

India's climate commitment requires activated district development planning



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Insight Piece

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India's Climate Commitments Require Activated District Development Planning

By: Ankit Raj, Swaniti Initiative

India celebrated its Constitution Day, also known as 'Samvidhan Divas' recently on November 26th. Every year, this marks the adoption of the Constitution which recognised, in the 1940s, that environmental protection and improvement should be prioritized over several administrative priorities like separation of powers. The Directive Principles of State Policies (DPSP), which speaks of environmental protection and improvement in Article 48A, is a list of mandatory policy recommendations for the union and the states. Hence, it is necessary for state legislatures to be proactive in picking up pieces of legislation from the same. The importance of safeguarding the citizens from changing climatic conditions, especially when it is directly and harshly coercive, is very high because it is read as a threat to the fundamental right to life. As a result, the governments are constitutionally bound to ensure its recognition.

Climate change and the state governments

The geographical diversity of the Indian landscape is a major element that cannot be discounted while addressing the issue of climate change. This diversity also necessarily increases the role of the states. The National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) was launched on 30th June 2008 to create an outline of national goals to be achieved collaboratively by all levels of government. In 2009, the Government of India requested all states explicitly to develop State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC). In a period of 13 years, we have reached a stage where all 28 states and 8 union territories have submitted their action plans to the Government of India.

Based on these plans, India has finalized its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), of which the first NDC reads, "To put forward and further propagate a healthy and sustainable way of living based on traditions and values of conservation and moderation, including through a mass movement for 'LIFE' – 'Lifestyle for Environment' as a key to combating climate change".

States are shying away

As a nation, which is governed by a constitution having a unitary tilt, it is hard to assume that decentralized action plans will get implemented. We have seen the idea getting sidelined when it comes to endeavors as basic as water conservation, cleanliness, and public grievance redressal systems. In June 2019, when a major part of the country was under the shadow of the drinking water crisis, the Prime Minister had to come forward and write personalized letters to Sarpanches for conserving rainwater so that the country can recharge its groundwater and resolve the drinking water crisis. Despite the fact that the shortage of drinking water was a severe issue and a direct security threat to citizens which could have led to internal disturbances, states were not seen to be taking any major mass awareness or systemic out-of-the-line steps to directly addresses the crisis.

District development planning is almost sidelined

The root of achieving sustainable development is meticulous planning. As far as the Indian nation is concerned, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments made it clear that Local Government will do the local development planning activities. Articles 243ZD and 243ZE declare that the state is to create a Committee for District Planning and Committee for Metropolitan Planning respectively.

The role of the District Planning Committee is to consolidate the plans prepared by Rural Local Bodies (Panchayats) and the municipalities. The responsibility of composing the District Planning Committee (DPC) and Metropolitan Planning Committee (MPC) was left to the states as local government is an item in the state list of the seventh schedule of the constitution of India. Even after almost three decades, local development planning is dominated by special authorities of the states and the system stands dented. District-level development planning bodies are systematically hyphenated or sidelined and that is a major hurdle in realizing the goals like net-zero carbon emission or Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Inaction from states leads to increased unitary tilt

With increased digitization, and the reach of the union government has increased. At the same time, it has caused the shrinking of the already unrealized space for the state governments, and having a delivery-focused government at the center is creating a compulsive situation for the state governments. Major responsibilities of the states include local development, welfare, law and order, and administration for which local development planning by the local government was a nodal activity. Heavily missing out on this, the states are increasing the tilt of Indian polity towards the union.

Climate change mitigation is an opportunity to activate local development planning

Addressing the issue of climate change and thinking about landscape development from a sustainability perspective brought a new opportunity for Indian states to realize their authority to control local development. This could have also been seen as an opportunity to strengthen the federal structure of the Indian republic. That said, one interesting political aspect of all these is that the Indian population is deeply skeptical about the delivery capability of many political parties.

What should be done?

As we approach the 30th year of constitutional recognition of panchayats, we have to realize that local governance is an indispensable part of the Indian constitutional framework.

Activate local development planning bodies like DPCs

Interacting most directly with the citizens of the country, Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipal Corporations hold the power to realize the change inside out. Climate change, in its current state of affairs, and India's ambitious NDCs provide an opportunity to avail the benefits/strengths of a fully-functioning local governance system. To be precise, the planning exercises must be a serious activity carried out by the designated bodies. Thus, the states need to constitute the DPCs and MPCs and functionalize them with appropriate legislation.

Districts need consultants who can bring new knowledge and strategies

The increased participation of people and local bodies in development planning is much anticipated and there is a sustained debate about it. But this must be replaced by decisive actions. My firsthand observation is that there are inherent systemic limitations. The Weberian bureaucracy of India is supported by a type of workforce that does not take jobs as a tool to create some result. The Government of India, constitutionally obligated to ensure the welfare of 1.4 billion Indians, is probably the biggest not-for-profit organization. It can't afford the majority of its employees to take jobs as means to survive. The union government realized this at the very beginning of the Modi Government coming into power and has been engaging extensively with business operations experts and management consulting organizations to revamp its organizational structure and operation strategies.

Some state governments have also started doing the same, as when the Government of UP onboarded Deloitte to support it in making UP a 1 trillion dollar economy. Similar support is required at the district level, and districts must be provided with enough scope to have competent strategy consultants. That will bring global exposure to districts and increase the pace of development. The key to this lies in the state assemblies and cabinets and can easily be done if we empower the DPCs and MPCs enough to mobilize the talent and tools they ensure the usage of millions of previously unutilized funds.