

# INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH-EAST INDIA: THE ROLE OF THE NORTH-EASTERN COUNCIL

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*The North-Eastern Region (NER), in the decades following the independence of India, was faced with administrative challenges including socio-economic backwardness, huge infrastructural gap with mainland India, regionalism and insurgent movements for independence. With the emergence of new political units as a result of the reorganisation of the region, the North-Eastern Council (NEC) was created by an Act of Parliament in 1971 to act as an intergovernmental organ and to coordinate the constituent units towards a planned development. This article also analyses how this institution can be made more efficient and vibrant.*

## INTRODUCTION

THE NORTH-EASTERN Region (NER) or simply North-East is a conglomeration of the eight States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It covers an area of about 2.6 lakh sq. km with a population of a little over 39 million. It is composed of some 475 ethnic groups and sub-groups, speaking over 400 languages/dialects. The region covers about 7.98 per cent of the country's total geographical area and accounts for as little as around 3.79 per cent of India's total population.<sup>1</sup> The North-East region shares international borders with China in the north, Bhutan in the west, Bangladesh in the east and Burma in the south and no part of India occupies such an important strategic location as the NER. The region, however, is connected to mainland India only by the 27 km Siliguri land corridor, the so-called "Chicken-Neck".<sup>2</sup>

Prior to India's Independence in 1947, the whole of present North-East was a part of Assam except Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim. Manipur and Tripura were princely states that became Part C States under the Constitution of India to be administered by the Central Government through Chief Commissioners or Lieutenant Governors. Sikkim was an independent

Himalayan kingdom and is not even directly linked with the rest of North-Eastern states. It joined India in 1975 and became a part of the 'seven sister states' only since its inclusion in the North-Eastern Council (NEC) in 2002.

### *Why the North-Eastern Council?*

With the independence of India, the issue of administration of the tribal areas of North-East came as a challenge as the region was already affected by politics of regionalism. A constitutional provision in the form of the Sixth Schedule was created for the administration of these tribal areas. The Sixth Schedule is referred to in Articles 244(2) and 275(1) of the Constitution of India and includes provisions for the administration of the Tribal Areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. It provided for a District Council for an autonomous district and a Regional Council for an autonomous region. These Councils are endowed with a certain degree of legislative, executive, judicial, and financial powers. The Sixth Schedule, however, did not resolve the regionalist demands of the region. Underdevelopment, especially poor governance, corruption, unemployment and low economic achievements sustain conditions for insurgency and alienation in the region. Politically, the region has undergone phases of insurgencies and ethnic conflicts, and reorganisation of the present North-Eastern states took place till the late 1980s. Nagaland was the first and A.Z. Phizo declared independence as early as August 15, 1947, and under his leadership, the Naga National Council (NNC) organised a plebiscite on the question of being independent or remaining in India on May 16, 1951.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, Nagaland gradually attained statehood in 1963 to become the first Indian state that is not carved out on the basis of linguistic lines. The Hill State Movement soon followed. The Mizo national movement spearheaded by the Mizo National Front (MNF) also followed suit in 1966. The process for the reorganisation of the region took place till 1987. Due to these, the NER is often perceived as a region of conflicts and tensions.

The NER is also economically backward in comparison to the rest of the country. Owing to its lack of infrastructure and poor governance coupled with low productivity and access to market (both domestic and international), this region has remained as one of the most backward regions of the country. Some of the challenges are: "inadequate development of basic developmental infrastructure; geographical isolation and difficult terrain that reduces mobility; high rainfall and recurring flood in the Brahmaputra valley; lack of capital formation and proper enterprise-climate; slow technology spread; absence of a supporting market structure and adequate institutional finance structure and low level of private sector investment".<sup>4</sup> The North-Eastern States have primarily depended on central funding for their developmental works. They were given the status of Special Category

States until before the 14th Finance Commission Report (February 2015) which meant that development plans for these States were centrally financed on the basis of 90 per cent grant and 10 per cent loan. Moreover, such States were allowed to use up to 20 per cent of the Central Assistance for Non-plan expenditure.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the decades following India's Independence, the poor socio-economic conditions were ripe for politics of regionalism to proliferate in the region, especially during the wake of the linguistic reorganisation of states in India.

