Chapter III

PLANNING UNITS IN DECENTRALISED PLANNING

3.1 Introduction

The methodology of Indian planning has acquired many new dimensions like district level planning in course of its evolution during the last decades. It reflects a vigorous awareness to changing conditions and needs, based on the capacity to learn from experience, on the one hand, and gives rise to misgivings as to whether a sound theoretical as well as empirical examination of the whole matrix of relevant issues preceded the decision to opt for economic planning, on the other hand.¹

In the earlier plans there was, consciously or unconsciously, a tendency on the part of the states to

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¹ Kabra, K.N., Planning Process in a District, Chapter 2, Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi, 1977, p. 3.
follow the national pattern of priorities and central direction with consequential neglect of their own growth capacity and requirements. In theoretical works on regional planning, emphasis was given on decentralisation or multi-level planning, and many direct and indirect factors bearing on the role, rationale, limits and methods of lower level planning were highlighted.

The current global trend is to reduce the emphasis on centralised planning and restructure the planning process to give more functions to lower level institutions. Decentralised planning is still in a formative stage to which satisfactory solutions had still to be found, namely, the problem of conformity between national and state priorities, the most suitable unit for decentralised planning; rural-urban integration, the determination of activities and programmes of different sub-state levels, integration of schemes at different levels in a consistent planning framework, both horizontally and vertically and the establishment of inter-sectoral linkages.


Economic planning at the level below the state is conceived as that of increasing the proportion of total national income so that growth generating impulses can be released and strengthened in the economy. In this sense, the priority of central sectoral planning over dispersed regional planning is not disturbed but only made realistic by assigning a well-defined and articulated role to lower level planning like district planning.

In a vast physio-economic diversity country like India, there is inevitability of administrative (operational) decentralisation. In such cases, a planning region should be so defined as to embrace convenient hierarchy or regional and local authorities, so that dialogue between the different levels can take place. This means that the definition of region should take into account existing administrative boundaries.\(^5\)

In this connection it can be mentioned that the number of districts in Assam has recently been increased from 10 to 23, obviously, for better administration. A number of sub-divisions has been elevated to the level of a district. The upgradation of sub-divisions into districts has to a great extent made such districts more

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or less a homogenous unit from the point of topography, resources, occupational distribution of population and also specific-economically dominant sector. Therefore, it may be assumed that each such district is a functional region from the point of view of resource flows and needs etc.

In India, culturally, economically as well as in matters of resource endowment different regions are different from one another so much so that the norm applicable for one region is not necessarily applicable for another. For example, the national norm of one well for irrigating 7.5 acres of land (irrigation potential) is based on the assumption that the soil type, water table, cropping pattern and rainfall are same. But since they do diverge from one region to another, even difference within a state is sometimes so significant that a national norm as such has practically little operational content. It may not be irrelevant to mention here that in Sibsagar district of Assam a formula of drinking water supply has been followed which assumed that Hand Tube Wells (Mark II pumps) with 25 ft. to 35 ft. depth would enable to supply drinking water. But a vast stretch of area under

Charaideo Civil Sub-division in Sibsagar district, particularly in areas bordering Nagaland such tube wells become quite unsuccessful, while they have fairly been successful in other parts of the district. Thus, we find that even within a district, sometimes some norms may have little practical significance.

Planning from below requires to be closely related to specific socio-cultural and institutional conditions of the country in general and of the concerned regions in particular. Moreover, certain pre-requisites for decentralised development such as education, general awareness, technical and organisational capabilities are needed for effective implementation of planning at the grass-root level.

In the light of the above analysis it would be necessary to identify the desirable degree of decentralisation in planning and the socio-political pre-conditions for making it feasible, consistent with equitable distribution of benefits from development. The decentralised planning involves delegation of decision-making process to the lower level of administrative units like district, sub-division, block, panchayat or village with corresponding devolution of resources. Therefore, the question arises as to what could be the lowest level of unit for planning? Let us examine this:
3.2 Village as a Unit of Planning

3.2(i) Advantages

The ideal way of achieving democratic decentralisation is to start planning at the village level where the experienced, well-informed and the senior members of the village may be taken into confidence in implementing programmes of development. Village being the primary unit of socio-economic organisation in India, its transformation is basic to any large-scale socio-economic change in the country.  

Secondly, in villages people know each other, they can identify their problems easily and, therefore, there is a greater prospect of the plans being monitored and implemented at the grass-root level. Moreover, it may be possible to mobilise resources more effectively for development efforts when planning and implementations are locally directed.

Thirdly, it is argued that development efforts at higher levels do not find a channel to be transmitted down to the villages, due to missing links in the spatial hierarchies. Therefore, village as a unit of planning at

the bottom of spatial framework may operate as the focal point of specific planned action. Its interaction should be carried back through the panchayat, block, subdivision, district state and finally at the national level.  

