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Time and Public Policy in Iran: Explaining the Failure of the Sixth Development Plan

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ABSTRACT

Iran has more than seven decades of experience in national development planning, yet successive development plans have repeatedly failed to achieve many of their principal economic, social, administrative, and institutional objectives. This study examines the failure of the Sixth Development Plan through the analytical lens of time and temporality in public policy. Rather than treating time merely as the formal duration of a five-year plan, the study conceptualizes it as a structural dimension connecting political mandates, legislative procedures, fiscal cycles, administrative processes, and long-term developmental objectives. The research adopted a qualitative case-study design based on documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with 18 government managers, policy practitioners, economic actors, and academic experts. The interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis, resulting in 49 subthemes organized under six principal themes. The findings indicate that the Plan's failure resulted from the interaction of policy short-termism, institutional and electoral asynchrony, prolonged and contested formulation, comprehensive and excessive objectives, unstable financing, fragmented implementation responsibility, and weak long-term policy commitment. The misalignment between presidential and parliamentary cycles delayed approval and weakened shared ownership of the Plan, while dependence on annual budgets and volatile revenues undermined its multi-year financial assumptions. The Plan's comprehensive orientation further increased coordination costs, dispersed administrative attention, and reduced the possibility of prioritizing limited national problems. Fragmented authority also enabled responsibility for nonimplementation to be transferred among the executive, legislature, budgetary institutions, and implementing agencies. The study concludes that the Sixth Development Plan failed because its medium-term developmental ambitions were embedded in a policymaking system governed by short political horizons, incompatible institutional calendars, uncertain resources, and discontinuous administrative commitment. Future development planning in Iran should therefore become more selective, problem-oriented, measurable, financially credible, adaptive, and institutionally coordinated across successive political periods.

Keywords: *Public Policy; Temporality; Policy Short-Termism; Institutional Asynchrony; Development Planning; Sixth Development Plan; Iran*

Introduction

Development planning has occupied a central position in Iran's system of public policymaking for more than seven decades. Since the adoption of the country's earliest national development plans, successive governments have relied on medium-term planning as a principal instrument for coordinating economic, social, cultural, administrative, and infrastructural transformation. The repeated preparation of five-year development plans suggests that Iranian policymakers have long recognized the need to move beyond fragmented annual decisions and to organize public action around broader developmental objectives. Nevertheless, the persistence of formal planning has not produced a corresponding accumulation of policy achievements. Many of the most important objectives repeatedly included in national development plans, including sustained economic growth, industrial development, economic diversification, social welfare, employment creation, administrative reform, regional balance, and social justice, have either remained unrealized or have been achieved only partially and temporarily. This contrast between a long tradition of planning and weak implementation constitutes one of the central puzzles of public policy in contemporary Iran.

The existence of a development plan should not be equated with the existence of an effective planning system. A formal document may contain numerous objectives, indicators, legal obligations, sectoral policies, and implementation requirements, yet still fail to guide collective action. Development planning becomes meaningful only when policy objectives are sufficiently clear, implementation responsibilities are allocated, resources are realistically identified, institutional actors are coordinated, and the temporal sequence of formulation, approval, financing, execution, monitoring, and evaluation is coherent. Shakeri argues that one of the recurring problems of planning in Iran is the tendency to treat the plan as an expansive legal and administrative document rather than as a selective mechanism for directing limited resources toward clearly defined developmental priorities (1). In such a system, the breadth of the plan may be interpreted as evidence of policy ambition, while the relationship between the plan's objectives and the country's actual implementation capacity remains insufficiently examined.

The repeated underperformance of Iranian development plans has been attributed to a wide range of political, economic, legal, and administrative factors. These explanations include dependence on oil revenues, exposure to international sanctions, instability in macroeconomic conditions, unrealistic economic projections, inadequate public investment, weak monitoring arrangements, administrative fragmentation, conflicting organizational mandates, changes of government, executive-legislative disagreements, and the absence of effective mechanisms of accountability. Each of these explanations identifies an important part of the problem. However, they are usually examined separately and are rarely integrated through a broader analytical concept. Economic analyses focus on resource shortages, legal studies emphasize deficiencies in the preparation and approval of plan laws, and administrative accounts point to weak coordination among implementing agencies. The result is a fragmented understanding of policy failure in which each institutional or economic problem is examined as an isolated defect.

This article proposes that many of these apparently separate problems can be understood more coherently through the concept of time in public policy. Time is not merely the chronological period within which a policy is implemented. It is also a structural characteristic of the policymaking system. Policies are formulated within political terms, approved within legislative calendars, financed through annual budget cycles, implemented through administrative processes, and evaluated according to institutional schedules. Their effects may emerge only after several years, while the political actors responsible for them may seek visible results within much shorter periods. A policy may therefore possess a formal five-year horizon but operate within a political environment dominated by annual budgets, immediate crises, electoral calculations, unstable expectations, and frequent managerial replacement. Vahid describes Iranian public policymaking as being shaped by a short time horizon in which the durability of public policies is often subordinated to changes in governments, political alignments, and immediate priorities (2). This short-term orientation weakens policy continuity and reduces the likelihood that long-term programs will be implemented according to their original logic.

The temporal dimension of policy becomes particularly important in the case of development planning. Development is cumulative and requires institutional continuity. Structural economic diversification, productivity improvement, administrative capacity building, regional development, environmental sustainability, and social transformation cannot be achieved through isolated annual measures. They require a sequence of mutually reinforcing decisions sustained over time. Yet the formal duration of a development plan does not automatically create such continuity. A five-year plan may begin late, be approved after major changes in its content, depend on uncertain financial assumptions, and be implemented by officials who did not participate in its preparation. Its objectives may also extend beyond the capacity of a single government or parliament. When the institutional environment does not support long-term commitment, the nominal duration of the plan becomes largely symbolic.

The concept of the short-term society provides one theoretical basis for examining this problem. Katouzian uses this concept to describe a historical pattern in which political, economic, and social arrangements have often lacked sufficient durability to generate cumulative institutional development (3). In a short-term society, existing structures are frequently replaced rather than gradually improved, political and administrative arrangements remain vulnerable to sudden change, and long-term expectations are weakened. Mousavi and Mousavi apply this framework to the comparative study of political movements and emphasize how discontinuity and weak institutional accumulation affect political outcomes (4). When transferred to public policy analysis, this perspective suggests that policy failure may result not only from poor design but also from the inability of the political system to preserve commitment across successive stages and actors.