#### *Creation of the North-Eastern Council*

As a measure to check the centrifugal forces that emerged after India's Independence, the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, introduced the idea of creation of the Zonal Councils. The country was divided into five Zonal Councils vide Part III of the States Re-organisation Act, 1956. Each zone has its own council. The composite state of Assam was also clubbed together with Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal in the Eastern Zonal Council.<sup>6</sup> The main objective behind the formation of these Zonal Councils is to provide in each zone a council of states in the region which could become a forum where the states could discuss and resolve their inter-state disputes; create a healthy inter-state environment; provide a common meeting ground in each zone; foster a balanced regional development and build harmonious Centre-State relations.<sup>7</sup>

The inclusion of composite Assam in the Eastern Zonal Council was short-lived and the Government of India created a new regional order in the North-East in the beginning of the 1970s. Firstly, the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971, was framed and passed into law in 1972. This Act converted semi-autonomous state of Meghalaya into a full-fledged State, the Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura into States, and the Mizo Hills District and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) into Union Territories, namely, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the Act resulted in the formation of five States: Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura; and two Union Territories: Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. As a consequence of these changes, the area of Assam was reduced from 47,091 square miles in 1947 to 30,342 square miles in 1972, and the population by more than one million. The area that is lost to Assam is rich in forest wealth and mineral resources. Secondly, to coordinate the activities of these political units, the North-Eastern Council Act, 1970, was passed as an Act of Parliament for the creation of the North-Eastern Council (NEC), a regional advisory body but did not come into force. This was attributed to the suspicion of the States and the Union Territories in the region that the Government of India was inventing an institution to impose its will on them even though the Union government tried to convince them that the Council

would primarily be an advisory body and that the units were free whether to join it or not.<sup>8</sup> One year later, the North-Eastern Council Act, 1971, was passed and it repealed the former Act. It brought together the seven units of the erstwhile North-East into an institutional arrangement.<sup>9</sup> With the creation of a number of new units and the nodal agency in 1971, B.P. Singh, a senior Indian civil servant who held key positions both in the NER and the Indian Home Ministry, referred to this process as "twins born out of a new vision for the Northeast".<sup>10</sup> Therefore, these twin developments can rightly be seen as peace-building measures for the resolution of conflicts in the region.

The NEC was inaugurated on November 7, 1972, by the North-Eastern Council Act, 1971, for securing balanced and coordinated development and effecting coordination among the North-Eastern States. The NEC, in its inauguration, was addressed by the Prime Minister as an advisory body and not a supervisory body.<sup>11</sup> However, the NEC acts as a planning and funding agency since the very beginning. Two policy innovations were made in the creation of the NEC. First, the concept of regional planning authority with separate plan and outlay. It is to cover the residuary gap between the central and state plans. The plan was to be executed under the supervision of the Council but as an advisory body, it could not assume direct control. The plan was to be financed by the Council out of the funds made available to it by the Central government, as the Council has no financial resources of its own. Second, the Council was given the task of being the source of ideas for the development of the region for human welfare as well as the maintenance of security and public order.<sup>12</sup> The members of the NEC now consist of the Chairman and three Members nominated by the President of India, and the Governors and the Chief Ministers of the eight member-States.

#### *Functions of the North-Eastern Council*

It may be interrogated as to why a separate body such as the NEC is devised when a zonal council is already in operation. Section 4 of the North-Eastern Council Act, 1971 (Act No.84 of 1971), enumerates the four-fold functions of the Council. Firstly, the Council is a regional planning body which may discuss and make recommendations on any matter of common interest of some or all of the member-states and give its advice to the Union government and the governments of the States concerned as to the action to be taken on any such matter. In this regard, it gives priorities to matters of common interest in the field of economic and social planning, inter-state transport and communication, and power or flood control projects.

