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## Original Research Article

# Investigation of Stimuli and Barriers to NGOs Activity for Improving Urban Management Performance Case Study: Rasht, Iran

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** Urban management has directed its approach toward good urban governance in recent years, emphasizing social participation and interaction necessity. In this case, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in creating a participation-centered environment by performing as intermediaries between urban management and people. NGOs can act effectively in this way due to their inherent nature and characteristics and their ability to win the trust of the local community. As the capital of Gilan, Rasht City has many active NGOs in different fields. Hence, it is essential to identify stimuli and barriers to the actualization of participation and achieve good urban governance.

**Research objective:** This study aimed at identifying the barriers and stimuli to NGO activity and examining how NGOs perform as an urban governance pattern to improve participation in urban management structures.

**Research method:** This was a descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach. The extant study used bibliographic studies and a survey method through 12 semi-structured and in-depth interviews to collect data. Interviewees were selected via the snowball method. Moreover, content analysis was used to analyze interviews through three-phase coding of concepts and categories.

**Conclusion:** NGOs do teamwork and make collective decisions; hence, they mediate the relationship between citizens and urban management. In this regard, participation, civic intervention, and citizenship are the most substantial stimuli in the urban management structure. Moreover, results of restrictive legal structures indicate that the political employment of NGOs and limited financial resources are the most important barriers to NGOs. In total, the urban management structure of Iran has ignored NGOs, and it is hoped that NGOs will become vital and effective elements in the urban management structure by eliminating the barriers.

**Keywords:** *Non-Governmental Organization, Stimuli, and Barriers, Participation, Urban management, Rasht.*

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## Introduction and Problem Statement

As complicated social phenomena, cities face many issues and challenges, and urban management tends to solve these problems to improve the citizens' quality of life indicators. In this lieu, citizens have always demanded to recognize and meet their needs. However, it is impossible to identify all needs of a wide range of citizens. The new attitude of urban management towards prioritization of citizens' needs and demands tends to improve performance emphasizing the necessity of interaction and the incidence of human relationships. This modern approach in urban management is called "urban governance," based on the interaction between people and urban managers. If this interaction is directed correctly, it will increase the urban management ability and citizens' satisfaction. The question is how one can be prepared for an appropriate field for interaction and simultaneously actualizing citizens' expectations and urban management. The answer can be found in the experiences of western countries, especially the USA, which uses informal potentials, NGOs, and social networks to outsource many of urban management's tasks. This process reduces the pressure on the urban management body but also emphasizes the interaction between citizens and urban management regarding the non-governmental natures of these organizations. Regarding the ascending trend of urbanism and challenges for citizens and urban management, as well as resource scarcity, there will be an inevitable rise in interaction and synergy between the public sector, the public, and non-governmental organizations. It is possible to find and prioritize citizens' problems and demands as an important step in urban planning through cooperation between the mentioned organizations and urban management entities. The important role of NGOs in solving urban issues and challenges and the increasing number of NGOs in different social, environmental, and other fields require identifying barriers and stimuli to the performance of these organizations. This identification contributes to improvements in conditions. The study investigated

some NGOs in Rasht City, Iran, active in urban planning, architecture, social, and environmental areas to identify stimuli and barriers to NGOs' activities. This study also tends to examine the methods for improving the participation of NGOs in urban management structures. The question here is whether NGOs and increasing civic participation in urban and urban development projects in Rasht can solve the problems, improve the structure of urban management, and actualize good urban governance. What stimuli can be effective? What are the barriers to NGOs in Rasht? The basic and underlying concepts, such as urban governance, NGOs, and social participation, have been reviewed to answer the above questions.

## Research Background

Various studies have examined the influence of NGOs on different environmental, social, cultural, physical, managerial, and other scopes to realize good urban governance and find challenges that NGOs face. [Table 1](#) reports the most important relevant studies.

The relevant studies imply the consensus on NGOs' low power and authority in implementing different (environmental, etc.) activities and their high motivation and influence on the improvement of community status (increase awareness of citizens, reduction in crimes, etc.) and governance environment. Most studies are quantitative studies that have collected data through questionnaires, which may reduce the creativity of respondents, preventing them from conveying their ideas. Another shortcoming of some relevant studies is that they selected a statistical population of interviews among those who work in NGOs. It is essential to find the problems in selecting samples and interviews among urban managers. If this point is ignored, the conclusion may be incomplete and false. Accordingly, a new perspective and qualitative method must be taken to investigate barriers to the performance of NGOs regarding cooperation with urban governance. Moreover, such a modern

Table 1. Research Background. Source: Authors.

