

## **Institutional Effectiveness of District Planning Committees in India: Powers and Functional Status**

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### **ABSTRACT**

District Planning Committees (DPCs), constitutionally mandated under Articles 243ZD and 243ZE of the Constitution of India, and are envisaged as the apex decentralized planning institutions responsible for integrating rural and urban development plans at the district level. Despite their critical role in strengthening decentralized governance, facing several functional challenges and issues related to the administrative bottlenecks. This paper has made an attempt to examine the institutional design, composition, powers, functional processes, participation patterns, and planning effectiveness of DPCs from selected states. Based on the primary data collected from 314 DPC members across nine states, the study reveals significant gaps between constitutional intent and operational challenges. Key findings indicate some important issues like, dominance of elected Zilla Panchayat members, minimal inclusion of subject experts, limited awareness of statutory powers, inadequate authority and resources, infrequent meetings, weak deliberative processes, and low intellectual participation of members. The paper argues that, DPCs function largely as ceremonial approval bodies rather than strategic planning institutions. It concludes that without structural reforms, capacity building, administrative autonomy, and political commitment, DPCs will remain peripheral to district development planning. The study offers policy recommendations to strengthen DPCs as effective instruments of democratic decentralization and integrated development.

**Keywords:** District Planning Committee, Decentralized Planning, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Local Governance, District Development, India

### **1. INTRODUCTION:**

Decentralized planning has been the cornerstone of India's development discourse since Independence. The aspiration to empower local governments and integrate grassroots priorities into development planning found constitutional expression through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments enacted in 1992. These amendments institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) as the third tier of governance, mandating the devolution of powers, functions, and responsibilities related to planning and development.

Within this constitutional architecture, District Planning Committees are established to serve as nodal institutions for consolidating rural and urban development plans into a comprehensive district development plan. DPCs are envisaged as platforms for participatory planning, coordination, and convergence, ensuring spatial equity, sectoral integration, and inclusive growth at the district level. While some states have institutionalized DPCs as active planning bodies, in many states remain weak, irregular, and dominated by administrative or political elites. This paper seeks to empirically examine the functioning of DPCs across selected Indian.

### **Review of Literature**

The review of literature on District Planning Committees (DPCs) provides comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving discourse on district-level planning institutions in India.

### **Institutional Design of District Planning Committee**

The constitutional mandate for DPCs under Article 243ZD marks significant innovation in India's planning architecture. Unlike earlier district planning mechanisms that were largely administrative in nature, DPCs were envisaged as democratic planning bodies integrating rural and urban development processes (Rao & Mathew, 2005). Several scholars highlight that the constitutional design of DPCs is conceptually sound but suffers from weak operationalization (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011; Oommen, 2018). Studies by the Planning Commission (2014) and NIRDPR (2017) observe that many states have constituted DPCs merely to comply with constitutional provisions, without empowering them with meaningful authority over planning or resource allocation. As a result, DPCs often operate parallel to, rather than integrated with, existing administrative planning structures.

### **Composition, Representation, and Capacity of DPC Members**

In the composition of DPCs, while elected representation ensures democratic legitimacy, several studies argue that over-reliance on political representation without adequate technical expertise undermines planning quality (Mathur, 2013; Shah & Shah, 2019). A few studies indicate that DPCs are dominated by Zilla Panchayat members, with limited participation from subject experts, sectoral departments, and civil society organizations (NIRDPR, 2017; Oommen, 2018). The exclusion of Gram Panchayat and Block Panchayat representatives further distances

district planning from grassroots realities. Capacity constraints among DPC members are widely documented. Manor (2010) notes that elected representatives often lack exposure to planning methodologies, data analysis, and programme evaluation. Similarly, World Bank (2016) studies on local governance highlight that absence of structured capacity-building initiatives results in dependence on bureaucracy for plan formulation. The literature consistently emphasizes that democratic representation alone is insufficient for effective planning; it must be complemented by technical knowledge, analytical skills, and institutional support systems (Smoke & Lewis, 1996).

### **Awareness and Adequacy of Powers**

Another dominant theme in the literature relates to the ambiguity and inadequacy of powers conferred upon DPCs. While State PRI Acts enumerate the functions of DPCs, scholars argue that these powers are largely advisory in nature and lack enforceability (Rao, 2014). Studies reveal that DPC members often possess limited awareness of their statutory powers and responsibilities (NIRDPR, 2017). This lack of awareness weakens institutional confidence and reduces DPCs to passive bodies endorsing departmental plans. Oommen (2018) argues that without financial and administrative autonomy, DPCs cannot function as genuine planning authorities. The absence of control over budgetary allocations and implementation mechanisms further erodes their relevance. Comparative studies indicate that states with stronger fiscal decentralization frameworks demonstrate relatively better DPC performance (Bardhan&Mookherjee, 2006).