3.2(ii) Disadvantages

However, in making a village plan and implementing the same, some practical difficulties may be encountered. On practical difficulty at village level planning is that the population structure of an average village does not perhaps warrant plan formulation at that level. For example, the distribution of population in Demow Development Block under Sibsagar sub-division is that, out of 71 villages, 19 villages (26.76 per cent) are below 500 population, 35 villages (49.39 per cent) in between 501 and 1000 population, 14 villages (19.72 per cent) have their population in the range of 1001 to 1500 and there are only 3 villages (4.22%) which have a population above 1500. Therefore, the size of the village is not economically viable for a unit of planning.

A cluster of villages is also advanced as a unit of organising development in rural areas. As suggested by

Dr. V.K.R.V. Rao, villages which have population upto 5000 should be clustered for the purpose of development.9

Secondly, there is also administration problem of proper coordination and synchronization of plan in village level. Planning requires continuous monitoring and a long-term and coordinated direction to achieve certain end result in consonance with the objectives set out at the national level.

Thirdly, the technical character of planning itself is not always easy to comprehend by lay non-official leaders and villagers. Moreover, planning necessitates not only the knowledge of the fundamentals of the national plan but also decision rules, parameters and enforcement mechanism which can harmonise local, lower level decision-making with national economic plan.10

9. Rao's cluster approach (also called as 'A Unit Area of Development') visualises a cluster of contiguous village formed on the basis of three criteria - viability, diversification and community identity. "The base has to be a cluster of villages with an achievable identity as a community and having a total population round about 5000 persons".


Further, with regard to expertise for plan preparation it is doubtful to what extent at the existing level of literacy and knowledge the village would be able to prepare a blue print of a plan even at the village level taking into account future projection, resource availability and allocation and monitoring etc. From our field investigation we have observed that almost all villages are extremely ignorant about the importance and significance of planning at their level. They do not seem to possess any wherewithal about the planning process being implemented by them. Moreover, most of the villages are fragmented and isolated, instead of being comprehensive and harmonious.

Even if planning is implemented at village level, there is still doubt how far it would succeed with the existing landholding system, domination of rich and elite group and socio-cultural constraints faced by weaker sections like tenant cultivators, landless workers and small artisans.

From all these points of view we may come to the conclusion that although planning is desirable at the village level yet from the points of view of economic viability, technical feasibility and administrative capability there are some practical difficulties to select a village as a unit of planning.
3.2(iii) Village Level Planning: A Review

The Second Five Year Plan had stressed the need for building up plans at various levels below that of the states, but the plan was not very definite about what (a village, a panchayat, or a block or sub-division or a district) actually should constitute a unit of planning. Yet, the plan emphasized the need for a district planning which should (obviously) take into account the requirement of villages and blocks. The detailed working principle was, however, abandoned before it was accepted.  

The Third Five Year Plan drew up the 'village production plans' which were to be formulated for involving the cultivators in the agricultural development and mobilising of local resources.

From the Fourth Five Year Plan onwards, several suggestions and schemes [(like Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP), Desert Area Development Programme (DADP), Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourer (MFAL), Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), Minimum Needs Programme (MNP), Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), etc.] are provided for village plans.

As for the planning at the village level through Panchayat, the Janata Government had appointed a Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions under the chairmanship of Ashok Mehta in 1977 and the committee submitted its report in August 1978. The Committee was of the opinion that as nearly 80% of villages have a population of less than 1000, they would not be able to discharge effectively developmental planning although they might be able to tackle the traditional civic and welfare function. The committee suggested that a cluster of villages with a population of 10,000 to 15,000 should be the primary unit of planning and the planning body there should be Mandal Panchayat above the village set up.

Based on 1971 Census, the committee shows that as many as 26% of villages in India had a population of less than 200 and another 29% between 200 and 499. In otherwords, over 50% of the Indian villages had a population of less than 500 person and in fact 92% had a population of less than 2000 inhabitants.

According to the committee it was difficult to think such tiny habitats are either self-contained or self-sufficient, although from a geographical point of view many of them might well be isolated. In any case, such units hardly qualify to be primary units for planning in
any meaningful sense.\textsuperscript{13}

Although the Second Five Year Plan of India emphasized that village plans were to be the foundation of the CD movement and the bricks upon which the edifice of entire state plan was to be erected, yet there have been no village plans in rural development under government auspices before 1973. The only effort that came closest to formulation and implementation of village plans was the Whole Village Development Programme (WVDP) initiated in 1973-74 on the basis of the recommendations of National Commission on Agriculture. Five pilot projects were launched under this scheme, covering 52 villages in 7 blocks in 4 states.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textbf{State} & \textbf{Block} & \textbf{No. of Villages} \\
Bihar & Musahri & 23 \\
 & Adhoura & 14 \\
Tamil Nadu & Malanelidanallur & 4 \\
Orissa & Jaleśwar & 6 \\
 & Balasore & \\
 & Saraskona & \\
Uttar Pradesh & Dudhi & 5 \\
\hline
\textbf{Total} & \textbf{7} & \textbf{52} \\
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\end{center}

The purpose of WVDP was to achieve the overall objectives of economic growth with social justice. Therefore, the emphasis was naturally placed on reducing unemployment and disparities of income.