Author(s)	Title	Conclusion and key points
Korab-Karpowicz (2020)	The United Citizens Organization: Public-private partnerships in global governance	The results of this study indicate that the participation of a new member in the governance model is effective in minimizing unilateral responses to problems, resource collection, and dividing the load between public and private actors (Korab-Karpowicz, 2020, 4).
Foo (2018)	Examining the Role of NGOs in urban environmental governance	This study indicates that urban partnerships often lack suitable network structures for implementing public programs smoothly. The presence of a horizontal structure can lead to a gap in management functions. From an urban governance perspective, NGOs can play a vital role in rolling out public programs.
Rezaee, Tavakolnia & Sarrafi (2021)	Examining the Role of Non-government Organizations (NGOs) in Realizing Good Urban Governance(Case Study: Tehran Metropolitan City)	Findings indicate that NGOs play an effective role in realizing good urban governance. NGOs indeed provide the field for the realization of governance by employing elites, increasing social capital and accountability, and creating social solidarity and cohesion in Tehran Metropolitan City (Rezaee et al., 2021, 124-125).
Barghamadi & Zamani (2022)	Study of the Interaction between NGOs and Municipalities in Tehran	This study examined the most important problems in the interaction between NGOs and urban management organizations. The most important challenges are as follows: complicated administrative bureaucracies, numerous numbers of officials working in NGOs, lack of understating of the position, capability, and power of NGOs, and lack of supervision over the NGOs’ performance (Barghamadi & Zamani, 2022, 448-450).
Lotfi Khachaki (2020)	Study of challenges of social problems intervention to help vulnerable groups in supporting NGOs	Analytical findings of the study indicate that the most fundamental challenge for NGOs is “micro level and individual activities.” What leads to the emergence of such a challenge is, first, the weakness of NGOs in finding the cause of social problems. The process of empowering all walks of society is an important issue. Results of the study indicate that it is a short-term, cross-sectional and one-dimensional process, which does not well use the local and native communities’ participation (Lotfi Khachaki, 2020, 10).
Rahimzadeh Sisibig, shichaslami & Zakerhaghighi (2022)	An analysis of the role of non-governmental organizations in improving the urban management system from the perspective of the citizens of the metropolis of Tehran	According to the results, two social and environmental dimensions played a more vital role (rather than economic, functional, physical, and institutional factors) within the intermediary relationship between urban management and citizens. NGOs are directly connected to citizens; therefore, they can easily reflect the issues and challenges in the urban management system (Rahimzadeh Sisibig et al., 2022, 444-445).
Rabbani, Meshkini, Roknoldin Eftekhari & Rafeian (2019)	Explaining the urban governance problems in future scenarios of Tehran Metropolitan City based on the approach of converting qualitative to quantitative scenarios	Due to urban complexities, it is important to use transdisciplinary and mixed mythological methods in urban governance. This study provides the field for an optimal urban governance model by preparing conditions for the participation of NGOs and civil society in urban governance (Rabbani et al., 2019, 1-2/14-15).
Aslipour, Khanmohammadi, & Abdolmohamad Sagha (2019)	Ranking the types of NGOs to improve the effectiveness of urban management with the public participation approach	Research results indicate that NGOs are based on the public participation approach to education and cultural activities, which is at the first rank, followed by general health, the international arena, citizenship rights, and sustainable welfare and development. The presence of these NGOs in urban management leads to an effective improvement in urban management (Aslipour et al., 2019, 264-265).

approach must be used to assess the available stimuli. The mentioned methods are innovative aspects of this study.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Urban governance

It is generally essential to create a proper space for the participation of stakeholders in the urban management system. Some approaches that can somewhat meet the needs and solve problems of cities have influenced urban management within different periods. “Urban government” and “urban

governance” are two effective extremes of the urban management spectrum. In urban government, we deal with formal and legal entities with legal power and can manage cities based on this power and authority. The urban government was gradually replaced with urban governance due to citizens’ changing needs and perspectives and their willingness to express their opinions and demands. The most prominent difference between these two paradigms is that urban governance becomes meaningful through a process that includes community and government. One can measure the quality of governance by using

good urban governance standards (Chuenpagdee, 2011, 207). As sustainable urban management, good urban governance is a process shaped based on the interaction between urban management organizations, non-governmental organizations, and civic society associations. In other words, good urban governance is a multidimensional concept (Meyer & Auriacombe, 2019, 11-13) realized in a multifaceted system by dividing democratic authorities and tools to mediate decision-making among local governments at the national level and the private sector (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019, 2404). Therefore, governance is a multi-level, multi-action, multi-faceted, multi-tool, and multi-source concept (Bressers & Kuks, 2013, 143). Accordingly, governance is a participatory process between society, local government, and public and non-governmental organizations (Seo, 2020, 5-6). Governance initiates the way for local governments to think and work and tends to create new ways for more participation of citizens (Basu & Punjabi, 2020, 101). Moreover, governance changes social relations, power, public action, and evolutions. In this case, NGOs and civil society can effectively realize good urban governance by participating in collective decision-making, accountability, and transparency (Galego, Moulaert, Brans & Santinha, 2021, 17-20). It should be considered that new insights are required for urban management contexts to pursue modern governance goals (Galway, Levkoe, Portinga & Milun, 2022, 14). The advanced management procedure that is based on increased public participation, networking, and learning across cities can be effective in streaming the people-based issues (Bai, McAllister, Beaty & Taylor, 2010, 131). Enhanced active participation between stakeholders and influencers in cities provides the connection between the urban management body and the lowest participation level (i.e., people) (Salaripour, Alizadeh Jorkouyeh & Taleb Vali Alah, 2022). In this way, the concept of “top-down government” is extensively replaced with multi-actor “governance” methods, which emphasize

