

School Mayors of Iran: World's Youngest Mayors Learning Social Participation

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Abstract:

School Mayors of Iran, a project currently in operation within over 1000 girls and boys middle-schools (Age 12 to 15) has been designed, experimentally executed and researched by the present author and sponsored by Tehran municipality. This project which has been selected by the 4th International Congress of Educating Cities as an international model project (Chicago, 1996), aiming at the establishment of an organization, run by elected mayors through students direct votes and without any interferences by school officials. This organization is responsible for school affairs and a 500 meters around each school considered as school mayors jurisdiction. Each school mayor has 6 elected deputies who will organize various students working groups. Project's main objectives are as follows:

S= Social Participation, C = Citizenship, H =Honesty, O =Originality, O =Organized way of life, L = Love of nature, M = Mobilization, A =Accountability = Younker, O = Optimism =Reliability, S = Sustainable Development. To realize the significance of this project, one has to take into account that historically the right to social gatherings of associational nature and political participation has not developed strong roots in Iran. As a result, the public sphere in general and the civil domain in particular have been considered as the ruler's domain. Thus projects such as School Mayors, can be regarded as first steps toward the creation of a new generation of true citizens. The outcomes of this project have been beyond anyone's expectations in Iran. To the point that one of the leading figure of Iranian right wing in the government while pointing to the causes of their defeat and election of Mr. Khatami, indicated that projects such as school mayors has mobilized not only the middle schoolers but also their families and through them the entire nation. Three surveys conducted at 1994, 1997 and 2000, by independent scholars all have pointed to extensive changes in students attitude toward participation, concern for cities, awareness about individuals rights, citizenship etc. UNESCO in its documents (Developing a Sense of Citizenship) has noted "The School Mayors project of Tehran is noteworthy. A study aimed at evaluating the project's impact (UNDP, 1996) clearly shows that students who have been part of 'school mayors' have enhanced their cultural development, their active participation in society and their awareness of the role of the citizen. It is planned to generalize the project to all high schools and in a symbolic manner in elementary schools next school year (sept. 20).

Introduction

An environmentally sustainable society is the end-result of environmentally sustainable development. This requires the balanced interrelation between political, economic, social, production, technological and, finally, administrative systems. These systems within the framework of sustainability work toward a type of development which contains three elements: the environment (biosphere & resources), equity (poverty elimination & social justice) and development (integrated social, cultural, political and economic progress). Sustainable development, urgent within the context of the Third World, also is a goal for the industrial nations. In this global endeavor, peoples' real participation at all levels is the cornerstone. For the fact is 'that sustainability is more about people and community-based prosperity. People within communities are the essential agents of change in the post-modern world'.

People participation at all levels, however a vital element of sustainable development, will not come into existence overnight. Masses of the Third World who have been deprived of their rights to participate in daily affairs for decades and in the case of older societies, for centuries, do not know the rules of the game. In most cases they do not even realize the miracles of participation and local initiatives. Moreover, they do not know how or where to begin. Thus, programmes aimed at capacity-building and mass awareness are vital and, in many cases, are a pre-condition for peoples' participation. The younger generations should have a special place in both capacity-building and mass awareness programmes.

School mayors of Iran is a project which has come to exist by realizing peoples' roles in the process of environmentally-sustainable development and the need to educate masses to participate in such a process. This project started in 1994 in the context of an experiment within an urban setting. At that time the project covered 40 middle schools, 20 as experimental group and 20 as control group.

Presently the project covers over 1,000 middle schools (ages 11-14) all over Iran. This project also served as the model for students councils which are now in operation in all Iranian schools. Understanding the importance of this project requires at least a general familiarity with the Iranian situation and the contradictory nature of social participation within the context of an Iranian history dominated by authoritarian regimes.

Background

Comprehensive studies concerning social participation in Iran are almost absent. The term 'social participation', whose importance in the era of globalization has increased, has not been analyzed. Its origins, theoretical frameworks encompassing the concept within the Iranian context, types of social participation actually practiced in different periods, and organizations devised to make social participation possible, have not been considered and studied thoroughly. Western scholars studying an Iranian society influenced by despotic regimes that leave little space for political participation, automatically have regarded Iran as a non-participatory society. (For a comprehensive review of the literature in this regard see Piran, 1998 & 2001).

Interestingly enough, Iranian historiography, especially works containing references to urban life and biographies of kings and captains, supports such a one-sided assumption. In those works, references to terms such as civil society, civic association, citizen, in short, concepts indicating voluntary participation of individuals in public sphere, mostly for secular and daily affairs, are severely limited and their current usage is of recent origin. Even today finding terms equivalent to concepts indicating civic participation in Farsi (Iranian language) is difficult. However, all those mentioned point only to one side of the coin.