\textsuperscript{14} State Block No. of Villages

- Bihar: Musahri 23, Adhoura 14
- Tamil Nadu: Malanelidanallur 4
- Orissa: Jaleśwar 6, Balasore, Saraskona
- Uttar Pradesh: Dudhi 5

Total 7 52
In terms of acquiring physical assets, the WVDP made success in providing better irrigation, drainage, farm inputs, milch animals, poultry and piggery units. Besides these, more employment opportunities and creation of additional income commensurated to the landless labourers and small marginal farmers. Of course the programme has to face several hindrances like delay in release of funds, limited expertise in plan implementation, lack of technical know how and knowledge funds and fraction of village in the effective implementation of WVDP.

Another experiment has been undertaken by the Government in Midanpore district of West Bengal. This is an experiment in village based district planning and was started in 1985. The purpose to associate the village community as a whole in the planning process so as to arouse their awareness and to create a self-reliant

Foot note 14 continued.
Harnessing of local resources through initiative action and initiating the process of development in the area so as to make the employment viable, self-sustaining and self-propelling, were considered the model for rural development. The main component of WVDP was an overall plan for land development, water control, cropping pattern, and expansion of subsidiary occupation. Composite funding of village plans was provided by the Central Government totalling Rs.3.73 crores between 1975-1983 (Mid-term Appraisal, WVDP, NIRD, December 1981, sponsored by Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India).

organisation. The experiment was being coordinated by the District Planning Committee, Midanpore with the assistance of the Rural Development Centre of the I.I.T. Kharagpur.

Some experiments in village level planning have also been made in an isolated manner by voluntary agencies and one successful experiment of this type can be cited in the 'Kundrakudi' village plan of Tamil Nadu.16

It is obvious, that planning at the village level have started taking place in recent years. But these have been confined to a few states only. The planning forum in such states are relatively strong in comparison to others.

3.3 Gaon Panchayat as a Unit of Planning

The idea of Panchayat Raj emerged as a by-product of national planning and community development. Panchayat Raj inaugurated by Nehru was hailed as pivotal to both development and democracy. At the present stage, however, the experience, content and direction of panchayat raj have to be considered primarily from the angle of planning and development, with emphasis on the role of the people

and people's institutions in grass-roots development. 17
The reasons in support of gaon panchayat as a unit of
planning can be enumerated as follows:

3.3(i) Advantages

1) Gaon Panchayat has been performing traditional
civic, welfare and regulatory functions associated with
Local-Self Government. Given the magnitude of task of
rural development, it may be predicted that development
component will grow in volume and intensity through gaon
panchayat.

2) Gaon Panchayat facilitates speedier decision-
making and also make effective actions with reference to
urgent or peculiar local problem under its jurisdiction.

3) Gaon Panchayat may fulfil the criteria of
democratic planning in the sense that it is a 'building
from below' and moreover it comes into existence through
voluntary participation and cooperation of the people.

4) Having close relation to local circumstances
with a view to securing full and efficient utilisation and
development of its resources in the field of agriculture
and allied activities, and being accountable to the
people, Gaon Panchayat can fully involve itself in the

17. Maddick, 'Can Panchayat Raj Become the Agency for
Rural Development?' The Indian Journal of Public
3.3(ii) Difficulties

From the beginning of the Panchayat Raj Act, 1959, the Gaon Panchayat as a form of local government and as a unit of planning have been merely stressed. It becomes evident in most of the states that village panchayats or Gaon Panchayat meant only a partial association of local representative in certain specific field; and it is not so much capable for the setting up of a planning machinery for 'building from below'. Moreover, local leader in general do not seem to have a comprehensive outlook. With a partial and rather short sighted attitude it is really difficult to attune to local needs and adjustment to the objectives of overall strategy of state and national level planning.

Unless and until adequate safeguards are provided against the likelihood of the dominance of the Gaon Panchayats by the vested interest, mere planning at the Gaon Panchayat level would not be fruitful to render the benefit for the weaker sections of people. To create such socio-economic and political atmosphere may be difficult in practical field.

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Another prime requisite of Gaon Panchayat to become the unit of planning for the rural development is the political will. Except in a few states there is hardly any worthwhile set up of village panchayat or such panchayat raj institutions. Most of the state governments have, while echoing promise and hope, only attempted to proceed in the matter of transfer of power to the people in a lackadisical manner. In case of Assam, the last election was held in 1979, and since then there was hardly any serious attempt taken by the governments to demonstrate the political will of government for facilitating panchayati raj institutions in the state.

Planning requires a considerable degree of communication skills, patience and hardwork to exploit the full potentiality of resources. Gaon Panchayats remained largely ineffective not only because of lack of finance but also because of certain deficiencies resulting in non-scientific locational plans and lack of public interest to Gaon Panchayat functionaries.