Secondly, the Council formulates and forwards proposals for securing balanced development in the region. It formulates a unified and co-ordinated regional plan which is in addition to the normal State Plan and gives priorities to projects and schemes included in the regional plan accordingly

and determine the stages for their implementation. The location of projects and schemes included in the regional plan are then elucidated and forwarded to the Union government for consideration.

Thirdly, the Council gives a timely review of the implementation of projects and schemes included in the regional plan and gives its recommendation for affecting coordination among the concerned member-States. When a project or a scheme is to benefit two or more States, it recommends the matter of execution and maintenance of such project or scheme; how the benefits may be shared and how the expenditure may be incurred. It reviews the progress of expenditure of projects and schemes included in the regional plan and gives its recommendations to the Union government the quantum of financial assistance to be given to the State or States concerned. It also recommends the Governments of the States concerned or the Union government for undertaking necessary surveys and investigation of projects to consider the feasibility of including new projects in the regional plan.

Lastly, the Council makes a timely review of the measures undertaken by the States concerned for the maintenance of peace and security in the region and makes recommendations for necessary measures to be followed in this regard.<sup>13</sup>

To catch up with the rest of India and ensuring a balanced socio-economic development in the region, various schemes and projects of regional nature pertaining to developmental interests of two or more States in the region are initiated. The prioritised sectors mentioned in the Revised NEC General Guidelines approved in the 64th Plenary held on 9th and April 10, 2015, in New Delhi are:

- (i) Agriculture and Allied Sector
- (ii) Transport and Communication Sector
- (iii) Power and RRE Sector
- (iv) Health Sector
- (v) Human Resource Development & Employment Sector
- (vi) Irrigation, Flood Control & WSM Sector
- (vii) Industries and Tourism Sector
- (viii) Science and Technology Sector
- (ix) Information and Public Relation Sector
- (x) Evaluation and Monitoring Sector.<sup>14</sup>

The Sector-Wise Release of Funds under NEC Plan during the 12th Five-Year Plan (Rs. in crore) is given in Table 1.

On 12th-13th May, 2008, the NEC in its Plenary held at Agartala adopted the North-Eastern Region Vision 2020 which was formally released by the Hon'ble Prime Minister at New Delhi on July 2, 2008. The document

TABLE 1: 12TH FIVE-YEAR NEC PLAN (RS. IN CRORE)

No.	Sectors	12th Plan Approved Outlay	Annual Plan (2012-13) Actual Expenditure	Annual Plan (2013-14) Actual Expenditure	Annual Plan (2014- 15) Budget Estimate
1.	Agriculture and Allied	425.99	77.34	81.98	104.67
2.	Power Renewable Resources of Energy	1,135.98	66.50	73.65	74.00
3.	Irrigation Flood Control and Watershed Management	227.20	36.19	45.84	33.00
4.	Industries and Tourism	483.64	33.49	54.80	47.46
5.	Transport and Communication	2,732.04	368.40	319.84	347.32
6.	Medical & Health	454.39	45.92	26.81	50.00
7.	Human Resource Development and Employment	454.39	76.83	69.70	72.93
8.	Science and Technology	129.50	17.44	17.69	27.94
9.	Information and Public Relations	56.80	8.89	7.05	9.63
10.	Evaluation and Monitoring	8.07	1.76	0.69	3.05
	Grand Total	6,108.00	732.76	698.05	770.00

Source: NEC Secretariat, Shillong.<sup>15</sup>

sets up the goals, identifies the challenges and suggests implementation strategies for various sectors for peace and prosperity of the region. The document has come up with six interdependent components for inclusive development of the region:

- (i) Empowerment of the people of the region by maximising self-governance and participatory development through grassroots planning;