Iranian society, denied its rights to political participation and social gatherings, has concentrated upon participation in informal contexts such as family and religion which serve as institutional substitutes for a civil society. These types of participation, due to their informal nature, are less documented and obviously ignored by event-oriented historiography and court historians. Thus, in studying social participation in Iran, the contradictory nature of social participation and its various and objective manifestations should be taken into account. In fact one could cautiously claim that most Iranians, contrary to common belief, act altruistically in informal settings related to family, tribe and religion and, to a large extent, egoistically in civil and public spheres which are historically considered as governments' domains.

Analysis of such a contradiction, neglected to a large extent but vital for a meaningful understanding of Iranian society, is an independent undertaking. It should be mentioned here that Iranian society,

for variety of reasons such as simplicity of the system, a huge rural population living in semi-secluded and self-sufficient villages, extended government with an army of officials and semi-public workers, could tolerate peoples' non-participatory approach and orientation toward public or more clearly civic affairs. However, the need to change non-participatory attitudes of the masses and the lack of representative institutions and organizations in the public domain has been realized by enlightened individuals for centuries. Without active social participation, Iran will face problems of a far-reaching nature. Rapid population increase (one of the fastest growing in the world up to the last decade which as decreased drastically since then) has created population pyramids dominated by the youngest age groups. They require educational and recreational facilities well beyond the government's capacity. Rural-urban migration has led to the emergence of metropolitan areas such as Tehran which contains close to a quarter of the country's total population. Growing unemployment, resource depletion due to irrational consumption patterns especially in regard to energy, environmental deterioration, destruction caused by war requiring extended reconstruction, a relative decline of national income due to crude oil price fluctuations, and growing inflation domestically and internationally, make social participation urgent. These factors and others reveal the motivations of Tehran Municipality to welcome any project which aims to enhance civic participation.

One also has to take into account the Iranian political landscape. Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian political life represents two factions. One believes in citizenship, i.e. a participatory democracy and social justice. The other has attempted to move toward a more centralized system, controlling all aspects of society including the private sphere. Those in favor of democracy encourage participatory projects such as School Mayors.

Globalization aims at complete market integration and creation of a unified international free market. This external factor increases the need for accelerated social participation in Iran. In this regard, shrinking government, with a limitation of its functions in economic and social management should also be emphasized. Thus, any attempt at increasing peoples' participation in civic or public domains is timely and important. In this regard, Iran School Mayors Project is justified.

A few years after the implementation of this project (1997), a social movement in Iran lobbied to reform the system and move toward a participatory democracy. A leading conservative political figure, in explaining the factors inspiring such a movement, referred to School Mayors of Iran (Abrar daily, 1997, August, 22).

Review of the Literature

Before designing the School Mayors of Iran, a research team was organized. One of its tasks was to search for similar projects in other countries. In this way an extended bibliography became available consisting of 528 projects, among which 29 projects were evaluated thoroughly. Most of these projects were executed by students of middle and high schools. (see Searoy: 1973, Franked et al: Fitzgerald: 1988, Morton & Landy: 1988, Tice: 1989, Wohl: 1987, Cutler: 1989, Erickson: 1986, Tarshis: 1990. Also for an extended bibliography of participatory organizations formed by students see Bulletin of the International Bureau of Education UNSECO, January – June 1993).

The most important difference between School Mayors of Iran and all other projects reviewed is that in School Mayors of Iran students are directly responsible for all affairs of a segment of the cities (500 Sq. meters around each school) without any interference by city officials or other adults. Other projects were limited in scope. Students in those projects were responsible for a particular task, well defined in advance. But in School Mayors of Iran tasks assigned to students are basically adults undertakings.

School Mayors¹ of Iran

Main objectives

School Mayors of Iran is an ongoing project aimed at the establishment of an organization within middle schools and later in all high schools and in a symbolic fashion in all elementary schools (age 6 to 11). It is organized and run by elected students through student votes and without interference from school officials or other adults. Such an organization has a number of interrelated objectives among which the following are more important:

- Increasing youth awareness concerning the vital role of each citizen in environmental protection.
- Helping children understand modern urban life and its requirements.
- Character building and self-confidence.
- Meeting obligations and accepting well-defined responsibilities.
- Exercising social participation by fulfilling certain tasks within a formal setting.
- Learning collective decision making.
- Becoming familiar with city management and existing organizations and institutions running cities.
- Increasing students' familiarity with a sustainable city and citizen's role in sustainability.
- Introducing the term "citizen", its meanings, obligations and rights attached to it.
- Increasing cooperation among students through participatory activities.
- Improving the relationships between students and school staff.
- Improving student relationships through collective undertakings.
- Increasing students' overall concern for the environment in general and their schools and surrounding areas in particular.
- Involving students' families in participatory activities within their communities.
- Enhancing the overall cultural atmosphere of the schools.
- Increasing educational collaborations
- Helping the young to become familiar with democratic procedures through free elections.

