

A Grounded Theory Study of Determinants of Access to Members of European Parliament (MEPs) for Human Rights NGOs Regarding the Human Rights Situation in Iran

*Abdollah Baei Lashaki**

*Alberto Lanzavecchia***

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Abstract

The EP has become an essential venue for Human Rights NGOs who work on Iran's human rights issues. However, the determinants of their access to MEPs are not precise. This study aimed to generate a theory grounded on the data that explains the determinants of access to MEPs for HRNGOs regarding the human rights issues in Iran. The systematic design of grounded theory designed by Corbin and Strauss is applied in this study. Theoretical sampling guided the recruitment of 11 representatives of Human Rights NGOs covering the human rights issues in Iran. Continuous comparison method in three phases of open, axial and selective coding was operated for data analysis. The theory of informational determinants of access of Human Rights NGOs to MEPs explains the determinant of access of these organisations to MEPs. The generated theory can guide Human Rights NGOs to apply the best strategy to access MEPs on human rights issues.

Keywords: Access; Information; Tactics; MEPs; Human Rights.

* PhD Graduate, Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies, University of Padova, Padua, Italy. (Corresponding Author)

Email: abdollah.baeilashaki@studenti.unipd.it

** Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies, University of Padova, Padua, Italy.

Email: alberto.lanzavecchia@unipd.it



1. Introduction

Human Rights NGOs¹ are a critical component of participation in human rights policymaking. They attempt to influence policymakers by applying different strategies. For example, in November 2010, after the arrest of Nasrin Sotoudeh, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders started a campaign and requested that people and policymakers' urgent intervention in that issue.

Since the European Parliament (EP) plays a crucial role in protecting human rights in third countries, MEPs are amongst the policymakers that NGOs try to interact with. Since the EP's beginning, Iran's human rights situation has been widely discussed in its reports and resolutions. As a result, the EP adopted several sanctions and resolutions towards Iran. For example, on 20 January 2011, the EP adopted a resolution, particularly in the case of a human rights activist, Nasrin Sotoudeh. In its resolution, the EP asked the Iranian government to immediately and unconditionally release her and all other prisoners of conscience.

Therefore, the coincidence of HR NGOs' activities and the EPs' resolutions toward Iran raised the question of whether the NGOs influenced MEPs' decisions. Therefore, researchers in this study decided to study the influence of NGOs on the MEPs' decisions. However, examining the literature, we found that measuring influence could be more problematic in human rights issues.² Therefore, some researchers introduced access as an alternative approach for measuring influence. However, Pieter Bouwen believes access does not fundamentally mean influence. He believes that some lobbying groups might access to decision-making bodies of the EU without translating this position into actual policy outcomes. However, Bouwen considers access to the EU decision-making bodies as a pre-condition to influence different decision-making processes. Hence, access is expected to be a good indicator of influence regarding human rights issues in Iran.³

This research utilised a qualitative study that derives its data collection and analysis framework from, and depends upon, relevant, grounded theory principles. It is used to develop an understanding of the determinants of access of NGOs to MEPs regarding the human rights issues in Iran and create a

1. We use NGOs instead of Human Rights NGOs to make the text smoother.

2. Pieter Bouwen, "The Logic of Access to the European Parliament: Business Lobbying in the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42, no. 3 (2004): 473–96.

3. Bouwen, "The Logic of Access."

framework through the utilisation of emergence, coding, and analysis. Therefore, it is regarded as a suitable methodology for this research as it attempts to explain an unclear issue related to the access of NGOs to MEPs.

The theory derived from this study sheds light on the informational determinants of access to MEPs and contributes to understanding the lobbying process in human rights issues. It also fills a literature gap by exploring how NGOs contribute to improving the human rights situation in Iran and provides guidance for their strategies in accessing policymakers.

2. Research Methodology

To study the determinants of access of NGOs to MEPs regarding the human rights situation in Iran, we applied a quantitative approach. As we explained in the introduction, this approach has three parts, which we explained below.

2.1. Sampling

In the sampling section of this research, the theoretical sampling method was used to create the theory. In theoretical sampling, the samples were selected to obtain a comprehensive and rich set of data.⁴ Theoretical sampling was not based on simple random selection or a sample representing a particular community, but rather a type of sampling whose primary purpose was to assist us in developing a theory.⁵ In this sampling method, samples were selected to help us clarify and define the boundaries and appropriateness of the categories.⁶

In theoretical sampling, an attempt was made to guide the analysis of the research process. We considered that after seven interviews, the main and sub-themes were repeated in the previous interviews, and we reached theoretical saturation. In this study, 11 NGOs were considered the interviewee's sample size. Interviews in this section were conducted from 06/10/2020 to 03/02/2021.

