations gain a deeper understanding of the political, economic, and social factors affecting their lives and to build their capacities to change and influence these conditions.

By Level of Operation:

1. **Community-Based Organizations (CBOs):** These organizations arise from individual initiatives, such as sports clubs, women's associations, and religious or educational groups. Some are independent, while others receive support from national or international NGOs. They may engage in awareness-raising, empowerment, or direct service delivery.
2. **City-Level NGOs:** These include organizations addressing urban problems and issues. Examples are trade councils, religious and educational groups, and civic associations established to address city-level concerns.
3. **National NGOs:** These organizations, such as the Red Crescent and professional associations, operate nationally with local branches and assist smaller, local organizations.
4. **International NGOs:** These encompass a wide array of secular organizations such as Radda Barnen (Save the Children), Oxfam, and the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, which operate globally by funding local NGOs, supporting institutions or projects, and implementing programs directly (Williams, 1991).

In another classification, NGOs are divided into operational and advocacy types. *Operational* NGOs are citizen groups focused on designing and implementing development projects. For instance, certain NGOs in Afghanistan organized extensive vaccination campaigns that, within a two-week period, successfully immunized approximately 95% of children aged six to twelve in Kabul. In contrast, *advocacy* NGOs engage in lobbying, media work, and public events to increase awareness, knowledge, and public support for specific issues they champion. For example, the Foundation for Development of America seeks to enhance citizen participation in democratic processes through education and technical assistance (Montilla, 2019).

4. The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the Development of Human Societies

Until the late 1970s, NGOs were seldom recognized as key actors in development programs. The few that did operate were primarily viewed as service providers addressing short-term issues. However, from that point onward, the role and importance of NGOs as the driving force of development initiatives increased significantly. The rise of neoliberal economic ideas during this period—accompanied by reductions in public spending and decreased government intervention in public sectors—paved the way for new actors to assume developmental responsibilities. Among these, NGOs, due to their unique characteristics and functional capacities, gained exceptional prominence (Banks & Hulme, 2012).

In developing countries, governments with limited resources and challenges such as weak governance and corruption have often been unable to ensure development opportunities for all citizens. Consequently, alternative models of state-led development have emerged, and since the 1980s, NGOs have been increasingly recognized as vital instruments for bridging the gap between citizens' needs and available services. In contexts where governments fail to provide essential goods and services or create conducive living conditions, NGOs can effectively fill these voids. The failures of governmental development programs in the 1970s and 1980s led to the emergence of NGOs as innovative, people-centered alternatives to traditional state mechanisms. Since then, the role and importance of NGOs in the development process have steadily expanded. Studies show that between 1992 and 2002, financial assistance directed to NGOs for development programs increased by 34%, from 928 million USD to 1.246 billion USD, while the number of NGOs grew by approximately 20% during the same period. NGOs are thus no longer peripheral players in development assistance; in some cases, they even receive more funding than governments for these purposes (Banks & Hulme, 2012).

In the early 1990s, socialist countries that remained from the former Soviet Union in Central and Eastern Europe joined the growing global movement welcoming the expansion of NGOs for developmental objectives. Gradually, NGOs in these countries assumed substantial portions of the responsibilities previously held by state institutions (Ibrahim, 2017).

Today, numerous NGOs operate across African countries, contributing to educational development and promotion. Prominent multinational organizations such as *Save the Children* and *Oxfam* exemplify large-scale NGOs that span the entire continent, employ hundreds of staff, and operate with annual budgets of several hundred million pounds. Alongside these, smaller groups of volunteers collect modest community donations to establish schools in villages. These NGOs, functioning under various titles such as associations, charities, councils, and foundations, share one defining characteristic—they are all non-profit entities. In addition to education, many of them are active in public health, sanitation, and child protection initiatives (Brophy, 2020).

One notable example is the Africa Educational Charity, an influential NGO that has operated across the continent for more than six decades. Throughout this period, it has managed and implemented a wide range of educational programs directly or through partnerships with governments. Evaluations of its performance indicate that African families have generally welcomed the activities of NGOs, viewing educational inequality as a root cause of social conflict. Between 1996 and 2005, this organization focused on developing innovative and informal educational programs for children with disabilities, particularly in rural regions. These programs placed strong emphasis on gender equality and on collaboration with local, regional, and national communities and institutions. Following this approach, the organization established branches in South Sudan, Somalia, and Uganda, delegating full management authority to local staff. Additionally, it provided distance learning services for adolescents lacking access to formal education in certain African regions (Brophy, 2020).

5. Participatory Institutions and Non-Governmental Organizations in Iran

Participatory life is not a new experience in Iran; the country has a long history of benevolent and humanitarian activities. Participation, rooted in religion, civility, and social customs, has played a vital role across all social, cultural, economic, defensive, and political domains. Iranian history is filled with decisive moments that could only be overcome through voluntary and collective participation. Traditional cooperative institutions such as *waqf* (religious endowments) and *nazr* (charitable vows) emerged from citizens' cooperation to meet economic needs and provide essential services. These institutions have acted as a social safety net for vulnerable groups, filling gaps that the state could not address. Their roots lie in Iran's humanitarian culture, its people's spiritual values, and their pursuit of freedom and social justice. Despite numerous constraints and limitations over time, these institutions have endured and continue to operate today (Entezari, 2018).

