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To Build Delhi's Future, Learn From Past Missteps

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

24 August 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES**ENVIRONMENT****GS1****GS2**

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 The Indian Express

24 August 2026

GS1

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Delhi added ten million people under a master plan that assumed it would not. If a plan's population assumption is wrong by that margin, what is the plan actually for?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

The Indian Express

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Delhi's third Master Plan was written for a city of 14 million. Ten million more arrived anyway. A plan that a city ignores is not a plan; it is a document.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Urbanisation is a standing GS1 theme and Delhi is the most documented Indian case. The editorial also supplies a clean example of a policy that worked and then was overwhelmed, which is a more interesting structure than simple failure.

GS Paper 1: Urbanisation, their problems and their remedies. **GS Paper 2:** Government policies and interventions, and issues arising from their design and implementation.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A **Master Plan** is a statutory land-use document. For Delhi it is prepared by the **Delhi Development Authority** under the **Delhi Development Act, 1957**, and approved by the Centre through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, which is unusual: in most states the plan is a state subject, but Delhi's status as a Union Territory with a legislature places the DDA under central control.

The plan sets out permitted land use, densities, and the infrastructure the city is expected to need. It is prepared for roughly a twenty-year horizon.

THE ANALYSIS

What changed while the last plan was in force

THEN, ABOUT 25 YEARS AGO	NOW
Population about 14 million	About 10 million more have arrived
Gurugram and Noida were fledgling suburbs	Neighbouring cities' civic infrastructure is under acute stress
The Metro's first lines were being laid	A large network, and still insufficient for the region
CNG policy introduced, air quality improving	An "almost intractable" pollution crisis

The CNG lesson is the sharpest one

Delhi's shift of public transport to CNG produced real, measurable air quality gains through the 2000s and early 2010s. It is regularly cited as a policy success, and it was one.

And the air is now worse. The reason is not that CNG failed; it is that **a one-time technological fix was overtaken by growth it did not anticipate** — more vehicles, more construction, a larger regional airshed, and sources outside the NCT entirely. The lesson generalises: an intervention sized to a 14-million city does not scale to a 24-million one simply by continuing.

Why intensification is the only direction left

With limited land inside the National Capital Territory, the plan bets on **redevelopment, mixed land use and better utilisation of existing urban land** rather than outward expansion. That is the correct diagnosis, and it is also the hardest thing to execute, because intensification means building in places where people already live, with existing property rights, existing infrastructure loads and existing residents who did not ask for density.

Outward expansion is politically easy and ecologically expensive. Intensification is the reverse.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Delhi's fourth Master Plan was notified in August 2026; the third came into effect about 25 years earlier.

Delhi's population at the third plan: about 14 million; roughly 10 million more have since arrived.

The CNG policy for public transport was introduced as a pollution-control measure and drove air quality gains through the 2000s and early 2010s.

Plan priorities: public transport, ecological restoration, redevelopment, affordable housing and mixed land use.

The plan is prepared by the Delhi Development Authority under the Delhi Development Act, 1957.

Delhi is a Union Territory with a legislature under Article 239AA, inserted by the 69th Constitutional Amendment, 1991, which is why land and the DDA sit with the Centre rather than the elected state government.

The National Capital Region is a separate planning entity from the NCT, coordinated by the NCR Planning Board under the NCR Planning Board Act, 1985, covering districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Air quality in the region is coordinated by the Commission for Air Quality Management in the NCR and Adjoining Areas, given statutory footing in 2021.

the NCT of Delhi and the National Capital Region are different jurisdictions with different planning authorities. A Delhi Master Plan governs the NCT; the growth that overwhelmed it happened substantially in the NCR, which the DDA does not plan for. That mismatch is arguably the structural reason master plans keep missing.

THE DEBATE

For optimism: the plan correctly identifies intensification over expansion, and the priorities named — transport, ecology, affordable housing, mixed use — are the right ones.

For scepticism: the previous plan named comparable priorities and was overtaken anyway; the DDA plans the NCT while growth occurs region-wide; and enforcement against unauthorised construction has historically been weak, with periodic regularisation undoing it.

The unresolved question: whether a plan confined to the NCT can govern a metropolitan region that has long since outgrown it. On the editorial's own evidence, the answer looks like no, and that is an argument for regional planning authority rather than for a better document.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable frame: **a plan fails at the boundary it cannot see across**. Delhi's plan governs the NCT; the growth is regional; the airshed is larger still. Whenever an urban policy underperforms, check whether the planning unit matches the functional unit. It usually does not.

This applies to solid waste, groundwater, transport and air quality alike, and it is why metropolitan governance, rather than city governance, is the recurring recommendation.

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Align the planning unit with the functional region**, since the NCT boundary does not contain the growth the plan must accommodate.
- ❷ **Make intensification implementable**, with transferable development rights and redevelopment mechanisms that give existing residents a stake rather than a notice.
- ❸ **Stop periodic regularisation of unauthorised construction**, which converts enforcement into a waiting game and prices the plan out of relevance.
- ❹ **Tie infrastructure sequencing to the plan**, so density is permitted where transport and water exist rather than where land is available.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

Connects to standing themes on **urban planning, the 74th Amendment and municipal governance**, and **air pollution in the NCR**. Practice question: *"Indian master plans fail less from poor drafting than from a mismatch between the planning unit and the functional urban region. Discuss."*

Source: To Build Delhi's Future, Learn From Past Missteps — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Indian Express argues that Delhi's fourth Master Plan, notified in August 2026, is right to recognise that the city cannot be built by expanding outward given the limited land within the National Capital Territory, and that its emphasis on public transport, ecological restoration, redevelopment, affordable housing and mixed land use is welcome, but that the previous plan's record shows the gap between a plan's intentions and the city's actual growth is where the problem lies.



SUPPORTING

- The scale of the miss is the argument: when the third Master Plan came into effect about 25 years ago Delhi had roughly 14 million people, Gurugram and Noida were fledgling suburbs and the Metro's first lines were being laid, and about 10 million more people have since made the capital their home.
- The air quality gains of the 2000s and early 2010s, achieved partly through the CNG policy for public transport, have given way to an almost intractable pollution crisis, which shows that a single successful intervention does not survive unplanned growth.
- Better utilisation of existing urban land through redevelopment and mixed land use is the only remaining direction given that land within the NCT is limited, which makes intensification rather than expansion the plan's central bet.



MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

Master plans have repeatedly failed to anticipate the growth of Indian metropolitan regions. Examine the reasons with reference to Delhi, and discuss what would make a fourth master plan more effective than its predecessors. (250 words)

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