The most important feature of the School Mayors' Organization as shown in the figure No. 1 is the fact that all students involved in the project are directly elected by other students. This bases the School Mayors' Organization solely upon student initiatives and keeps adult involvement to a minimum.

Liaisons are organized by district municipalities. School superintendents and parents coordinate activities of the School Mayors' Organization, trying to solve contradictions and conflicts between the organization's decisions and school regulations and district municipalities. Another important feature of the School Mayors' organization is that it covers all aspects of urban management and environmental enhancement. Few projects organized by youth throughout the world have been as comprehensive as the Iran's School Mayors.

At the beginning of the academic year (Sept. 22), the election of School Mayors, city-school councils (between 7 to 11 students based upon a school's population) and six deputies for every school is

1. Tehran is officially divided into 22 districts and each district is sub-divided into a number of areas. Each district and every area has its own mayor working under the supervision of the Mayor of Iran. In order to make the term School Mayor meaningful, a new sub-division within each area was introduced, encompassing a middle-school and 500 meters around it which is considered the School Mayor's jurisdiction. In all other cities the same area is under School Mayor's direct control.

School Mayors' Organization:

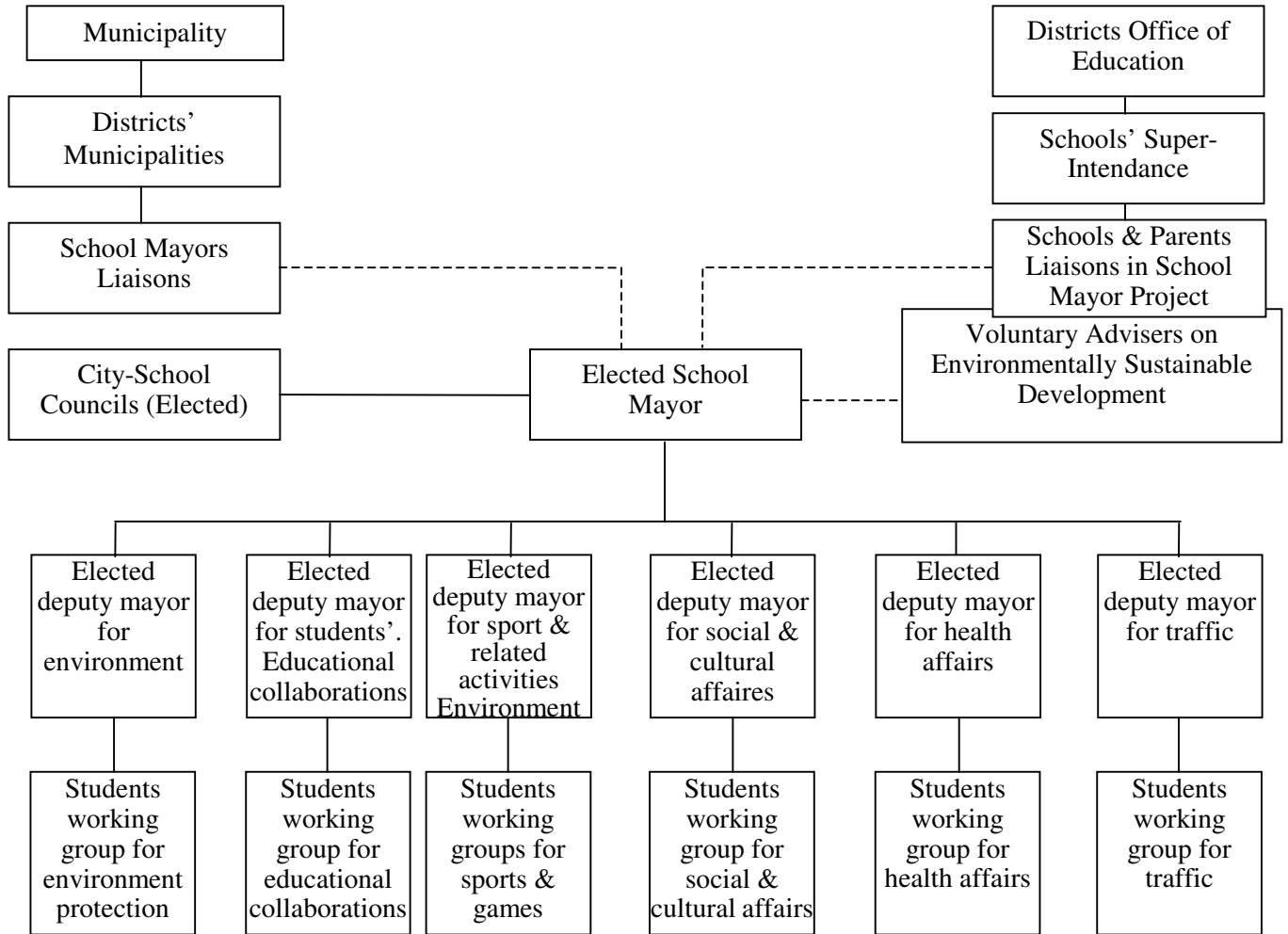


Figure No. 1: School Mayors Organization

carried out. The candidate who receives the highest votes is elected School Mayor. Candidates with fewer votes occupy other positions. At the same time a group of voluntary advisers, university professors and other professionals interested in environment protection is formed to advise students on their proposed environmental activities.

Establishment of Iran School Mayors started with a field experiment comparing 20 middle school with school mayors and 20 middle schools without such an organization (all schools were chosen randomly and divided into two groups, also by random assignment). The experiment was designed to test a number of hypotheses important for generalizing the project to other schools. By the end of field experiment and based upon its findings, the organization was revised and generalized into 40 schools. Eventually the project covered schools all over Iran.

Schools which have participated in the School Mayors' Organization have changed drastically. Students showed increased abilities in fulfilling adult roles. It is planned to introduce the project to all Iranian elementary, middle and high schools within 10 years.

All evaluations of the project carried out by independent bodies have emphasized the successes of the project. Parents of elected students who took part in an attitude survey independently organized and administered by the Tehran Office of Education, have clearly indicated that they notice positive changes in their children (Ministry of Education, 1999). These young people have become more responsible and better organized in their daily affairs. Their school performance has improved and they care more about their community and their fellow students.