Gaon Panchayats act generally as agent of government implementing a limited schemes, without much autonomy or power and finance. Baring a few states like Karnataka, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, at present Panchayat Raj institutions have no power to make plan and implement it.¹⁹

The above are some of the reasons which may be said to stand in the way in making Gaon Panchayats as a planning unit at the micro level. These also explains why in our field investigations we have seen that most of the officials show their reluctance to select Gaon Panchayat as a suitable unit of planning.

3.4 Block as a Unit of Planning

The blocks in the Community Development (CD) schemes are the grass-root implementing agencies of rural development. With the establishment of C.D. block from 1955 onwards they were treated as units of planning and development. The modus operandi of the plan formulation at the block level is that the schemes of all relevant departments are integrated together to make it a block plan. The schemes are implemented through the administrative machinery of the development block consisting of the extension officers of various department (development) headed by Block Development Officer (B.D.O.). But with the passage of time and particularly with the introduction of Panchayat Raj Act in 1972, the administrative capabilities of block lost their significance. They could not render their services as instruments of socio-economic transformation to that level.20 Although the idea of making a block as a unit of

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decentralised planning did not take off to its logical conclusion, it may be said nevertheless that at least it made a significant attempt towards democratic planning process in India, making an average citizen more conscious of his rights than before.

3.4(i) Advantages of Block as a Unit of Planning

Block-level planning may claim some advantages which may be pointed out as follows:

1) In Block-level planning there is the possibility of greater opportunities for minute study of details which may be viewed as sine-qua non of rational planning. It is claimed that this will make the task of implementation easier and more effective. It is assumed that the close proximity between the planners and the people at the block level would encourage a spontaneous and continuous dialogue making room for correction in the light of thinking and practical experiences.

2) It is intended that the attention of the Block-level planning should be generally directed to the functioning of the local economy particularly village economy. In other words, the solution of rural problems relating to roads, bridges, irrigation facilities, power supply, lower level education, public health, village and

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small scale industries etc. would be easier.

3) People's participation is an important condition for the success of planning. In Block-level planning, rural people are expected to participate in the process of plan formulation and implementation which may create a higher level of rural enthusiasm for the fulfilment of plan objectives.

4) While national planning or state planning is necessary for the country's overall needs, the block-level planning has a local or area-bias. But such Block-level planning should not be viewed as an isolated exercise but as a link hierarchy to the sub-division, district, regional, state and national level.

5) From the point of view of technical feasibility, Block has more supporting staff in comparison to Gaon Panchayat or village level. The set up basically consists of a Block Development Officer (B.D.O.) who is associated by five extension officers, one overseer, a social education organiser, besides village lever workers and clerical staff.

6) Block is an observation platform in close proximity of the beneficiary group and this helps to:

i) understand more clearly the felt needs of the
people and factors inhibiting the uplift of the weaker sections;

ii) ascertain area (block) specific physical and human resource potential;

iii) identify constraints inhibiting socio-economic and technological growth;

v) expand the area of people's participation in preparation and implementation of plans.\textsuperscript{22}

G. Thimmaiah viewed that, in fact, block plans have merely been rural employment plans rather than plans for development. D.M. Najundappa favours block planning from the point of social justice and benefits to the neglected areas. Iqbal Narain, argued that block as a unit of decentralisation seems more conducive to the cause of democracy than to development in its economic sense.\textsuperscript{*}


3.4(ii) Limitations/Disadvantages of Block as a Unit of Planning: A Critical View

Although a Block has some advantages as a unit of planning yet it is not free from its limitations. Let us now look at the latter and see to what extent they are genuine.

1) The block team is a group of officials drafted from the development departments designed to have a unified approach for achieving a common goal. But the departmental officers do not act as they are expected to act. They have their own departmental prejudices, intra-departmental and inter-departmental rivalries. Even in the same department, there is no cohesion among its various wings.

2) Achieving coordination at the block level would involve a restructuring of the administrative apparatus aiming at strengthening of the horizontal linkages and loosening of the vertical command line.\(^{23}\)

3) In the absence of any constitutional measures, there has been reluctance on the part of the state leadership to delegate powers to the block level. Unless certain powers are delegated to the block level and the

mismatch of authority and responsibility corrected, it is practically impossible to make any effective plan at this level.

4) The tendency of planning from above prevailed here too, because it is a question of administrative tradition and attitude.

5) The sectoral plans at the block level may face constraints of short projection periods, of almost exclusive reliance on individual judgements and guess-work and finally of inability to build up inter-sectoral perspectives. From this point of view block might be too small an area for adequate planning growth centres. In this connection it may be worthwhile to mention that the report of the Dantwala Committee makes a pointed reference to the existence of certain other linked activities which have to be undertaken as part of larger resource development programme cutting across block boundaries. The other linked activities implies sectoral and spatial integration of plan activities in a broader sense.