2.2. Systematics Data Collections and Analysis

In the method we applied to create the theory, data analysis was performed simultaneously with their collection, and these two processes were not separate from each other. During the data collecting process, their analysis was started

4. Ylona Chun Tie, Melanie Birks, and Karen Francis, "Grounded Theory Research: A Design Framework for Novice Researchers," *SAGE Open Medicine* 7 (2019).

5. Chun Tie, Birks, and Francis, "Grounded Theory Research."

6. Juliet M Corbin and Anselm Strauss, "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria," *Qualitative Sociology* 13, no. 1 (1990): 3–21.

simultaneously, and through simultaneous analysis of the collected data, awareness was created to collect more data. Therefore, as Charmaz pointed out, the distinction between data collection and analysis stages in traditional research methods was deliberately ignored.⁷

Data analysis involves systematic yet flexible procedures for constructing a theory inductively. This process of data analysis is accomplished through the coding process. Coding means that different parts of the data are labelled to indicate what each piece of data is about.⁸ The process of data analysis is accomplished through the coding process. The data analysis process required the application of a continuous adaptation strategy. Continuous adaptation requires deep and continuous immersion and comprehensive and sufficient knowledge of the data or the ability of theoretical sensitivity. In this study, relying on the coding procedure of Strauss and Corbin and mainly Allan,⁹ a flexible and straightforward model for data coding was used.

2.3. Data Analysing Process

Three phases of coding that include the systematic grounded theory approach were applied to analyse the data. These coding stages pursue the order of open, axial, and selective processes.

2.3.1. First Cycle of Coding

After identifying the key points in the data, they were assigned codes or labelled in this way. After encoding and labelling the key points, the sensitive and essential conceptualisation stage began. However, extracting concepts was a complex and challenging activity and required creative confrontation with the initial code and an abstract representation of events and interactions between the coding data. To convert the data from the descriptive level to the conceptual level, after identifying and recording the key points and assigning the code to them, the resulting codes were analysed. Furthermore, finally, those codes related to each other were grouped and described in terms of a specific concept.

7. Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage, 2006).

8. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

9. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research Techniques* (Citeseer, 1998); George Allan, "A Critique of Using Grounded Theory as a Research Method," *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods* 2, no. 1 (2003): 1–10.

2.3.2. Second Cycle Coding

After identifying the concepts, the relationships between them and the common axis that connects them were identified. In a more precise sense, other common axes were found, referred to as categories by comparing concepts. Categories were created through the process of analysing and comparing concepts based on similarities and differences between them. This stage of coding is called as axial coding.¹⁰ The guiding principle of the second stage of data analysis was theoretical sampling. The theory of theoretical sampling required that inferred concepts be categorised and organised. Therefore, common concepts were grouped and described in more significant categories to extract categories.

2.3.3. Final Cycle

The final data analysis stage enables researchers to develop a grounded theory based on qualitative research. In general, the theory derived from qualitative research is a set of relationships that offers a plausible explanation of the phenomenon under study. This theory consists of relationships that provide a plausible explanation for the research problem. It combines data sources and draws coherent, systematic relationships between concepts and categories. The main category is selected objectively, and other categories are subjected to it. Relationships are validated, and categories in need of improvement and development are completed.

3. Findings

The details of the findings of the interviews and focus group discussion, with the extracted categories from the coding process, are presented in this section. In the end, the researcher discusses the theory developed in this study.

3.1. Open codes and Axial Coding

The data analysis developed initial categories regarding the studied phenomenon based on all data collected.¹¹ The “*Informational determinants of access to MEPs on the human rights situation in Iran*” phenomenon was determined to be the centre of the process by considering 12 extracted categories. The determination of the core category was based on the frequent

10. Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research Techniques*.

11. John W Cresswell, “Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research,” *Educational Research*, no. 10 (2012).

appearance of this category in transcriptions related to interviews. Also, the relationship of this category with other categories and their coverage, the integration of other categories around it and its theoretical superiority compared to other categories was the reason for choosing this category as the core category. Table 1 indicates the process of converting the categories into the core categories.

Table 1. The Approach to Converting the Categories to the Core Category

Core Category	Categories				
Informational Determinants of Access to MEPs on the Human Rights Situation in Iran for HR NGOs	Causal Condition	Supplying Political-based Information	Supplying Technical Information	Supplying Legal Information	
	Strategies	Cooperation			
	Interfering Conditions	HR NGOs Longevity	Material Resources		
	Contextual Conditions	Face to Face Meeting	Sending Emails	Media Strategy	Mobilization Strategies
Consequences	Direct Access to MEPs	Access to Advisors			

Six axial categories constructed the groupings of the open categories. Creswell¹² defined that an axial coding paradigm demonstrating the interrelationship of the categories is affected in this phase. The core category selected is informational determinants of access to MEPs on the human rights issues in Iran. The coding paradigm indicates that the causal conditions have an impact on the core category. Strategies are affected by the core category, contextual, and intervening conditions. Consequences are affected by the strategies.¹³

12. Creswell, "Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating."
 13. Creswell, "Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating."