The Sixth Development Plan provides a particularly revealing case for examining these issues. The Plan was prepared during a period marked by political disagreement, economic uncertainty, international pressures, changes in the organization of planning, and institutional tensions between the executive and legislative branches. Its preparation involved multiple documents, revisions, policy statements, and legal proposals. Its approval extended across the final period of the Ninth Parliament and the beginning of the Tenth Parliament. The executive adopted a different approach from that used in earlier planning cycles by distinguishing between permanent development provisions and those legal authorizations it considered necessary for the Sixth Plan. Nikounahad and Mousavi show that the disputes surrounding the preparation and approval of the Plan revealed important legal and procedural ambiguities concerning the respective duties of the government and parliament (5). The policy process was therefore not only technically complex but also temporally fragmented.

The content of the Sixth Development Plan also reflected a tension between comprehensiveness and implementability. The Plan sought to address a broad range of national problems and contained numerous general policies, legal provisions, strategic objectives, sectoral requirements, and quantitative targets. Zakari and colleagues explain that the preparation framework combined a comprehensive orientation with special attention to selected subjects, while also requiring sectoral, cross-sectoral, and provincial planning documents (6). This approach increased the number of actors, documents, decisions, and implementation sequences that had to be coordinated. The more comprehensive the plan became, the greater the amount of time required for preparation, negotiation, approval, resource allocation, and operationalization. Yet the formal implementation period remained limited. The Plan thus embodied a paradox: it attempted to govern a very wide range of national activities within a fixed medium-term horizon while operating in an institutional system characterized by delay, fragmentation, and short political time.

Financial feasibility created another temporal contradiction. The Plan's targets depended on assumptions concerning economic growth, public and private investment, government revenues, external resources, and the completion of unfinished projects. Hadi-Zenouz emphasizes that the financing framework of the Sixth Development Plan did not clearly establish the total volume and composition of investment required during the Plan period (7). Multi-year policy commitments were therefore tied to financial resources that were unstable, annualized, and vulnerable to oil-price fluctuations, sanctions, inflation, and macroeconomic shocks. This created a mismatch between the long-term character of policy objectives and the short-term character of fiscal decisions.

The failure of the Sixth Development Plan should consequently not be reduced to a simple gap between targets and achievements. Its underperformance reflected a deeper inconsistency between the formal temporality of the plan and the actual temporality of the policymaking system. Political institutions operated according to different electoral calendars. Governmental priorities changed during the policy process. Legislative approval consumed part of the period originally intended for implementation. Financial commitments were not stabilized across the plan's duration. Implementing bodies faced numerous objectives without a clear hierarchy. Responsibility was distributed among many organizations, making it difficult to identify a single actor accountable for cumulative outcomes. The Plan's later extension beyond its original duration further demonstrated that its legal time frame did not correspond to the realities of implementation.

The objective of this article is to explain how temporal structures contributed to the failure of Iran's Sixth Development Plan. It examines time not as a background variable but as a central dimension of policy design and implementation. The article asks how short political horizons shaped the treatment of the Plan, how institutional asynchrony affected the relationship between the executive and legislature, how comprehensive planning intensified temporal pressure, how unstable financing weakened implementation, and how fragmented responsibility reduced long-term policy commitment. The central argument is that the Sixth Development Plan failed because its medium-term developmental ambitions were embedded in a policymaking system governed by short-term political incentives, incompatible institutional calendars, delayed policy processes, annual and unstable financing, excessive objectives, and fragmented implementation authority.

This argument does not deny the importance of sanctions, oil dependence, economic instability, or administrative weakness. Rather, it explains how these factors became especially damaging because the Plan lacked temporal resilience. A development plan designed for uncertain conditions should contain mechanisms for prioritization, adaptation, phased implementation, resource reallocation, and periodic revision. When such mechanisms are absent, unexpected events produce either paralysis or informal deviation from the plan. Crozier's conception of the modern and modest state emphasizes the need for institutions to abandon rigid and self-confident forms of control in favor of more adaptive, learning-oriented approaches (8). Applied to development planning, this insight suggests that the state should not attempt to regulate every aspect of economic and social transformation through a fixed and comprehensive document. It should instead create strategic direction, coordinate key actors, identify limited priorities, and revise instruments in response to changing conditions.

The article is organized into five sections. Following this introduction, the second section develops a conceptual framework for understanding temporality, short-termism, institutional asynchrony, and the contradiction between comprehensive planning and limited implementation time. The third section explains the qualitative research design, documentary analysis, expert interviews, thematic analysis, and procedures used to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. The fourth section presents and discusses the principal factors contributing to the failure of the Sixth Development Plan, including contextual instability, short political horizons, executive-legislative asynchrony, comprehensive planning, fiscal inconsistency, excessive objectives, fragmented responsibility, and weak policy commitment. The final section draws the findings together and offers conclusions and implications for the future design of development planning in Iran.

Time, Temporality, and Development Planning in Iran

Public policy is inseparable from time because every stage of policymaking involves expectations about sequence, duration, continuity, and change. Policymakers identify problems through interpretations of past developments, act within present institutional constraints, and attempt to shape future conditions. Even apparently immediate policies contain temporal assumptions. Emergency interventions distinguish between urgent and non-urgent needs, distributive programs determine when benefits will be provided, and regulatory measures establish deadlines for compliance. Development policies are more explicitly temporal because they seek to transform structural conditions over a period extending beyond a single budget year. They establish future targets, distribute resources across successive stages, and assume that decisions taken at one moment will generate cumulative effects at later moments. A development plan is therefore not simply a collection of policies; it is a temporal architecture for coordinating public action.

The effectiveness of this architecture depends on the compatibility of several types of time. Political time refers to the duration of governments, parliaments, electoral mandates, and political coalitions. Legislative time concerns the procedures through which bills are prepared, debated, revised, and approved. Administrative time refers to the pace of bureaucratic coordination, procurement, recruitment, project preparation, and organizational learning. Fiscal time is shaped by annual budgets, revenue collection, borrowing, investment cycles, and economic fluctuations. Developmental time refers to the longer periods required for structural transformation. These forms of time rarely coincide automatically. Effective policymaking requires institutions capable of coordinating them. When coordination fails, the formal schedule of a policy becomes detached from the actual behavior of political and administrative actors.

A five-year development plan illustrates this difficulty. Its legal period may be five years, but the policy process begins before formal implementation and often extends beyond the plan's termination. Research, consultation, drafting, interorganizational negotiation, cabinet review, parliamentary deliberation, and preparation of executive regulations may consume several years. If these activities are delayed, the effective implementation period becomes shorter than the formal one. In addition, many objectives require preparatory actions before measurable outcomes can occur. Large infrastructure projects involve feasibility studies, financing arrangements, land acquisition, procurement, and construction. Administrative reforms require legal changes, organizational restructuring, personnel training, and institutional adaptation. Economic diversification requires investment, technological upgrading, and market development. A plan that ignores these temporal sequences may establish targets that are technically desirable but impossible within the allotted period.

