

Poverty Alleviation through Empowerment with a Focus on Partnership: A Case Study of Iran

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Abstract

Empowerment in the area of poverty alleviation, beyond being a partnership for improvement or progress of the performance, means accountability for the prioritized needs. As to empowerment, the approaches are mostly confined to motivational level or organizational and institutional reform. Based on this general approach, Iran has also drawn up many empowerment programs and implemented them through Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF), the main supporting organization of the country. Pursuing the empowerment projects on the basis of this limited approach has been the source of instability for such projects. Evaluating the empowerment projects of Iran focused on poverty alleviation, developed and embedded in the broad programs of the IKRF, the study aims to identify the components of a pattern of empowerment for poverty alleviation through a social approach. Finally the proposed strategies are formulated based on three centers of active participation of the poor, strengthening inter-organizational relationships and defining an advisory role for supporting organizations to decision-making bodies. The methodology was descriptive-analytical and the data collected through direct observation and interviews with experts and academic elites and collecting questionnaires. Delphi Questionnaire was filled by the sample population in two categories of managers and experts of the IKRF and the clients. The Snowball technique was applied for identifying the size of the sample. The research questions were responded through SWOT analysis.

Keywords: empowerment, IKRF, partnership, poverty alleviation, self-sufficiency

1. Introduction

Nowadays one of the main objectives of development is increasing the empowerment and promoting development by the people. This goal is pursued by expanding and improving the capability and potential capacities of the society. Meanwhile, the voluntary participation of people in the process of promoting capacity is of significance in advancing development. Decentralization and devolution of authority are the two concepts usually considered in empowerment (Chambers, 2014). Public participation can guarantee stability, make the development-oriented activities more effective and help build local capacities. But encouraging public participation requires different practices and methods as well as different expectations, which people should be aware of them. Strengthening social cohesion and ensuring the principle of justice and social satisfaction are being emphasized as the main features of empowerment; this issue is of vital importance in regards with the poor segments of society. Responding to the overriding needs and creating a mechanism to involve the poor in the process of planning and building problem-solving skills, have to be at the center of attention.

There are many definitions of empowerment among which the following can be noted: Empowerment means delegating authority to people in an organizational position, which more than anything else, implies the will of the person to take responsibility and accountability; or it can be defined as delegating legal power and authority, commissioning and granting power. Empowerment is also defined as the groundwork for increased dialogue, critical thinking and activity in small groups (Lee, 2013). To develop plans and programs that are closely related to the local needs and status of communities, the labor force and human resources must be constantly engaged in the planning, funding, implementation and evaluation of development projects, and also contribute in fostering development by their behavior and decisions. Following such an approach, planning and management would be a bottom-up process and based on empowerment, with an emphasis on human resources, social capital and

participation of the every district residents (Bandura, 1995). Accordingly, human beings, as active creators, contribute in the process of initiation and shaping of development.

Empowerment also means increasing the power of individuals and groups where individuals, families and communities can take action to improve their situation. In other words, empowerment is a dynamic flow of power within the society. Intrinsic motivation, perception and commitment, job structure, transfer of power and sharing resources and information constitute the main components of empowerment (Robbins, Crino, & Fredendall, 2002). In light of empowerment, the ability and competence of people will be employed in order to improve and increase productivity, growth and development of the organization and workforce (McNamara, 2001). Thus, a genuine bottom-up approach of empowerment is expected. Mechanical instilling of the concept of empowerment in society, without considering the social and cultural context, would reduce its impact. Furthermore, since it is not rooted in the social fabric, it would definitely be short-lived in terms of sustainability. Empowerment requires strengthening the accountability of individuals, which is attainable in light of confidence-building and breaking hierarchical thinking. In this approach, the population, organizations and civil society are the main agents of development process (Mayer, 2008).

The approach to poverty alleviation in the last three decades in Iran, at least at the level of strategic plans of the government, could be regarded as a move from meeting the basic needs to local empowerment and participation; this transition is based on identification of the basic needs of development and recognition of the necessity of providing social services and delegation of some small development projects to non-governmental organizations, by local communities in accordance with local capacity.