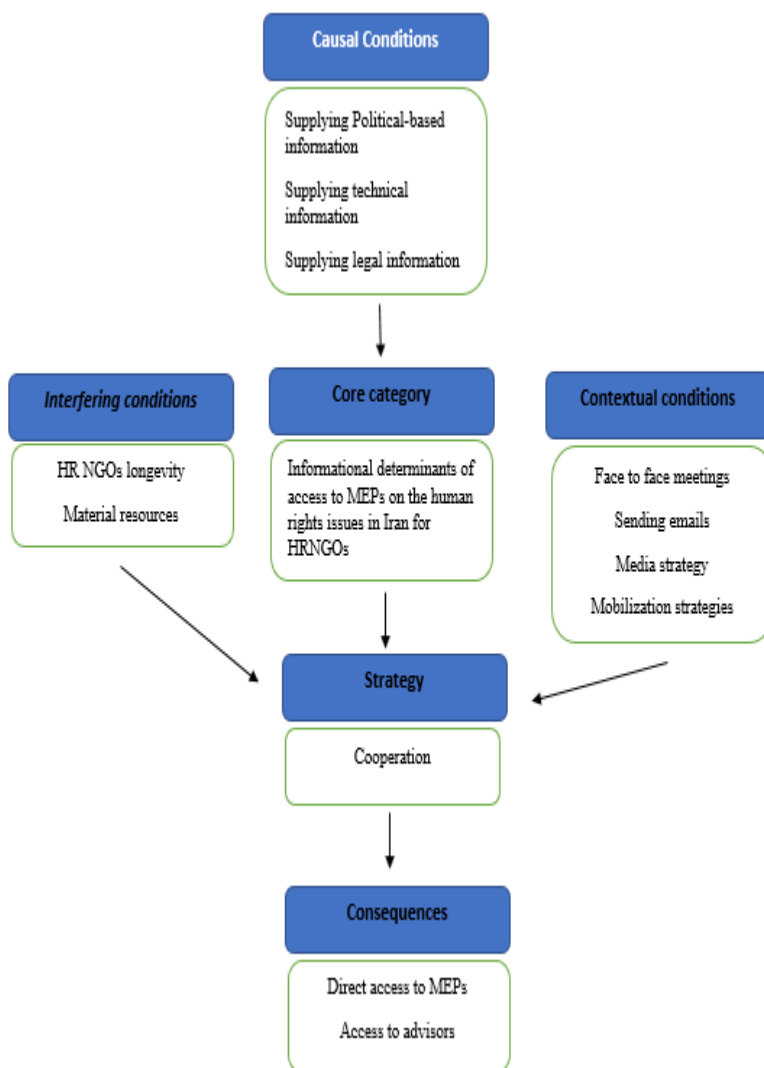


Figure 1. Axial coding paradigm

The main categories of research are developed around Informational determinants of access to MEPs on the human rights situation in Iran as a central phenomenon. The following categories are presented with examples of raw data or direct quotes from the interviewees.

3.2. Core Category

The core category determined for this study is Informational determinants of access to MEPs on the human rights situation in Iran for HR NGOs. It repeatedly emerged in all the transcribed interviews. As Corbin and Strauss¹⁴ stressed, it was selected because the core category is relatable in all the other categories. All representatives of NGOs who participated in this research expressed that the main factor which led them to access MEPs is information. As a representative of an NGO expressed, "Whiteout information prepared in a good way, going to meet MEPs and telling them the situation of human rights is not good, and you should do something, leads to nothing."

NGOs provide different information types for various reasons based on their goals. However, they are aware that to influence MEPs, they have to provide information based on the informational needs of MEPs on the human rights issues in the third countries. Therefore, NGOs may have not the same capability to provide different types of information based on the MEPs needs. Nevertheless, they share the same desire to access policymakers in different institutions by supplying them information regarding the human rights abuses in Iran to promote the human rights situation in Iran.

3.3. Causal Conditions

The characteristics that influence the core phenomenon are categorised under causal conditions. These explain the reasons based on that NGOs access MEPs regarding the human rights situation in Iran. Therefore, these factors play a significant role in the determined phenomenon. These causal conditions were divided into three main groups: Supplying political-based information, supplying technical information, and supplying legal information. Each of these three categories will be addressed in detail in the following.