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24. The key projects and supporting subsidiary projects that are identified in an area in the productive sectors (have) a generative role and is concentrated in a few specific locations may be called rural growth centres; in Roy, Prodip and Patil, B.R. (eds.), Manual For Block Level Planning, Macmillan, Delhi, 1977.

6) The existing system of administration involves a sort of dual control in Community Development Projects. For example, the operational and administrative control of extension officers at the block level is with the concerned district officers. Since the technical officers of the Extension Services are officers meant for rendering technical guidance it seems, therefore, logical that they should be subject to the technical control of their own superior officers functioning at the district and higher levels.

3.4(iii) Pre-requisites of Block Level Planning

The Dantwalla Committee has laid down some pre-requisites for block level planning. They mainly related to (a) reform of the agrarian structure and the institutional set up; (b) proper manpower estimation and jobs required and created; (c) credit planning; (d) arrangement of people's participation; (e) identify local needs and problems, (f) assessment of resources available; (g) formulation of plans and programmes rationally and take up hard and pragmatic decisions to implement it.

The Dantwalla Committee's suggestions are that:

1) Adequate will and power\textsuperscript{27} will have to be developed to increase the number of decision-making and plan implementation bodies in the rural areas and block level.

2) Allocating local resources for different terms of development will have to be tackled efficiently.

3) For the success of plans and programmes, adequate and effective institutions and organisations are necessary.

4) Adequate coordination of block plans, state or national plans will have to be ensured.

5) Measurement of poverty (in money terms), potential resources, local needs, and proper identificational handicaps will have to be arranged through adequate facilities and machineries.

The necessity for planning at the block level was emphasized in the Second and Third Five Year Plans. Although some efforts seem to have been made in the fifties and sixties to evolve a suitable methodology in block level planning, it now appears in retrospect that they were merely piecemeal and disjointed effort with hardly any push and thrust.

\textsuperscript{27} Pieris Ralph, Social Development and Planning in Asia, Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1979, pp. 80-86.
In accordance with the recommendations of the Balawantra Mehta Committee,* three tier Panchayati Raj institutions namely Village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad (at village, block and district level respectively) were introduced. These tiers were interlinked and the Committee recommended that the block level should be the most crucial agency for local level planning. But the idea of block as a unit of planning and development has not fully been materialised; because the state development departments did not transfer either resources or powers as was expected from them.

However, more than the official level, some non-official organisations seem to have contributed in a better way towards block level planning. For example, the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (under the inspiration of Jayprakash Narayan) was the first to undertake the preparation of full employment block plan. Under the direction of Ranjit Gupta it prepared the famous Musahri Plan (Muzzafarpur district, Bihar) in the early 'seventies.**

* The Committee was appointed in 1957 to study Community Development (CD) and National Extension Service (NES) Programmes, with particular reference to popular participation.
** 'District Administration and Decentralised Planning' in L.C. Jain et al. (eds.), Grass Without Roots, op. cit., p. 60.
In accordance with the suggestions of the Asoka Mehta and Dantwalla Working Group Committee (Block Level Planning and Panchayati Raj Institutions respectively) the Planning Commission during the period of Janata Government started formulating guidelines for block level planning.

The Planning Commission of India in October-November, 1978, decided to take up 300 blocks (each block covering population of about 1 lakh, spread over 100 villages in area of 100 sq. km.) every year beginning from 1978-79 for five years for comprehensive block level planning. This was in addition to 2,000 of the 5,000 blocks in the country, taken up for intensive integrated development. An assistance of Rs. 2 lakhs per block every year was provided for the 300 blocks for 1978-79. It is pertinent to mention that block plans initiated under the Draft Sixth Plan (1978-83) brought to the surface considerable employment potential and opportunities.


29. The block plans were envisaged to be built within the framework of the state plans. The state plans form a part of the national plan. It was thus a scheme of limited decentralisation and essentially an exercise in multi-level planning from above.

However, the scheme did not get support from the state governments ruled by political parties not in alliance with that in the centre. They saw in its design a method to circumvent the power and function of the state authorities. There was much opposition for this from the opposition-ruled states.

Over the years, changes took place both at the block level and at the field level such that in the words of the G.V.K. Rao Committee, \(^3\) "at the start of the 'eighties the block was a picture of disarray."

3.4(iv) Block-Level Planning in Some States

Gujarat has made considerable progress in decentralising the planning process at the taluk (block) level by allocating untied funds and creating a planning machinery. In Jammu and Kashmir, Block Development Board has been delegated to perform IRDP, NREP, activities and few other related rural development programmes. In Maharashtra, Kerala and Tripura also there has been a proposal to introduce block level planning.\(^3\)\(^2\)

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31. In March 1985, the Government of India appointed a Committee to Review the Existing Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programmes under the chairmanship of G.V.K. Rao. The Committee submitted its report in December 1985. This Committee underlined the need for strengthening the planning process at the district and block levels.