governance (Cowley, 2015, 222). The participation-based urban governance plays a vital role in creating top-down balance and orchestra as well as bottom-up participation (Biondi, Demartini, Marchegiani, Marchiori & Piber, 2020, 3). Public participation in decentralized decision-making structures is a substantial component of good urban governance (Aina, Wafer, Ahmed & Alshuwaikhat, 2019, 273). Therefore, the realization of high-level participation is highly significant in good urban governance (Esmailpoorabi, Yigitcanlar, Kamruzzaman & Guaralda, 2020, 9-1).

#### • Participation

A wide range of issues and challenges seen in cities of today’s world originate from insufficient or incorrect knowledge about the citizens’ needs. Cities have been shaped for citizens and their quality of life, while citizens have been neglected and ignored. The participatory urban development model has been introduced in the developed world to solve this problem based on the motto “with the people, for the people” to narrow the gap between people’s demands and urban management performance. On the other hand, participation highly affects the legitimacy of urban management, which indicates the multiple and effective role of participation. Participation improves the mental relationship between individual participation and a sense of social connection (Piber, Biondi, Demartini, Marchegiani & Marchiori, 2017, 14-15). More deep participation of stakeholders can boost their positions and situations in the governance structure (Moosavi & Brown, 2021, 11). It can also be claimed that high participation rates can create high-quality governance and improve the orchestrated development process. Therefore, governance focuses on the role of local participation in the social and economic development of urban communities (Meyer & Auriacombe, 2019, 11-13). However, it should be mentioned that participatory processes are insufficient but should be strengthened and improved to influence governance and legalization (Greenhill, Sundnes & Karlsson, 2021, 1). Regarding the citizen’s demands and needs,

services in the urban field will be improved, and the presence of citizens in the decision-making process will legitimate the urban management, which are required conditions for realizing urban governance. In this case, it is essential to create a suitable space for the participation of stakeholders in the urban management system. NGOs can provide the field for such participation.

#### • NGOs in urban management system

Delegating all city responsibilities to a specific organization (either public or private) is costly, so the available resources must be used to adjust financial, specialized, and human costs. NGOs are one of the most important resources for urban management that can facilitate the urban management process through their voluntary activities to win citizens' trust regarding effective participation. Because NGOs have small scales, they have a mutual relationship with people (Macdonald, 1995, 201-202) and usually try to be active in a participatory process (Vivian & Maseko, 1994, 8), and most of NGOs are defined based on the citizens' participation (Macdonald, 1995, 201-202). Facilitation of the participation process requires the relationship between NGOs and the government (Madon & Sahay, 2002, 2). In recent years, non-governmental organizations have emerged as important and influential organizations for disaster management (Park & Yoon, 2022, 1). However, ordinary relationships between non-governmental and governmental organizations have been described at a scale of "benign neglect to outright hostility" (Edwards & Hulme, 1992, 1-5), i.e., governments neglect these organizations or create barriers to their activities based on their view on outsourcing and power scale-down. Both of mentioned perspectives neglect the valuable potential of these organizations. It should be considered that separation between non-governmental and governmental organizations for inter-organizational cooperation is an unable and improper solution (Bebbington, 2004, 729). NGOs' strategy can solve this issue; this strategy includes the participatory approach and realization

of participation on different scales. Nevertheless, realization and reflection of participation usually occur at the micro-scale and local levels despite diverse participation scales (Madon & Sahay, 2002, 2-4). The meaning and performance of NGOs indicate that these organizations play a significant and vital role as social phenomena and intermediary organizations between people and government. This role provides many advantages, which building trust between people and government and a decline in pressure on the management body through increasing participation opportunities are the most important benefits. NGOs have been established based on voluntary participation and activities regarding the public interest, implying these organizations' role in reviving and teaching participation. NGOs are alternatives to formal governmental organizations (ibid., 1) but face some barriers and stimuli. Budget and financial resource problems are some of the barriers that are provided by some donors and benefactors (Vivian & Maseko, 1994, 36-37). The possible tension between non-governmental organizations and governments is another barrier, so the tendency of these organizations for independence and their impatience with governmental bureaucracy may intensify these tensions (ibid., 34-36). Non-governmental organizations can rapidly find the unsatisfied needs of society and solve these dilemmas quickly (Park & Yoon, 2022, 1). As mentioned before, urban governance is a process based on the interaction between official organizations and institutions of urban management and informal entities of civic society or the public arena. Participation of informal institutions and improvement of the public arena in urban management can contribute to consistency between various interests and the sustainability of urban development. In a country where the government is responsible for providing services, NGOs engage stakeholders in social and environmental liabilities to realize good governance procedures (Arantes, Zoub & Cheb, 2020, 18). Urban management system of Iran is based on the urban government model