3.3.1. Supplying Technical Information

Supplying technical information is an essential requirement for NGOs to access MEPs. The supply of technical information by NGOs can be seen as part of an expertise-based exchange process in which MEPs seek technical information from NGOs and therefore provide them with access or raise their voices to be heard by decision-makers at a different level. Technical information refers to "highly technical", "scientific aspects", "data-driven

14. Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (London: Sage publications, 2014).

information", and "the effectiveness of a specific policy". However, the existing literature is not optimistic about the ability of NGOs to supply technical information;¹⁵ NGOs activities include providing technical analysis and documenting human rights violence. Monitoring human rights issues in Iran allows NGOs to collect data and provide technical information and emphasise any issues that need quick intervention. By providing technical information on the general or special cases, cooperating with other HR NGOs, and transmitting information to MEPs and the public, NGOs try to be the voice of unheard voices of victims of human rights violations. They use technical information to access MEPs. For example, an interviewee said their organisation tries to influence MEPs by providing technical analysis and research reports based on facts and figures. The interviewee mentioned that:

Through supplying technical information, our organisation tries to access MEPs to convince them to consider the human rights situation in Iran as their priorities. For example, every year, we provide information related to the people executed in Iran by providing statistics and comparisons of different years. With our organisation efforts, I mean by our quarterly or monthly reports in most EP resolutions, we can see the EP condemn Iran for the high number of executions in Iran.

3.3.2. Supplying Political-based Information

A literature review in the existing studies regarding the access of interest groups to MEPs indicates that supplying political-based information is one of the tools NGOs gain access to MEPs.¹⁶ Political-based information refers to the level of political and social impact or support regarding an issue under the consideration of MEPs. These types of information are not directly related to the substance of an issue but are more related to support and public opinion regarding that issue. Therefore, NGOs signal the level of support regarding the human rights issues in Iran to MEPs by supplying these types of information. Pieter Bouwen¹⁷ believes that based on "the constituency orientation of the MEPs", they require information about the desires of their voters. On the other hand, Dür and de Bièvre discuss that NGOs based on their limitations cannot

15. Iskander De Bruycker, "Pressure and Expertise: Explaining the Information Supply of Interest Groups in EU Legislative Lobbying," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54, no. 3 (2016): 599–616.

16. Iskander De Bruycker and Jan Beyers, "Lobbying Strategies and Success: Inside and Outside Lobbying in European Union Legislative Politics," *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 1 (2019): 37–56.

17. Bouwen, "The Logic of Access."

supply expert information; therefore, they are more likely to supply “compelled to constantly appeal to general principles like equity, social justice, and environmental protection” that has less value for the EU decision-makers.¹⁸ Findings of this study show that NGOs provide information about public opinion and the political and social impact of their decisions or silence regarding the human rights situation in Iran. These two factors are categorised as supplying political-based information in this study. The present study results show that despite the limitations of HR NGOs, these organisations try to influence MEPs with information regarding public opinion and the political and social impacts of MEPs’ silence on the human rights situation in Iran. In this regard, we can refer to the statements of one of the interviewees:

We believe that in addition to the expert information we provide to MEPs, by providing information on public opinion in the EU or Iran and the negative political and social implications of not taking effective action on human rights issues, we highlight the importance of our expert information.

Also, the other interviewee mentioned that:

Providing information based on the public opinion, especially in the case of Iran, is not the way we provide technical information to MEPs. However, in most of our meetings, we give them limited oral information about the political impact of human rights issues in the EU in order to remind them this issue is important, and they should take the necessary action regarding that issue.

3.3.3. Supplying Legal Information

Besides technical information regarding the human rights situation in Iran, NGOs also supply legal information to influence MEPs. A review of the available literature shows that many researchers have examined legal information in the form of expert information.¹⁹ However, the findings of this study indicate that although the provision of legal information requires a high degree of expertise, this expertise is different from the expertise used by NGOs to supply technical information. In this regard, interviewee mentioned that:

Apart from the fact that we review human rights issues in Iran based on

18. Andreas Dür and Dirk de Bièvre, “Inclusion without Influence? NGOs in European Trade Policy,” *Journal of Public Policy* 27, no. 1 (2007): 79–101.

19. Adam William Chalmers, “Trading Information for Access: Informational Lobbying Strategies and Interest Group Access to the European Union,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 1 (2013): 39–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2012.693411>.

facts and figures annually or quarterly in annual reports, we also separately review human rights violations in Iran under international law and EU law. We provide information using legal language because EU members have to respect the human rights clause while having relations with third countries. That is why I have separated EU law and international law.

According to the interviewees, supplying technical information to MEPs is not enough. In their opinion, the combination of this type of information with legal-based information provides a better picture of the human rights situation in Iran for MEPs. Therefore, legal information is considered a kind of compliment to technical information. The process of converting the concepts into the core categories is shown in the table 2.