Summing up, we may say that unless the presence of an adequate planning machinery and implementing agencies at the block level are ensured, block level planning cannot be a working proposition. Bulk of the work of the block level should be production-oriented with specific targets rather than only welfare oriented projects. The block level planning agency should act as a channel of interaction between gaon panchayat level and district level. In the present system of administrative structure, the appropriateness of choice of a block as a planning unit, though desirable, does not appear to be feasible.

3.5 District as a Planning Unit

Districts are not statutory or constitutional units in the Indian federal system; they are administrative units and can be created or abolished by the state at will. The reasons for choosing the district as a unit of planning are:

1) First, the district is the only level below the state where adequate administrative and technical expertise is available. Decentralisation of the planning process at the district level is expected to bring informational, decision-making and operational structure into harmony with each other. This would also provide the basis for obtaining 'planned' results from outlay of
resources in agriculture and allied activities in the sphere of social overhead capital and for arriving at realistic, waste-avoiding 'planned' task.33

2) District planning makes for better dovetailing of physical and financial planning because knowledge of local conditions is brought to bear on decision-making. District has its ability in identification and mobilisation of resources, including popular participation and development in the process of plan formulation and implementation.34

3) It is the only grass-roots territorial unit where adequate finances and information necessary for planning were readily available. Since district plans are integral part of overall national plan, the national perspective plan generates the regional perspectives and the objectives, strategy and principles of district plan conform to their national counterparts. This necessitates not only the knowledge of the fundamentals of national plan but also decision rules, parameters and enforcement mechanism which can harmonise local, lower-level decision making with national economic plan. It is felt that in the absence of the above mentioned informational inputs

34. Santhanam, K., 'Planning from Below' in M.V. Mathur et al. (eds.), Panchayati Raj Planning and Democracy.
and policy instrument planning cannot subserve national objectives. Therefore, district is thought to be a proper unit to perform the above mentioned goals.

4) The wings of almost all state level departments are available at the district level, and effective communication (through these departments) between state level and district level is possible.

5) Competent development officers and specialists are required for guidance to prepare local plans and the district has the full complement of the services.

6) The accurate and adequate data which are needed for drawing up district plans can be available at district level.

7) Better use of local resources such as land and manpower may be expected in district level. Location of various socio-economic activities, integration and coordination of national and state level department schemes and popular association of people is possible at the district level. The village and block levels are relatively too small units to provide integration and coordination of all socio-economic activities. Because of lack of co-ordination the Agricultural Department often do

not know what the Department of Livestock and Animal Husbandry was doing in the state level planning. In contrast, district planning can be regarded as more effective for bringing integration and so can escape from overlapping.

8) Another facet of the district level planning is the argument that since more intimate, precise and detailed knowledge about physio-geographical, techno-economic, socio-political and organisational level, planning for activities which have strong local foci (like agriculture and allied activities, employment generation in rural areas, raising productivity in predominant economic activities, provision of infrastructural facilities, etc.), can be more fruitfully undertaken at the district level. 36

9) District level planning is conceived as a device which unite plan formulation and plan implementation together in the same agency. There hardly exist a sub-regional agency better than district administration in the present set up of our country which can discharge the functions of lower level planning organ.

The justification for having the district as the planning unit is that traditionally the district has been

the administrative unit. The Deputy Commissioner/District Magistrate who has the chief executive power at the district level keep under his control various departments of the state. The responsible officers are supposedly eminently fitted to advise on local development needs and suggest worthwhile schemes for implementation. Further, most activities of data collection do not at present go below the district level. L.S. Bhat stressed in the district level planning as a means to achieve the end. Iqbal Narain viewed that district serves the cause of planned development more than democracy because it is too remote from the grass-root people.* From all these points of view district planning, in our view, is preferred as special unit of low-level planning.

[The Planning Commission, under the leadership of Professor D.R. Gadgil, drew up a set of detailed guidelines setting out the methodology for district planning to the state and district agencies before the exercise on formulation of Fourth Plan.37 These guidelines have been adopted in most of the state governments with suitable modification, and district

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Narain, Iqbal, op. cit.

planning is in operation in most of the states now. Yet, unfortunately, district planning remains to be an experimental issue. The actual planning operation in a district is diffused between numerous agencies, local authorities and government departments].

However, while enumerating all the plus points for making district as a planning unit, let us not underestimate some of the shortcomings of district planning. These are discussed in the following section.

3.5(iii) Shortcomings/Limitations of District Level Planning

With regard to some shortcomings, it may first be stated that at the district level, active participation may remain confined to elected representatives only. But it is the levels of villages or panchayats that the scope for participation would be more.

Secondly, district planning as it is conceived and administered today seems to be unsuitable for bringing about socio-economic transition at the grass-root level of predominantly rural economy. The Deputy Commissioner/District Magistrate at present at the head of the development organisations at the district level suffers from the same glaring defects as state level development departments. He is loaded with new duties,
compelled to fulfil a quasi-political role, yet still burdened with all his former responsibilities. If over and above these, he is expected to coordinate and inspire all development tasks, then perhaps we are expecting too much from him. Therefore, under such limitation it may be difficult to expect a real decentralisation at the district level.