Policy short-termism arises when decisions are shaped primarily by immediate political, economic, or organizational incentives. Vahid argues that Iranian public policymaking has often been characterized by limited time horizons and weak continuity across political periods (2). Short-termism may be visible when governments prioritize projects that can produce rapid and observable results, even if long-term alternatives would generate greater public value. It may also appear when new governments discontinue inherited policies, replace managers, reorganize agencies, or redefine priorities without a systematic evaluation of previous experience. The political value of announcing a new initiative may exceed the value of completing a less visible program designed by earlier officials. The result is an institutional bias toward initiation rather than completion.

Short-termism does not necessarily imply that policymakers consciously reject long-term development. Governments may prepare ambitious documents and publicly endorse long-term goals. The contradiction lies in the relationship between rhetoric and institutional incentives. Political actors may support development in principle while acting according to electoral cycles, budget limitations, crisis pressures, or struggles over authority. A plan may therefore contain long-term targets while its implementation is determined through short-term bargaining. This distinction is important because it explains why the existence of a five-year plan does not itself demonstrate a long-term policy orientation. Long-termism requires the protection of policy commitments from short-term political disruption.

Katouzian's analysis of Iran as a short-term society provides a broader historical interpretation of this pattern (3). The concept refers to weak continuity in social, political, and economic structures and to the limited accumulation of institutions across time. In such settings, arrangements may be replaced before they mature, political relationships remain uncertain, and actors discount the future because existing rules may not endure. The significance of this framework for public policy lies in its emphasis on discontinuity. Policies produce durable outcomes only when knowledge, organizations, financial commitments, and responsibilities accumulate. If each political period begins by redefining previous priorities, the policymaking system repeatedly returns to the initial stages of problem definition and institutional design.

Mousavi and Mousavi use the short-term society framework to explain differences in political development and the durability of democratic movements (4). Their analysis reinforces the idea that political outcomes depend on the ability of institutions to preserve achievements and sustain commitments. In the field of development planning, the same logic applies to policy learning. Each development plan should build on evaluations of the previous plan, preserve effective institutions, revise unsuccessful instruments, and progressively improve implementation capacity. If plans repeatedly reproduce broad objectives without resolving earlier institutional problems, planning becomes cyclical rather than cumulative.

The Iranian planning system exhibits a paradoxical combination of formal continuity and substantive discontinuity. Five-year plans have been prepared repeatedly, giving the appearance of an established planning tradition. Yet the content, priorities, administrative structures, and political commitment associated with these plans have changed substantially. Shakeri notes that Iranian development planning has often lacked a shared and stable conception of development (1). Without agreement on the meaning of development, successive plans can become vehicles for different and sometimes conflicting policy orientations. Formal repetition then conceals conceptual instability.

The relationship between governments and inherited plans illustrates this problem. Development plans frequently extend across more than one political period, but governments may not consider themselves equally committed to policies formulated by predecessors. The preparation of a plan may begin under one set of political conditions and its implementation may occur under another. If the actors responsible for implementation did not participate meaningfully in formulation, they may regard the plan as externally imposed, politically outdated, or inconsistent with their priorities. This problem is intensified when the plan contains a large number of obligations that limit executive discretion. Government officials may selectively implement the provisions they support while delaying, reinterpreting, or neglecting others.

Institutional asynchrony is a useful concept for analyzing this situation. Asynchrony occurs when institutions involved in a common policy process operate according to different and poorly coordinated timelines. In Iran, presidential and parliamentary terms are not synchronized. A government may therefore interact with different parliamentary majorities during the preparation, approval, and implementation of a development plan. Vahid identifies the temporal disconnection between executive and legislative elections as a source of instability in public policymaking (2). The government may initially face a parliament elected under earlier political conditions, later work with a more supportive legislature, and eventually confront another parliament with different priorities. Each transition can alter the policy process.

The Sixth Development Plan demonstrated this form of asynchrony. The bill was examined during the final period of the Ninth Parliament and continued into the Tenth Parliament. Zakari documents how the Plan moved from general policies and preparatory documents to legislative consideration across two parliamentary periods (9). This transition affected the continuity of debate, the composition of parliamentary actors, and the relationship between the legislature and the executive. The timing of the Plan's preparation was therefore not merely an administrative issue. It influenced the distribution of political authority within the policy process.

Legal uncertainty further intensified the temporal problem. Nikounahad and Mousavi explain that disagreements between the government and parliament regarding the form and content of the Sixth Development Plan revealed deficiencies in the legal rules governing the preparation and approval of development plans (5). Previous governments had generally followed established practices, but the Sixth Plan exposed the extent to which those practices depended on political agreement rather than explicit and comprehensive legal requirements. When actors disagreed, the absence of clear procedural rules generated delay and conflict. This demonstrates that policy time is shaped by law. Clear procedures can stabilize sequences and deadlines, while ambiguity allows institutions to contest authority and prolong decision-making.

The government's decision to distinguish permanent development provisions from the time-bound content of the Sixth Plan was intended to reduce repetition and limit the size of the plan bill. In principle, separating permanent laws from medium-term policies could improve temporal coherence. Provisions that apply indefinitely should not need to be reenacted every five years. However, the manner in which the separation was introduced created additional uncertainty. The government presented different legal texts with different titles and rationales, and parliament had to determine how these documents related to the expected structure of a national development plan. Zakari shows that the process produced multiple versions and substantial changes between preparatory decisions and the government's final proposal (9). An effort to simplify the plan therefore contributed to a more complicated policy process.

The temporal challenge was also connected to the breadth of the Plan. Comprehensive planning assumes that the state can identify, coordinate, and regulate a wide range of economic and social processes within a single framework. This ambition often reflects a desire for coherence. Policymakers may believe that development problems are interconnected and should therefore be addressed simultaneously. However, the practical effect of comprehensiveness is to increase the number of objectives, institutions, documents, and decisions. Each additional objective requires indicators, resources, responsible organizations, implementation instruments, and monitoring arrangements. As the number of objectives grows, the difficulty of sequencing them also increases.

Shakeri criticizes comprehensive development planning for attempting to resolve too many problems at once (1). A plan that includes nearly every national concern may appear politically inclusive, but it loses strategic focus. It cannot clearly distinguish between urgent priorities, enabling reforms, desirable long-term aspirations, and routine administrative responsibilities. The absence of such distinctions has temporal consequences. Policymakers cannot determine what must be implemented first, what can be postponed, and what should be pursued only after institutional prerequisites have been established.