Table 2. Causal Conditions

	Categories	Sub-categories
Causal Conditions	Supplying Political- based Information	Public Opinion Political and Social Impact
	Supplying Technical Information	Information Regarding Special Cases Information in the Form of Yearly, Quarterly or Monthly Reports Analysis and Research Reports
	Supplying Legal Information	The Violation of the Eu Law The Violation of International Law

3.4. Interfering Conditions

According to Creswell,²⁰ intervening conditions facilitate or limit strategies in specific areas. These conditions include the budget, number of staff of an organisation, longevity of an organisation which affect the adoption of strategies of HR NGOs. The intervening conditions of this study were categorized as 'longevity of NGOs and material resources.'

3.4.1. NGOs Longevity

The longevity of NGOs activities can also affect NGOs' function as information providers since they, as the supplier of different types of information, need experience in different issues. As some NGOs operate longer in human rights issues in Iran, they comprehend the situation and have more capability to provide different types of information. As a result, NGOs have more chances to access MEPs or sometimes lobby on this situation with

20. John W Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (London: Sage, 2014).

MEPs with different information types and incentives. Furthermore, as NGOs work longer in the human rights issues in Iran, other NGOs try to develop a network with them to share their information or apply tactics to influence MEPs. This tendency to cooperate with other organisations can strengthen HR NGOs' function as human rights advocates.

MEPs and other politicians typically accept the information we provide with complete confidence because of our organisation's longstanding work on human rights issues. Also, they are aware that based on our longstanding work, many people in the world trust us and follow the information we provide to the public... Also, other organisations are eager to collaborate on different issues because of our great work on human rights issues in Iran for a long time.

On the contrary, organisations that their activities in the human rights issue in Iran are not if the activities of some well-known NGOs have some limitations regarding supplying different types of information. Since they do not have their network in Iran to provide them first handed information, they cannot provide expert information on different issues. In this regard, one of the interviewees explained that:

Well, many people in Iran are not aware of our activities since we are almost a new organisation compared to others like Amnesty international. So, we have limitations in recruiting people in Iran to provide us with the information we need.

3.4.2. Material Resources

Financial and staff resources are necessary conditions for NGOs towards their goals. NGOs need to acquire enormous material resources to supply information required by MEPs. Since providing information regarding human rights issues needs data from the context of those issues, the budget, and staff of NGOs is essential. The higher the spending power of HR NGOs, the more they can provide different types of information and invest in diversifying their tactics. In this regard, an interviewee explained that:

...Our financial resources play an influential role in the diversity of the information we provide. As a non-governmental organization that depends on donations from different resources, our budget sometimes makes it difficult to provide certain types of information. ...Given that providing technical information requires a lot of financial resources, we face the challenge of how to provide the required resources. Sometimes, we need to

provide information as quickly as possible, but our budget limitation is a serious barrier. Now consider that we want to hold demonstrations in Brussels or plan seminars on the human rights situation in Iran with these budget constraints.

Expert staff is another important resource in preparing and analysing data. In this regard, one of the interviewees explains:

One of the things we sometimes suffer from is the lack of specialised human resources in the data analysis process. Due to some limitations in some areas, we do not have enough manpower. For example, sometimes, we need a person that specialises in this area to make a thematic analysis of women's rights. Unfortunately, finding such a person is sometimes time-consuming and difficult for us.

Table 3. Interfering Conditions

	Categories	Sub-categories
Interfering Conditions	HR NGOs Longevity	
	Material Resources	Budget Human Resources

3.5. Contextual Conditions

Creswell explained that contextual condition is a circumstance that affects the strategies.²¹ The contextual condition is a situation that serves as the backdrop of the procedure under study, which affects the activities correlated to the core category and is regarded as a situational factor. The contextual conditions for this study included the Face-to-face meetings, sending emails, media strategy, and mobilisation strategy.

3.5.1. Face-to-face meetings

One of the tactics used by NGOs to access MEPs on human rights issues in Iran is face to face meetings with MEPs. NGOs take every opportunity to influence MEPs in their meetings by providing them with detailed information related to the human rights violations in Iran. NGOs know that information they transmit to MEPs through an interview with a well-known or in seminars or other public events is also transmittable through face-to-face meetings with

21. John W Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative* (Hoboken: Prentice Hall Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2002).

MEPs; however, not all information is transmittable through face-to-face meetings is transmittable through other tactics to access MEPs. The superior efficiency of face-to-face meetings concerning information processing should encourage NGOs to prioritise face to face meetings. Because some of NGOs are registered in the EU lobbying system, these organisations can have pre-scheduled meetings with MEPs or, in some cases, schedule emergency meetings with them based on the importance of the issue to inform them the exact situation of human rights condition in Iran by different types of information. On the other hand, other organisations with limited access to the EP try to have a direct meeting while MEPs attend seminars or other places, however during their meetings with MEPs in seminars and other places outside of MEPs offices they cannot deliver much expert information. One of the interviewees stated:

Many times, we have met MEPs in seminars or other places. These opportunities helped us talk to them about our priorities, and we provided them with some key points of our information that we could not provide them through other access channels. So, although not much information can be provided in these meetings, we can provide the basis for sending information via email and other possible ways.

