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Professional Ethics in Policymaking: Evidence from the Iranian Red Crescent Society

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: The Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS), as a major humanitarian organization, faces a gap between formally stated ethical principles and their application in policymaking and practice. This study examines the role of professional ethics in policymaking and develops a contextually grounded framework.

METHODS: A qualitative documentary content analysis was conducted using purposefully selected sources, including the Society's Statute, Code of Ethics, Islamic normative concepts (Iḥsān, Infāq, Taʿāwun), and empirical studies (2005–2025). Data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured via peer debriefing, audit trail, and thick description.

FINDINGS: Three themes emerged: a) formal embedding of ethical values (accountability, impartiality, justice); b) a gap between policy and practice; and c) the mediating role of moral intelligence and prosocial orientation in implementation.

CONCLUSION: Ethics-based policymaking requires institutionalization through a binding ethical charter, continuous training, and transparent accountability mechanisms. This study contributes by linking professional ethics to macro-level policymaking within an Islamic–Iranian context.

Keywords: Professional ethics; Policymaking; Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS); Accountability; Islamic ethics; Moral intelligence

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Introduction

The Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS), as a key humanitarian organization and a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, plays a critical role in disaster response and social support through a complex organizational structure (1). Despite the existence of high-level strategic documents and a formal Code of Ethics (2), evidence from prior studies suggests a persistent gap between normative frameworks and their operationalization in policymaking processes (3-5). Specifically, ethical principles are often articulated at the declarative level but are not systematically embedded within policy design and decision-making structures.

This gap is particularly consequential in relief settings, where practitioners face complex ethical dilemmas—such as resource allocation under scarcity, culturally sensitive interventions, and rapid decision-making in high-pressure environments—where formal regulations alone are insufficient (6). Although ethical conduct has been shown to influence policy implementation (3), limited attention has been paid to the role of professional ethics in earlier stages of the policy cycle, particularly agenda-setting and policy formulation.

From a contextual perspective, Islamic ethical concepts such as Iḥsān (benevolence), Infāq

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(charity), and Taʿāwun (cooperation) provide a strong normative foundation for humanitarian action (7). However, empirical evidence indicates that motivational shifts—such as instrumental participation in volunteer activities—may weaken the internalization of these values (7,8). This further underscores the need to institutionalize ethics beyond individual attitudes and integrate them into formal policy mechanisms.

Accordingly, the present study addresses the following research question: *What is the role of professional ethics in the policymaking framework of the Red Crescent Society, and how do ethical principles influence different stages of the policy cycle?*

Rather than testing a causal hypothesis, this study adopts an analytical proposition: effective policymaking in humanitarian organizations requires the institutionalization of professional ethics as a normative and structural component. It is argued that bridging the gap between formal ethical documents and strategic practice depends on embedding ethical principles into policymaking processes and institutional arrangements.

The contribution of this study lies in shifting the focus from individual-level ethical behavior toward a macro-level, policy-oriented framework. By integrating insights from prior research (8-10), it aims to provide a conceptual and analytical basis for ethics-driven policymaking in the Red Crescent, addressing a gap that has remained insufficiently explored in the literature.

Methods

This qualitative study employed documentary content analysis to systematically examine written sources and identify latent and manifest meanings (11).

The research corpus included three categories of documents: 1) official organizational documents, namely the Statute of the Red Crescent Society (2025), the Code of Ethics (2), and the 2021–2025 Strategic Plan; 2) Islamic normative sources, including the Qur'an, *Al-Kafi*, and commentaries on Iḥsān, Infāq, and Taʿāwun; and 3) selected peer-reviewed articles and reports on professional ethics and policymaking (2005–2025), identified through a systematic search of Persian and English databases.

Documents were selected using purposive sampling based on relevance, institutional credibility, and publication timeframe.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. The unit of analysis was meaning units (sentences or paragraphs). Coding was conducted manually, and consistency was enhanced through independent coding and consensus.

Rigor was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's criteria, including peer debriefing, audit trail, and detailed contextual description.

Table 1. Thematic Structure of Findings

Overarching Theme	Subcategories	Sample Codes
Theme 1: Normative Embedding of Ethical Values	Accountability; Impartiality and non-discrimination; Justice and fairness; Honesty and transparency; Confidentiality	"Alleviate human suffering without discrimination" (Statute, Art. 2); "Accountability to affected populations" (Code of Ethics, Clause 3); "Avoidance of conflict of interest" (Code of Ethics, Clause 5)
Theme 2: Policy–Practice Gap in Ethical Implementation	Lack of operational guidelines; Weak internalization among staff; Insufficient training follow-up; Absence of performance linkage	Strategic Plan refers to "ethical training" without defined indicators; lack of mechanisms linking ethics to policy design; limited integration into evaluation systems
Theme 3: Mediating Role of Moral Intelligence and Prosocial Orientation	Sincerity (ikhlas); Empathy and compassion; Moral courage; Justice orientation; Commitment to impartiality	"Moral intelligence distinguishes right from wrong" (6); "Prosocial tendencies shape ethical behavior" (5); "Commitment under pressure" (12)

Findings

The analysis yielded 47 initial codes, which were organized into 9 subcategories and subsequently synthesized into three overarching themes. Table 1 presents the thematic structure of the findings.