Iran's Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (2005-2009) (Planning and Management Organization, 2004) also had particularly emphasized on job security, promotion of food and nutrition security, equal opportunity and access to education, employment, investment, paying special attention to deprived areas and increasing their income, targeted subsidies, improving the supply of basic needs of the population and ultimately reducing poverty through empowerment programs for underserved and low incomes populations. Iran's Fifth Development Plan (Planning and Management Organization, 2010), aiming at empowering needy individuals and groups, especially female-headed households and the needy disabled, set its agenda priority on the empowerment of at least 10% of families covered by supporting organizations, with the exception of the elderly and the mentally handicapped (Paragraph B, Article 39).

The existence of this legal background for empowerment and poverty alleviation provides an important opportunity for organizations that are active in this area. Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF), as the major organization in the country working in this field, having focused on the concept of empowerment, seeks to achieve the goals of poverty alleviation programs. IKRF essentially has to design its programs and advance its goals through being placed under such upstream documents. However, the problem is that the poverty alleviation programs are less attached and linked to the National Development Plans of the country. To be precise, the required organic relationship between Development Plans and empowerment and poverty-oriented programs of the IKRF can be rarely observed. Actually, the main concern of the Five-year Development Plans of Iran is knowledge-based development with an emphasis on industrial production, which is less considered in empowering the clients of the IKRF.

This problem is actually linked to another deficient structure, namely lack of infrastructure, which makes not only the private sector but also the government to have less effective presence in investment at deprived areas due to the lack of minimum requirements of living in such places. On the other hand, the main focus of the development programs of Iran is mostly industrial development, however, investment is normally being attracted in areas where the required grounds are prepared and ready. This leads to exacerbation of imbalances; In other words, as a result of existing deficiencies and lack of facilities, skilled manpower and investment attraction would not have a significant presence in deprived areas. So the cycle of underdevelopment will be exacerbated and poverty would be reproduced.

The IKRF, as the largest supporting organization in Iran, follows human development strategies for empowerment and poverty alleviation under the following themes: strategy towards meeting the basic needs, poverty alleviation via offering microcredits by institutions, microfinance and local funds' development, raising income levels, creating income opportunities and improving the quality of life of the rural poor. To achieve this important goal, IKRF pursues the participation and engagement of people in the safety-net programs which, presented under the heading of empowerment, increase the success degree of such schemes.

Promoting skills, knowledge and motivation play a significant role in empowering individuals. Knowledge and skills' development is the trump card of the knowledge-based organizations. In this respect, by creating a sense

of control over the implementation of tasks and activities, empowerment fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability. During the last three decades, IKRF, considering its charter and mission statement, has organized ongoing activities for self-reliance and empowering needy individuals and poor families. This is particularly being pursued in the form of self-sufficiency programs. Self-sufficiency schemes are offered either in the form of loans and grants paid to the households covered by the IKRF, for carrying out activities like carpet weaving, woolen cloth weaving, knitting, sewing, handicrafts and keeping livestock or through short-term and long-term training and employment counseling as well as job finding. Activating capacities and social potentials as well as proper and proportionate use of social partnership, necessitates adoption of an engagement strategy to empower the poor through development of social partnerships.

2. An Introduction to the Case Organization: Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF)

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation was established in March 5, 1979, for unlimited period, to provide support for needy people and poor families and also make them self-sufficient. The headquarters of IKRF is in Tehran and it has branches in almost all cities and towns of the country. The organization has a Central Council, the highest decision-making body, which is responsible for all affairs of the IKRF. Head of the IKRF as the Chief Executive Officer is also a member of the Central Council and implements all the resolutions adopted by the Council. The General Office in each province serves as the coordinator and supervisor for the affairs of main branches located in the cities and municipalities.

The number of people covered by the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation in Iran is 4,500,000. Of these 1,500,000 are elderly people and about 800,000 are students and female-headed households. In addition, almost 3,000,000 people receive case-specific services of the IKRF.

The Relief Foundation supplies the required resources for its aid programs via donations, local incomes, religious payments, contributions by organizations and institutions, aids of the charities and factories, revenues from economic activities and governmental funds. In addition, running various ceremonies such as charity celebration, a celebration of affection and religious festivals, the Relief Foundation collects donations from people and then distributes them among needy groups and individuals. In order to better realize its goals and fulfill its potential and actual capacities in external environment, the IKRF has associated with charities and non-profit associations and organizations inside and outside the country (Report of the IKRF performance on social affairs, 2014).

