

NITI Aayog- A Think Tank Replaces the Planning Commission: A Review

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ABSTRACT

A newly formed nation, freshly out of the adverse conditions created by the struggles of independence, partition and the World War II, with scarce resources and the responsibility to build a strong economy, had a difficult growth path ahead. It immediately needed formulation of a strong strategy to deal with its socio-economic issues and the planning commission was constituted by late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Lal Nehru. For 65 years, the Planning Commission served India via its five year plans and laid the foundation of a strong mixed economy. However, the concept of planning changed from directive planning towards indicative planning after economic reforms of 1991. The world economy too changed drastically and in this scenario, the planning commission began running out of course. Realizing the need of the hour - to step up the pace of development and meet the sustainable development goals - The NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) was formed to replace the planning commission.

This study reviews the major achievements of the planning commission. It highlights the reasons for replacing the planning commission with NITI Aayog. The major differences in the policy approach of the two have been highlighted. It is a study of the objectives of the NITI Aayog and its achievements since inception in light of the arguments on the basis of which it was constituted.

1. Introduction

The Planning Commission (Government of India), served the Indian economy for sixty five years by performing many functions, the most important was the formulation of the twelve Five-Year Plans (FYPs). It had been set up with the objective "to promote a rapid rise in the standard of living of the people by efficient exploitation of the resources of the country, increasing production, and offering opportunities to all for employment in the service of the community."¹

The First and the Second Five Year Plan adopted the strategy which emphasized on rapid industrialization through investment in the public sector. The focus shifted to exports promotion in the Third FYP. Agricultural development, removal of poverty and self reliance, social welfare, raising plan resources for infrastructure spending, were the focus of the subsequent four plans. The Eighth Plan was formulated immediately after the New Economic policy of 1991 i.e after adoption of strategic changes in the economic policy framework – Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization. The Ninth Plan had four important dimensions: quality of life, generation of productive employment, quality of life, a balanced regional development and self-reliance. The 2004-2014 - period of the Tenth and the Eleventh Plan was a period of rapid economic growth. The Twelfth Plan aimed at 'faster, sustainable and more equitable growth'. The private sector developed rapidly and the economy began to be driven by market forces.

The GOI conducted an internal evaluation on the achievements of the FYPs and concluded that in the changed scenario of market economy, the planning commission and its strategies had lost its relevance and a new Institutional

framework was needed for rapid growth and sustainable development.

In 2014, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the closure of the Planning Commission and its replacement by - National Institution for Transforming India i.e. The NITI Aayog. The NITI Aayog has been envisaged as a Government of India 'think-tank' with the objective to bring about a fundamental change in the planning and financing of economic policies in the country, to encourage involvement and participation of the State Governments of India in the economic policy-making process. For effective governance, the NITI Aayog has been set-up to "evolve a shared vision of national development priorities and foster cooperative federalism, recognizing that strong states make a strong nation."²

The Prime Minister said that "Through the NITI Aayog, India will move away from the one size fits all approach and forge a better match between schemes and needs of States."³ He believes that NITI Aayog will pave the path for a better future of India. This study attempts to analyze the achievements of the planning commission, causes of its replacement by NITI Aayog, throw light on its objectives and functioning and see differences between Planning Commission

² <https://www.narendramodi.in/government-establishes-niti-aayog-national-institution-for-transforming-india-to-replace-planning-commission-7105>

³ Srinivas, V, Planning Commission to NITI Aayog – Making Strategies for Transforming India <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx>

¹ First Five Year Plan

and NITI Aayog and finally to outline the achievements in the last three years.

2. Objectives of the study

- To briefly review the achievements of the Planning commission and the causes of the dissolution of Planning Commission.
- To outline objectives and composition of The NITI Aayog and its role in the governance framework of federal India.
- To make a comparative study between Planning Commission and NITI Aayog and their functioning.
- To discuss the development goals of NITI Aayog and the policy measures undertaken by it to achieve these goals since its composition.

