

## An Introduction to Reading Promotion in Iran

**Mohsen Haji Zeinolabedini** | To achieve scientific, cultural, and economic growth and prosperity, there is no way except to promote a reading culture and create a continuous and purposeful public habit. Therefore, promoting a reading culture can be considered as a fundamental step in human development and the development of countries. It is sensible that in order to achieve this purpose, establishing the habit of reading among the general public must be considered. Because promoting reading has focused its work on integrating its services with people's daily lives, helping them solve their problems, nurturing their talents and deterring them from inappropriate tendencies to unhealthy entertainment and unfavorable desires due to its high moral and ethical objectives. Such activities importantly are supposed to provide suitable opportunities in order to gather different groups of people to benefit from reading and efficiently spending their leisure time and in addition, guide them in developing human relationships and share their emotions. In such activities, there are often no differences among people in terms of their age, knowledge, and health and everyone, regardless of their race, nationality, religion, or ethnicity, is encouraged to read and such cul-

tural gatherings can provide them with the opportunity to read a variety of information sources in order to preserve and transmit knowledge to enhance their intellectual ca-

capacity and their knowledge. According to the latest guidelines by the International Federation of Librarian Associations and Institutions (IFLAs) for public libraries, NGOs play

an important role in shifting the focus onto the cultural and artistic development and promoting reading books inside a society.

Extensive and healthy reading programs can effectively help develop the moral values and mental health of the community and attract more people to read books, prevent the disadvantaged groups from committing delinquency and criminality, and compensate for the deficiencies and moral failures such as shyness, jealousy, stinginess, and extreme competition.

In this regard, not only should the organizations and institutions related to books and reading strive to provide services to ordinary people and to the ones who receive their services, but also to the specific groups of society such as ethnic, religious, and racial minorities, the disabled, patients, prisoners, workers, housewives, employees, children, and villagers by providing physical conditions and appropriate facilities in order to promote reading and in addition, they should extend such services to remote and under-populated areas through book promotion groups, mobile libraries, and other facilities. It should not be. [continue below]



[continued from upon] ... overlooked that these activities will be effective if they go beyond the bureaucracy and come out inside a society, and people will be intrinsically motivated to encourage each other to read books. Thus, in addition to sharing experiences, feelings, and interests, reading will grow its root among the people and it is, of course, more desirable that the reading promotion is gained and offered by themselves. In Iran, promoting book-reading culture has been systematically structured for several years. Therefore, it is appropriate to review the activities carried out in this regard, to introduce a number of successful projects in Iran, in order to compare the local plans, evaluate the national ones, and identify the potential strengths and weaknesses.

These programs have special privileges that distinguish it from other regular activities. The followings are the most important ones.

- Non-Governmental Plans: This plan is a voluntary one organized by the public and non-governmental organizations. The idea of encouraging book-promotion groups rose among the groups themselves and book fans and then followed by the colleagues and activists. Initially, more than 90 active plans were received by the festival secretariat, which was several times more than what had been expected.
- Matching to Local and Regional Needs: All the plans and activities are "native". None of the plans have been copied from the western models or ideas implemented in the capital. Each group has established and implemented creative and innovative activities based on their needs, backgrounds and experiences.
- Low-cost and Economically Healthy: All plans are economically "healthy and well-built"; either those which are char-

ity-driven or those have been strengthened with small cultural-economic activities, they have consciously and controllably eliminated the possibility of any kind of corruption in their group.

- Volunteerism: None of these groups have been given a mission from either government or private sector (such as publishing industries, semi-governmental organizations, etc.), and all have worked solely to promote book-reading due to their personal concern.

- Extensive use of virtual social networks: Utilizing the capabilities and features of "virtual space" are of other features of these plans. Accordingly, using the site, blog, email, and even virtual networks (such as Facebook) and mobile-based virtual networks (such as Viber and Telegram) has been noticed in most of the plans received. This feature becomes even more important when many of them have been implemented in remote cities and even villages, reflecting the expansion of these capabilities and the breadth of IT-based activities.

