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Reforms in urban planning capacity in India

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India is one of the most rapidly urbanising countries in the world. It is expected that half of the country's population would be living in urban areas in few decades. Cities are the drivers of economic growth and globalisation. Urbanisation is a continuous process and almost impossible to reverse. People migrate from rural areas to urban areas in search of employment opportunities, better education & healthcare and a higher standard of living. To stop the migration, the government tries to provide all these facilities to the rural areas.

Although urbanisation is considered as a healthy sign for any economy, unplanned urbanisation leads to several issues. These issues include lack of proper infrastructure, unhygienic living conditions, extreme pressure on existing infrastructure, pollution and many more. Overall, it can be summarised that unplanned urbanisation not only leads to a fall in the quality of life but also has consequences for the environment. India is set to become the most populous country in the world by 2027 according to United Nations report. To address the issues posed by unplanned urbanisation, NITI Aayog prepared and launched a report titled "Reforms in Urban Planning Capacity in India" in September 2021. The report calls for a systematic approach to urbanisation in the country.

The report outlines a detailed roadmap for the country's urban planning for years to come. In the subsequent paragraphs, we will discuss some of the key features of the report.

- **Development of 500 healthy cities:** Urban planners have been talking about Smart Cities for quite some time, however, being healthy is equally, if not more, important. A healthy city would be an intersection between urban planning, infrastructure management, public services like healthcare and environmental conservation. In other words, a healthy city must provide a wholesome living experience to its residents. The government of India targets developing 500 healthy cities by the year 2030.
- **Ramping up the human resource:** One of the reasons for unplanned urban development in the country is the lack of skilled persons at the right places. In many cities and towns across the country, the positions of urban planners are vacant. Niti Aayog has directed the city authorities to fill these places with trained human resources.
- **Re-modelling of the urban governance:** Most Indian cities are suffering from the multiplicity of authorities. Urban planners have to take lot of approvals from many authorities that even the smallest projects take years to start and complete. Delhi is a prime example of this situation. The report by Niti Aayog has recommended remodelling of urban governance to ensure the minimum possible number of authorities needed to approve or sanction any urban development project.
- **Revision of the laws and acts for urban planning:** Many laws and regulations for urban development in the country are either from the colonial period or decades old. These laws need to be revised to meet the needs of modern cities.
- **Increase the participation of local communities:** Government are temporary but the communities are permanent. For efficient planning and administration of the cities, the government can do only to a certain limit. To achieve the desired results of a healthy city, the involvement of the local communities is extremely important. The local communities are much more aware of the problems and the needs of their areas. They are also experienced enough to suggest what might work and what not for their localities.
- **Encourage private parties to participate in urban planning:** Engaging the private parties in urban development not only brings in investment but also expertise. However, the government needs to make its policies lucrative enough to attract the private parties to partner in the endeavours.
- **Invest in capacity building:** Capacity-building exercise is a continuous process. Departments must have a dedicated cell with appropriate budget allocation to conduct sessions on ongoing technologies and their applications. Stakeholder's participation must be mandatory. Without thoroughly trained manpower, the dream of 500 healthy cities cannot be realized.

With the current rate of urbanisation, it might well become the largest population in near future. The rapid growth of India's economy has pulled millions of people out of poverty and the per capita income in the country is on a constant rise. The expectations of the people from the cities are also increasing. People are demanding better planning and governance from the urban authorities. The recommendations of the report by Niti Aayog, if implemented sincerely, will be a game-changer in the transformation of the urban scenario in the country.