Attar's examination of development planning in Japan, South Korea, China, and India highlights the importance of limited and measurable priorities (10). Successful planning experiences did not necessarily depend on controlling every sector through one comprehensive document. They often concentrated national resources on specific problems and adjusted priorities as development progressed. Problem-oriented planning recognizes that time, money, and administrative attention are limited. Its purpose is not to produce a complete description of the desired future but to identify the obstacles that must be removed in order to move toward that future.

The relationship between comprehensiveness and time can be understood as a planning paradox. A more comprehensive plan requires more time to prepare and implement, but the legal period of the plan remains fixed. If preparation is prolonged, implementation time is reduced. If implementation begins before operational details are complete, agencies act inconsistently. If the plan includes too many simultaneous targets, resources are dispersed and coordination costs rise. The state may respond by postponing implementation, reducing targets informally, or extending the plan. Each response indicates that the original temporal design was unrealistic.

This paradox was visible in the Sixth Development Plan's structure. Zakari and colleagues explain that the planning framework included general principles, plan characteristics, content requirements, drafting processes, and organizational arrangements for sectoral, cross-sectoral, special, and provincial documents (6). Some operational programs were expected to be prepared after the approval of the main law. This sequencing meant that formal implementation could begin while important operational documents were still under development. The legal plan and the administrative plan did not fully coincide in time.

Financial planning created a similar contradiction. Development plans establish multi-year objectives, but public finance in Iran is strongly influenced by annual budgets and volatile revenues. Hadi-Zenouz argues that the Sixth Plan did not clearly identify the total investment required at constant and current prices and did not adequately specify the financial contributions expected from public and private sources (7). Without a credible multi-year financing framework, the Plan's targets depended on annual decisions. This weakened the binding character of the plan and allowed immediate fiscal pressures to override medium-term commitments.

Oil dependence intensifies fiscal short-termism. When government revenues depend heavily on oil exports and international prices, future resources are difficult to predict. Sanctions, exchange-rate instability, inflation, and restrictions on foreign investment further reduce predictability. A development plan may assume high levels of investment and economic growth, but actual revenues may decline sharply. The problem is not merely forecasting error. It is the absence of mechanisms for adapting priorities when forecasts fail. A temporally realistic plan should define essential objectives that will be protected under adverse conditions and secondary objectives that may be revised. A comprehensive plan that treats all objectives as important provides little guidance when resources become scarce.

Administrative time is also affected by unfinished projects. Governments inherit infrastructure and development projects initiated during earlier periods. Completing these projects may be economically preferable to starting new ones, but political incentives often favor new initiatives. Hadi-Zenouz notes that a substantial share of development expenditure during the Sixth Plan was likely to be devoted to unfinished projects (7). Yet the Plan did not establish sufficiently clear criteria for selecting which projects should receive priority. The absence of such criteria allowed political and regional bargaining to influence allocation decisions.

Policy responsibility is similarly temporal. Formulation, approval, financing, implementation, and evaluation are often assigned to different actors. If responsibility is not preserved across these stages, each actor can attribute failure to decisions made elsewhere or earlier. Parliament may blame the government for nonimplementation, while the government may argue that parliamentary amendments made the plan unrealistic. Implementing agencies may cite inadequate resources, and later governments may blame inherited conditions. Fragmented responsibility therefore fragments accountability over time.

The integrated conceptual framework used in this article treats the failure of development planning as a product of misalignment among political time, legislative time, fiscal time, administrative time, and developmental time. Political time encourages governments to seek visible results within limited terms. Legislative time may delay approval and alter policy content. Fiscal time subjects multi-year objectives to annual and volatile resources. Administrative time is slowed by coordination, regulation, and organizational turnover. Developmental time requires continuity extending beyond the life of individual officeholders. The central problem of the Sixth Development Plan was that these temporal structures were not coordinated.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case-study design to examine the role of time and temporal misalignment in the failure of Iran's Sixth Development Plan. A qualitative approach was selected because the research problem concerned institutional processes, interpretations, policy experiences, conflicts among actors, and causal mechanisms that could not be adequately understood through quantitative performance indicators alone. Statistical comparisons between planned targets and actual outcomes can demonstrate underachievement, but they do not explain how the policy process generated that result. The study therefore focused on the meanings that policymakers, managers, experts, and academic specialists attributed to the preparation, approval, financing, and implementation of the Plan.

The Sixth Development Plan was treated as a critical case because it combined several characteristics that made temporal analysis especially relevant. Its preparation occurred during a period of institutional change and economic uncertainty. The relationship between the government and parliament was contested. The proposed legislation was considered across two parliamentary periods. The government introduced a distinctive legal approach by separating permanent development provisions from the authorizations it considered necessary for the Plan. Multiple drafts and documents were produced, while operational programs were expected to follow the approval of the main legislation. The Plan also depended on ambitious economic and financial assumptions and contained numerous policy objectives. These characteristics allowed the study to investigate the interaction among political cycles, legal procedures, budgetary constraints, administrative sequencing, and long-term developmental expectations.

The research combined documentary analysis with semi-structured expert interviews. Documentary analysis was used to reconstruct the policy process and identify the formal assumptions embedded in the Sixth Development

Plan. The documents examined included general policies relating to the Plan, government bills, parliamentary legislation, preparatory frameworks, supporting documents, policy reports, legal evaluations, and assessments of financial feasibility. The study also examined scholarly works addressing short-termism, development planning, institutional instability, executive-legislative relations, and thematic analysis.

The documentary component served several purposes. It established the formal chronology of the Plan's preparation and approval, identified changes in its structure and content, and clarified the legal and financial assumptions underlying implementation. It also provided evidence for comparing official expectations with the experiences reported by interview participants. The use of documents reduced dependence on retrospective accounts and enabled the study to distinguish between formal policy design and the practical interpretation of that design by relevant actors.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen participants possessing direct or specialized knowledge of development planning and public-policy implementation. The participants included government managers at different organizational levels, senior policy practitioners, academic experts, economic actors, and specialists in economics, public administration, industrial management, public policy, sociology, accounting, entrepreneurship, and finance. This diversity was important because the Sixth Development Plan was not confined to one institution or sector. Its preparation and implementation involved political, economic, legal, and administrative processes, and no single professional group could provide a complete account.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used initially to identify individuals whose positions, experience, or academic specialization made them capable of providing information relevant to the research questions. Snowball sampling was then used to locate additional participants with direct experience of the planning process or the implementation of national development policies. The purpose of the sampling strategy was not to achieve statistical representation but to obtain information-rich accounts from individuals familiar with the institutional dynamics of the Plan.

The interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached. Saturation was understood as the point at which additional interviews no longer produced substantively new themes relevant to the research objective. Interview length ranged from approximately thirty-five to one hundred and twenty minutes, and most interviews lasted around one hour. This duration allowed participants to explain institutional processes in detail, compare the Sixth Plan with earlier experiences, and reflect on the relationship between political time, policy continuity, resource allocation, and implementation.

The interview guide was organized around several broad domains. Participants were asked to discuss their understanding of time in public policymaking, the durability of policies across governments, the relationship between the electoral cycles of the executive and legislature, delays in the preparation and approval of the Plan, the effect of multiple drafts and legal documents, the feasibility of the Plan's financial assumptions, the allocation of implementation responsibility, the number and clarity of policy objectives, and the level of political and administrative commitment. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and explore issues that emerged during the conversation.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis. The study drew on the six-stage procedure commonly associated with familiarization, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final account. Abedi Jafari and colleagues describe thematic analysis as a systematic method for identifying and explaining patterns within qualitative data (11). Their approach emphasizes the movement from initial textual codes toward broader organizing themes capable of explaining the structure of participants' experiences.

The first stage involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts and documentary material. This process allowed the researcher to become familiar with recurring concepts, institutional events, contradictions, and causal explanations. During the second stage, initial codes were generated manually. The codes captured references to electoral cycles, short-term political calculation, delayed approval, financial uncertainty, oil dependence, sanctions, organizational fragmentation, unclear responsibility, inherited projects, unrealistic objectives, excessive legal provisions, weak monitoring, and lack of commitment.

The third stage involved grouping related codes into preliminary themes. Codes concerning oil dependence, sanctions, international uncertainty, and organizational complexity were organized under contextual conditions. Codes related to limited political horizons, delayed policy formation, incompatible election cycles, and weak anticipation of the future were grouped under policy time. Financial mismatch, unrealistic projections, and inadequate identification of resources formed an economic and budgetary theme. References to multiple organizations, unclear implementation authority, and distributed responsibility formed a responsibility-related theme. The multiplicity, ambiguity, and idealism of objectives were grouped under policy goals. Codes concerning political will, conflict among actors, and the distinction between policy formulation and implementation were organized under commitment.

The fourth and fifth stages involved reviewing, redefining, and naming the themes. Preliminary themes were compared against the interview transcripts to ensure that they adequately represented the data and were analytically distinct. Some themes were combined where they reflected the same underlying mechanism, while others were divided to preserve important differences. The final analysis produced forty-nine subthemes organized under six principal themes. These themes concerned contextual conditions, time in policymaking, economic and budgetary inconsistency, fragmented responsibility, policy objectives, and policy commitment.

The sixth stage involved producing an integrated analytical narrative. The themes were not reported as isolated lists. They were interpreted through the conceptual framework of political time, legislative time, fiscal time, administrative time, and developmental time. This integration was necessary because many of the themes overlapped. For example, financial instability was not simply an economic issue; it shortened policy horizons and disrupted implementation sequences. Executive-legislative conflict was not only political; it delayed approval and weakened ownership. The multiplicity of objectives was not only a design problem; it increased the time required for coordination and reduced the feasibility of implementation within the plan period.

The trustworthiness of the qualitative findings was strengthened through several procedures. Selected interview materials were coded independently by individuals familiar with the subject. Independent coding was used not to establish mechanical uniformity but to challenge the researcher's interpretation and identify alternative ways of organizing the data. Abedi Jafari and colleagues note that independent coding can help analysts examine their assumptions and improve the credibility of thematic structures (11). Differences between coders were discussed, and revisions were made where the initial coding did not adequately reflect the data.

Documentary triangulation was also used. Claims made by participants concerning the preparation, approval, and financing of the Plan were compared with available policy documents and research reports. For example, statements about the multiple versions of the Plan were examined alongside documentation of the drafting and legislative process. Claims about financial ambiguity were compared with evaluations of the Plan's investment and financing framework. This procedure increased analytical credibility by connecting subjective experience with formal evidence.

The study also sought to preserve negative or divergent cases. Participants did not necessarily attribute policy failure to the same factors or assign responsibility in the same way. Some emphasized sanctions and external pressures, while others focused on domestic institutional arrangements. Some regarded the government's separation of permanent provisions from the Plan as a necessary reform, while others viewed it as a source of conflict and delay. Rather than eliminating these differences, the analysis interpreted them as evidence of the complexity of the policy process.

Confidentiality was preserved by presenting participants according to broad professional categories rather than personal identities. Participation was voluntary, and the purpose of the interviews was explained before data collection. The analysis focused on institutional processes rather than personal accusations. Because several participants had held senior governmental or policy-related positions, anonymization was necessary to allow candid discussion of disagreements, implementation weaknesses, and organizational responsibility.

The study has methodological limitations. The sample was purposive and cannot represent all individuals involved in the Sixth Development Plan. The findings reflect informed interpretations rather than statistically generalizable attitudes. Some participants may have evaluated the Plan through their own institutional positions or political preferences. Documentary records may also present the official logic of policy decisions without fully revealing informal negotiations. Nevertheless, the combination of diverse expert interviews, documentary evidence, independent coding, and thematic analysis provides a strong basis for analytical generalization.

The purpose of the study was not to calculate the isolated effect of each factor. Policy failure emerged from the interaction of multiple conditions. The methodology was therefore designed to identify mechanisms and relationships. It sought to explain how short-termism, institutional asynchrony, financial uncertainty, comprehensive planning, excessive objectives, fragmented responsibility, and weak commitment reinforced one another. This approach is consistent with the view that development-plan failure is a systemic outcome rather than the result of a single administrative defect.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that the failure of the Sixth Development Plan resulted from an interaction among contextual instability, short political horizons, institutional asynchrony, comprehensive planning, fiscal inconsistency, excessive objectives, fragmented responsibility, and weak policy commitment. These factors should not be treated as separate and additive causes. They formed a mutually reinforcing structure. External shocks intensified short-term decision-making, institutional conflict delayed the policy process, delays reduced the effective implementation period, comprehensive objectives increased coordination demands, unstable financing disrupted priorities, fragmented authority weakened accountability, and weak ownership encouraged selective implementation. The Plan was therefore constrained not only by what it attempted to achieve but also by the temporal organization of the institutions responsible for achieving it.

The first major theme concerned the contextual environment in which the Plan was prepared and implemented. Participants repeatedly referred to oil dependence, sanctions, uncertain international conditions, restrictions on foreign investment, inflation, exchange-rate instability, organizational complexity, and ideological conflict. These conditions affected both available resources and policy expectations. The government could not reliably predict the fiscal and economic environment across the entire period of the Plan. Yet the Plan retained ambitious targets that assumed a degree of macroeconomic stability and investment capacity.