- Group-work: While many people (and even experts) in the society claim that the culture of teamwork has been diminished among the people, but the plans sent for the festival showed that more than eighty percent of them are run as a group and by popular support. This is an important point that is expected to be addressed in public and private sector planning.

- Focus on Women and Children: According to education experts, the most focus should be on this age range and this is also a fundamental feature in the international plans and fortunately it is clearly reflected in the plans reached at the festival. Another highlight is the "strong presence of women and girls". These groups have practically proved this claim that women outnumber men in voluntary engagement and activities.

**Esmail Yazdanpour** | Reading is that unique nexus between the individual mind and the human culture. For the past 3000 years, books have shown to be the most truthful medium of culture and no other media has ever provided better services to the society. In the past five years, reading promotion projects in Iran have enjoyed a fresh start. An astonishing number of group and individual book promoters have started new and innovative rounds of activities. They have started forming networks and communicating each other, thus learning from each other and using new ideas and methods for reading promotion in every corner of the country. As a result of these emerging networks in different cities and villages, municipalities are planning fresh cultural projects around books and reading, village authorities have recognized village libraries as centers for public to participate in rural development projects. Moreover, individual and organizational reading projects are now recognized and are finding

new languages and platforms for communication of ideas and experiences. All these are boosting writers, publishers, book distributors, bookstores and libraries who in turn, find their specific location within the network.

Even the social media, once recognized as a threat to the book, is serving the flow of books and promotion of reading within different layers of society. Today reading promotion initiatives in Iran have found their due central position and every cultural, educational, environmental activist, has discovered the pivotal role reading promotion campaigns can play for development of any benevolent project.

This is a brief report on some of the main initiatives for reading promotion in Iran. Although such a general report cannot cover all the creativities and new energies that are activated in the field, it clearly shows a map of the prodigious position of such projects at every level of the Iranian society.







**Ali-asghar Seyedabadi**  
**Advisor to the Minister,**  
**Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance &**  
**Director-General of Planning Office,**  
**Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance**

Book reading clubs are a local plan and the appraisal must be locally, as well. Accordingly, we have villages which had been successful, without receiving any expenses. They had performed good works, even though sometimes they would be unsuccessful. However, the great achievement is that these clubs are formed and held with contribution of local people and they vary depending on capacities of each region. Book-reading clubs are a contributonal-local activity. Tehran does not decide for these clubs and decisions are held locally. For this reason, method of operation varies from a city to another city and from a province to another province. It is powerful in some provinces and is weak in others. Hence, some provinces follow contribution models, while others follow official models, so we cannot judge about all provinces equally.

Holding review sessions is one of specifications of book-reading clubs cup. People who acted as facilitators in different cities and provinces usually propose their reviews about the effectiveness of issues proposed in the workshops and then they can reform their activities for the next year. Our colleagues in the central secretary collect all executive criticisms related to the official structure and then transfer them to directors and then directors will try to solve the previous problems.

Some specifications of these projects are as follows: discovering and running a sustainable relationship with the active and noble forces in any geographical region of the country in order to guide and encourage them to start an effective movement in the framework of cultural goals of Iran, discovering new pats and methods to fair distribution of financial resources given the cultural capacities and needs of each region and also paying attention to the imperatives of “Resistive Economy”.



**Ebrahim Heidari**  
**Director-General of**  
**Cultural Studies and Book Reading Office,**  
**Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance &**  
**Secretary of book-loving towns and**  
**villages Steering Committee**

Since the inception of the 11th government of Islamic Republic of Iran, the Cultural Affairs Deputy of Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in cooperation with a number of governmental and non-governmental entities and organizations started to devise and implement a set of book-reading promotion initiatives in order to achieve cultural justice development especially across less-developed areas, villages and remote cities, to decentralize, to realize sustainable cultural and social development, and also to provide various walks of life with subsidies of publishing area.