Thirdly, the purview of district planning is further limited by the objectives and constraints faced by the state and National plans. The two power variables pertaining to policy, namely the factor and product prices, fall outside the jurisdiction of the district planners. Needless to say that this limitation restricts the scope of plan formulation at the district level.\textsuperscript{38}

And finally, one may note that if higher authorities lack political will to pass on administrative power to local (district) authorities, panchayati raj institutions would not receive direction and encouragement from the district level to fruitfully participate in the process of development.

3.5(iv) Conclusion

Despite the above mentioned limitations, one thing is, however, evident that if decentralised planning is to

\textsuperscript{38} Misra, R.P. et al., Regional Development Planning in India, Vikas Publications, 1972, pp. 201-203.
be implemented earnestly, in the present administrative set up, the district should be regarded as the best unit of planning. Otherwise, there may not be uniformity in the states, and diverseness would prove detrimental to the process of decentralisation. Planning Commission had recommended the district as the unit of planning and development. It had emphasized the need for district level planning on the assumption that the plans made at the state and national level can be brought down to the people in a much more efficient manner. Another advantage of the district, as has been pointed out above, is that it has well integrated administrative structure for implementation of micro level plans. Moreover, the planning and implementation in a district can, therefore, easily be coordinated. A district plan may start with almost a clean slate and progressive distribution of district plan expenditure ensures that equity is much better served. In the field of administration, as a practical unit, the district has virtually stood the best of time. Therefore, from all these points of view we feel that a district should be selected as unit of planning in the present circumstances.

3.6 Decentralised Planning in India - 1969 Onwards

Our planners recognised the importance of decentralised planning right from the beginning and this problem has been discussed in almost all the Five Year Plan documents formulated so far. Despite the acknowledged merits of grass-root planning and efforts taken by the Central and State Governments during the past four decades, planning in India remained basically centralised. The progress, if anything, made towards decentralisation in planning, implementation and decision-making to district and block levels has been sporadic and tardy.  

However, it is only in the Fourth Five Year Plan that the Planning Commission had taken a clear stand on the question of district plan. The plan marked a significant departure from the earlier ones in as much as it defined the nature and scope of district planning and issued operational guidelines to the state and district agencies. During this plan attempts were made to


develop the three tier panchayat raj system and to associate the people's representatives in planning process below the district level.

But the attempts at the decentralised planning did not succeed because the states were neither ready nor well-equipped for the task. The data base was weak. There was no planning machinery at the district level, nor there was any institutional mechanism. Above all, there was lack of political will for decentralisation. Of course, the planning agencies of some states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra prepared their own guidelines within the framework of the guidelines issued by the Planning Commission with particular attention to their special needs and problems.

Since the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79), a number of special area programme like SFDA, MFDA, IRDP, and MNP were undertaken with some special agency at districts and blocks for their implementation. The programmes were targetted and ameliorate rural poverty.\(^42\) Thus, the introduction of the special area programme led to the recognition of the decentralised planning efforts. Although, most of the state governments started formulating district level plan, they faced the problem of personnel and it was due to the existing weak planning

machinery at the state level itself. The Planning Commission as a remedial measure assisted all the state governments financing on fifty-fifty matching grant basis to enable them first to strengthen the state planning agencies. Consequently, it gave way for the state governments to initiate fruitful work on district planning. Similar financial assistance was offered to the state governments in 1982-83 to strengthen the district level planning machinery.

The Sixth Plan (1980-85) continued giving emphasis on decentralisation and formulated a central programme for strengthening the planning machinery at the district level.

In September 1982, a Working Group under the chairmanship of Professor C.H. Hanumantha Rao was set up by the Planning Commission to define the scope and content of district planning in the context of state planning. The Committee submitted its report in 1984. It has advocated a gradual approach towards introduction/strengthening of district planning and has made several recommendations for the same. The first stage, according to these recommendations, will be a phase

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of 'initiation', the second stage 'limited decentralisation' and the third and final stage will involve planning for all district sector activities with high level of people's participation. The Working Group envisaged that all states in the country would reach the final phase by 2000 A.D. It recommends that the State Plan should have two-fold classification, one dealing with district plan and the other with state plans. District Planning Board should have complete autonomy in respect of district schemes both with beneficiary-oriented and area development schemes.

In March 1985, the Government of India appointed a Committee to Review the Existing Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programmes under the chairmanship of G.V.K. Rao which submitted its report in December 1985. The Committee endorsed the concept of a district budget, the creation of a post of District Finance and Account Officer and considerable delegation of powers (including reappropriation of funds) to him from the state level.