2.1 Objectives and Mission

The activities of the IKRF cover all areas of cognitive, counseling, advocacy, empowerment and executive affairs. In this regard, the main functions of the organization are as followed (IKRF):

- Identifying and understanding the material and spiritual deprivations of the poor, providing their basic needs and improving their lives;
- Reviewing and proposing policies, operational strategies, plans, programs and practices to address the deprivations of the poor, to the competent authorities and carrying out follow-up measures for their realization;
- Providing the required facilities in order to make individuals and families self-sufficient through creation of employment, granting loans and providing vocational training;
- Facilitating the delivery of health and medical services as well as providing vulnerable classes with health and social insurance, to the extent possible and within the framework of applicable laws and regulations;
- Pension payments (cash and in-kind contributions), interest-free immediate loans, helping with repair and supply of housing, marriage and dowry requirements;
- Supporting individuals and families in need faced with problems caused by accidents or natural and unnatural disasters;
- Offering advice, assistance and necessary legal support and services to less fortunate individuals and families;
- Ongoing support from people without caretakers;
- Providing support services for the needy elderly (60 years and older) in rural and tribal areas;
- Offering loan facilities including self-financing loan, allocating capital, creating the atmosphere of self-sufficiency, providing tools and work equipment and providing technical and vocational training to create job opportunities;
- Creating the opportunity for continued education of children and promoting the scientific and cultural level of the people covered by the IKRF.

2.2 Empowerment Programs of the IKRF

Empowerment schemes of the IKRF are mainly identified in the form of self-employment programs. With this explanation, according to the reports of this organization, during the period of 2001 to 2007 only 44000 households became self-sufficient via the self-sufficiency programs. This means that less than 3% of the households which enjoyed self-sufficiency facilities of the IKRF, turned to the status of self-sufficiency and their pensions were cut. Another important point is the number of households became self-sufficient, which shows a decline of 6674 in 2001 to 2268 households in 2007 (IKRF Center for Planning and Information Technology, 2008); this is while the number of households being covered by such schemes during the same period, enjoyed the average annual growth of 15% and have increased from about 147000 households to more than 238000. In addition, the proportion of households being self-sufficient among the total number of households receiving loans, decreased from 4.5% in 2001 to about 0.7% in 2007 (Karimi, 2009).

Based on the empowerment programs of the IKRF, by the end of 2007, 117800 households and during the six-year period of 2008 to 2013, 271000 household clients have been removed from this cycle. However, the anticipated number of self-sufficient households through the active schemes had to reach 930700 by the end of 2013. Thus, a wide range of the programs of the IKRF had little impacts and benefits for the families. Since every year a significant amount of the financial resources of this organization is being spent for creating job opportunities, education and employment for clients, the evaluation of the success of varied self-sufficiency schemes of the Relief Foundation and finding ways to improve and increase their productivity is of utmost importance (IKRF Center for Planning and Information Technology, 2013).

2.2.1 Education and Employment

Reviewing the performance of IKRF in the field of education and employment in the ever-changing environment it becomes apparent that IKRF is facing a lot of challenges and in order to improve its performance must overcome them. For instance, education for the purpose of empowerment should be aimed at promoting job skills tailored to the needs of the future market. Such an approach can enable the clients to find sustainable and secure jobs. This is while most of trainings, such as rug and carpet weaving, face lower demand for labor force and therefore cannot provide an opportunity to get out of poverty.

From the total trainings provided in 2013 to 406636 people (long-term vocational trainings: 90,885 people, short-term vocational trainings: 260687 persons, vocational trainings for high school students: 37852 students and master-apprentice trainings: 17212 individuals) only 37461 people have been successful in employment (IKRF Center for Planning and Information Technology, 2013). This is despite the fact that their education was entirely targeted based on the number of people anticipated to enter the labor market.

2.2.2 Microcredits

In reviewing programs and initiatives of the IKRF, the significantly visible fact is that, planning to take the poor out of the circle of poverty by empowering them is in the form of microfinance. Based on a new concept of poverty alleviation, one of the main ways of the supporting organizations for rehabilitation of people is through self-employed loans; a solution which is known as microcredit. The credit is used for creating at least one new small business or developing the existing one.