Lack of security, climatic and geographical conditions, economic poverty, and religious teachings—such as the traditions of *waqf* and *nazr*—have ensured the continuity of participatory culture in various forms of cooperation and mutual assistance. Institutions such as orphanages, charitable foundations financed by endowments and vows, and traditional cooperatives exemplify participatory models that have existed in Iran since ancient times. Today, most relief and charitable activities in Iran are carried out by both governmental and non-governmental organizations such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Martyrs Foundation, the Housing Foundation, the Construction Jihad Organization, and the Women's Health Volunteer Society. Although these began as voluntary public movements, the expansion of their membership and operational scale led to the institutionalization of management structures and, over time, their partial transformation into semi-governmental bodies (Entezari, 2018).

In recent years, numerous specialized associations and institutions have emerged to address critical social and cultural issues such as addiction, child protection, women's empowerment, and environmental conservation. These organizations work alongside long-standing professional and trade associations whose activities date back several decades. Additionally, traditional charitable and voluntary organizations, often involving younger generations, continue to complement these efforts (Najafi Abrandabadi, 2003).

In the past few years, many NGOs have been established in Iran and remain active. Some estimates place their number at around 15,000, though this figure may be somewhat exaggerated. The Iranian Family Planning Association—an NGO itself—compiled a national directory of NGOs containing information on more than 2,000 Iranian organizations (Namazi, 2001). According to this data, most of these NGOs are engaged in cultural, educational, and welfare-related activities, including charity and microfinance. Their main funding sources are public donations and governmental grants, reflecting the crucial partnership between the state and the people in supporting and strengthening such organizations.

Given that many of these organizations are newly established and relatively young, it is essential that the government provide initial support to ensure their stability and growth. Without adequate assistance, financial vulnerabilities could expose these organizations to exploitation by individuals or groups. When properly supported, NGOs can function as intelligent partners and communication channels between the government and the public, voicing the genuine needs of citizens—especially marginalized groups—and helping the government incorporate these perspectives into national decision-making and development programs (Khosrowshahi, 2014).

It is evident that popular and civic organizations in Iran have deep historical and cultural foundations. Although few historical studies have explored this subject, Iran's culture of mutual aid based on civic organization has ancient roots. Traditional civil institutions such as mosques, *tekyehs* (religious congregations), religious guilds, and coffeehouses were among the earliest forms of NGOs. Later forms included credit unions, charitable organizations, Islamic associations, alumni networks, professional unions, and engineering or trade organizations—modern evolutions of earlier civil structures that must gradually transition away from semi-governmental management toward full civic autonomy (Homā'i, 2009).

The regulatory framework for NGOs in Iran was formalized with the Bylaw on the Establishment and Operation of Non-Governmental Organizations, ratified on June 19, 2005, in the final days of President Mohammad Khatami's administration, under Article 138 of the Constitution. The terms *association*, *society*, *center*, *group*, *assembly*, *house*, and *institution* can all serve as substitutes for "organization" in this context. NGOs with shared goals may form networks or join international organizations in accordance with this bylaw. Such networks, depending on their credibility and the scope of their collaboration

with other organizations, enjoy significant legal capacities—from publishing periodicals and holding assemblies to participating in policy-making processes, proposing bills to the government or parliament, and even requesting amendments to national legislation (Homā'i, 2009).

In contemporary Iranian usage, the term *NGO*—meaning *Non-Governmental Organization*—refers to these civic, associative, and community-based bodies. However, to adapt the concept to local cultural and institutional contexts, Iran has adopted the Persian equivalent “Saman-e Mardom Nahaad” (Saman), meaning *People-Based Organization*. The acronym “Saman” is now commonly used as the localized substitute for “NGO” (Homā'i, 2009).

6. Conclusion

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become an indispensable component of modern governance, social development, and human progress. Their evolution from small, local charitable groups to globally influential institutions reflects the transformation of social structures, the diversification of collective action, and the gradual shift from state-centered governance to participatory models of societal management. In every context—local, national, and international—NGOs represent a convergence of citizen initiative, moral responsibility, and institutionalized cooperation aimed at improving the quality of life, advancing justice, and promoting sustainable development.

In the Iranian context, NGOs have emerged as both a continuation of deeply rooted cultural traditions of philanthropy and as modern expressions of civic engagement. The long-standing presence of charitable endowments, community associations, and cooperative institutions has created a cultural foundation for participation and volunteerism that distinguishes Iran's civil landscape from many others. These organizations bridge the past and present, merging traditional mechanisms of social solidarity with contemporary models of organizational management. This continuity highlights that the culture of cooperation and social responsibility is not imported or imposed but deeply embedded in Iran's historical, religious, and moral fabric.