- (ii) Rural development with a focus on improving agricultural productivity and the creation of non-farm activities;
- (iii) Development of sectors including agro-processing industries, sericulture, large hydroelectric power generation and focus on developing services such as tourism;
- (iv) Augmenting infrastructure including rail, road, water and air transportation, improve communication networks and harnessing power generation potential will open up markets, attract private investment and create greater employment opportunities for people of the region;
- (v) Making the 'Look East Policy' meaningful for the region by connecting it with South-East Asian markets; and
- (vi) Ensuring adequate flow of resources for public investments, encouraging private participation in augmenting infrastructure and flow of investments to harness the physical resources of the region for the welfare of the people.<sup>16</sup>

It is stated that an investment to the tune of Rs. 13,29,891 crore (from 11th Plan to first three years of the 13th Plan) would be required to achieve the required growth in the region. Seventeen Thematic Groups have been constituted to translate the objectives enunciated in the Vision document into concrete Plans which have started working on preparing the Action Plans to achieve the objectives of the Vision Document. The Action Plans were presented at the NEC Secretariat in Shillong on 3rd-4th December, 2008.<sup>17</sup>

The State-wise NEC Fund Released during 2012-2014 for the members of the NEC are given in Table 2.

The NEC also established the Regional Documentation and Information

TABLE 2: STATE-WISE NEC FUND RELEASED DURING 2010-2014

State	Rs. in Lakh		Rs. in Crore	
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Arunachal Pradesh	11,387.06	10,568.51	91.70	75.70
Assam	8,835.30	5,715.64	91.40	69.05
Manipur	4,613.78	4,481.67	52.55	91.06
Meghalaya	7,185.73	5,623.58	86.35	53.23
Mizoram	4,394.89	7,403.50	83.18	55.54
Nagaland	4,856.85	8,455.43	84.00	114.86
Sikkim	3,233.28	5,340.00	55.84	53.12
Tripura	4,209.70	5,275.44	37.99	81.37

Source: Source: NEC Secretariat, Shillong.<sup>18</sup>

Centre (RDIC) in 1974-75. The RCID has built up a reputable collection of records and documents of research, reports and studies on various aspects of the region and has also set up a library. The Centre has helped a great deal in the dissemination of information relating to all aspects of developmental activities, prospects and challenges and plan strategies in respect of the States of the region. It has also provided valuable information about the historical background, the socio-cultural heritage as well as the mindsets of the people in the region. Since its establishment, the Centre has obtained a collection of more than 42,000 books, 5000 reports, Plan documents, etc. It subscribes to 200 journals of various subjects and disciplines, both national and international.<sup>19</sup> As far as the funding agencies are concerned, the North-East Council gets support from the Ministry for Development of North-East Region (MDoNER). Normally, a Detailed Project Report (DPR) is the basis for sanctioning money through MDoNER.

*Towards Strengthening of NEC: Creation of MDoNER and Amendment Act*

In the wake of the new millennium, fundamental changes took place in the administration of the North-Eastern region. Firstly, a new Ministry for the Development of North-Eastern Region (DONER) was added to India's national government in 2001 within the Ministry of Home Affairs.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, the North-Eastern Council (Amendment) Act, 2002, was passed on December 23, 2002, The Act, *inter alia*, added Sikkim as the eighth member-State of the NEC (Section 2). Consequently, the Ministry of Home Affairs excluded Sikkim as member of Eastern Zonal Council.<sup>21</sup> Section 3 of the Amendment also made provision for the nomination of the Chairman and three members in the Council by the President for the eight States in the region. Section 4 of the Amendment transformed the NEC into a statutory regional planning body while formulating the regional plans, the Council shall give priority to schemes and projects of mutual interests which will benefit two or more States. Section 5 makes provision for the meeting of the Council at least twice a year. Section 6 lays down that the NEC has also been placed under the Department of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER) of the Ministry of Home Affairs and both institutions worked for planning and development in the region.<sup>22</sup>

The earlier criticism that the Council was designed mainly to serve security interest than to promote an integrated development approach in the region has been addressed with the Amendment Act of 2002.<sup>23</sup> Though the NEC is still placed under the administrative control of the Government of India's Ministry of Home Affairs, its chairmanship by one of the Governors of the North-Eastern States has been replaced by Minister of DoNER making it more democratic.