The goal is that the people who already possess the ability to perform activities of economic benefit even very small ones, but for various reasons are unable to get bank credit, could improve their activity and raise their incomes by having access to such funds. Here, the credit will be granted to the people who, despite being poor, are capable of setting up and managing small businesses, and repay the credit from their income. Granting these credits should be accompanied by financial facilities for investment, exemption from insurance and tax and offering consultancy services on business, job training and feasibility studies.

2.2.3 Self-Employment Loans

The total granted loans of the IKRF during a period of six years from 2001 to 2007 increased from 65% to 81%. In addition, this organization annually spends certain amounts to create self-sufficiency spaces, providing technical and vocational trainings and running training workshops. During this period, almost 468000 loans was given to clients for creating new jobs, however, only about 44000 families became self-sufficient through the implementation of these projects. In other words, on average, for every 11 loan, there was one case of self-sufficiency. Comparison of the average amount of granted self-sufficiency loans with the average capital required for a permanent job, is another index which could be used to compare and evaluate the quality of jobs created by the Relief Foundation. Furthermore, comparison of the average amount of self-sufficiency loans granted to clients in different years with the average required investment to create jobs in other sectors, indicates

that the loan amounts were much less than the amount they could create sustainable jobs.

For example, in 2006 the payable loans by the Fund for Supporting Careers of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Iran was 10000 USD; however, in this year, an average of 2400 USD was paid to clients (IKRF Center for Planning and Information Technology, 2009). Also, according to a report by the Deputy for Strategic Planning and Monitoring on Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), the average credits offered in 2007 were about 6300 USD for self-employment projects, 9200 USD for projects in agricultural sector and 16300 USD in mining industry. This is while during the same year, the average credits paid for self-sufficiency programs of the Relief Foundation was 4200 USD, which is roughly equivalent to one third of the average capital necessary for creating a sustainable job opportunity (Deputy for Strategic Planning and Monitoring of the President's Office, 2007). Consequently, the jobs created with very little capital, would not enjoy the necessary stability and cannot suffice to cover the costs of a typical household. This is one of the main reasons of the failure of self-sufficiency goals in regards with the majority of IKRF-covered households. It should be noted that from 2009 to 2013, such loans increased averagely 0.8% in terms of numbers and decreased 40.8% in terms of the amount (IKRF Center for Planning and Information Technology, 2013).

2.2.4 Sustainability of Jobs Created

A permanent and sustainable job that meets the living expenses can be a secure source of income for households. The type of jobs created in QIP projects and the comparison of the average loans paid through self-employment schemes with the cost of creating a job opportunity, are the two indicators of the quality of jobs created within the self-sufficiency plans of the IKRF. Self-sufficiency loans are relatively of high diversity but the biggest share of them is dedicated to livestock, agriculture and horticulture which all have lower return compared with industrial activities and services, and in addition, those working in this sector are lower paid than workers in other sectors (The Annual Statistical Reports of the IKRF during 2009-2014 acknowledge this claim).

Given this context of opportunities and threats, this question would be raised that how far the protectionist approach and empowerment policies of the IKRF proved to be fruitful? And to what extent the performance of this organization has reduced the number of the poor? Here, based on a set of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats recognized by experts, elites and clients about the performance of IKRF, the attempt has been made to identify sound and effective strategies to take advantage of the strengths, avoid the threats, seize the opportunities and reduce the vulnerabilities.

3. Methodology

In order to identify the most effective strategies to promote the performance of Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, SWOT analysis is used. In strategic approach, SWOT, is the best technique to analyze and guide the environment (Yüksel & Dagdeviren, 2007) and is considered as a management tool in developing operational strategic programs (Amin, Razmi, & Zhang, 2011). This method is a general tool for analyzing the internal environment (strengths and weaknesses) and external environment (opportunities and threats) and a systematic approach toward the issue which helps in decision-making positions (Wheelen & Hunger, 1995).

The main internal and external environmental factors that can affect the future of an activity are considered as strategic factors, which are being listed in a summarized form within the method of SWOT analysis (Kajanus, 2001); (Kajanus, Kangas, & Kurttila, 2004).

SWOT analysis is used to identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats faced by a system. The logic of the approach is that an effective strategy should maximize the system's strengths and opportunities and minimize its weaknesses and threats (Amin et al., 2011). After identifying the internal and external factors and evaluating them, the status of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation is discussed. The next step was to determine effective strategies for strengthening the organization in achieving the goals which are set based on the influential factors.