rather than urban governance; therefore, urban control and development are done in official and governmental, military organizations and institutions. In contrast, urban governance means that governments can no longer control and direct the city and meet the increasing needs of urban society due to the enhanced and complicated urban system and urbanism. Therefore, principles of good urban governance, including efficiency and effectiveness, democracy, justice, responsibility, and accountability, make citizens participate in civic society and enter the decision-making and urban management process in all public and private sectors (Ebrahimzadeh & Asadian, 2012, 5-6). Accordingly, a participatory urban management approach within the interaction with stakeholders has become one of the underlying steps in the strategic planning of cities (Salaripour et al., 2021). Therefore, collective action plays a vital role in the urban governance process (Taghipour, Mashayekhi & Jafari, 2020, 19). Iran's top-down urban system is inflexible and irresponsible. Therefore, NGOs and the participation of citizens in urban affairs can realize the good urban governance theory. Participation, however, is not the final goal but is a measure to stimulate good urban governance. According to the mentioned points, the research objective must be pursued through a review of the basic concepts of the study, including NGOs, good urban governance, and community-based participation. Accordingly, Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual structure of the extant study.

NGOs and their management systems must be assessed more precisely to get more information about the advantages of stakeholders' participation and the activities, barriers, and stimuli of these organizations. This information was collected through interviews with different NGOs and urban management members of Rasht metropolitan. Few NGOs perform in the urban planning field in the studied area; hence, a wide range of NGOs, including those that work in architecture, urban planning, and environment scopes in Rasht city, were considered.

## Research Method

The extant study was descriptive-exploratory

research with a qualitative approach. Bibliographic and survey methods were used to collect data through semi-structured interviews. In this case, some similar basic questions adopted from theoretical foundations were asked. Interviewees included 12 members (agents of NGOs working in urban fields, environmental activists, and agents of governmental organizations in Rasht). Interviews took an average of 60 minutes, and finally, 85 pages were derived from the interviews. The interviews were continued until reaching theoretical saturation. Data or theoretical saturation is an approach that is used in qualitative studies to determine sampling adequacy (Livingston, 2009). Data saturation occurs when any additional interview or observation does not lead to extra attitudes or theories (Ranjbar et al., 2012, 245). Methodological studies indicate that most required information is obtained from the first five-six interviews. Moreover, approximately 80-92% of identified concepts are mentioned in the first ten interviews. According to the relevant studies, less than 16 interviews (this number differs in each study based on the required information and diversity of interviewees) are sufficient for data saturation (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020, 2). Therefore, 12 interviews were sufficient for theoretical saturation because no new subject was added to interviews after the eighth interview. This study designed open questions to find the ideas and opinions of interviewees without restricting their attitudes and beliefs. In the first phase of this study, the bibliographic study was done to review theoretical references about urban management, governance, and NGOs, and then semi-structured interviews were done with specialists and NGOs working on urban issues. The Snowball sampling method was done to select interviewees and participants. The first interview was done with environmental NGOs. The analysis method of this study was done using three-level coding, including coding, identifying categories, and determining the main categories of research. The categories were derived from interviews and classified because the coder

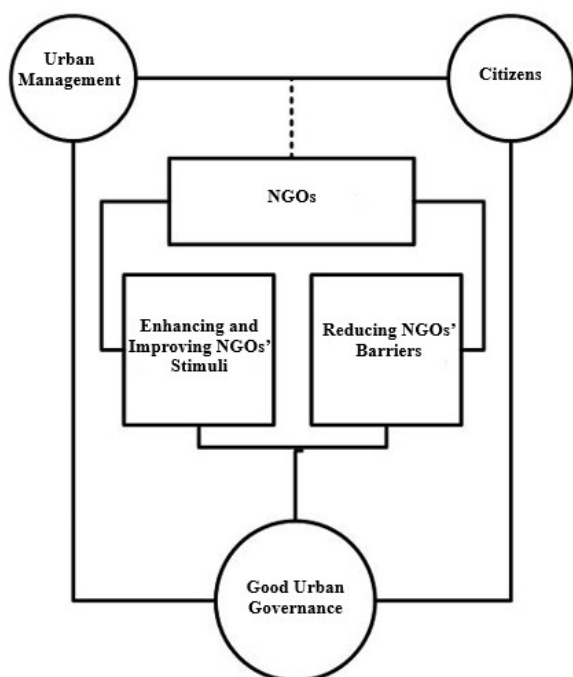


Fig. 1. The conceptual structure of the main components of the study. Source: Authors.

aimed to find underlying themes and categories. Data reliability and rigor were assessed by using the qualitative Lincoln and Guba’s evaluation method (Tabatabaee, Hasani, Mortazavi & Tabatabaei, 2013), which comprises four indicators: transferability (presenting details of participants’ activities), dependability (reducing the time of data collection, conducting interviews and extracting data from them), credibility (using participation and opinions of experienced individuals in diverse activities), and confirmability (transcribing text of conducted interviews).