### **Functioning of DPC Meetings and Planning Processes**

Several studies report that DPC meetings are irregular, and poorly structured (Sivaramakrishnan, 2011; NIRDPR, 2017). Despite statutory provisions for quarterly meetings, many DPCs meet only once or twice a year. Research indicates that agendas are often prepared by district administration or line departments, leaving little scope for deliberation or modification by DPC members (Mathur, 2013). Consequently, meetings tend to focus on procedural approval rather than substantive planning discussions. Absence of systematic mechanisms for monitoring and review of development programmes result in poor performance. Without feedback loops and performance assessments, district plans remain static documents (Planning Commission, 2014).

### **Participation, Deliberation, and Democratic Practice**

Fung and Wright's (2003) theory of empowered participatory governance emphasizes that institutional design must actively enable participation through information sharing, deliberative spaces, and decision-making authority. In the absence of these conditions, participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive. Political dynamics further influence participation. Studies document instances where opposition party members or politically neutral representatives are marginalized in DPC deliberations, particularly when DPCs are chaired by Ministers or dominated by ruling party elites (Manor,

2010; Shah, 2018). Such dynamics undermine pluralism and democratic contestation within DPCs.

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### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts descriptive-analytical research design to examine the institutional effectiveness of District Planning Committees (DPCs) in India. Given the complex and multi-dimensional nature of decentralized planning institutions, the methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The mixed-methods framework enables a comprehensive understanding of structural characteristics, functional processes, and perceptual dimensions associated with DPC functioning across selected states.

### **Study Area and Sample**

The study was conducted in selected states and aimed to capture regional diversity, variation in decentralization frameworks, and differences in the institutional maturity of Panchayati Raj systems. The selection reflects representation from eastern, southern, northern, central, and western regions of India, thereby enhancing the comparative and generalizable nature of the findings. Within each state, districts where District Planning Committees had been formally constituted were identified. From these districts, DPC members constituted the primary unit of analysis, as they are directly involved in district-level planning and decision-making.

DPC members were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation of Elected members from Zilla Panchayats and Representatives from Urban Local Bodies (Municipalities and Town Panchayats), and Nominated members, subject experts, and special invitees where applicable.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure methodological triangulation and robustness of findings. Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to ensure methodological triangulation. The structured questionnaire was designed to generate quantitative data on the socio-political profile of District Planning Committee (DPC) members, patterns of composition, levels of awareness regarding statutory powers and functions, frequency and conduct of DPC meetings, nature of participation and deliberative practices, and perceptions of the overall effectiveness of DPCs in district-level planning. The instrument comprised closed-ended and multiple-response questions to capture both factual information and perceptual dimensions of DPC functioning. Prior to final administration, the questionnaire was pilot-tested to assess clarity, relevance, and reliability, and necessary refinements were made based on feedback from respondents. To complement the quantitative data and gain deeper insights into institutional processes, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected DPC members, chairpersons, and key officials involved in district planning. In addition, focus group discussions were

conducted in select districts to enable collective reflection among DPC members on challenges and opportunities related to decentralized planning. Secondary data were collected from wide range of official and documentary sources to supplement and contextualize the primary data. These sources included State Panchayati Raj Acts and associated rules, government orders and notifications pertaining to the constitution and functioning of District Planning Committees. District planning guidelines and operational manuals, and reports published by the Planning Commission, NITI Aayog, and the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR). In addition, relevant academic literature, policy papers, and research studies on decentralized planning and local governance were reviewed.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of data followed a systematic and sequential approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure comprehensive understanding of the functioning of District Planning Committees. Descriptive analysis was considered appropriate in view of the exploratory nature of the study. Qualitative data generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The approach allows for a nuanced understanding of institutional effectiveness and offers a replicable framework for future research on decentralized planning institutions.

### Major Findings of the Study

#### Composition of District Planning Committees

The study indicates that, 64.3 percent of DPC membership comprises elected Zilla Panchayat (ZP) representatives. This dominance reflects the strong political character of DPCs and ensures democratic legitimacy in accordance with constitutional provisions. However, the overwhelming presence of ZP members also highlights limited diversity of professional backgrounds within the committees. While elected representation is essential for accountability and political ownership of development processes, the excessive reliance on political representation without adequate technical support constrains the capacity of DPCs to engage in strategic planning. The findings suggest that DPCs function more as political forums rather than as multidisciplinary planning institutions.

Representatives from Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), including Municipalities and Town Panchayats, constitute 24.5 percent of DPC members. This reflects partial compliance with the constitutional requirement of proportional rural-urban representation under Article 243ZD. While the presence of ULB representatives provides an institutional mechanism for integrating urban concerns into district plans, their representation remains uneven across states and districts.