The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) stipulated that as the district is a well known and accepted administrative unit, the decentralisation of planning from the state level should be taken to the district in the first phase and eventually extended to the block level,
particularly for the more effective implementation of anti-poverty programmes. In this context, the need for and possibility of introducing a larger unit than the district at the intermediate level of planning was also supposed to be examined.\textsuperscript{44}

The Eighth Plan approach also envisaged \textit{decentralisation of the planning process}. It involves not only a reorientation of the forces and priorities of planning, but also in its processes and mechanisms. This process will be enriched and made more effective by involving mass of the people in planning and implementation through democratic decentralisation and closer association of the Planning Commission with the State Planning Organisations. The state planning agencies will need to interact closely with institutions of democratic decentralisation in rural and urban areas.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{3.7 An Overall Assessment}

Thus, we see that planning process in India once conceived at a macro level is now being transformed into a micro level to achieve our required goals. The


decentralised concepts have been accepted, but new ideas are being analysed, and some details worked out. It is still in a trial and error process. The plans are implemented in most of the states through the heads of development departments at the district level. But it is at the level of formulation that much remains to be done, although, as we have said above, efforts are being made by our planners to diffuse the administrative power towards the bottom to formulate, execute and implement the plan.

The attributing factors for the failure on its operational level may considerably be due to:

1) lack of political will and commitment to hand over the administrative power to the lower authorities;
2) absence of well-developed techniques and methodologies at different levels of planning;
3) lack of chance of public participation in the planning activities to the desired extent; and
4) inadequate financial resources and technical personnel at sub-district level to make decentralisation operational.

Reviewing the past attempts for adoption of 'grass roots planning', the seventh plan has noted that the

actual decentralisation of political and administrative authority has been generally in limited nature. Nor have there been sufficient arrangement of technical and administrative personnel at the state level and below to facilitate decentralisation.

C.H. Hanumantha Working Group reviewed that district planning in the country has remained a non-starter all along because all the essential elements or ingredients did not exist as a total package. Where the structure existed, the personnel were not there or where the personnel existed, skills, powers or authority were lacking. Somewhere the district planning process got chocked on the way and could not follow, somewhere the flow began but directions were not clear and so on. 47

The pattern and level of decentralisation achieved in various states is not uniform. Some states like Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal have made appreciable progress. It is interesting to note that states where decentralised planning at district level is effective are precisely the states whose performance in respect of land reforms has been better. West Bengal, Karnataka and Jammu and Kashmir belong to this category.

Assam is in the initial stage of decentralised planning and has made a beginning only. West Bengal is, perhaps, the only state in which Panchayat Raj Institutions have been intimately associated with district/block planning and implementation of development schemes.

Karnataka is another state which has ushered in a new era of democratic decentralisation in 1987 with the establishment of Zilla Parishads and Mandal Panchayats endowed with powers, functions and resources. The credit for achieving this measure of success goes to political leadership and its willingness to share power with newly created district level institutions. Andhra Pradesh has also introduced major reforms in Panchayat Raj. Kerala has attempted a pilot district planning project only in Quilon district, Madhya Pradesh has also prepared a perspective plan for one district, Baster. U.P. has made an institutional arrangement for planning at the divisional level and Gujarat has made considerable progress at taluk level.

Inspite of all these, decentralised planning is in the state of slow progress because of the following reasons:

3.7(i) Causes of Slow Progress of Decentralised Planning

1) The very role of planning is not realised by many bureaucrats and politicians and they viewed that it is implementation rather than planning which is important in development. So, they hinder the setting up of a suitable planning machinery.

2) Central schemes carrying subsidy strike at the root of local level planning. These provide a temptation to the state governments to adopt these schemes regardless of their suitability for specific areas so as to obtain the funds associated with them and thereby exercise some patronage at the local levels.

3) Monitoring of progress is done with respect to the fund spent or the number of beneficiaries and not with reference to the quality of schemes or the impact of the programmes. Therefore, there is no pressure to prepare good schemes.

4) There is a vital lack of coordination in planning process. On its core, the district plan is implemented through heads of Development Departments which generally lack co-ordination. The plan programmes and 'Zilla Parishad' schemes are treated as separate streams administered by different organisations. It requires a
great deal of work to develop integration to bring about a homogenous area development approach.

5) A predominantly sectoral or departmental outlook is that officers tend to look at planning as a marginal activity. Planning becomes a primary responsibility of only core planning staff and attains a secondary status within a departmental organisation. It has been corroborated in our field investigation in Sibsagar District of Assam.

6) In reality the basic task of plan formulation is undertaken by the Planning Commission at the Central level. The State Governments simply adjust their policies and programmes accordingly. This perhaps is the reason which reportedly prompted some District Magistrates to complain that the plans prepared in Delhi and state capital cannot be effectively implemented. If this is the position of the state in plan formulation one can well imagine the fate of district planning. 

3.7(ii) Conclusion

In the present socio-political and economic set up, district is the best unit of planning, though it has suffered from a lot of practical hindrances. It is true.

that, genuine and effective decentralised planning would remain beyond our reach unless there is adequate devolution of resources and decision-making powers at sub-state level, restructuring of administrative set up and attitude, administrative personnel capable of achieving intersectoral coordination, active participation of the masses, strong political will and action oriented motive instead of mere promises.