In the process of collecting Delphi questionnaires, the sample population was classified in two different groups: a) 14 questionnaires filled out by managers and experts associated with the organization, b) 15 questionnaires completed by professionals and academic scholars. Based on areas of research, it was requested from people familiar with the subject matter of research in universities and various specialized institutions, to introduce qualified and experienced experts in other research institutions as well.

To collect data for this study, direct observation, field study and survey method, interviews with experts and academic elites and questionnaires in the form of Delphi method were applied.

4. Analysis of the Findings

In this section, the data collected by SWOT analysis, were categorized in groups of internal and external factors that affect the performance of IKRF. After determining the internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) and classifying the data, analysis of the impact of each factor on the performance of the organization was carried out. The purpose was to find out how the identified factors are significant in the process and future direction of poverty-oriented and empowering measures of IKRF and would lead to what kind of strategy for this organization.

4.1 Internal factors

4.1.1 Strengths

- clear organizational goals
- commitment of employees and their high spirits to participate and respond to the needs of clients
- branches and multiple offices in the provinces
- updated information on the concerned problems and the target population
- wide range of supporting services
- acquiring an acceptable social capital and network communications in support of the poor within Iran's social system
- ability in carrying out projects to stimulate and apply religious traditions in favour of the poor

4.1.2 Weaknesses

- budget deficits, lack of resources, credit failures
- unnecessary expansion of organization resulting in extra costs
- non-statutory spending under poverty-alleviation programs
- inadequate advertising
- shortage of personnel
- generalization of supporting programs for empowerment, despite the different environmental structures
- lack of a coherent and guiding definition of the target population
- prevalence of protectionist attitudes and ignoring the causes of poverty
- insignificance of research and study in IKRF and the minor role of research in the promotion and improvement of the organization's programs
- disproportion between organizational structure of IKRF and its defined goals
- lack of planning and scheduling to achieve the goals
- mismatch between educational level of employees and their functions and their organizational positions
- lack of skilled experts and professionals in the training system of human resources
- lack of optimal utilization of communications and external relations
- predominance of emotional aspect over vital aspects of supporting the poor
- nonexistence of systematic relationship between collecting feedbacks and developing reform strategies
- lower utilization of science and technology in the Foundation's programs compared with other organizations
- inadequate compliance of empowerment programs with National Development Plans
- inefficiency in fulfilling a regulatory function

4.2 External Factors

4.2.1 Opportunities

- favorable view of society and the local trustees towards supporting the poor
- potential capacity to expand social insurance coverage for villagers and nomads
- availability of various partner organizations and institutions in the community; potential to solicit participation of fellow groups
- multiplicity of appropriate incentive measures on the basis of religious ideas in order to improve the absorption of community support
- participation of target groups, particularly in employment and empowerment
- positive attitude of the government and authorities in supporting the poor
- presence of upstream policies as well as convenient and efficient development programs to empower the poor
- anticipation and expansion of preventive systems against personal and social damages within the development programs of the country
- technological and communication capacities

4.2.2 Threats

- mass unemployment as the main problem of the country
- abundance of clients and annual increase of the new cases
- failure of microcredits in empowering
- geographical distribution of the target group and the age composition of the target population
- low literacy rate of the target population, and little awareness of their needs
- limitation of the number of institutions offering educational and social services
- shortage of specific supporting organizations in small deprived towns
- inefficiency of evaluation and monitoring system
- lack of development infrastructures in some areas
- existence of some prevalent and influential elements involved in the exacerbation of poverty in country including addiction, divorce, illiteracy, lack of social skills, the imprisonment of the head of households, physical and mental disabilities and accidents
- disorganization of supporting charities and NGOs in the country
- parallel functions of the institutions operating in this field and undermining of the potentials for dealing with poverty

Executive programs of IKRF for poor people are generally designed based on protectionist attitudes. Dominance of protectionist attitudes and paying little attention to the roots of poverty and the inadequate environment surrounding the poor, lead to widespread inaction and irresponsibility, either obviously or implicitly. Meanwhile, activating the objects of the target population in education and employment programs in order to empower clients has almost been ignored. In order to address this damage, shifting the approach towards enhancing participation of the poor and extending their capabilities is of great importance. For the purpose of attaining this main goal, the needy people must be grouped and organized in the form of social organizations, while in the light of participatory planning for more active participation of the poor in decision-making and implementation of poverty-oriented programs, the accountability of the poor should be enhanced. At this stage, the poor must be encouraged to design plans for their lives, and the roles and responsibilities should be transferred to them.