Oil dependence was particularly important because it connected external volatility to domestic policy time. When public revenues depend heavily on oil exports, government plans become vulnerable to price changes, production constraints, international sanctions, and geopolitical developments. These shocks force policymakers to revise expenditures, delay projects, and prioritize immediate obligations. The temporal horizon of policy contracts from medium-term development to short-term fiscal management. Hadi-Zenouz's assessment of the Sixth Plan emphasizes the uncertainty surrounding the volume and composition of investment required for its implementation (7). Without a stable relationship between objectives and resources, the Plan could not function as a binding guide to public action.

Participants did not describe economic instability merely as an external obstacle. They emphasized that the Plan lacked sufficient mechanisms for adaptation. A policy framework prepared for an uncertain economy should establish alternative scenarios, define essential priorities, and specify how targets will be revised if major assumptions change. The Sixth Plan instead combined ambitious objectives with weak prioritization. When financial conditions deteriorated, implementing institutions lacked a clear basis for deciding which objectives should be protected. This encouraged selective and politically negotiated implementation.

The contextual theme also included international sanctions and post-agreement uncertainty. Expectations concerning international investment and economic opening influenced planning assumptions, but these expectations were not realized at the anticipated scale. The problem was therefore partly temporal. The Plan incorporated future-oriented assumptions that depended on international conditions beyond the control of domestic institutions. When those conditions changed, policy instruments were not adjusted through a clear and institutionalized process. The Plan remained formally valid even as some of its economic foundations weakened.

The second major theme concerned the short time horizon of Iranian public policymaking. Participants described a system in which political actors often focus on the immediate period of their own authority. Long-term programs may receive rhetorical support, but their implementation is vulnerable to changes in governments, ministers, senior managers, and parliamentary alignments. Vahid identifies this short policy horizon as one of the central weaknesses of public policymaking in Iran (2). The findings of the present study support this interpretation and show how short-termism affected the Sixth Development Plan at multiple stages.

The preparation of a development plan requires decisions whose results may not become visible during the tenure of the officials who initiate them. This creates a political incentive problem. Policymakers may prefer projects that produce rapid and observable outcomes, even when less visible institutional reforms are more important. Managers may also hesitate to invest in programs that could be completed by successors who will receive political credit. Participants described cases in which inherited initiatives received limited support because current officials had not participated in their design.

The short-term society framework helps interpret these observations. Katouzian argues that the limited durability of political and social arrangements weakens accumulation and long-term expectation (3). Within the planning system, this appears as discontinuity in priorities, organizations, and implementation commitments. Each government may seek to redefine the policy agenda, even when a development plan formally remains in force. The Plan therefore becomes one influence among many rather than the authoritative framework for governmental action.

Mousavi and Mousavi emphasize the broader political consequences of weak institutional continuity (4). The same problem is evident in development planning. Policies require an institutional memory that preserves the rationale for earlier decisions. When managers change frequently or institutions are reorganized, knowledge is lost and policy implementation is interrupted. New officials may revisit decisions that were already made, reinterpret objectives, or request additional studies. Administrative time is consumed by repeated reconsideration rather than cumulative execution.

Participants also referred to a mismatch between the five-year duration of the Plan and the political cycle of governments. A five-year plan does not correspond precisely to the four-year presidential term. Even when a president serves two terms, the Plan may begin in the middle of one term and continue into another. The officials who prepare the Plan may therefore differ from those responsible for completing it. This mismatch is not necessarily fatal if institutions preserve continuity, but it becomes damaging when political ownership is personalized.

The third major theme was institutional asynchrony, particularly between the executive and legislature. The electoral cycles of the presidency and parliament are not synchronized, and the Sixth Plan was considered across two parliamentary periods. Vahid argues that the temporal disconnection between these institutions creates conditions in which the executive may lack a stable legislative majority across the policy cycle (2). The Plan's preparation and approval illustrated this problem. Different institutions entered the process at different moments, with different mandates and expectations.

Zakari documents the movement of the Sixth Plan from general policies through government preparation to examination in the Ninth and Tenth Parliaments (9). This prolonged process affected continuity. Members of one parliament participated in initial discussions, while another parliament completed approval. Changes in committee composition, political priorities, and legislative preferences influenced the treatment of the bill. The government also revised the proposals prepared by the planning structure before submission.

The preparatory process itself displayed internal asynchrony. Zakari and colleagues explain that the official framework of the Sixth Plan included a comprehensive orientation, special subjects, sectoral programs, cross-sectoral programs, and provincial documents (6). These different components were not all completed at the same time. Some operational plans were to be prepared after the approval of the main law. This created a gap between legal authorization and administrative readiness. The plan period could begin while the detailed instruments necessary for implementation remained incomplete.

The government's approach to the legal form of the Plan intensified disagreement. It first submitted legislation concerning selected permanent development provisions and later presented a bill containing legal authorizations it considered necessary for implementation. This differed from previous planning practice. Nikounahad and Mousavi argue that the resulting conflict exposed legal ambiguities concerning the duties of the executive and legislature in preparing and approving development plans (5). The absence of clear procedural rules allowed the dispute to become a policy crisis.

This conflict had several temporal effects. It delayed approval, multiplied the number of documents, increased the need for negotiation, and reduced the effective implementation period. It also weakened shared ownership. The government and parliament could each regard parts of the final law as products of the other institution. When implementation problems emerged, responsibility could be transferred between branches. Institutional asynchrony therefore affected both time and accountability.

The fourth theme concerned the paradox of comprehensive planning. Participants widely criticized the multiplicity of subjects included in the Plan. The Plan contained numerous policy objectives, legal provisions, sectoral obligations, and quantitative expectations. Its comprehensive form attempted to address economic growth, public finance, employment, social welfare, culture, administration, regional development, infrastructure, and other issues within a single framework.

Shakeri argues that comprehensive planning in Iran has often produced unrealistic documents because it seeks to regulate too many aspects of development simultaneously (1). The findings support this argument. Participants observed that the greater the number of objectives, the more difficult it became to identify priorities, allocate resources, coordinate organizations, and evaluate progress. Comprehensiveness increased the formal authority of the Plan while reducing its practical capacity to guide decisions.

The temporal contradiction was central. A comprehensive plan requires extensive preparation. Each sector must formulate objectives, negotiate with other institutions, estimate resources, and define indicators. The resulting document then requires cabinet review and parliamentary approval. If all national problems are included, preparation becomes prolonged. Yet the implementation period remains fixed. Time spent expanding and negotiating the plan is taken from the period available for execution.