Being a statutory body, permanent in nature, it is required that the tenure of nominated members of the Council be specified in the Act. Thus, the North-Eastern Council (Amendment) Bill, 2013, *inter alia*, seeks for the inclusion of (a) one member of the Planning Commission of India (now replaced by NITI Aayog), being in charge of the NER; (b) two non-official members nominated by the President for a three-year period extendable for a further period not exceeding two years. In its 7th Report on "Capacity Building for Conflict Resolution," the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, *inter alia*, made a recommendation for the amendment to restore the 'conflict resolution provision' of the original Act of 1971 that requires the Council to discuss matters of common interest of two or more States in the region and to advise the Union government accordingly. This too was addressed in the Amendment Bill of 2013.<sup>24</sup>

Considering the challenges faced by the region and the interdependence of the economies of the region, the establishment of the NEC was a significant institutional innovation. The NEC, now headed by the Chairman who is the Hon'ble Minister of MDoNER, it must be recalled, began more as an intelligence arm of the Union government with one of the Governors of the region as its Chairman. Subsequently, after the Indian state got complete control over the region, the agenda of the North-East got enlarged with the addition of actual coordination role of NEC in areas of development. The eight-State body in a land-locked area is faced with multiple challenges in the domain of development. There are infrastructural gaps which NEC has successfully filled. The NEC started funding the power projects, roads, railways, airways, etc. It is successful where the inter-state projects are involved through third-party agencies like Central Public Works Department (CPWD), Central Water Commission (CWC) and National Highway Authorities of India (NHAI). It is also successful in funding state-level projects in horticulture, fisheries, aquaculture, animal husbandry and tourism.

It may be noticed that the lion's share of the grants is given for augmenting infrastructure. Of late, the NEC is also involved in funding Human Research Development like granting money for diploma courses offered by NIRD and other education-related activities. The NEC in general acts as the top-up to the funding development through Planning Commission (formerly) in addition to 10 per cent grants allocation to North-East since 1998-99. The Deve Gowda government introduced a provision by which all the Ministries have to spend at least 10 per cent of their budgeted funds on the development of North-East, under what is referred to as Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Recourses (NLCPR). If some ministries are unable to spend before March 31st of Financial Year, the funds do not get lapsed and/or

returned to the Finance Section to be spent by the Ministry concerned later also. The institutional mechanism for obtaining grants is through a specific Detailed Project Report (DPR). Perhaps this is the first ever relaxation of March 31st deadline to any region in the country, which only testifies Union government's priority for the region's development.

Senior administrators on being interviewed about the state of development in North-East articulated the need for altogether a different criterion for measurement of development in this region which in our opinion is novel. Analysing state and society in North-East, the administrators noted that with no reported cases of hunger, begging, eve-teasing, total absence of rape incidents, respect to women, with customs according a place for women and the property rights of women, we are wondering whether we need to have a matrix for measuring happiness of North-East people like Bhutan. The need for Community-based self-esteem index is a need of the hour as considered by those who work in that area.

Despite the efforts of NEC, the North-Eastern region has failed to harness the huge hydro power capacity and continues to depend on power supply from outside the region. In recent years the role of NEC in accelerating the economic development has been severely affected by the limited funds allocated to it. The functioning of the Council also comes for criticism from the State governments in the region. This has centred on the delay in sanctioning of funds as the Council does not have adequate powers to sanction projects and they lack expertise in many areas needed to assess the projects. Another important issue raised by the States is the absence of funding mechanism for maintenance of assets and infrastructures such as roads created through the support from the Council resulting in these assets being under-utilised. It is also true that NEC is plagued by bureaucratic lethargy like all other government agencies and there has been no study thus far to assess the performance of these institutions. It is, therefore, considering the need and urgency of development of connectivity, suggested to speed up the process of fund disbursement and easing the operational hindrances.