3. Research Methodology

The paper examines the issue on the basis of secondary data sourced from the reports and documents of NITI Aayog, Government of India, Economic Surveys, Five Year Plan documents and other research papers and articles related to various aspects of the paper. As per the objectives of research, the paper is descriptive in nature.

4. The planning commission in retrospect

From the beginning of the planning process in 1951, the Indian economy grew at an average rate of 3.5 percent during the first three decades. The average growth rate increased to 5.5 percent during the eighties. After the New Economic Policy of 1991 and the adoption of liberalization, privatization and globalization, it rose to 6 percent in the nineties. In the early years of the new millennium, the growth rate rose further and the economy strongly withstood the global financial crisis in 2008-09. However the economy did not achieve the eleventh plans targeted growth rate of 9 percent. Table 1. shows the targeted and achieved growth rates of the twelve five year plans.

Table 1
Targeted and Actual Growth Rate in the Five Year Plan

Plan	Targeted Growth Rate	Actual Growth rate
First Plan (1951-56)	2.1	3.5
Second Plan (1956- 61)	4.5	4.2
Third Plan (1961-66)	5.6	2.8
Fourth Plan (1969 -74)	5.7	3.2
Fifth Plan (1974 -79)	4.4	4.7
Sixth Plan (1980 – 85)	5.2	5.5
Seventh Plan (1985-90)	5.0	5.6
Eighth Plan (1992-97)	5.6	7.9
Ninth Plan (1997-2002)	6.5	5.7
Tenth Plan (2002 – 07)	8.0	7.6
Eleventh Plan (2007-12)	9.0	8.0
Twelfth Plan (2012 – 17)	---	6.6
2012-13	---	5.4
2013-14	---	6.3
2014-15	---	7.1
2015-16	---	7.2

2016-17	---	7.0
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Source: Planning Commission, Twelfth Five Year Plan, Government of India 2012, Economic Survey 2016-17, Government of India

Mihir Shah, member, Planning Commission, 2009-2014, outlined the 'Potential Positive Power' of planning commission stating that " there are at least seven broad areas in which the Planning Commission played an extremely positive role: one, pioneering an inclusive planning process; two, facilitating and mainstreaming reform; three, pushing decentralized planning forward by emphasizing the principle of subsidiary in recognition of the deep diversity of India; four, rationalizing the centrally sponsored schemes and introducing greater flexibility within them; five, being the spokesperson of the states at the centre; six, co-coordinating across, if not breaking down departmental silos within the Government of India as also arbitrating disputes by taking a more long-term and holistic view of issues; and seven, providing an independent evaluation and critique of government programmes and policies."⁴ Clearly, these contributions of the commission to the economy have played an important role in laying out strong economic foundation.

In the post-liberalization period, the concept of planning changed from directive planning towards indicative planning. As private investment started exceeding public investment, the economy began to be driven by market forces. In such a scenario, the priorities and allocation of resources to various sectors could no longer be determined by a central planning authority which is autocratic. It was strongly felt that the need of the hour was to replace the Planning commission with a consultative body.

The early plans had emphasized on capital investment in sectors which were given priority in Plan. In order to increase the productive capacity of the economy, a major portion of the plan expenditure was capital expenditure. However the composition of expenditure has undergone a change in and today a bulk of the expenditure is revenue expenditure.

An important feature of the fiscal management and governance process that had been adopted with planning was the classification of expenditure into Plan and Non-Plan by both at Centre and State level. An impact of this distinction between plan and non plan expenditure was that it led to a bias in favor of plan expenditure as it was assumed to be more 'productive'. This bias had many results like in neglect of expenditure on many essential heads which were categorized under non plan expenditure like maintenance expenditures and also an increase in plan expenditure. In 2011, a committee, headed by Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council Chairman C Rangarajan, in its report 'Efficient Management of Public Expenditure', recommended that the distinction between plan expenditure and non plan expenditure should be removed.