**Marginal Role of Experts and Line Departments:** The inclusion of technical expertise within DPCs is found to be extremely limited. Sectoral department representatives account for only 0.6 percent of the membership, while subject experts and special invitees together constitute merely 2.2 percent. This marginal presence significantly

undermines the technical rigor and analytical depth of district planning processes. Given the complexity of development planning, which requires expertise in areas such as infrastructure, agriculture, health, education, and environmental management, the absence of professional inputs weakens the ability of DPCs to critically assess departmental proposals and ensure convergence across sectors. Consequently, planning tends to be driven by line departments and district administration, with DPCs playing largely procedural role.

**Absence of Grassroots Representation:** A notable finding of the study is the complete absence of representation from Gram Panchayats and Block Panchayats in DPCs across all sampled states. This exclusion distances district-level planning from grassroots realities and undermines the principle of bottom-up planning envisaged under the Panchayati Raj system. Gram Panchayats, as the primary units of local governance, possess first-hand knowledge of local needs, priorities, and constraints. Their exclusion weakens the feedback loop between village-level planning and district-level consolidation, resulting in district plans that are often detached from community-level aspirations.

Overall, the findings reveal that the composition of DPCs is heavily skewed towards political representation, with insufficient inclusion of technical experts and grassroots institutions. This imbalance limits the effectiveness of DPCs as strategic planning bodies and contributes to their transformation into formal approval mechanisms rather than dynamic institutions of decentralized planning.

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#### Subject Expertise and Capacity of DPC Members

The effectiveness of District Planning Committees as institutions of decentralized planning depends not only on their constitutional status and composition but also on the professional capacity and subject expertise of their members.

**Lack of Professional Expertise:** The study finds that over 90 percent of the respondents reported having no specialized experience or professional training in key planning-related sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, engineering, infrastructure development, public administration, or economic planning. Lack of subject expertise is critical institutional weakness, given the multidimensional nature of district planning, which requires sectoral integration, technical assessment, and long-term development visioning. Although many DPC members possess valuable political experience and familiarity with local issues, the absence of technical and analytical competencies limits their ability to engage meaningfully with complex planning documents and sectoral proposals presented by line departments.

#### Awareness and Adequacy of Powers

The awareness and perceived adequacy of statutory powers are central to the effective functioning of District Planning Committees. An institution may be constitutionally empowered, but without adequate

knowledge of its authority and sufficient operational powers. The findings of the study reveal significant gaps between the formal existence of powers and their practical understanding and utilization.

### **Awareness on Statutory Powers**

The study reveals that 82.5 percent of respondents acknowledged that statutory provisions under State Panchayati Raj Acts confer powers and functions upon District Planning Committees. This high level of general acknowledgment suggests that most members are aware of the existence of legal framework governing DPCs. However, deeper examination of responses indicates that awareness is largely superficial.

Only 49.7 percent of respondents demonstrated actual knowledge of the nature, scope, and implications of these powers. Many members were unable to clearly articulate their roles in plan consolidation, prioritization of development works, or monitoring of implementation. In several cases, respondents confused advisory functions with executive authority, reflecting ambiguity regarding institutional responsibilities. This gap between nominal awareness and substantive understanding significantly weakens the confidence and assertiveness of DPC members in planning and decision-making processes.

### **Perceived Adequacy of Powers**

Perceptions regarding the adequacy of powers further underscore the institutional limitations of DPCs. Approximately 62 percent of respondents expressed the view that the powers conferred on DPCs are inadequate, especially in relation to financial authority and administrative control. Respondents highlighted that DPCs lack decision-making power over resource allocation, budget approvals, and implementation mechanisms, which severely constrains their ability to influence district development priorities.

Even among the remaining respondents who perceived the powers as formally adequate, there was widespread agreement that ineffective implementation, lack of supporting institutional mechanisms, and administrative dominance undermine their practical utility. The absence of dedicated technical staff, financial autonomy, and enforcement authority reduces DPCs to consultative forums rather than empowered planning institutions. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of District Planning Committees is constrained not merely by the existence of limited powers, but by combination of inadequate authority, poor operational clarity, and weak institutional support.

### **Participation, Deliberation, and Decision-Making**

Effective decentralized planning requires regular meetings, meaningful deliberation, and active participation of members in decision-making processes. District Planning Committees are constitutionally envisaged as deliberative bodies where diverse perspectives from rural and urban local governments converge to shape integrated district development plans. However, the findings of the study reveal significant procedural and substantive weaknesses in the functioning of DPCs across the selected states.