Attar’s analysis of development-planning experiences in Asian countries emphasizes the importance of quantifiable and problem-oriented objectives (10). These experiences suggest that development plans are more effective when they concentrate political attention and resources on a limited set of strategic problems. A problem-oriented plan does not ignore other sectors. It distinguishes between ordinary governmental responsibilities and the specific priorities requiring coordinated national action during the plan period.

The Sixth Plan did not make this distinction sufficiently clear. Many provisions reflected desirable public goals but did not identify a realistic sequence. Objectives were presented simultaneously rather than hierarchically. This created competition among agencies and sectors. Each organization could argue that its responsibilities were mandated by the Plan, but the government lacked sufficient resources to implement all mandates. The Plan therefore became a basis for claims on the budget rather than a mechanism for resolving priorities.

The fifth theme concerned economic and budgetary inconsistency. Participants repeatedly emphasized the gap between policy ambitions and financial capacity. The Plan assumed levels of growth, investment, and resource mobilization that were difficult to achieve under prevailing conditions. Hadi-Zenouz notes that the Plan’s financing documents did not clearly specify the total investment required or provide a sufficiently transparent account of public, private, domestic, and foreign resources (7). This weakness reduced the credibility of the Plan.

A multi-year plan requires a financial framework extending across the same period. In practice, implementation depended heavily on annual budgets. Annual budgeting allows governments and parliaments to revise priorities each year. While this flexibility can be necessary, it also means that the development plan lacks financial certainty. Ministries may receive insufficient funds, projects may be delayed, and legal obligations may remain unimplemented. The Plan’s time horizon was therefore longer than the time horizon of its financing.

Participants also emphasized the burden of unfinished projects. A significant proportion of development resources had to be directed toward projects initiated in earlier periods. Hadi-Zenouz warns that the selection of incomplete projects for financing has important consequences for economic growth and resource efficiency (7). However, the Plan did not establish a strong and transparent system for prioritizing such projects. As a result, allocation could be influenced by political bargaining, regional pressure, or administrative inertia.

Inherited projects also weakened policy ownership. Officials responsible for completing them may not have participated in their original design. They may question their value, modify their scope, or prefer to initiate new projects associated with their own term. The issue is therefore both financial and temporal. Resources committed in the past constrain present choices, while current decisions create obligations for the future. A mature planning system must manage these intertemporal commitments explicitly.

The sixth theme concerned excessive, ambiguous, and idealistic objectives. Participants distinguished between measurable policy goals and broad statements of aspiration. Many provisions of the Plan were formulated in general language, making it difficult to determine the exact action required, the responsible institution, the necessary resources, and the indicator of success. The large number of general policies associated with the Plan further expanded the range of expectations.

Ambiguity has important temporal effects. When an objective is not clearly defined, implementation is delayed while institutions interpret its meaning. Different organizations may issue regulations, request clarification, or dispute responsibility. Monitoring becomes difficult because evaluators cannot determine whether the objective has been achieved. Ambiguous objectives may remain formally active throughout the plan period without producing specific action.

The relationship between objectives and instruments was also weak. Some goals required major structural changes, but the Plan did not always specify the sequence through which those changes would occur. A target may depend on earlier legal reform, institutional coordination, investment, and capacity building. If these prerequisites are not identified, the target becomes detached from implementation time. The Plan records the desired outcome but not the path required to reach it.

Shakeri's criticism of idealistic and comprehensive planning is relevant here (1). Plans may become repositories of national aspirations rather than selective policy instruments. The political process encourages inclusion because excluding an objective can be interpreted as denying its importance. As a result, plans expand through negotiation. Each sector, institution, and political actor seeks recognition of its concerns. The final document becomes more inclusive but less coherent.

The seventh theme concerned fragmented responsibility. Development planning involves many actors, but effective implementation requires clear leadership. Participants described a system in which responsibilities were distributed across ministries, agencies, public organizations, provincial authorities, parliament, planning institutions, and budgetary bodies. In some cases, several institutions were responsible for related aspects of the same objective. In others, no institution had authority over the full policy process.

Fragmentation weakened accountability. If a policy was not implemented, each actor could identify another institution as the source of failure. Ministries could point to insufficient budget allocations. Budget authorities could cite unrealistic legal obligations. Parliament could blame the executive for noncompliance, while the executive could argue that parliamentary amendments had made the Plan impractical. Later governments could attribute problems to earlier decisions.

This fragmentation also divided policy time. One institution prepared the proposal, another approved it, another allocated funds, and another implemented it. No actor remained responsible from formulation through evaluation. The institutional memory of the policy was therefore dispersed. Changes in personnel or organizational structure could interrupt coordination and require new negotiations.

Nikounahad and Mousavi's analysis of the legal process demonstrates how unclear institutional roles contributed to conflict during the preparation of the Plan (5). The same ambiguity continued during implementation. Legal responsibility did not always correspond to operational authority. An institution could be formally required to achieve an objective without controlling the resources or cooperation necessary to do so.

The final theme concerned political will and policy commitment. Participants repeatedly distinguished between the existence of legal obligations and the willingness of actors to implement them. A development plan may be legally binding, but implementation still depends on political support, administrative attention, and resource allocation. Weak commitment appears when officials treat plan provisions as optional, symbolic, or secondary to immediate priorities.

The distinction between policymakers and policy implementers was especially important. Actors involved in drafting may support ambitious objectives because they are not responsible for implementation. Implementing agencies, however, must confront resource limitations, organizational constraints, and competing demands. If implementers were not meaningfully involved in design, they may lack ownership. Conversely, if the final law differs significantly from the government's proposal, executive commitment may decline.

Zakari shows that substantial changes occurred between preparatory decisions, government proposals, and parliamentary approval (9). These changes were not merely technical. They affected the identity of the Plan and the distribution of political responsibility. The final document was the product of several institutions and stages, but no single actor fully owned it. This weakened the long-term commitment necessary for implementation.

Crozier's argument for a modest and adaptive state provides a useful contrast (8). A state that recognizes its limits will focus on coordination, learning, and feasible priorities. A state that assumes it can control all aspects of development through an extensive legal plan may produce obligations beyond its implementation capacity. When these obligations are not achieved, the response may be to prepare another comprehensive plan rather than reform the institutional process.

The findings demonstrate that the Plan's failure followed a recognizable causal sequence. Short political horizons reduced continuity. Institutional asynchrony prolonged formulation and approval. Comprehensive planning increased the number of objectives and actors. Delays reduced the effective implementation period. Fiscal instability disrupted the relationship between targets and resources. Fragmented authority weakened accountability. Limited ownership reduced commitment. External shocks then intensified all of these weaknesses.