The lack of precise definitions of poverty, poor, empowerment and poverty-alleviation is another challenge that disturbs the consolidation of empowerment and poverty-alleviation programs of IKRF. Therefore, there is not a sound basis or a consensus to provide appropriate solutions. To be more precise, lack of coherent and directive definitions has made ambiguities in the strategies. Hence, it is essential to have clear definitions of concepts and the related problems so as to be able to develop and implement appropriate strategies to deal with them.

Empowerment programs of the IKRF are designed with a narrow atomistic view whose area of coverage are developed on the basis of traditional economy with less attention to the macro-economic structure defined within the Development Plans of the country. The resulted employments or empowerments would have an unstable future which due to the lack of organic connection with economic foundation and development programs of the country, will not enjoy the overall support of the Development Plans either.

Therefore, it is recommended to adopt a precise definition of poverty-oriented, support and empowerment programs. In addition, while the main concern of 5-year Development Plans of the country is knowledge-based development with an emphasis on the industrial production sector, the areas of support and empowerment schemes of Relief Foundation are focused on non-industrial fields. Avoiding to do any adjustment between empowerment initiatives and development programs, it appears that supporting and developing the traditional economy would be unstable. Therefore, expanding market-based programs as a guiding element for economic empowerment activities is emphasized.

Annual increase in new clients' cases, shortage of personnel and credit limits are the main challenges of the organization in realization of poverty-alleviation plans. Not-so-transparent performance of IKRF on the one hand, and spread of beggary on the other hand, have led to the loss of social capital and support of the advocates of this organization. Thus, the budget deficit and required funding to implement poverty-oriented programs of IKRF have been a principal concern of the management of this organization.

If executives in different levels, do not provide sufficient reasons for the future success of poverty-oriented and empowering programs and projects, people would not have the required incentive to spend their time, energy and facilities to implement them. The people will not support such programs nor actively participate in their implementation. Involving more comprehensive range of social forces in the form of civil societies for the realization of anti-poverty programs provides the organization with good executive leverages to advance its objectives. It also is a way to compensate for the lack of funding and shortage of manpower. Therefore, IKRF

should provide the grounds for participation of local stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of poverty-oriented and empowerment programs.

The large organizational structure of IKRF has also resulted in higher costs; considering the problem of resource deficits, this would be a major challenge for achieving the goals of the Foundation. Thus, any proposed strategy must be devised on the basis of the two following principles:

The first principle is taking advantage of the potential of a vibrant civil society; this is feasible and possible by the existence of numerous pro-poor agencies as well as through institution-building among the clients to carry out projects. The second one would be taking advantage of the benefits of interagency relationships in order to transfer a major part of the costs to other organizations, including social security insurance to Social Security Organization. In short, faced with vast number of roles to be played for poverty alleviation and empowerment, IKRF should focus on institution-building, outsourcing and enjoying the inter-organizational relationships so that on the one hand, could benefit from the specialized function of each institution and on the other hand could avoid from being involved in the cost-related bureaucratic issues, specifically as to the areas where the personnel and administrative expenses should be the least.

Weakness of IKRF in employing inter-organizational relationships is another serious challenge of this organization which leads to parallel, overlapping activities and failure to use the potential of organizations and institutions involved in the fight against poverty. Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation always complains about finance deficits as an obstacle against the full realization of its programs. This is while parallel activities of the institutions involved in the issue of poverty alleviation and empowerment, have undermined the potentials in dealing with the poverty. For example, in some cases, refusal of support by Social Security Organization has enforced IKRF to take the responsibilities of measures in this area too. In this case, Social Security Organization must provide conditions which enable the poor to be covered by insurance with appropriate tariffs; accordingly, a lot of people would be automatically removed from the IKRF list, since for them, the only reason to enter the IKRF system is their inability to pay their medical expenses.

Another issue in this area would be the necessity of taking advantage of the potential of reputable scientific centers for improvement and continuous promotion of the performance of IKRF. This, more than anything, needs to outsource research projects and take advantage of potential academic institutions. Thus it is recommended that the policies of the IKRF be directed towards defining poverty alleviation as a social problem, thus actuating and enjoying the potentials of institutes and universities to identify means to empower the poor and implement poverty alleviation projects. Undoubtedly, establishing an organic and logical relationship between Relief Foundation and other civil society and government bodies is one of the strategies to promote the capability of IKRF in the realization of its goals.