#### *What Needs to be Done?*

As stated earlier, the *NER Vision 2020* has come up with policy advice and key objectives for ensuring balanced development in the region. The year-wise allocation of funds under the NEC suggests that transport and communication and power are the priority sectors for the development of the NER. States. However, Chief Ministers of the region lamented the inadequacy of the overwhelming requirement of adequate funding to realise those objectives in the region which the Government of India fails to meet. They also voiced the late release of funds for their development projects.

Therefore, if the Government of India is really interested in bridging the development gap between mainland India and the NER, sufficient and timely allocation of funds are priority measures. Also, the clearance of projects is criticised to be a cumbersome and complicated process because neither the NEC nor the MDoNER possess final powers and instead function in a very bureaucratic manner. The State governments submit their proposals to the NEC but these are again sent to the MDoNER as a parent-ministry of the NEC. The MDoNER again sends these proposals to line ministry. In such a way, it has become a time-consuming and overly bureaucratic process.<sup>25</sup> According to the Tour Notes of the Secretary of NEC on his visit to Mizoram from 17th-19th February, 2016, four out of the five NEC projects in the Agriculture and Allied Sectors are delayed as in December 2015 because of non-submission of Utilisation Certificate (UC) and Quarterly Progress Report (QPR).<sup>26</sup> In the case of Tripura, five out of the eleven projects in the same sector are delayed for the same reason.<sup>27</sup> It is recommended that the NEC and the Ministry of DoNER be merged as they work in a highly bureaucratized system and this process is cumbersome and time-consuming.

Lal Thanhawla, the Chief Minister of Mizoram, suggested that investment in Human Resource Development would be the most productive development investment for the NER.<sup>28</sup> Though the region has high literacy rate of 74.48 which is higher than the national average of 74.04 as per the Census 2011, unemployment is also high due to the lack of skilled labour and lack of opportunities in primary, manufacturing and service sectors. Accordingly, the *Vision 2020* recommends providing access and incentives for the education of women and tribal population that in turn brings social and economic transformation and provides sustainable livelihood system. Besides, increasing training opportunities in nursing can expand productive employment opportunities for women in the region. With reference to higher and technical education, the *Vision 2020* emphasised a concerted effort to create higher educational institutions such as IITs/IIITs/IIMs through both public and private initiatives. The NEC has also supported 12 institutions focusing on health, defence, space, cane and bamboo technology, water and land management, etc.<sup>29</sup> This effort would address the critical skill shortages, especially in higher and technical education for the region. Further, focus on other aspects of human development such as basic health needs is equally important for capacity development. And there is all the optimism, given that the region having a rate of literacy has a good prospect for manpower training and skill development.

To meet the region's required power supply, particularly in the rural areas, micro hydel projects as successfully introduced in States like Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir may be initiated

with people's involvement. This will not only electrify rural areas but will also support cottage industries. Thus, the NEC may organise studies for the establishment of micro hydel projects in hilly areas, provide funds for technology and training of local inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> Another major concern of the North-Eastern States is the maintenance and rehabilitation of the already existing roads. Especially during the rainy season, the roads are damaged by landslides and water logging and it is suggested that the NEC may approve projects for maintenance and rehabilitation of existing roads as new projects. Moreover, not only inter-state roads but also intra-state roads connecting districts should be addressed.

Tourism is one area where the NER has comparative advantage, especially in terms of hill and adventure tourism. Often described as a 'paradise unexplored', it has scenic, climatic and vibrant cultural attractions. If tourist circuits connecting two or more of these states could be developed, it could attract tourists from outside the region and provide employment and livelihood opportunities to the people. Favourably, these tourists circuits should also include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand. North-East also has unique arts and vibrant cultures in which it could develop its handloom and handicrafts industry. Bamboo handicraft and colourful clothes of traditional designs that represent the unique cultures and traditions of the different tribes have now attracted both domestic and foreign markets.<sup>31</sup> A cluster or pool-based approach is desirable for the success of handlooms and handicrafts in the region. This could decrease labour costs and promote market internally and externally. Development of these industries could attract skilled labour into the cluster and provide large-scale employment.