⁴ Shah, Mihir, The "New" Planning Commission, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 49. Issue No. 35, 30 Aug, 2014

The committee stated that, "Plan and Non-Plan distinction in the budget is neither able to provide a satisfactory classification of developmental and non-developmental dimensions of Government expenditure nor an appropriate budgetary framework. It has, therefore, become dysfunctional."⁵

The committee suggested that the plan and non-plan distinction should be removed and a holistic view should be adopted. This was possible only when the roles of the Planning Commission, The Ministry of Finance, The Ministries and State Governments were redefined. The committee report suggested the possible changes in 'the mandates/roles of main organizations and broad processes involved in the formulation of FYP.' This perhaps was, (though no suggestions were put forward to dissolve the planning commission) the first step towards the end of planning commission.

The Planning commission itself had suggested doing away with the "illogical and dysfunctional" distinction of Plan and non-Plan expenditure in the Eleventh FYP (2007-12) document.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance, chaired by Yashwant Sinha, also suggested restricting the commission's control over the funds. It stated, "Planning in the country has failed to deliver the desired results owing to disjunction between planning and budgeting, lack of synchronization between the plans/policies and implementation and monitoring."⁶

Another major argument put forward for the dissolution of the planning commission was need to promote 'cooperative federalism' between the centre and the states. The policy makers and the government wished to reform the system of collection and sharing of revenues raised through Central taxes, introduce reform measures in education, health, law and order, energy and environment and make the system truly democratic. The idea behind the new body envisaged was emphasis on 'federal cooperation' which would replace the trickle down approach with 'bottom to top' approach.

In general, the consensus was that the planning commission had run out its course and needed to be replaced by a new body. Strongly criticizing the functioning of the planning commission, V.Srinivas expressed his opinion that, "An internal evaluation in Government revealed that Planning Commission was witnessing policy fatigue necessitating structural changes in central planning process. The assessment identified that the collapse of public investment in the face of rising subsidies, huge demands on public resources from the Right to Education Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and a poorly targeted Public Distribution System. Further rigid labor laws were impeding

progress, and there were difficulties in releasing land for public housing and other public projects."⁷

In the changing economic scenario, it was necessary to make a distinction between the 'process' of governance and the 'strategy' of governance and to emphasise on the process. An institution was needed which would function as a think-tank of the government and provide strategic and technical advice in the formulation of economic policies to both the central and state government. Such an institution would cover a wide range of issues related to the economy, help in dissemination of best practices and most important, help the nation to keep pace with socio-economic changes across the globe.

5. The NITI Aayog : Objectives and Composition

The NITI Aayog has been constituted as "a knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurial support system through a collaborative community of national and international experts, practitioners and partners...a platform for resolution of inter-sectoral and inter-departmental issues in order to accelerate the implementation of the development agenda"⁸

With the help of resources and skills, the 'think tank' aims at replacing the centre-to-state planning process with a process which calls for partnership with the states in policy formulation.

5.1 Objectives of The NITI Aayog: The NITI Aayog has outlined following objectives

- To ensure "active involvement of States in the light of national objectives."
- "To foster cooperative federalism" because a strong nation's foundation lies on strong states.
- "To develop mechanisms to formulate credible plans at the village level"
- To incorporate "the interests of national security" in formulation of economic policies.
- To ensure inclusive growth and benefit all sections of society.
- To design long term policy framework and a system of monitoring and receiving feedbacks to be used to make improvements as well as mid-course corrections.
- To set-up a Think- tank linking key stakeholders and policy research institutions, national and international experts and thereby create a knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurial support system.
- To actively monitor and evaluate the implementation of programmes and initiatives and ensure their success and scope of delivery.
- To focus on technology up gradation and capacity building for implementation of programmes.