3.5.2. Sending Emails

Sending emails is one of the easiest ways to send information to MEPs or manage a meeting regarding the human rights issues in Iran. NGOs can find MEPs' official email address on the website of the EP. NGOs doubt if this tactic is good enough to take the attention of MEPs, however they explained that the first choice of them is to send detailed information to MEPs by email. An interviewee stated that: "We are aware MEPs might receive a lot of emails every day, and they might not have time to check all, but we do it because we don't want to miss any chance to influence MEPs." Also, the other interviewee explained that: "We send emails to MEPs based on our agreement with MEPs to send them information we collected about the human rights conditions on specific issues in Iran." The other interviewee who claimed that they have regular access to some MEPs stated that, however, they meet MEPs in different situations, they sent all the information they provide to MEPs by email. The rationale of the interviewee was that they could provide critical points of their information during a meeting, but they could not provide all details of their information in an hour.

3.5.3. Media Strategy

Based on the activities of NGOs, it seems natural that these organisations use the media to promote their activities to influence the people and MEPs. Interviews on HR NGOs' relationship with the media and the public show how NGOs act as agenda-setters and norm-generators and use the media to pressure MEPs. Representatives of some NGOs stressed that their organisations have separate communication teams. These teams publish their activities through the media based on the circumstances and announce their readiness to accept media interview requests. One of interviewees considers communication with the media and the public essential for NGOs. The interviewee added that they use the media for purposes such as *“awareness of the public and putting pressure on politicians.”* Based on another interviewee explanations, public awareness is essential for their organisations in two ways. First, this awareness helps NGOs raise more money for their targeted projects, and then this awareness can indirectly put pressure on decision-makers.

3.5.4. Mobilization Strategies

Mobilization strategies is another tactic based on which NGOs try to indirectly send their information to MEPs. This category is consisting of two other sub-categories, which are legal demonstration and holding discussions and conferences. Although holding legal demonstrations and holding discussions and conferences is associated with many challenges due to NGOs limitations, they consider it to impact public opinion and attract the attention of MEPs. One of interviewees stated that in different cases, when they plan legal demonstrations or hold a conference, they attract a lot of media attention, and this causes the message of these activities to be noticed by many people, especially MEPs. The interviewee points to the various demonstrations in some European cities supporting Nasrin Sotoudeh to show the impact of legal demonstrations on access to MEPs. Also, regarding the seminars the interviewee said that:

We try to conduct seminars and round tables to discuss the situation of human rights issues. Sometimes we invite some MEPs or their assistances to participate in our events. During these kinds of gatherings, we provide different types of information and discuss all aspects of an issue. Since we can provide the attendance of our events in more detail, I think this way is better than sending information via emails, and they do not consider it.

Table 4. Contextual Conditions

	Categories	Sub-categories
Contextual Conditions	Face to Face Meeting	-Face to Face Meeting in the Official Offices
		-Face to Face Meeting in Seminars or Other Places
	Sending Emails	-Sending Emails to Official Emails -Sending Emails to Advisors
		Media Strategy
Mobilization Strategies	-Legal Public Demonstration -Holding Discussions and Conferences	

3.6. Strategy

Strategy is a mechanism and tactic used in dealing with a specific phenomenon and is based on actions and reactions to control, manage and deal with the described phenomenon. These strategies are purposeful and are based on specific reasons. They outline the process, leading to the consequences. The strategy used in this study to manage the phenomenon is influenced by the set of causal, conditional, and intervening conditions described earlier. The strategic condition in access to MEPs is labelled as Cooperation of NGOs.

Cooperation among NGOs can determine their access to MEPs based on the information they supply or tactics they provide to access MEPs. NGOs' cooperation exists when some NGOs collaborate on specific human rights subjects in Iran. They have different motivations to form cooperation based on their concerns. For example, an NGO might cooperate with other organisations based on their limitations on staff and material resources or their needs regarding specific types of information. In this regard, an interviewee explained that:

We have many reasons to work with other organisations. Perhaps the most important reason for us is access to first-hand information on the human rights situation in Iran. But rather than working together to have particular types of information, we work together on how to draw the international community's attention to the human rights situation in Iran. This cooperation may be simply because of access to information, but other reasons are also essential.

Table 5. Strategy

Strategy	Categories	Sub-categories
	Cooperation	

3.7. Consequences

These categories were evaluated to be the consequences after the strategies were conducted to access MEPs. The consequences included direct access to MEPs and access to advisors of MEPs.