The zone comprising Eastern Himalaya and North-East India is also one of the most unique floristic regions of the world. It is phytogeographically linked with the mountain tropical flora of Indo-Malaysia and the temperate flora of Eastern Tibet, Sino-Burma and North-East Region. The diversity of habitat and climatic conditions have supported a very rich flora and fauna in this region. Quite a few of the best known plants of the temperate gardens of the world are introduced from this region.<sup>32</sup> Thus, there is scope for successful horticulture industry and agro-forestry sector including expansive and extensive bamboo plantation, exotic flora in the region.

Importantly, building the required infrastructure such as establishing connectivity and communication links via road, railways, water and air, and promoting trade and economic exchanges with the countries neighbouring the NER are proposed to be promoted under the 'Look East Policy'. It is believed that redefining 'Look East Policy' has the potential to resolve the outstanding issues of trade, transit and investment with the countries

neighbouring the region. However, it is revealed by the Shillong Round Table Summary (2015) that the NER is not adequately linked in the Look East Policy (LEP) or Act East Policy (AEP). With the slow developments in the implementation of the LEP, the challenge also remains for making Indian traders in Nathu La (Sikkim), Zokhawthar (Mizoram), Moreh (Manipur) and Nampong (Arunachal Pradesh) benefit by improving bilateral trade and removing restrictions on commodities for trade.

Despite the efforts of the NEC since the beginning, the *NER Vision 2020* document highlighted the failure of governments to control floods and river bank erosion which causes huge damages to the lives and properties of millions of people that leave them in more vulnerable conditions. The *NER Vision 2020* document also mentioned that the backwardness, remoteness and problems of governance have caused the armed insurgencies. Importantly, the document opined that the gap between the region and the rest of the country in terms of various developmental outcomes, capacities of people and institutions is large and growing, which needs to be paid immediate attention. The *NER Vision 2020* document highlighted that one of the major constraints in the region is poor infrastructure, affecting road, rail, air, cyber and telecom, and power connectivity.<sup>33</sup> It is believed that the NER has potential for quarrying and mining, ranging from coal and limestone to uranium. However, besides focusing on accelerated growth, it is also required that environmental laws, standards and norms should be carefully adhered to for sustainable development.<sup>34</sup>

Prime Minister Narendra Modi believes that "to meet the growing aspirations of the people, it is important that the NEC introspect and assess the extent to which it has been able to achieve its objectives". He is also of the view that it should be developed as a "state-of-the-art resource centre for the North-Eastern States with necessary resources, knowledge and skills". Further, it could enable the States and the implementing agencies to properly plan and execute projects, promote research and innovations and provide strategic policy vision for the region. The government intended to connect all North-Eastern states by rail and upgrade road, telecom and power networks. Prime Minister Modi dedicated to the nation the Doppler Weather Radar at Cherrapunji.

A certain degree of decentralisation may be introduced to the regional planning body through the empowerment of and coordination with the local governments such as the Village Councils in Mizoram or the Village Development Boards in Nagaland. The PESA initiative may be reviewed and amended to make these local governments more vibrant in the planning, implementation and supervision process. As a whole, the *NER Vision 2020* of achieving peace and prosperity outlined above is feasible. However, it