### **Frequency of Meetings**

The study finds that most districts conduct only one or two DPC meetings in a year, despite statutory provisions mandating quarterly meetings. In several districts, meetings were convened irregularly and often only to fulfill procedural requirements related to the consolidation or approval of district plans. Respondents reported that meetings are often scheduled at short notice, further constraining meaningful preparation and informed participation by members.

### **Quality of Deliberations**

The quality of deliberations within DPC meetings is found to be largely superficial. Over 86 percent of respondents reported that meetings are primarily characterized by procedural approvals rather than substantive discussions on development priorities, sectoral convergence, or inter-local body coordination. Agenda items are frequently predetermined by district administration, with limited scope for members to introduce alternative perspectives or critically examine proposals. As a result, DPC meetings often function as formal ratification platforms for plans already prepared by line departments, rather than as forums for democratic deliberation and strategic planning.

### **Nature of Participation**

More than 80 percent of members reported functioning as silent or passive participants, with minimal involvement in discussions or decision-making. This pattern of less participation is attributed to low institutional confidence arising from limited awareness of powers, lack of technical knowledge, and perceived dominance of political and administrative elites. Respondents indicated that dissenting views are either discouraged or informally suppressed, reinforcing the culture of compliance rather than constructive debate. The combined effect of infrequent meetings, weak deliberations, and passive participation significantly undermines the decision-making capacity of District Planning Committees.

### **Planning Outcomes and Institutional Effectiveness**

The effectiveness of District Planning Committees lies in their ability to produce integrated, inclusive, and comprehensive district development plans. The findings of the study indicate that, despite their constitutional mandate, DPCs have limited influence over substantive planning outcomes. Instead, their role remains largely procedural, with weak inter-sectoral and rural–urban convergence.

### **Procedural Nature of District Planning**

The study reveals that DPCs predominantly function as plan-approval bodies, endorsing development proposals prepared by line departments and district administration with minimal scrutiny or modification. In most districts, plans are consolidated at the administrative level and placed before the DPC primarily for formal approval, rather than for critical review or strategic alignment. Respondents consistently reported that opportunities to revise priorities, reallocate resources, or introduce locally responsive interventions are extremely limited.

### Limited Rural–Urban and Sectoral Convergence

A key objective of DPCs is to ensure convergence between rural and urban development plans and promote integrated district development. However, the study finds that coordination between Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies remains weak and largely symbolic. Rural and urban plans are frequently prepared in isolation, with little effort to align priorities, infrastructure investments, or service delivery mechanisms. Absence of effective convergence undermines the potential for addressing cross-cutting issues such as urban–rural linkages, peri-urban development, transportation networks, water management, and environmental sustainability.

The findings suggest that the institutional effectiveness of District Planning Committees is constrained by their procedural orientation and weak coordination mechanisms. Unless DPCs are empowered to move beyond formal approval functions and actively shape planning priorities through convergence and strategic integration, their contribution to decentralized development will remain limited.

### 2. CONCLUSION

District Planning Committees are constitutionally envisioned as pivotal institutions for advancing decentralized, participatory, and integrated development planning in India. Anchored in the principles of democratic decentralization and cooperative federalism, DPCs were expected to harmonize rural and urban development priorities, consolidate bottom-up plans, and provide strategic direction for district-level development. However, the empirical evidence from this multi-state study suggests that DPCs continue to remain institutionally weak, underutilized, and marginalized within the broader governance architecture. The findings reveal that structural imbalances in composition, marked by the dominance of elected representatives and the

marginalization of technical experts and grassroots institutions, have limited the planning capacity of DPCs. Capacity deficits, low awareness of statutory powers, inadequate financial and administrative authority, irregular meetings, weak deliberative practices, and administrative dominance have further constrained their effectiveness. As the result, DPCs largely function as procedural bodies, endorsing pre-prepared departmental plans with limited scope for meaningful intervention, convergence, or innovation.

Revitalizing District Planning Committees requires comprehensive reform agenda that goes beyond formal constitutional recognition. Structural reforms are needed to ensure balanced representation, including the systematic inclusion of technical experts and grassroots institutions. Equally important is sustained political commitment to decentralization, reflected in the devolution of real financial and administrative powers to DPCs. Institutional capacity-building through regular training, technical support, and orientation on statutory roles is essential to enhance confidence and competence in planning processes. In addition, procedural reforms to ensure regular meetings, structured deliberation, and transparent decision-making are critical for strengthening the participatory character of DPCs. Strengthened and empowered District Planning Committees are indispensable for realizing the constitutional promise of participatory governance and integrated district development. Without effective DPCs, the goal of bottom-up planning remains largely aspirational. Reinvigorating these institutions is therefore essential not only for improving planning outcomes but also for deepening democratic governance and promoting sustainable and inclusive development at the district level in India.

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