**Studied Area**

Rasht City is the capital of Gilan County and Province, located in the central part of the county. Rasht reaches surrounding villages and Pasikhan from the north, Sangar, Islam Abad, and Saravan villages from the east, Shaft County from the west, and Rudbar from the south. An urban management system needs to provide desired services and decrease constraints due to the high social, cultural, and environmental potential of Rasht City. Lack of stability and an integrated urban management system in the management and governance structure

of Rasht are the most important challenges occurring in the process of problem-solving. In this case, NGOs can play an effective role in this structure. One of the positive and effective results of the interview with urban managers of Rasht City was holding several meetings for NGO agents and municipality organizations to enhance cooperation between these two sectors. Rasht has around 500 registered NGOs, which mostly work on charity, consultation, and environmental affairs. Some NGOs exist that work in urban planning and issues related to the urban environment. The mentioned NGOs do various activities, including holding workshops for citizenship rights, documents about urban affairs, etc. Figure 2 shows the geographical location of Rasht city.

**Discussion and Findings**

According to the interviews with individuals who are active in NGOs doing social, environmental, architecture, and urban planning activities. It was attempted to identify barriers, stimuli, and all options that pave the way for cooperation between NGOs and urban management. In this lieu, the coding method was done on interviews to answer the research questions. The research achievements have been proposed separately herein.

**• Participation of NGOs in urban management and governance system**

NGOs are public groups that are shaped by the

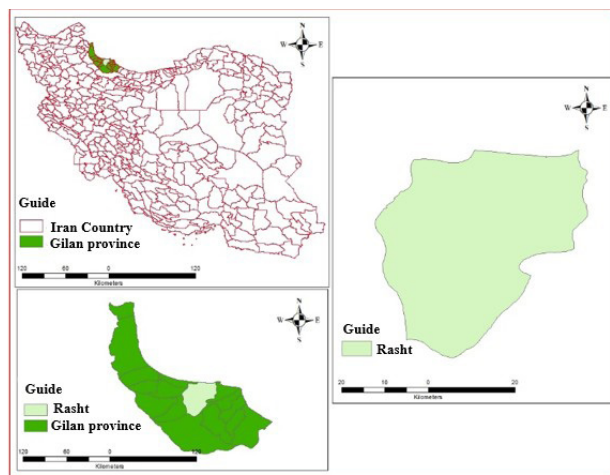


Fig. 2. The geographical location of Rasht City. Source: Authors.

community. These groups are usually active spontaneously and voluntarily in different social contexts. In other words, NGOs are non-profit and independent organizations defined within the law. These institutions are shaped based on the voluntary presence of citizens or diverse groups full of experts and scholars in different social, cultural, and other contexts. NGOs pursue shared goals and concerns through integrated cooperation, interaction, and participation. Figure 3 shows NGOs' participation in Rasht City

This study considered a wide range of NGOs, including NGOs that work in architecture, urban planning, and environmental scopes in Rasht City, due to the lack of NGOs working on urban planning in the studied area. NGOs ate underlying bases that facilitate the relationship between the governance system and urban management with their citizens' audiences. In this regard, NGOs can express people's demands and mobilize social capital in urban affairs. NGOs' intermediary role in urban affairs can contribute to the optimal use of social and urban resources and capital. NGOs can facilitate

affairs by decentralizing resources and authorities. These organizations perform as the intermediate layer in urban development planning. According to the obtained results, carious factors can improve or weaken the effect of NGOs on the governance system and management system caused by the activities done in NGOs, while external mechanisms outside the NGOs cause others.

**• Factor increasing (stimuli) the influence of NGOs' participation in the management system and urban governance**

NGOs have a voluntary nature based on participation and public engagement, so they can use their mediator role to facilitate building trust between urban managers and citizens through the free flow of information and transparency. Therefore, NGOs can improve the governance system and urban management and increase the affectation of relevant activities. Management structures of Rasht can rely on NGOs' potential to improve their management performances and realize the objective of good urban governance based on active participation. After examining the results obtained from an interview