needs concerted efforts of all governments, non-government agencies, and people of the region. It requires the mobilisation of the people, implementing a people-based development strategy, infrastructure development, capacity building and responsive administration and efficient governance. The *Vision 2020* document hoped to bring peace and prosperity in the NER and realise people's dreams.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Census of India, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup>Sanjib Baruah. *Postfrontier Blues: Towards a New Policy Framework for North-East India*. Washington D.C.: East-West Center, Washington, 2007, p.6. also Samir Kumar Das. *Conflict and Peace in India's Northeast: The Role of Civil Society*. Washington D.C.: East-West Center Washington, 2007, p.5 referred to the 'Chicken Neck' as about 21-kilometer-wide.
- <sup>3</sup>S.K. Chaube. *Hill Politics in North-East India*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, Third Revised Edition, 2012, p.154.
- <sup>4</sup>Ministry of Home Affairs. *North-Eastern Vision 2020 Annexures*. Volume III, p.215.
- <sup>5</sup>Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region. Website, <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/background-1>
- <sup>6</sup>The Eastern Zonal Council currently comprises of Bihar, Jharkand, Orissa, and West Bengal.
- <sup>7</sup>Rajesh K. Jha (Ed.) *Fundamentals of Indian Political System*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 2012, p.172-173.
- <sup>8</sup>Venkata Rao and Niru Hazarika. *A Century of Government and Politics in North-East India*. Vol. I. Assam. New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Ltd, 1983, p.219.
- <sup>9</sup>The North-Eastern Council Act, 1970 was not put into effect and was repealed in Section 8 of the North-Eastern Council Act, 1971.
- <sup>10</sup>B.P. Singh quoted in Sanjib Baruah. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of North-East India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.41.
- <sup>11</sup>S.R. Maheshwari. *Indian Administration*. Sixth Edition. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2001, pp.436-437.
- <sup>12</sup>M.D. Bhuyan. *The North-Eastern Council*. DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2005, pp.42-45.
- <sup>13</sup>The North-Eastern Council Act, 1971 (Act No.84 of 1971).
- <sup>14</sup>North-Eastern Council Secretariat. *Revised NEC General Guidelines*. Shillong, 2015.
- <sup>15</sup>North-Eastern Council Secretariat. *Basic Statistics of North-Eastern Region 2015*. Shillong: Government of India, 2015, p. 185.
- <sup>16</sup>Ministry of Home Affairs. *North-Eastern Vision 2020*. Agartala: North-Eastern Council, 2008, pp.2-3.
- <sup>17</sup>Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region. *Annual Report 2008-09*.
- <sup>18</sup>North-Eastern Council Secretariat. *Basic Statistics of North-Eastern Region 2015*. Shillong: Government of India, 2015, p. 183
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- <sup>22</sup>The North-Eastern Council (Amendment) Act, 2002. No. 68 of 2002.
- <sup>23</sup>Kelizedo Kikhi. "What Ails the North-East? Challenges and Responses." *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (September - December 2009): 346-366, p.355
- <sup>24</sup>The North-Eastern Council (Amendment) Bill, 2013. Bill No. XVII of 2013. Rajya Sabha.

<sup>25</sup>Proceedings of the 61st North-Eastern Council Meeting held on 27th June, 2012 at the Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi, pp. 9-15.

<sup>26</sup>Revised Tour Note of Shri Ram Muivah, IAS, Secretary, NEC. Mizoram (17th to 19th February, 2016)

<sup>27</sup>Revised Tour Note of Shri Ram Muivah, IAS, Secretary, NEC. Tripura (31st Jan to 2nd February, 2016)

<sup>28</sup>Proceedings of the 61st North-Eastern Council Meeting held on 27th June, 2012 at the Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi, p.4

<sup>29</sup>North-Eastern Council. "NEC Supported Institutions". Website: <http://necouncil.gov.in/index 1.asp?linkid=67>

<sup>30</sup>Proceedings of the 61st North-Eastern Council Meeting held on 27th June, 2012 at the Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi, p.4.

<sup>31</sup>Ministry of Home Affairs. *North-Eastern Vision 2020*. Agartala: North-Eastern Council, 2008, p.204.

<sup>32</sup>National Committee on the Development of Backward Areas. *Report on Development of North-Eastern Region*. New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1981, p.57.

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p.vi.

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