The most important book-reading promotion programs are choosing and introducing the book capital of Iran, holding book-friendly villages and nomads festivals, holding festivals to appreciate book-reading promoters and holding book-reading clubs cup for children and young-adults. The joint steering committee consisting of governmental, non-governmental and popular organizations was established to coordinate among book-friendly cities and villages, book-friendly cities network, book-friendly villages network, book-reading promoters networks. The committee acts according to the statute and based on certain purposes such as book-reading promotion and enhancing the synergy between various organizations as the executive arms and planning for books areas since 2018. Using national, religious and regional capacities and attracting people and various industries’ contributions in villages, cities and geographical areas to implement book-reading plans, to develop unity and coherence in national and regional levels, to design and implement cultural and book-reading plans, which have brought about coherence and sympathy to implement economic programs in many areas, are among other achievements. Such synergy among public and private organizations and institutes to implement cultural programs on books field, strengthening infrastructures of publishing industry, especially bookstores, libraries across various cities and villages of the country, intensifying the relationship between writers and urban and rural audiences are other realized purposes of these projects.



**Mohsen Haji Zeinolabedini**  
**Head of the National Reading Promoters Network**  
**& Faculty member of LIS, Shahid Beheshti University**

Organizing programs for reading promotion and establishing related events – such as Reading Mondays at kindergartens and pre-school centers, Cup of Reading Clubs for Children and Young Adults, Festival for Appreciating Reading Promoters and Clubs, Designation of Iranian Book Capital and Festival for Bibliophile Villages of Iran with its special feature helping reading to flourish – are all invaluable activities for book promotion in Iran. But regarding an Iranian social characteristic, being a ‘short-term society’ as some historical sociologists call it, the continuity of these events necessities institutionalization and changing such a movement into a public demand by public groups for reading promotion and paving the way for their participation and presence in public policy makings. The scientific committee of the festival consists of five main members who are selected from experts, professors, and book and reading activists. These referees were from the faculty members or critics, writers, literary prize winners, editors of publications, and pioneers in the field of library and information science.

The criteria include:

- Sustainability in impact
- Creativity and innovation
- Attracting popular participation
- Being volunteering
- Creative use of existing facilities
- Attention to deprived areas
- Consistency with native culture
- Modeling capability



**Farmehr Monjazi**  
**Secretary of the National Reading Club Cup**

Today is the sixth anniversary of appreciating book-reading promoters. Maybe it can be said that the six years old is the beginning of a new round of activities, although promotion activities and introduction of books into children and young adults’ life start in families, and continues in schools, but we see this shortage both in families in schools. Fortunately both reading and finding new methods to encourage reading have become a concern for some classes of the society. Some people from each guild and age, from teachers and trainers to mothers who invite other children to enjoy book-reading are active in this field. Or the student who thinks can invite his fiends to read new books through bringing books to a remote school, or the doctor who prepare a shelf of books for her patients and or the driver who carries books for his countrymen. It is very nice that the book reading promotion activities have taken so seriously which a wide diversity is seen in works.

When the presence and necessity of something is felt, everybody will try their best to conduct it. Perhaps, it is for this reason that when we read cases of promoters we reach innovative and new ideas which indicate how useful have been these projects. It also shows that the promoter has felt that to make his/her work more attractive and to absorb more people to reading he/she can use more diverse methods.

It can be said that, as time goes by the works which are received are better and more diverse; however, maybe it is inevitable. Anyway, access to various methods through media, books and social media can be effective for both promoters and fans of books.

Although choosing a different and exquisite work will be very difficult for the jury and they have to discuss many hours about works, it is very pleasant. Because we know that judging and participation in festivals is an excuse and nobody has not started this path for awards and hooray.

When you categorize works in various fields and reach a section which indicates the continuous and sustainable activity of its promoters, you will be happy because you see that the work has been taken seriously and history and background. Perhaps what can be envied in the cultural section of the developed countries are cultural institutes with very long history and continuous social and cultural activities.

In other countries, you would find many libraries, bookstores and NGOs which have long history and are working for years and decades. When during reading and analyzing the received cases you would see that more works have been gathered in the section of continuity you will be happier, because you see that the promoters are going on and try to take advantage of newer methods. So, you are hopeful to face more diverse and attractive activities in the field of book reading promotion.