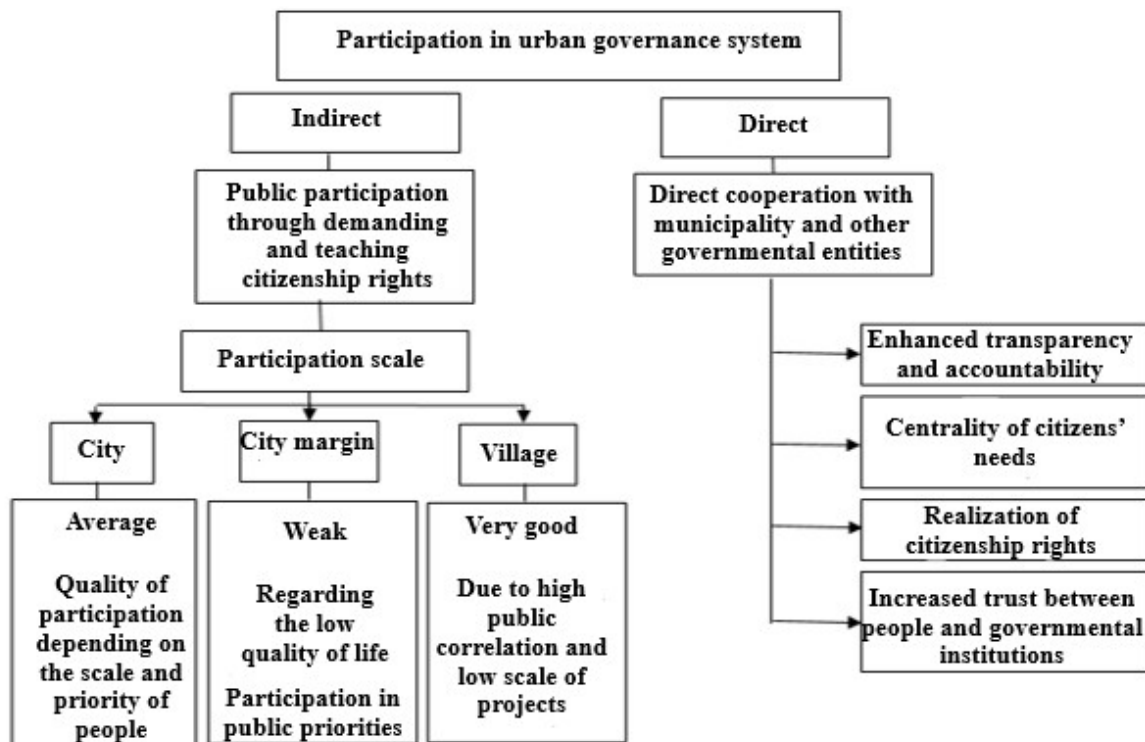


Fig. 3. NGOs' participation in Rasht City relies on the results of interviews. Source: Authors.



with NGO agents and governmental organizations (urban management), Table 2 reported the main stimuli of NGOs working in urban planning, environmental and other fields of Rasht to create good urban governance.

Analysis of NGOs’ activity stimuli indicates the difference between these factors regarding the scope and space of influence. Some stimuli, such as communications, accountability, and transparency of NGOs, group activity and teamwork, and behavior and activity of NGO internal members, differ from the extra-organizational mechanisms. On the other hand, NGOs can use teaching and culturalization measures to create positive attitudes among people and increase the cooperation and participation of citizens in voluntary affairs. Finally, increasingly

demanding participation of people and similar factors can perform as extra-organizational stimuli contributing to positive outcomes and incidences, such as creating a formal position for NGOs in the executive structure of city. Intra- and extra-organizational stimuli have been assessed and explained herein.

**- Extra-organizational stimuli**

According to the results, civic and citizenship intervention is an effective factor in correcting urban affairs, improving urban management through social responsibility within NGOs, doing voluntary affairs associated with urban issues, and meeting citizens’ demands. In this case, correct demanding methods based on the rule of law within the law framework, the step-by-step movement towards informing and

Table 2. Results of analyzing stimuli to NGOs’ activity. Source: Authors.

Main Category	Category	Code
NGOs’ activity stimuli	Civic and citizenship intervention	- Civic and citizenship responsibility - Demanding and concerns of citizens in doing voluntary affairs - The centrality of citizens’ demands and needs in NGOs - Spontaneous and voluntary nature of NGOs
	Mediator and facilitator role of NGOs	- NGOs link urban management with other walks of society - Building trust between citizens and government through the voluntary affairs
	Communications	- Creative communication between media and NGOs - Innovation and modern methods of NGOs in making the relationship between citizens via virtual space
	The rule of law	Legality and step-by-step movement through voluntary activities
	Participation	- Integrated and purposive urban planning in cooperation with NGOs and considering citizens, needs, and demands - Participation of citizens in urban management structure by NGOs - Down-scaling the activities by voluntary works at the local scale and creating bottom-up management flow
	Teamwork	Collective work and group and participatory decision-making in voluntary activities
	Inclusiveness	Paying attention to diverse groups and walks of society in voluntary works
	Teaching and making people aware	- Socialization training
	Practical and social training and culturalization	- Culturalization and making citizens aware and informed
	Transparency and accountability	Transparency in urban management structure by NGOs