3.7.1. Direct Access to MEPs

Some NGOs have regular access to MEPs regarding the human rights situation in Iran. As a result, these organisations provide MEPs information about different human rights issues in Iran. Also, the relationship between NGOs and MEPs is not a one-way road. According to the interview statements, some MEPs regularly asked NGOs to provide information about some cases. For example, one of the interviewees stated that:

We regularly, I mean every month or at least quarterly, meet MEPs to share our information with them and consult them about the human rights issues in Iran. But there were times that they asked us to provide them information about human rights issues in Iran. Last time we met some MEPs who asked us to provide them information about the situation of Bahai's in Iran.

On the other hand, many NGOs do not regularly access MEPs; however, based on the information they provide on particular cases, they meet MEPs to provide more details or consult them about that issue. This situation happens typically for NGOs who work specifically on human rights issues in Iran. An interviewee regarding the access to some MEPs stated that:

We have many limitations to meet MEPs. Sometimes we meet them in seminars or other places. But there were times when we provided them with some critical points of our information in seminars or some public events, and after a while, we had a message from MEPs to meet them or provide them with more information. So, however, the number of these types of MEPs is tiny; some let us meet them in some exceptional cases we provide information about.

3.7.2. Access to advisors

Based on the busy schedule of MEPs sometimes it is not possible for them to meet HR NGOs. Therefore, the advisors or assistances of MEPs meet HR NGO representatives to discuss the information they provide or ask them for more details about human rights conditions in Iran or particular cases. In this regard, an interviewee stated that:

Honestly, we don't expect to meet MEPs in person on different issues whenever we want. But we know they are busy, and they may have other priorities. So, in most cases, we meet MEPs' advisors to share our information and convince them to do something to advocate for victims of human rights abuses in Iran.

Table 6. Consequences

	Categories	Sub-categories
Consequences	Direct access to MEPs	Regular Access Access Regarding Special Cases
	Access to Advisors	

3.8. Theory Building

Selective coding is the final coding phase in grounded theory. According to Corbin and Strauss, selective coding is integrating and refining a theory.²² A visual model highlights the inter-relatedness of the concepts and the connection between the categories. A middle-range theory grounded in the data is generated, which describes on an abstract level the informational determinants of access to MEPs regarding the human rights issues in Iran. Since the theory is close to the data collected, we can say that the theory is the middle-rang.²³ The theory labelled as informational determinants of access to MEPs was presented in Figure 2. Also, based on the method Creswell introduced, the theory was followed by a series of theoretical propositions, statements revealing the relationship of the generated categories.

The exchange theory can define the informational determinants of access to MEPs. For example, some researchers use the exchange theory to study the lobbying process in the EU. According to this theory, based on the limitations

22. Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures*.

23. Creswell, "Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating."

of EU institutions, they are not internally self-sufficient. Therefore, they demand resources from the outside and interact with those groups that control the resources they require. A significant consequence is that organisations outside the decision-making process in the EP can exchange resources they need in exchange for access to the decision-making process.

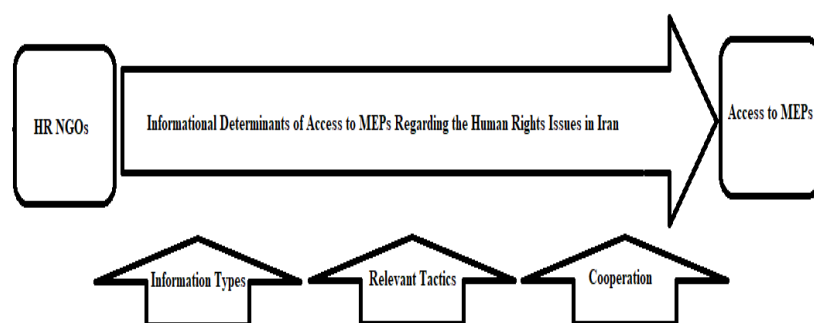


Figure 2. Theory of informational determinants of access to MEPs regarding the human rights issues in Iran

3.9. Propositions

Propositions were determined which describe the connection among the categories. These are statements defining the concepts indicating the approach to informational determinants of access to MEPs regarding the human rights situation in Iran.

3.9.1. Proposition 1: “Information is a key factor based on which NGOs can access MEPs.”

Information is often seen as the currency in the EU in the expertise-based exchanges between different types of interest groups and EU policy-makers. MEPs based on their function and commitment to human rights issues struggling with complex situations and to solve them they need different sorts of expertise. Usually, they lack detailed information on human rights issues in the third countries and time pressure and busy schedules preclude them to collect the relevant information regarding those issues themselves. NGOs are attractive to MEPs they work closely with victims of human rights issues and they often possess different types of information regarding human rights issues. However, what NGOs desire is access to MEPs to raise the issue's importance.

Access of NGOs to MEPs can be manifested through providing different types of information. Providing technical and legal information followed by political-based information can increase NGOs chance to access MEPs to influence MEPs to take the necessary action regarding the human rights situation in Iran.

