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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Comprehensive Planning and the Challenge of Coordination in Iran's Development Planning System

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

Introduction

This research investigates the reasons behind the failure of comprehensive development planning to fulfill its coordinating role within Iran's national development planning system. Development, understood as the "upward movement of the entire social system," requires extensive coordination among national development actors to enable the social system to progress from its current state to a developed state. The development planning institution, established in Iran in 1948, is considered one of the key institutional mechanisms for achieving such coordination. Despite more than seven decades of experience, Iran's development planning system has performed inadequately in achieving development goals, and studies indicate that incoordination within and among its subsystems (planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation) constitutes a serious systemic challenge.

This lack of coordination persists despite the original goal of comprehensive planning-which became the dominant planning pattern from the Third Development Plan prior to the Islamic Revolution-of establishing broad coordination across the national development process. This study aims to analyze the factors contributing to the failure of comprehensive planning to foster coordination, thereby addressing the existing gap in the literature on development planning in Iran and offering practical recommendations to enhance coordination within the iran's development planning system.

Mothodology

This research is qualitative in nature, exploratory in orientation, and applied in purpose, utilizing qualitative secondary analysis to address a new central research question. The data used in this study includes 16 semi-structured interviews and a set of documents related to Iran's development planning system, which were collected from a previous study by the authors of the paper. The data analysis process was carried out using thematic analysis and the MAXQDA software. To ensure the credibility of the research, the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985)- credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability- were employed, with appropriate techniques applied for each criterion. The theoretical framework of Gholipour et al. (2024) was used for data analysis. Based on this framework, the quality of coordination depends on the existence of a clear,

common, and valid basis for the actors. Therefore, the research question, framed within this theoretical framework, asks: What role does comprehensive planning play in the lack of a clear, common, and valid basis for action in Iran's development planning system?

Findings

The set of factors explaining the failure of comprehensive planning to fulfill its coordinating role within the development planning system can be categorized into three main issues:

1. Failure to Meet Foundational Requirements: Comprehensive planning requires three fundamental components: sufficient analytical capacity to understand and integrate the complexities of the social system, a detailed, accurate, and timely statistical and informational system, and an appropriate time frame to develop a coordinated document. The absence of any of these components disrupts the creation of a realistic, cohesive, and analytical basis for planning. When such a basis (a clear and valid basis for action) is not available, the planning process, instead of being based on deep analysis, clear prioritization, and a systematic approach to addressing issues, turns into a rushed and chaotic aggregation of sectional demands, incomplete data, and scattered decrees. Such a plan is neither internally coordinated nor capable of serving as a reference framework for coordination at the implementation level.

2. Failure to Meet Institutional and Executive Requirements: In addition to the foundational requirements of comprehensive planning, another set of requirements pertains to the institutional and executive environment in which the plan is created and intended to be implemented. These requirements include a coherent and stable governance system, as well as the presence of suitable executive capacities, to facilitate the formulation of a coordinated comprehensive plan and ensure its accurate implementation. If these requirements are not met, they not only make the development of a coordinated plan difficult but also lead to incoordination in the execution phase by weakening the plan's enforcement mechanisms. Therefore, the "incoherent and unstable governance system" and "limited executive capacities" in Iran are two key factors contributing to the failure of comprehensive planning to fulfill its coordinating role within the development planning system.

3.Incoordinating Consequences: The third category of factors contributing to the failure of comprehensive planning to fulfill its coordinating role within the development planning system directly relates to the incoordinating consequences of comprehensive planning, which can be categorized into two groups: plan-related consequences and executive consequences. Plan-related consequences include the lack of prioritization, the transformation of the plan into a platform for fulfilling everyone's demands, and weak executive aspect of the plan, which works against the formulation and implementation of a plan based on a clear, common, and valid basis. Executive consequences include the bloating of administrative structures, the intensification of legal chaos, weakened accountability, and failure in solving problems. These not only work against the formulation and implementation of a plan based on a clear, common, and valid basis of action but also exacerbate incoordination in the governance system as a larger whole.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, the failure of comprehensive planning to fulfill its coordinating role in the development planning system can be attributed to three categories of fundamental, institutional, and consequential factors that interact with each other. First, due to the failure to meet the foundational requirements of comprehensive planning (limited analytical capacity, limited informational capacity, and limited time opportunity), the failure to meet institutional requirements (incoherent governance system), plan-related consequences (the transformation of the plan into a platform for fulfilling

everyone's demands and the lack of prioritization), and executive consequences (failure in solving problems and the accumulation of problems on one another), it is fundamentally impossible to design a plan based on a clear, common, and valid basis. As a result, development plans become internally incoordinate, and the plan, instead of being structured on an integrative and holistic logic, transforms into a chaotic aggregation of scattered demands and decrees.

Second, due to the failure to meet institutional and executive requirements (incoherent and unstable governance system with limited executive capacities), plan-related consequences (lack of prioritization, weak executive aspect of the plan), executive consequences (the intensification legal chaos and weakened accountability), and also internal incoordination, comprehensive development plans cannot serve as a clear, common, and valid basis for executive actors and, at the implementation stage, collapse functionally, losing their coordinating role.

Third, comprehensive planning is associated with unintended consequences in the execution phase, which themselves contribute to the intensification of incoordination in the governance system; including failure in solving problems and the accumulation of problems, the bloating of administrative structures and organizations, and the intensification of legal chaos.

Nevertheless, the achievements of comprehensive planning in fostering coordination should not be entirely dismissed. Despite all its shortcomings, these comprehensive plans, by creating a basis for action—albeit of less-than-optimal quality—have, to some extent, been effective in relatively guiding actors and preventing certain crises resulting from the lack of overarching direction. The occurrence of severe incoordination due to deviations from comprehensive development plans in the experience of Iran's development planning provides evidence of this.

Finally, it is worth noting that the new theoretical framework presented by gholipour et al. (2024) has proven its effectiveness in analyzing the coordination challenge and has been able to comprehensively cover the incoordinating factors identified in both literature and field data.

KEYWORDS

Development Planning System, Comprehensive Planning Failure, Coordination, Basis of Action, Qualicative Secondary Analysis.

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