So far 550,000 students have been directly involved in the project either as elected bodies or as student working groups. School Mayors Liaisons, a body organized by district municipalities, is responsible for coordinating the activities of School Mayors' Organization and providing assistance to accomplish the decisions reached by School Mayors' Organization, especially those related to 500-meter area around each middle-school. So far, School Mayors Organization has been able to renovate 305 middle schools, most of them in poorer districts. To many people's surprise, students have shown great ability in fulfilling different tasks collectively. This project has also shown the importance of social participation at grass roots level and has clearly indicated the fact that a city can educate its inhabitants as a life-long learning process. News of this project is covered regularly by Iranian independent newspapers and journals.

Probably the most important impact of the project has been the mobilization of elected students' parents for community participation. According to the attitude survey just mentioned, parents of the elected students have visited schools more often than before and they have been more available for group undertakings concerning their communities.

Such a change has been particularly visible in poorer districts. Many adults never thought that youngsters 11-14 years of age could be capable of working together so maturely and in such a democratic fashion, successfully accomplishing adult tasks. Based upon the overall changes of middle schools with School Mayors' Organization, many youngsters have shown a clear interest to enrol in these middle schools.

School Mayors of Iran has been selected by a number of international organizations as a successful project. During the third international congress of educating cities, Bologna 1994, the project was well received and was chosen among the most successful projects. The designer of the project, while participating at the meeting of city experts organized by the UNESCO (On Road to Istanbul, Habitat II), presented the project in the session on "success stories". The 4th International Congress of Educating Cities, Chicago, Sep. 1996, has chosen the project as an international model project, and a booth was allocated to the project. Moreover the designer of the project presented a review of School Mayors of Iran as a part of the sub-program "International Market Place of Ideas". This project has never received external support of any kind.

5. School Mayors Achievements: A Few Examples

Apart from qualitative accomplishments of the students involved in the project under review here, other more quantitative achievements can be singled out. Only a few cases are presented here:

5-1. Renovation of over 500 schools. In order to renovate school buildings, a group of young volunteer architects presented their designs. Each city-school council and each school mayor and his or her deputies in a number of formal sessions reviewed the renovation project for their school. They also asked other students in each school to participate in the review process. Students voted on the renovation project for each school and either approved the project or requested changes or modifications. District municipalities provided the budget necessary for renovations. Student working groups worked side by side with the renovation staff.

5-2. Helping students with learning problems. A deputy mayor is responsible for students' educational collaboration. A students' working group for educational collaboration is active in each school. So far a number of students with learning disabilities have received help from their classmates.

5-3. School Mayors of Tehran have carried out a number of projects to protect the environment. Cleaning mountains and rivers are only two examples.

5-4. Visiting nursing homes for elderly regularly.

5-5. Publishing School Mayors Weekly.

5-6. Organizing Neighborhood NGOs.

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