3.9.2. Proposition 2: “Combination of tactics that NGOs employ provide them with access to MEPs”

NGOs employ various channels to convey their message to MEPs. When determining their access tactics, NGOs choose the channels through which they can reach MEPs effectively. These channels offer numerous opportunities for NGOs to ensure that their message is heard by MEPs. Some channels involve the public and are more open, while others are private and not subject to public scrutiny. NGOs can directly transmit information to MEPs through face-to-face meetings, emails, or by targeting the media and the public. Inside tactics refer to HR NGOs' direct communication efforts with MEPs, utilizing more direct approaches. These inside tactics enable NGOs to establish private communication channels for direct exchanges with MEPs, allowing them to decide whether to maintain confidentiality in their interactions.

Conversely, some NGOs prefer outside tactics, such as publicizing information on social media or contacting reporters to exert pressure on MEPs. These strategies, known as outside tactics, involve making their messages public and engaging the broader public and media in discussions about human rights issues. By employing a combination of inside and outside tactics, NGOs can grab the attention of MEPs, highlighting human rights concerns in Iran, and potentially gaining access to them.

3.9.3. Proposition 3: “Cooperation of NGOs during the provision of information and tactics to influence MEPs can lead them to access MEPs regarding the human rights issues in Iran.”

Cooperation among NGOs plays a pivotal role in their access to MEPs regarding the human rights situation in Iran. These collaborations facilitate efficient goal achievement in their activities. NGOs cooperate by sharing and interpreting information and strategizing communication with MEPs. The more NGOs cooperate in information preparation, the greater chance to access MEPs. Credibility is enhanced when multiple NGOs collaborate to provide information, particularly when smaller organizations align with well-known

ones to bolster credibility. For well-known organizations seeking first-hand information on Iran's human rights situation, cooperation with smaller organizations possessing local connections is preferred due to access restrictions.

Regarding strategy, NGOs cooperate to exert more significant pressure on MEPs, emphasizing the significance of specific issues through media and social platforms. Doing so signals to MEPs that neglecting these issues can have political consequences. Furthermore, cooperation among NGOs raises awareness among EU citizens about Iran's human rights situation, indirectly influencing MEPs by enhancing public knowledge.

In summary, cooperation among NGOs amplifies their impact on decision-making and MEPs access. Collaborations optimize information exchange, increase credibility, exert pressure on MEPs, and enhance public awareness, ultimately contributing to their collective influence on human rights issues.

4. Implications

In contemporary academic areas, the consideration regarding the access of different interest groups, especially NGOs, to different policymakers have expanded dramatically,²⁴ as it can be perceived by different conferences, review articles and specific journal topics. Different case studies,²⁵ and surveys,²⁶ address the issue of access of different interest groups to different institutions. These studies show that the access of different interest groups to the policy-making process depends on different information types²⁷ and informational tactics.²⁸

24. David Coen and Alexander Katsaitis, "Chameleon Pluralism in the EU: An Empirical Study of the European Commission Interest Group Density and Diversity across Policy Domains," *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 8 (2013): 1104–19; Justin Greenwood, *Interest Representation in the European Union* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2017); Patrick Bernhagen and Thomas Bräuninger, "Structural Power and Public Policy: A Signaling Model of Business Lobbying in Democratic Capitalism," *Political Studies* 53, no. 1 (2005): 43–64.

25. Andreas Dür and Gemma Mateo, "Who Lobbies the European Union? National Interest Groups in a Multilevel Polity," *Journal of European Public Policy* 19, no. 7 (2012): 969–87.

26. Lisa Maria Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, "Advocacy Strategies in Global Governance: Inside versus Outside Lobbying," *Political Studies* 65, no. 3 (2017): 705–23.

27. Jonas Tallberg et al., "NGO Influence in International Organizations: Information, Access and Exchange," *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (2018): 213–38; Marcel Hanegraaff and Arlo Poletti, "Public Opinion and Interest Groups' Concerns for Organizational Survival," *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 2 (2019): 125–43.

28. Dür and Mateo, "Who Lobbies the European Union?"; Marcel Hanegraaff, Jan Beyers, and Iskander De Bruycker, "Balancing inside and Outside Lobbying: The Political Strategies of

This study is an addition to contemporary academic studies regarding the importance of information to access decision-makers at the EU level. This reveals that supplying information is the fundamental part of an exchange process based on that NGOs can access MEPs regarding human rights issues. Although the level of access to MEPs for NGOs is different based on different variables, NGOs can access MEPs by supplying different types of information types based on the informational needs of MEPs. Through supplying information to MEPs, NGOs can fulfil their goals to advocate the human rights situation in Iran. Victims of human rights in Iran can be affected by a political decision that the EP makes based on the human rights issues in Iran. In addition, through the theory developed, which was labelled as “informational determinants of access to MEPs regarding the human rights issues in Iran for HR NGOs,” more NGOs will be guided on how to access MEPs on human rights issues in Iran.

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