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NATIONAL PLANNING - THE ANTIGUAN EXPERIENCE



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NATIONAL PLANNING - THE ANTIGUAN EXPERIENCE

Introduction

When considering the preparation of a national plan for any one country, it is apparent that the state of this particular aspect of development economies is perhaps least suited to generalisations and standard methodology. The combination of the different types of planning, from complete central planning to almost complete laissez-faire, on the one hand, and the diversity of the levels of development of the economies, on the other hand, makes attempts at standardisation particularly hazardous and the transfer of methodology even from economies at similar levels of development even more dangerous.^{1/} Another reason for a non-standard approach is the type of plan to be drawn-up. It could be argued that three types of plan exist: one showing a true picture of development prospects, one which was most acceptable to the ruling political party (and therefore has more chance of adoption) and the third as suitable for persuading aid donors to provide funds and technical assistance, where possible combining this by demonstrating conditions for attracting private foreign investment. It remains up to the individual planner to walk this difficult path, to determine the element of Government involvement, choose the type of plan and the methodology to be adopted and, equally important, to build into the plan elements which will allow for ease of implementation in an attempt to bridge the gap between formulation and implementation the lack of which has accounted for the high mortality rate amongst national plans.

^{1/} In this context, it is worth noting that the Government of Antigua has a policy of limited control of economic activity and concentrates control in such areas as prices, foreign and local trade licences, activities of expatriate firms and workers, land wage, type of manufacturing.

Plan Preparation in Antigua

Several plans at the national level had been drawn-up prior to the present exercise. Dr. Carleen O'Laughlin prepared such a plan in 1974, but it progressed no further than the draft stage, possibly due to the untimely death of the Author. The United Nations Multi-Island project also wrote a plan for Antigua in 1978 and various World Bank missions have sought to establish public sector investment programmes. The economy of Antigua is characterised as being open and dependent on external factors such as tourism and foreign trade.

In approaching the formulation of a national plan covering both private and public sectors, the Planning Unit, set up in mid-1978, sought first to establish the degree of commitment by Government to planning as such. A firm commitment from the Deputy Premier, who is responsible for Planning, was given and an outline of procedures and a timetable were accepted.

In examining the various type of plans and methods of preparation, it was clear that without total co-operation from all Ministries and Departments, the chances of success were severely limited. In ideal circumstances, sectoral plans could be requested from individual Ministries and a total national plan could be shaped from the resultant parts. However, to request Ministries to prepare such sectoral plans, even if outlines, criteria, assumptions and all such assistance were provided, seemed unlikely to be effective, especially with a limited time span, due to officials being involved in day to day duties and unable to spare time. A more practical approach was to allocate to each planning officer within the Planning Unit responsibility for sectors of the economy, and with four such officers within the Unit and eight major sectors, apportionment of responsibility was made. Each officer then worked full-time in the Ministries/Departments allocated and drafted the sectoral plan working with an appropriate Ministry official. Drafts were then submitted to Permanent Secretaries of the Ministries for approval. The Planning Unit officers worked from a standard list of subjects to be covered ranging from sectoral objectives and strategies, a background through present problems, existing projects to new projects and resources required. All projects were included as a vetting process was scheduled for later in the plan preparation and, where possible, priorities were established.

The philosophy behind the approach of involvement by Ministries at basic levels was to avoid the impression that a central planning unit was imposing opinions and projects upon Ministries and, that it was their plan that was now produced and not the figment of a central planner's imagination.

With drafts of sectoral plans approved up to Permanent Secretary level, the task of bringing these together into a National Plan and to sum up requirements of resources was begun. Resources were conventionally defined as manpower (both skilled and unskilled), finance (local and external), technical assistance, land, natural resources, utilities of water, electricity, roads and transport facilities. To these was added an estimate of administrative capacity of each Ministry to carry out the plans they had put forward. New projects were vetted for pre-feasibility within national objectives and sectoral objectives.

The next step was to see what effect the implementation of the total requirements would have on the economy and, more critically, whether such a level of resources could be obtained and absorbed in a five-year period. It was evident on the first estimate that even with a 10% proportion of finance sourced as local, the substantial jump in local revenue this implied, would be too great a strain on the economy when combined with the sharp increase in debt servicing resulting from the inevitability of external loans even with a generous allowance for grant funding.

On the second round, with the postponement of several projects and a revision of the sourcing of finance, a more realistic picture emerged. For other resources, unskilled manpower was not a problem with unemployment hovering around 20%, nor was semi-skilled labour. Land is plentiful, especially good agricultural land, and utilities were improved during the plan formulation. Natural resources were not fully known so a consultant was requested to sum up the potential of mineral wealth, and another consultant to report on the possibility of oil being found in economic quantities. Lack of reliable statistics remained a problem throughout the exercise and still needs improvement before a sound base is established.

The Next Step

Plan implementation and monitoring is an area of equal importance to the preparation, and calls for a greater discipline and organization in Ministries to fit within the broad framework of the Plan. Even with a plan which is flexible, such discipline is required especially in communicating with the central planners. It remains to be seen how successful this exercise turns out in the Antiguan context. The intention at this time is to review plan progress every year but to retain the overall framework of the plan for the 5-year period.

Summary

Of the various type of plans and methods to be employed, it is the feeling of the Planning Unit that the present plan is a strictly realistic set of guidelines for future development prepared by Ministries and Departments with some assistance from central planners. At the same time to achieve the objectives will stretch the economy to the limit of resources. The final version is with Cabinet and it is of great encouragement to the Planning Unit that the Hon. V. C. Bird, Sr., Premier, in his address to the nation upon re-election spoke of the blueprint of the future being set out by the Socio-Economic Development Plan now in front of Government.