Theme 1. Normative Embedding of Ethical Values

The analysis indicates that official documents, including the Statute and Code of Ethics, strongly emphasize core ethical values such as accountability, impartiality, justice, honesty, and confidentiality. For instance, Article 2 of the Statute highlights the obligation to "alleviate human suffering without discrimination," while the Code of Ethics explicitly mandates accountability to affected populations. These findings demonstrate a well-established normative foundation; however, this ethical commitment

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remains largely declarative and is not systematically translated into policymaking mechanisms or operational procedures.

Theme 2. Policy–Practice Gap in Ethical Implementation

Despite the strong rhetorical emphasis on ethics, the findings reveal a clear gap between codified principles and their practical application in policymaking. The analyzed documents lack explicit guidelines for integrating ethical values into policy design, resource allocation, and performance evaluation. Although the Strategic Plan refers to ethical training, it does not define measurable indicators or link such training to policy outcomes. This pattern suggests that ethical principles are insufficiently institutionalized and remain peripheral to formal decision-making processes.

Theme 3. Mediating Role of Moral Intelligence and Prosocial Orientation

The analysis further shows that Islamic normative sources and empirical studies converge on the importance of individual-level attributes—such as sincerity (ikhlas), empathy, and moral courage—in enabling ethical decision-making. These characteristics function as mediating factors that facilitate the translation of ethical principles into practice. However, the reviewed policy documents do not incorporate these attributes into criteria for selecting policymakers or evaluating policy effectiveness. This highlights a critical disconnect between individual ethical capacities and institutional policymaking structures.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings indicate that professional ethics within the IRCS is strongly articulated at the formal level but remains insufficiently institutionalized within policymaking processes. This pattern aligns with normative institutionalism (18), where the "logic of appropriateness" is embedded in official discourse but weakly translated into practice due to limited internalization among policymakers. As noted by Hosseinizadeh (2012), institutional norms may lose effectiveness when not reinforced through continuous practice and structural integration.(13)

From a deliberative perspective, the absence of participatory mechanisms reflects a critical gap. Despite formal references to accountability, affected communities are not systematically engaged in policy design, undermining legitimacy. This supports Habermasian arguments on the necessity of inclusive dialogue and echoes Mahdavi and Mobaraki's (2006) critique that policies lacking genuine participation are ethically deficient (14).

The findings also highlight the limits of individual-level interventions. While prior studies (e.g., Karami Baghtifoni et al., 2015) (6) demonstrate that training can enhance moral intelligence, the absence of institutional requirements for such competencies—particularly among policymakers —reduces their impact. This supports Abedi Renani's (2017) argument that ethical capacities must be embedded within organizational systems rather than addressed through isolated training initiatives (15).

Furthermore, the lack of transparent and standardized procedures suggests weaknesses in procedural justice. Key principles such as impartiality, accountability, and the "right to be heard" are not operationalized in policy frameworks, potentially contributing to perceived inequities in resource allocation, as noted by Pirmoradi and Salajeghe (2017) (3).

Compared to previous research, this study extends existing insights by demonstrating that professional ethics should not only guide implementation but also fundamentally shape policy formulation. While prior studies have emphasized individual or operational dimensions, the present analysis highlights the need for systemic integration of ethics throughout the policy cycle.

Bridging the gap between ethical principles and policymaking requires structural reforms, including: 1) the development of a binding ethical charter with enforceable mechanisms; 2) continuous ethics training focused on moral intelligence and applied decision-making for both operational staff and policymakers; 3) the establishment of transparent accountability systems incorporating stakeholder feedback; and 4) the integration of ethical competencies into recruitment and promotion criteria for policy-level positions.

This study demonstrates that professional ethics in the IRCS remains largely rhetorical rather than operational within policymaking structures. The identified themes—normative embedding, policy–practice gap, and the mediating role of moral intelligence—reveal a disconnect between articulated values and their practical application.

By applying complementary theoretical perspectives, the study shows that this gap stems from weak institutionalization, limited

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participatory processes, insufficient integration of virtue-based competencies, and a lack of procedural transparency. Its primary contribution lies in shifting the focus from individual ethical behavior to macro-level policymaking, offering a foundation for ethics-based governance grounded in Islamic–Iranian values.

However, the study is limited by its reliance on documentary data. Future research should incorporate empirical methods, such as interviews and surveys, to assess the extent of ethical institutionalization and validate the proposed framework. Longitudinal and measurement-based studies are also recommended.

Advancing toward ethics-based governance is essential for strengthening organizational legitimacy, improving policy effectiveness, and sustaining public trust in humanitarian institutions.

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving document analysis and secondary data. All sources were properly cited, and no human participants were directly involved.

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Author's Contributions

This article is derived from the doctoral dissertation of Abuozar Moradbaygi Sani, a PhD candidate in Political Science specializing in Political Thought, under the supervision of Mohammad Tohidfam. The original idea and conceptualization of the study were developed by Abuozar Moradbaygi Sani. Mohammad Tohidfam, as the supervisor, provided guidance on the overall research design and contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and the final review of the manuscript. Saeed Eslami and Seyyed Mohammad Naser Taghavi, as advisors, provided critical insights throughout the research process and contributed to data analysis and interpretation. All authors participated in drafting, revising, and approving the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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