Despite their rich cultural foundation, NGOs in Iran face a complex set of challenges that limit their full potential. Institutional fragmentation, bureaucratic constraints, limited financial autonomy, and the persistent dominance of state structures in the social sphere all hinder the ability of NGOs to operate independently and effectively. Moreover, the overlapping boundaries between governmental and non-governmental organizations have created a hybrid environment where many entities retain formal ties to the state while attempting to maintain civic identity. This hybridity reflects both opportunity and tension—it allows for access to resources and influence but also constrains independence and innovation. The balance between state partnership and autonomy remains one of the most crucial issues in defining the future of NGOs in Iran.

Another challenge is the lack of a unified and transparent legal framework governing NGO operations. While regulatory bylaws have provided some degree of legitimacy and recognition, the absence of consistent implementation and the presence of ambiguous bureaucratic procedures discourage civic initiative and delay institutional growth. Legal reform that simplifies the establishment process, clarifies accountability mechanisms, and provides fair oversight without stifling independence is essential for the sustainable development of NGOs. Equally important is the need to enhance coordination among government bodies, academic institutions, and NGOs to ensure that collaborative efforts are coherent, strategic, and directed toward common national goals.

From a broader perspective, NGOs play a dual role: they serve as service providers and as agents of advocacy. As service providers, they address immediate needs such as education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and disaster relief. In this capacity, NGOs complement government functions, often reaching marginalized communities that public institutions overlook. As advocacy agents, they amplify public voices, defend human rights, promote environmental protection, and encourage participatory governance. This advocacy function is particularly vital in societies where public channels for expression are limited, as NGOs can act as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers, translating social demands into actionable policies.

The developmental impact of NGOs extends beyond material improvement. Their work fosters social capital, trust, and civic responsibility—all crucial components of a resilient society. Through participatory decision-making, NGOs cultivate a sense of ownership among citizens and encourage active involvement in community affairs. This empowerment process not only enhances individual agency but also strengthens collective identity and democratic culture. In the long term, societies that integrate NGOs into their developmental fabric experience greater stability, innovation, and inclusiveness.

The experience of NGOs in other parts of the world offers valuable insights for Iran. Internationally, NGOs have demonstrated their capacity to influence policymaking, shape international norms, and contribute to global governance. Their participation in drafting major international treaties, advocating for human rights, and promoting sustainable development goals has established them as essential actors in the international system. These experiences suggest that empowering NGOs domestically not only enhances national welfare but also strengthens a country's global engagement and reputation. For Iran, developing a dynamic and autonomous NGO sector could thus serve as both a domestic developmental tool and a diplomatic asset in international cooperation and humanitarian diplomacy.

Financial sustainability remains a critical issue for NGOs worldwide, and Iran is no exception. Overreliance on state support or external donations creates vulnerabilities that can compromise independence and strategic continuity. Building diverse funding models through social entrepreneurship, membership contributions, and transparent partnerships with the private sector can ensure greater autonomy and resilience. Moreover, capacity-building programs that train NGO leaders in management, fundraising, digital communication, and evidence-based policy advocacy can significantly enhance their efficiency and credibility.

Cultural transformation is another area of importance. For NGOs to thrive, society must recognize and respect their legitimacy as independent entities contributing to the public good. This requires a shift in public perception—from viewing NGOs merely as charitable actors to understanding them as strategic partners in national development. Media platforms, educational systems, and policy frameworks all have a role in promoting this awareness. Encouraging civic education, volunteering, and community engagement from early stages of schooling can nurture a new generation of citizens who view participation as both a right and a responsibility.

Looking forward, the success of NGOs in Iran will depend on three interrelated pillars: supportive governance, professional capacity, and public trust. Supportive governance involves creating an enabling environment through transparent laws, efficient bureaucracy, and recognition of civil autonomy. Professional capacity refers to the development of managerial, technical, and communicative skills that allow NGOs to operate effectively in complex social systems. Public trust, the most delicate and valuable asset, emerges from transparency, accountability, and consistent service to community welfare. When these pillars align, NGOs can evolve into powerful engines of social innovation, ethical governance, and national resilience.

Ultimately, NGOs represent the moral and social conscience of society. They give structure to compassion, translate solidarity into action, and transform individual concern into collective power. In times of crisis—whether environmental, economic, or humanitarian—they embody the human capacity to organize for the common good. In times of stability, they remind states and citizens alike of the continuing duty to improve, include, and innovate. For Iran, investing in the growth of NGOs means investing in the nation's social capital, ethical strength, and democratic maturity. It signifies a transition from government-centered development to people-centered progress, where cooperation replaces dependency, and civic initiative complements public authority.

In conclusion, NGOs should not be seen as peripheral or secondary actors but as integral elements of a balanced and forward-looking national system. They reflect the will and creativity of the people, the ethical spirit of the nation, and the shared aspiration for justice and prosperity. Their evolution in Iran mirrors the broader journey of society—from traditional charity to modern citizenship, from passive aid to active participation, and from isolated benevolence to institutionalized collaboration. The path forward lies in deepening this evolution: fostering stronger partnerships between the state and civil society, ensuring legal and financial independence, and embracing the transformative potential of organized civic participation. By doing so, Iran can harness the full capacity of its people to build a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient society where NGOs serve not as substitutes for the state, but as its most trusted and dynamic allies in the pursuit of national development and human dignity.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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