5. Strategies

Strategies are being developed in order to achieve a more favorable position. Strategies include a series of special actions needed to provide policies. In case of IKRF, strategies can determine what kind of supports should be developed in specific places and which policy should be adopted to use the facilities and services in the best way for the benefit of the clients. In SWOT analysis, after identifying the internal and external factors and determining their degree of significance as well as the overall situation of this organization in terms of these two factors, effective strategies must be formulated. Having analyzed the situation, in order to map out the strategies, it is required to create strategic balances between opportunities and strengths as well as threats and weaknesses. Strategies are being drawn up based on a combination of four factors involved in the strategic planning; whereas during this process, some strategies may overlap each other or be executed simultaneously and in harmony with one another. The following strategies, effective in optimizing the performance of IKRF, are classified in four categories of strategic balance:

5.1 SO Strategies (Aggressive Strategy): To Exploit the Opportunities Utilizing the Strengths

- Regulating and developing cooperation and strengthening inter-organizational relationship with parallel organizations like Social Security Organization, State Welfare Organization and municipalities, in order to share and cooperate in the implementation of the wide range of supporting services that IKRF lacks the necessary resources to fulfill them.
- Networking and strengthening linkages with NGOs and community-driven organizations to exploit the benefits of participation of local communities in poverty alleviation and empowerment.
- Outsourcing and reducing the responsibilities of the IKRF in order to manage costs and shortage of specialist personnel.

- Strengthening social capital through advertising and publicizing information about supporters and those who help the poor.
- Developing mechanisms to derive benefit from civil monitoring
- Encouraging a culture of accountability, documentation and self-assessment of the charity entities

5.2 *WO Strategies (Review Strategies): To Reduce Vulnerabilities by Taking Advantage of Opportunities*

- Setting up collaborative mechanisms to delegate responsibilities and roles to the poor in conducting supporting programs; this would increase the degree of success of such projects.
- Decentralization and setting up a mechanism for assigning roles to local stakeholders in planning, implementation and monitoring.
- Increasing transparency and accountability in terms of financial information and performance reporting: considering the sensitivity of the community, whether the support groups or the clients' group, this would play an important role in attracting and keeping their advocacy.
- Creating feedback mechanisms to identify and respond to stakeholders' expectations of IKRF.
- Outsourcing research projects to scientific centers to deepen the performance of the IKRF.
- Improving the human resources of Relief Foundation, as the main agent of providing services, in order to empower the organization at individual, team and organizational levels, through teaching, learning, innovation and continuous improvement.
- Designing programs for poverty alleviation and empowerment within top universities and colleges in order to take advantage of the academic abilities and prevent the spread of bureaucracy or imposing ongoing costs to IKRF.
- Moving from supplying basic needs towards local empowerment and participation with the support of inter-organizational relationships and utilization of capacities of scientific and research centers.
- Motivating the private sector beyond mere traditional philanthropy, so as to mobilize all community facilities in poverty alleviation and empowerment; this would contribute in benefiting the poor while meeting their needs.
- Taking advantage of technological capacities to mobilize resources and accelerate service provision.
- Aligning poverty alleviation programs with National Development Plans for using the potentials of the legal structure and enjoying the outcomes of development.

5.3 *ST Strategies (Diversification Strategies): To Avoid Threats and Use Strengths*

- Since it is not possible to simultaneously achieve all the goals, the listed objectives need to be prioritized by importance and necessity. Then, required incentives and resources to achieve that goals should be provided.
- Improving managerial role of IKRF in the area of poverty alleviation and empowerment through giving trainings to civil society organizations and expert associations so as to improve their performance.
- Advising decision-making institutions to increase access of the poor to the markets, and adopting policies against local and national discrimination.
- Actuating religious and cultural institutions in poverty alleviation activities in the form of workshops at schools, universities and cultural centers.
- Giving advice to decision-making institutions to design programs to balance development in different regions and investment in deprived areas.
- Compiling scouting reports of IKRF in the field of poverty alleviation and empowerment, and acting as the monitoring entity over the measures and activities of state institutions in this area.
- Organizing, developing and monitoring the local partnerships supporting the disadvantaged.