understanding citizenship rights, and accepting citizenship responsibilities are important issues in NGOs' collective and voluntary activities. In doing collective activities, full information is required. In the first phase, the information must be transferred through a process and cycle to provide the practical phase in the next step. Socialization, informing, responsibility, growth, and demand are derived from this process. The poor information and socialization training cause burnout of social capital and participation decline. In this case, NGOs play a significant role in practical teachings and informing citizenship rights, culturizing, and teaching being responsible citizens. Therefore, NGOs can underpin participation in society through the mentioned processes. Participation is the cornerstone of good urban governance. According to the results of this study, as the third dimension, NGOs are missing loops of urban management structure in Rasht city. In this lieu, NGOs can formulate the bottom-up urban management flow by employing different cooperations of participation-seeking citizens, structuralizing them within NGOs at the local scale, and injecting them into management structures. It seems that the participation process highly reflects the participation at the micro-scale and local levels. The top-down urban system is inflexible, irresponsible, and unaccountable. Therefore, it is possible to realize good urban governance theory by using NGOs' participation, cooperation, and engaging citizens in urban affairs. The important point is the difference between participation and doing work collectively. Trust is the significant and underlying base of this structure. A transparent structure of management can build trust effectively. Participation is not the final goal herein but is a measure to create good urban governance. The study results indicate that NGOs are one of the most substantial pillars that create city participation. NGOs are effective in creating a fully flexible participatory space due to the voluntary nature of these institutions.

#### - Intra-organizational stimuli

NGOs gather a wide range of individuals through voluntary and teamwork, so they pay more attention to the needs and demands of various groups and walks of society. Using modern methods to attract participation from a wide range of population groups and walks of society is essential. NGOs are based on an extensive network of social communications, so they can effectively realize innovations, including creative relationships with citizens in smart cities and modern evaluation methods based on big-data analysis via social media. Therefore, good urban governance requires innovation and modern methods to create a relationship with its audiences in cities regarding the rapid changes and advanced technology and collective communication tools in the recent decade.

#### • Inhibiting factors (barriers) to the influence of NGOs on management systems and urban governance

According to [Table 3](#) and the results of analyzed interviews, members of NGOs and urban activists name the most important barriers to the activity of NGOs as follows: restrictive legal structures, political exploitation, inefficient urban management, and scarce and unstable financial resources. Like stimuli of the influence of NGO's participation in the management system and urban governance, the mentioned barriers can be divided into two intra- and extra-organizational parts.

#### - Intra-organizational barriers

Various challenges and barriers were found against the activity of NGOs working on urban planning and architecture in Rasht City. The required finance is one of the most crucial challenges for NGOs. Lack of financial resources and subsequent poor stability of NGOs may reduce the motivation of experts to do voluntary affairs. NGOs have unstable and temporary financial resources causing a challenge in their activity and survival. The financial resources of NGOs include two main categories. The first category comprises donated resources through project finance and public donations, which are

Table 3. Results of analyzing barriers to NGOs' activity. Source: Authors.

Main Category	Category	Code
NGOs' activity barriers	Restrictive legal structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Incorrect implementation of rules and non-systematic management approaches, and lack of executive enforcement of rules and non-systematic management approaches</li> <li>- Lack of supportive rules for voluntary mechanisms</li> </ul>
	Political exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Politicization and political exploitation of NGOs</li> <li>- Directing NGOs by governmental and political institutions</li> <li>- Highlighting the political-security dimension in urban challenges and issues</li> <li>- The political approach in decision-making and the lack of a comprehensive, integrated plan for urban management</li> </ul>
	Inefficient management of NGOs	Bias and opposition of urban managers against NGOs
	Financial resources	Financial dependences of NGOs and ignoring the voluntary nature of NGOs Limited and unstable financial resources

severely unstable. The second category includes income-generating activities through membership fees and services and training. NGOs must have a combined case of the two mentioned categories to keep stability and continue acting in a way that fixed and income-generating resources outweigh the first category in the finance process.

**- Extra-organizational barriers**

According to the study results, restrictive rules and bureaucracy of NGO activity and registration are other barriers NGOs face. In this case, the lack of supportive rules for voluntary mechanisms and improper implementation of rules, and lack of systematic management approach to this case have severely limited these institutions. Other barriers include highlighted political-security dimension of urban affairs, lack of a comprehensive and integrated plan for NGOs, activities, and political approach to decisions made in these organizations. The results indicate that these barriers conflict with NGOs' non-profit and independent nature.

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

According to the results of analyses, conceptual framework in Fig. 4 was designed. In this model,

two main categories of the study included barriers and stimuli to the active participation of NGOs to influence the management system and urban governance. These factors can be divided into intra- and extra-organizational parts. The most important options have been reported in the Fig. 4.