The NITI Aayog has planned to change the administration paradigm of India's planning process by making the government an 'enabler' rather than a 'provider of first and last resort'. It has also planned to ensure that the economic potential of India's entrepreneurial, scientific and intellectual human capital would be realized to attain sustainable development. Realizing the need to achieve the above

⁵ Rangarajan, C, Report of the High Level Expert Committee on Efficient Management of Public Expenditure, Planning Commission, July 2011, Government of India New Delhi

⁶ Banerji, Devika and Deepshikha Sikarwar, PMEAC wants Planning Commission to shed funds allocation role, Economic Times, Aug 24, 2011 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/pmeac-wants-planning-commission-to-shed-funds-allocation-role/articleshow/9713462.cms>

⁷ V Srinivas, op. cit

⁸ <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=114276>

objectives, NITI Aayog has outlined seven pillars of effective governance:

- Pro-people agenda
- Pro-active
- Participative
- Inclusion
- Equality of Opportunity
- Sustainable development
- Transparency

5.2. Composition of NITI Aayog

The full-time organizational framework of the NITI Aayog comprises of

- The Prime Minister of India as the Chairperson
- Vice-Chairperson
- Governing Council comprising the Chief Ministers of all the States and Lt. Governors of Union Territories
- Regional Councils, which are formed to address specific issues of some states or a region. Experts, specialists and practitioners with relevant domain knowledge as special invitees nominated by the Prime Minister

Further, the NITI Aayog has members, part-time members (maximum of 2 from leading universities, research), ex officio members (aximum of 4 members of the Union Council of Ministers) There is a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Niti Ayog, who is appointed by Prime Minister and has a rank similar to Secretary to the Government. NITI Aayog has three wings Team India Hub (TIH) and the Knowledge and Innovation Hub (KIH) and a flexi pool. The function of these is dissemination reform-related ideas and best practices across governments.

6. Comparative study of planning commission and NITI Aayog

There are many fundamental differences between the Planning Commission and the NITI Aayog – in their objectives and pillars of governance, constitution and working process. The NITI Aayog was constituted to separate the planning process from governance, to diminish centralized planning, to recognize the regional diversity of the states and to cater to them accordingly and to promote the spirit of federalism. The differences can be seen in many parameters as have been outlined in Table 2.

Table 2.
Difference between The Planning Commission and NITI Aayog

Parameter	Planning Commission	NITI Aayog
Composition	Eight full-time members No part-time members Secretaries/member secretaries were appointed through the usual process.	Full-time members decreased Number of Part-time members flexible The Prime Minister appoints the CEO.
Constitution	Governing Body was National Developing Council. All Chief Ministers of State and Lieutenant Governors of all Union Territories were its members	NDC replaced by the Governing Council. The NITI Aayog gives its recommendations to the GC.
Directional Approach	Top-down approach with a 'one-size-fits-all plan'.	Empowerment and equal staus to all stakeholders. 'A bottoms-up approach' to encourage participatory development agenda at the village level.
Participation of States	States' role was limited to the National Development Council and annual plan meetings	State governments given a significant role
Fund Allocation	Planning commission had the power to allocate funds to ministries and state governments	NITI Aauog is only n advisory body or a think-tank. The powers to allocate funds given to the finance ministry
Time Period	Five Year Plan	Fifteen Year Vision Plan to focus on infrastructure, education, health, poverty. Internal security and National defense included within the sphere of planning.
Model Used	Socialism	Co-operate Federalism

An important difference is the power assigned to the Governing Council as compared to the NDC. The NDC had a separate institutional mandate and hence had a commanding authority. However the Governing Council is an integral part of the Aayog and is under the authority of The Prime Minister. While the supporters of the NITI Aayog argue that this is essential to promote cooperative federalism, many critics feel that it may result in making the decisions of NITI Aayog biased towards the states with the government of the ruling party.

Besides the Governing Council, The NITI Aayog also has regional councils which have been formed to achieve the

objective of active involvement of the state governments in the planning process. They will increase the frequency of meetings of the Chief Ministers and the Governing Council.