## Appreciating Book Promoters

Hundreds of book promoters are annually identified and honored at a national celebration. Appreciating the superior individuals and groups in promoting book reading is one of the most effective programs in the field of book promotion that was designed and implemented for the first time in 2014 and since then has been annually continued with the efforts of the individual and group volunteers active in this field. Firstly, this program was held with the presence of over 50 individuals and groups in which it was clarified that the nationally book-reading, in addition to the main circles of the publishing industry including authors, publishers, distributors and book sellers, relies on other social factors that need attention, planning, and support. The results of the first round of the program demonstrated that the individuals and groups working to promote reading at the local and national levels are among the most important forces influencing the development of reading culture in a society. However, policymakers and officials in the field of culture and reading have paid less attention to these influential forces. The serious competition of 60 applicants and the tremendous scope of their activities, despite the short time available for information giving, was one of the main incentives for the Deputy Director of Cultural Affairs to continue the program. In the second round, based on the prior experience, it has been accompanied by some structural and content changes. These changes include the addition of special sections as follows:

- The best teacher
- The best celebrant
- The best librarian
- The best book seller
- The best kindergarten

Adding these special sections has been due to the influence of these groups on different social strata and the presence of various individuals and groups across the country indicates the serious activity of these sections in a community. The program was thirdly held in 2016 under the supervision of the Iranian Library and Information Science Association (ILISA).

## Book-friendly villages and Nomads

Annually, ten nomadic villages are nominated as book-friendly villages due to their activities and programs. The sixth recall of this festival has been announced.

The "Book-Friendly Village and Nomads Festival" is a program run each year under the supervision of the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry and in the collaboration with a range of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Accordingly, every year ten nomadic villages or villages are nominated as book-friendly villages and nomads. To participate in the festival, the villages must introduce the specific cultural and social characteristics of the village, and their activities, plans and executive programs to strengthen the book reading substructure and promote the book reading in the village.

The festival aims to support the actions taken in the villages and innovative suggestions in the field of book-reading in the villages and to introduce cultural and promotional activities related to book-reading carried out by the people and institutions active in the village or anticipated for the coming year. Other goals and objectives are to allocate funds for expanding book and book-reading activities in villages and draw people's attention to the importance of books, make the rural environment more cultural and fill children and adolescents' leisure time with book. Thus, in collaboration with a number of governmental and non-governmental agencies in each province, a secretariat has been established to direct the festival in the province. Each village, according to the festival recall, should submit its documentation related to their book-reading activities in that village with the signature of the village assistant and the head of Islamic village council, along with the completed forms to the provincial secretariat of the festival based in the provincial headquarters of Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry or the central secretariat in Tehran. Village assistants, the Village Islamic Council, regional governors, mosques' cultural-art centers, schools, and other cultural institutions and popular organizations play an important role in introducing book-friendly villages. In the first festival, 620 villages participated, which increased to 800 villages in the second year. After several stages of judging and evaluating the activities and programs in these villages, 20 villages were nominated and in the final judgment, 10 villages were nominated as Iran's Book-Friendly Village.

## Children Book Club Cup

A comprehensive and honorable program for holding small book-reading groups across the country with the aim of reading books, discussing them, writing a letter to their authors, and selecting and introducing the best books that children have read.

Three Book Club Cups have been held so far and children and teens across Iran are preparing for the fourth one whose recall will be announced soon.

The Children Book Club Cup is a competition among book clubs in cities and villages across Iran whose fourth recall will be held in 2019 with the following conditions: Book Clubs are a permanent activity and any time of year under the conditions set out in this manual, eligible enthusiasts can register their club in the site. The clubs registered in the previous years are also officially accepted in 2019 and they can participate in the Club Cup and enjoy book discounts.

The facilitators are allowed to set up clubs who have participated in the workshops and the ones who did the previous courses can also set up a new club. A new course of workshops will be also held for facilitators in various cities in the year 2019 according to the manuals. The workshops will be held by the trainers who have participated in the provincial training workshops and are qualified based on the manual. Facilitators work voluntarily. According to the manual, they can register for the book club after passing the training workshop.