5.4 *WT Strategies (Defensive Strategies): To Reduce Weaknesses and Avoid Threats*

- Strengthening insurance-based approach in support affairs; offering comprehensive and efficient insurance as well as quantitative and qualitative expansion of the social security system and health insurance services would provide the foundation for improvement of the business environment and reduction of risks of economic activity for the poor.
- Strengthening the technical advisory role, particularly in developing long-term plans of the government in the field of structural handling of poverty and empowerment.
- Given the concentration of poverty in border areas, expansion of economic activities in the border areas and southern coasts and islands via utilizing the country's foreign trade capacity.

- Development of cooperative sector to enhance the ability of clients in a coherent structure with the aim of empowering them.
- Providing trainings to promote job skills tailored to the needs of the future market, enabling the poor to find stable jobs in future.
- The poor, especially those who are able to work, have to be actively involved in the process of poverty alleviation.
- Appointment of IKRF as the main agent of educating subsidiary bodies in the field of poverty alleviation and empowerment as well as the key monitoring body.
- Setting up a mechanism for transparency of financial information and submitting performance report to ensure the financial health of the organization and maintaining supporters' trust.
- Coordination with Social Security Organization in order to cover appropriate social security to protect the poor from economic shocks so as to reduce new clients entering the IKRF system.
- Drawing the action plans of the IKRF in collaboration with academic and research centers, based on local and regional parameters, in order to take advantage of local and regional potentials and improve the possibilities for realization of the programs.

6. Conclusion

If we classify the approaches on dealing with the problem of poverty into three levels, namely the micro level of individuals, the middle level of groups and the macro level of structures, most of the activities of IKRF would be categorized in the micro level which is mainly based on cash payments. This issue specifically makes major problems for IKRF in the field of empowerment including vulnerability of the jobs created for households in environmental conditions, market conditions (sales) as well as rising inflation, which all need the adoption of a structured macro approach in order to be resolved. Therefore, despite the wide range of the poverty-oriented activities of the IKRF and efforts to empower its clients, the proportion of self-sufficiency in these plans is declining.

Prevalence of protectionist attitude within all supporting schemes of IKRF and failure to take note of the main roots and causes of poverty is also a missing link in the programs of this organization. In addition, the policy of financial support is of main priority and bringing about independence remains in margin. Besides, the offered trainings lack organic relationship with the context of the development of the society; most of the trainings, such as rug and carpet weaving are of lower labor demand, consequently couldn't be an opportunity to get out of poverty or provide the basis for finding sustainable jobs. At the same time, the necessities for maintaining and strengthening human resources in the areas that suffer from uneven development must be provided through adequate and wise investments. Functioning as the provider of expert advice in the field of poverty alleviation, empowerment and social justice to decision-making bodies, and acting as the monitoring entity over the performance of state institutions in this area must be taken into consideration.

Finally, enhancing the role of IKRF from being an executive agent toward a monitoring body can broker a solution to address the complex challenges that this organization is dealing with in realization of its goals of poverty alleviation and empowerment. On the one hand, multiplicity of civil society organizations working in the field of poverty alleviation and empowerment, which are often damaged from overlapping roles and parallel activities, and on the other hand, the wide range of social problems and socially disadvantaged people who require specialized services, call for a structure that strongly emphasizes on the supervisory and guiding role of the IKRF. This issue could be followed through trainings for civil society organizations working in the field of poverty alleviation and empowerment, besides organizing and strengthening civil institutions.

Promoting social capital for the purpose of poverty alleviation and empowerment of the target population is another objective that this organization should prioritize in its programs. This goal could be pursued through establishing and strengthening mechanisms to monitor charities, creating a system for recording the information of charities by themselves and encouraging charities to report and do self-assessment, and finally advertising about this system as a criterion for community support from organizations which communicate and document an acceptable report of their activities in that system. Carrying out fieldwork, once in a period of a few years, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of services and improvement of performance will be a consolidating measure. Finally, to achieve the best strategy in terms of empowerment, cooperation in research activities with well-known academic centers, transparency of performance, training manpower, taking advantage of the potential of inter-organizational relationships and deepening it, monitoring the performance of government agencies and civil society organizations active in this field and being placed within the feasibility sphere of the national Development Plans are essential.

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