With reference to allocation of resources, the five year plans merely focused on the allocative role or earmarking public expenditure to the states. The allocation was made in consultation of the NDC with minimum interaction with the states, therefore the planning commission failed to pay due attention to the regional diversities and specific requirements of the states. The NITI Aayog has totally given up this allocative

role and limited itself to the advisory functions. Financial allocation to states will now be handled by the Finance Ministry.

other capital expenditure for economic development and social welfare.

7. NITI Aayog in the last three years

The NITI Aayog based its functioning on a Vision document, Strategy and Action Agenda of different time frames -

7.1. Vision Document, Strategy & Action Agenda – The NITI Aayog is preparing -

- i. A 15-year vision document in accordance to the social goals setup by it.
- ii. A 7-year strategy document spanning 2017-18 to 2023-24 to develop policy measures for achieving the above longer-term vision.
- iii. A 3-year Action Agenda for 2017-18 to 2019-20, related to the 14th Finance Commission Award period, was submitted before the Prime Minister on April 23, 2017 at the 3rd Governing Council Meeting. It proposed linking Central government expenditures to future priorities, substantial expansion in expenditures by 2019-20 on agriculture, rural development, education, health, rural development, infrastructure, defense, and

7.2. The document ‘Strategy for New India@75,– This document, released in Nov. 2018, attempts to make innovation technology and efficient management an integral part of policy making. It has three main aims - to make development a mass movement, to achieve broad based balanced economic development across all states and regions, by introducing new technologies, innovations and upskilling, making India a ‘Development State’ with efficient delivery of public services and minimum corruption.

The document outlines the, “objectives for 2022-23 in a diverse range of 42 areas that recognize the progress already made; and challenges that remain; identify binding constraints...and suggest the way forward for achieving the stated objectives. The strategy document has disaggregated 41 sectors under four sections: drivers, infrastructure, inclusion and governance.”

The important achievements of the NITI Aayog have been outlined in Box.1

Box 1. Achievements of the NITI Aayog

- **Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital (SATH)** –transformation in health and education in states by providing them technical support. improvement in health indicators and healthcare delivery in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Assam while in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, education sector was given special assistance.
- **Development Support Services to States (DSSS)** for establishing Public Private Partnership across states in the infrastructural Sector. 4450 projects from 20 states, 11 projects from 8 States in 10 sectors were shortlisted.
- **Promoting Inclusive Growth** – Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas
- **Reform in Central Public Sector Enterprises** – Disinvestment in more than 3 CPEs approved. A report on 74 sick/loss making/non performing CPSEs has been prepared and closure of 15CPSEs has been undertaken.
- **Measures for Balanced Regional Development** – North East Industrial Development Scheme 2017, Scheme for Holistic Development of Islands of Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep, setting up of Island Development Agency, GIS based planning in all states/UTs in lines with the planning implemented by BISAG, Ahmedabad.
- **India Energy Security Scenario 2047** revamped in 2015 for achieving nationally determined targets in the energy sector. Draft National Energy Policy is being developed.
- **Governance and Transparency –**
 - NITI Aayog developed measurable output and outcome indicators for more than 850 CS/CSS outlays.
 - An analytical tool, Strategic Outcomes Verification process has been developed for performance monitoring.
 - Other such measures adopted are: development of Web Based Interactive Dashboards for implementation of Union Outcome budget 2017-18, A task force on SDGs to monitor progress on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, A progress Tracker Dashboard for Union Territories, Project Appraisal Wing of the Government.
- **Samavesh** - In order to collaborate with national and international think-tanks, 34 Knowledge and Research institutions entered into a MOU with the NITI Aayog. Three lectures on Transforming India and two workshops titled “Champions of Change”.
- **Knowledge and Innovation Hub Initiatives** - Good Practices Resource Book, 2015, Knowledge Portal to share best practices will be launched, Compendium “Skilling For Employability: Best Practices” published.
- **Reforming Medical Education by replacing** the Medical Council of India with new body for regulating medical education. The draft legislation for the proposed National Medical Commission has been submitted to the Government.
- **Reforms in Agriculture:**
 - a Model Agricultural Land Leasing Act, 2016 formulated to recognize the rights of the tenant as well as safeguard interest of landowners.
 - On the basis of this act, Madhya Pradesh enacted a separate land leasing law and land leasing laws were modified in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Andhra Pradesh Telangana and Orissa are also taking such steps.
 - Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee Act version 2 was introduced in 2016 to introduce marketing reforms
 - Agricultural Marketing and Farmer Friendly Reforms Index to sensitise states about the need to undertake reforms in marketing, land leasing and forestry on private land.
- **Digital Payments Movement**
 - Efforts for widespread dissemination of the advantages of digital payments movements
 - Target to bring 5 crore Jan Dhan accounts to digital platform.
 - Promote the use of digital payments through the BHIM App.
 - Schemes to promote digital payments like Digi Dhan Vyapar Yojana and Digi Dhan Melas.