The registered book clubs can participate in the Reading Club Cup competitions. Both urban and rural book clubs to participate in the Reading Club Cup must first compete in the Reading Club Cup in their own county.

In this competition, participants will compete in various fields including the selected club, the selected letter, the selected film, the selected book, the selected facilitator and the selected bookseller.

## Art and Culture Creative Cities Network

Art and Culture Creative Cities Network is a plan aims at identifying cultural and artistic creativities in cities and geographical areas in Iran and creating some networks to define partnerships and joint programs among them. The plan is implemented under the supervision of the art affairs Deputy of Culture and Guidance Ministry and aims to identify and activate some centers as the main members of the network in each artistic climate.

Subject areas: Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Music, Fashion and Clothes, Handicraft and traditional arts, Literature, Media and press, Computer games, Cinema.

Each city can define some branches in the field of these ten subject areas and report on its potentialities and plans for its development. Finally, the cities with the best capacities, background, and programs are designated as the capital of that area or branch and take on the task of developing that branch across the network.

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## Selecting and Introducing Iran's Book Capital

Annually, each city's plans are judged and one city is introduced as Iran's Book Capital. So far, Ahvaz, Neyshabur, Bushehr, and Kashan have been the Book Capital, respectively. In 2019, Yazd is the Book Capital.

Iran's Book Capital is the title of a plan in Iran according to which a city is annually selected as Iran's Book Capital. Some parts of this plan have been modeled on the World Book Capital; however it has become largely consistent with the cultural situation in Iran in terms of its executive structure. In the first year when cities in Iran competed for the title of Book Capital, Ahvaz earned the title with the participation of NGOs such as the Citizenship Education Center for Development (CECD). In the second year, Neyshabur was given the title.

Since 2001, UNESCO has annually bestowed the title of World Book Capital to a city which has made a great deal of effort to strengthen the place of reading. UNESCO aims to launch cultural programs related to book-reading, thereby create a passion for reading among people.

This selection has no financial prize for the selective ones, but it is recognition of the best program devoted to books and reading. In the first festival, 64 cities with 390 plans responded to the recall and requested for the title of Iran's Book Capital.

After some formal evaluations, ten cities reached the final stage and were presented to the jury.

Considering the objectives and the evaluation indicators, the jury nominated Yazd, Bushehr, Gonbadkavos, Neyshabur and Ahvaz as the final nominees for the festival.

Finally, according to the jury's statement, the Book Capital of Iran, Ahvaz, due to presenting innovative, participatory, effective, and coherent programs and utilizing the capacities of the private sector, popular organizations, industries, sports and cultural centers, was bestowed the Certificate of Appreciation by the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the UNESCO National Commission.

In the second festival, 99 cities participated and Neyshabur was selected as the second Iran's Book Capital and Bushehr, Shiraz, Yazd, Shahrekord and Ray City were nominated for the title of Iran's Book Capital.

The most important reason for executing this program is to provide coordination and cooperation among various governmental and non-governmental organizations active in small towns in book-related activities.

The designers and executives of this program believe that such projects can help increase the per capita reading among citizens. It is also justified that the Iran's Book Capital plan is the first national experience for Iran in this field and that this experience will, over time, bring them closer to the universal criteria of selecting the Book Capital.

Iranian cultural officials point out that their criteria are more defined nationally and based on local structures and capacities. The Iran's Book Capital plan has several objectives based on which the book capital is selected. They are defined as follows:

- increasing the cooperation and participation of various governmental and non-governmental institutions in the field of book;
- attracting funds from the private sector;
- making the various industrial, economic ... sectors more cultural;
- indirectly promoting foresight and planning in the field of culture;
- Supporting new and innovative ideas in the field of books;
- Decentralizing the cultural programs and promoting cultural justice;
- Promoting book-reading;
- Designing attractive and popular book programs;
- Promoting the cultural management position in towns.

The cities selected as the book capital in the past years are Ahvaz, 2015; Neyshabur, 2016; Bushehr, 2017; Kashan, 2018; Yazd, 2019.



# iBulletin Memory board



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