**Conclusion**

The study examines how NGOs participate in urban management structures to realize good urban governance in Rasht City. After reviewing the relevant theoretical studies, the interviews with NGOs working in urban contexts were analyzed, and the following results were obtained. NGOs are one of the important cornerstones of participation in urban management, although they do not have an eligible position and remain a missing loop in the urban management structure. Hence, coherent and stable teamwork can be realized between NGOs and urban management by emphasizing the importance that NGO collective decision-making within the cooperation with urban management facilitates the relationship between citizens and urban management. This decision-making also increases awareness and the demanding spirit of

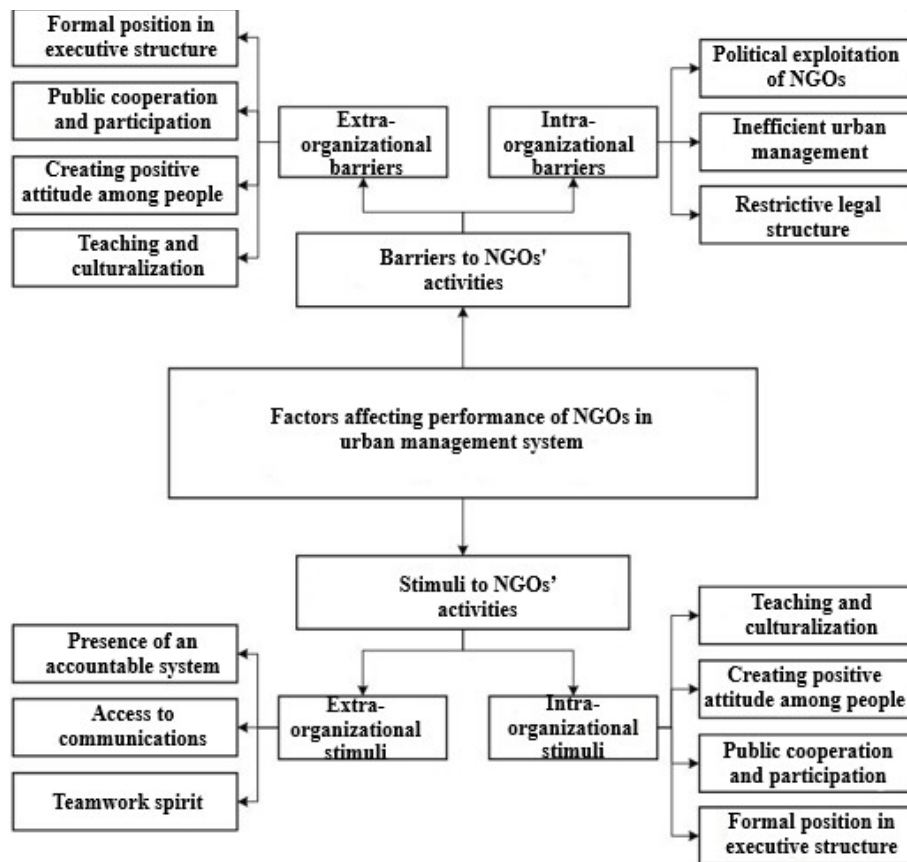


Fig. 4. Conceptual framework derived from interviews. Source: Authors.

people and builds trust among citizens. According to the background of public participation in Rasht City, this city has the potential for enhanced awareness and participation of citizens, which improved the influence of NGOs on the management system and urban governance in Rasht. As mentioned before, the realization of this case depends on some stimuli, such as transparency and responsibility, teaching and culturalization, and keeping the spirit up.

In addition to stimuli that improve the role of NGOs in urban management structure, NGOs face other barriers and challenges to their performance. Urban activists and NGO members mentioned some prominent challenges and barriers: lack of supportive rules for voluntary mechanisms and restrictive management and legal structures related to the registry of NGOs, such as bureaucratic phases in registration of NGOs and lack of governmental organizations' cooperation. The few NGOs registered in the urban scope of Rasht City may be attributed to these factors. The mentioned challenge

is critical because the best method for dealing with urban issues is taking small and gradual steps to teach and inform society regarding socialization, responsibility, or practical citizenship training for children and adolescents. NGOs are responsible for nurturing responsible, demanding, and questioning individuals. Therefore, the easy registration process of NGOs leads to society dynamism and awareness of citizens because society dynamism is realized in a society where responsibility is institutionalized, and the change begins here. Another challenge NGOs face is that governmental organizations cooperate with these institutions due to the insistence of NGOs or the sensitivity of people. The mentioned point implies the gap between NGOs and governmental organizations. This need must be a mutual and high-quality interaction to improve the conditions. It should be emphasized that the quantity and quality of public participation in defined projects of these NGOs depend on various factors, including knowledge of NGOs about people's concerns, modern methods for



public participation, motivation beyond the callings, and performance scale of organizations (i.e., the smaller the performance scale of projects, the higher the quality of public participation due to higher sense of belonging). Therefore, NGOs play a vital role in urban management structure, so they must exist in the urban management process. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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