- **Atal Innovation Mission** to strengthen the innovation and entrepreneurship. Schemes which were started under this mission in 2016-17 are
 - Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs) to establish 500 ATLs in schools to encourage where students in making technological innovations.
 - Atal Incubation Centres (AICs) to provide financial support of Rs.10 crore and capacity building for setting AICs. These will foster innovation-entrepreneurship.
- **Indices for Measuring States' Performance in Health, Education and Water Management**
- **Sub-Group of Chief Ministers on Rationalization of Centrally Sponsored Schemes, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Skill Development**
- **Task Force on Elimination of Poverty in India presented its** report on 11th July, on issues of measurement of poverty and strategies to combat poverty. It recommend poverty reduction through "intensive sustained rapid growth and effective implementation of anti-poverty programs."
- **Task Force on Agriculture Development:** It suggested important policy measures for reforming agriculture and increasing farm income.

Source: 3 Eventful Years at Niti Aayog, *Nayi Niti, Nayi Disha, Naya Bharat, NITI Aayog, 2018*

The Niti Aayog has been functioning as a think tank and inviting innovative ideas from all stakeholders for policy making and implementation. It has helped in increasing the level of accountability by establishing a Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office which monitors the functioning of the ministries regularly for efficiency of governance.

Since NITI Aayog is a think tank for generating new ideas, its actual role in formulation and implementation of policies is limited. After the lapse of the twelfth five year plan, The NITI Aayog announced but failed to adopt the "three Year Action Plan" announced in the third Governing Council meeting. 'Strategy for New India@75, released in Nov. 2018 aims to emphasize on innovation and efficient management in policy making. The aayog has started outlined many achievements in the last three years but actually achieving the objectives it has outlined in the new agenda is rather challenging.

8. Conclusion

The planning commission played a commendable role in laying the foundations of growth in the economy which cannot be ignored. Indeed, with the changing economic scenario, it

was necessary to redesign the planning process. The NITI Aayog has undertaken the massive task of transforming the policy making process in an economy which is still suffering with unemployment, poverty and inequality in income distribution. It has taken many measures in the last three years in accordance to its goals and objectives. However it has no role in either directing public or private investment or in policy making. Thus the question being raised is how can it set-up a new paradigm of planning for sustainable development? The critical role of the State in the sustainable economic development of the nation cannot be ignored and a mere think-tank organization cannot shoulder this responsibility. The government's vision of 'co-operative federalism' cannot be realized merely by doing away with the 'autocratic' planning commission. What is needed is decentralization combined with efficiency in management of fiscal resources. NITI Aayog must draw upon the rich experiences of the planning commission in making its future strategies. It has a crucial role to play in improving centre-state relations. The task of preparing the strategy of development and policy making over a time-bound period has to continue and The NITI Aayog has to evolve into a stronger organization.

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