The extension of the Plan beyond its original period was a particularly important indication of temporal failure. Extension may be justified under exceptional circumstances, but it also demonstrates that the formal schedule did not correspond to implementation reality. A plan designed for a specific period should either achieve its priorities, be formally revised, or be replaced through a timely new planning cycle. Extension preserves the legal framework without resolving the underlying causes of delay.

The Sixth Development Plan was therefore unsuccessful not simply because its targets were ambitious or because economic conditions were unfavorable. Its deeper weakness was the lack of alignment among political time, policy-process time, fiscal time, administrative time, and developmental time. The Plan expected long-term commitment from institutions structured around short-term incentives. It required coordinated implementation from actors operating under different mandates and calendars. It established multi-year objectives without sufficiently stable multi-year financing. It attempted comprehensive transformation within a period shortened by preparation and approval delays.

The results also show that policy short-termism and comprehensive planning are not contradictory in appearance but are mutually reinforcing in practice. Short-term political systems may produce highly ambitious plans because political actors gain immediate legitimacy from announcing extensive objectives. The costs of nonimplementation emerge later and can be attributed to other institutions, external conditions, or successor governments. Comprehensive planning may therefore coexist with short-term behavior. The plan becomes long-term in language but short-term in political function.

Conclusion

The failure of Iran's Sixth Development Plan cannot be adequately explained through a single economic, political, legal, or administrative factor. Its underperformance resulted from a systemic mismatch between the formal time horizon of development planning and the actual temporal structure of public policymaking. The Plan was designed as a medium-term framework for national transformation, but it operated within institutions governed by short political mandates, incompatible electoral cycles, delayed legal procedures, annual financial decisions, unstable expectations, and fragmented administrative responsibility.

The central problem was not the absence of planning. Iran possesses a long tradition of development planning and has repeatedly produced detailed legal and policy documents. The problem was that formal plans were not supported by the institutional conditions required for continuity. A five-year plan cannot produce cumulative outcomes when governments reinterpret inherited priorities, parliaments alter the policy framework during prolonged approval processes, implementing agencies lack ownership, and resources are renegotiated annually under unstable economic conditions.

The Sixth Development Plan demonstrated the consequences of institutional asynchrony. Its formulation, revision, approval, and implementation were distributed across different political periods and actors. The executive and legislature did not operate within a unified policy calendar. The Plan was examined across two parliaments, while the government introduced an approach to development legislation that differed from established practice. The resulting legal and political disputes consumed time and weakened shared responsibility for the final document.

The comprehensive character of the Plan further reduced its implementability. By attempting to address a wide range of national problems simultaneously, the Plan increased the number of objectives, responsible institutions, required documents, financial commitments, and coordination processes. The breadth of the Plan was treated as a sign of importance, but it prevented clear prioritization. When resources became constrained, the Plan did not provide a sufficiently explicit hierarchy for protecting essential objectives and revising secondary ones.

Financial uncertainty transformed the Plan's multi-year commitments into contingent annual decisions. The objectives were framed over several years, but funding depended on yearly budgets, oil revenues, macroeconomic conditions, and external constraints. The absence of a credible and transparent multi-year financing framework weakened implementation from the beginning. Implementing agencies could not confidently sequence projects or make durable commitments when future resources remained uncertain.

Fragmented responsibility also contributed to temporal discontinuity. Different institutions controlled different stages of the policy process, but no single actor remained accountable for the complete life cycle of the Plan. Formulators, legislators, budget authorities, implementing bodies, and evaluators operated at different moments and under different incentives. This arrangement allowed responsibility for failure to be transferred across institutions and political periods.

The findings indicate that future development planning in Iran should move away from comprehensive legal documents that seek to regulate nearly every aspect of national development. A more effective model would be selective, problem-oriented, measurable, and adaptive. It should identify a limited number of national priorities that require coordination beyond the ordinary responsibilities of ministries and agencies. Each priority should be connected to a clear implementation sequence, a responsible authority, a credible financial framework, and measurable annual milestones.

The timing of the planning process should also be reformed. Preparation and legislative approval should be completed before the formal implementation period begins. Operational, sectoral, and provincial programs should not be postponed until after the main law has entered into force. Delays in preparation should not be hidden by preserving the original time frame. When approval is delayed, the implementation schedule should be revised explicitly.

Development plans should also include formal mechanisms for adaptation. Economic forecasts are inherently uncertain, particularly in a country exposed to oil-price volatility, inflation, sanctions, and external political shocks. A realistic plan should define alternative scenarios and establish procedures for revising targets and reallocating resources. Adaptation should not occur through informal nonimplementation. It should be transparent, rule-based, and subject to evaluation.

Multi-year objectives require multi-year financing. The relationship between the development plan and annual budgets should therefore be strengthened. Each strategic priority should be connected to a medium-term expenditure framework that identifies expected public, private, domestic, and foreign resources. When funding falls below expectations, decision-makers should be required to explain which objectives will be revised and why.

Policy ownership should extend across governments and parliaments. This does not require eliminating political disagreement or preventing democratic change. It requires distinguishing between legitimate policy revision and routine discontinuity. Governments should be able to revise inherited policies, but major changes should be based on evidence, formal evaluation, and transparent justification. Effective programs should not be abandoned merely because they originated under earlier administrations.

Clear accountability is equally necessary. Each major objective should have a principal institution responsible for coordinating implementation and reporting results. Other organizations may participate, but responsibility should not be so widely distributed that no actor can be held accountable. The responsible institution should retain oversight from formulation through evaluation and should report regularly on progress, delays, resource gaps, and corrective measures.

The most important implication of this study is that time should be treated as a substantive policy variable. Development planning is not successful merely because it establishes a five-year period. Effective planning requires coordination among political, legislative, fiscal, administrative, and developmental time. It requires realistic sequencing, continuity across institutional transitions, and protection of long-term priorities from short-term disruption.

The Sixth Development Plan failed because its medium-term ambitions were imposed on a policymaking system that was not temporally coordinated. Its objectives exceeded the time, resources, and administrative attention available for implementation. Its political ownership was divided, its financing was uncertain, and its responsibilities were fragmented. Extending the Plan beyond its original period did not resolve these problems; it confirmed that the original temporal design had been unrealistic.

Future development plans will reproduce the same cycle unless the temporal foundations of policymaking are reformed. The preparation of another extensive document, the addition of more legal provisions, or the announcement of more ambitious targets will not compensate for institutional discontinuity. The central task is to create a planning system in which objectives, resources, responsibilities, and political commitments remain aligned across time. Only then can development planning become a cumulative process rather than a repeated sequence of ambitious formulation, delayed implementation, partial execution, and eventual extension.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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