

Reimagining governance

The 115 Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) conceived by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is radical not because this is the first time that a government in India has focussed on India's most backward districts but because the exercise envisages a serious re-imagination of government and governance, and deepens cooperative federalism. The programme is informed by the failures of the past and therefore has a more contemporary vision of how public services are best delivered to those who need them most.

The 115 districts were chosen by senior officials of the Union government in consultation with State officials on the basis of a composite index of the following: deprivation enumerated under the Socio-Economic Caste Census, key health and education performance indicators and the state of basic infrastructure. A minimum of one district was chosen from every State. Unsurprisingly, the largest concentration of districts is in the States which have historically under-performed such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, or which are afflicted by left-wing extremism such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Moving forward, the areas that have been targeted for transformation are: education, health and nutrition, agriculture and water resources, financial inclusion, basic infrastructure and skills. Deliberately, the districts have been described as aspirational rather than backward so that they are viewed as islands of opportunity and hope rather than areas of distress and hopelessness. Attitudes and narrative matter for outcomes.

There is no financial package or large allocation of funds to this programme. The intent is to leverage the resources of the several government programmes that already exist but are not always used efficiently. The government doesn't always need to spend more to achieve outcomes but instead to spend better. Many schemes of the Centre have flexible spending components which permit autonomy at the level of local governments but these are seldom used in practice due to controlling Central and State machineries.

Achieving success in this programme requires three tiers of government, the Centre, States and district administrations, to work in tandem. There is a structure in place. Each district is assigned a prabhari (in-charge) officer from the Centre (of additional secretary or joint secretary rank) and a prabhari officer from the State (of the rank of Secretary to State government) who will work in cooperation with the district administration. It is necessary for the Centre and States to be involved because not all decisions can be taken at the level of district. For example, if there is a shortage of teachers in a local school or a shortage of health personnel in a primary health centre, it needs the State capital to act, possibly through transfers of personnel from over staffed areas. On financial inclusion, the full cooperation of banks is necessary and only the Central government has leverage over them. But most crucial is the District Magistrate or Collector who is familiar with the challenges of his or her geography and has considerable power to implement government schemes. Partnership is not something which comes easily to the upper tiers of government, which are used to dictating terms to lower tiers.

The spirit of cooperation needs to be supplemented by a culture of competition. This programme takes the principle of competitive federalism down to district administrations. Each district will be ranked on the focus areas which are disaggregated into easily quantifiable target areas. So as not to bias the rankings on historical achievements or lack of them, the rankings will be based on deltas or improvements. The rankings will be publicly available.

India's long history of a dominant state apparatus has led to an entrenched perception that government is the sole actor capable of and responsible for the transformation of India. The ADP

has opened its door to civil society and leveraged the tool of corporate social responsibility to form partnerships which will bring new ideas and fresh energy with boots on the ground from non-government institutions to join the “official” efforts. The force multiplier on outcomes from such participation is potentially massive.

One area which is being given serious attention is the collection of quality data on a real-time basis. Too often in India, data collection is delayed or lacking in quality which ends up leading to policymakers shooting in the dark. With continuously updated data dashboards, those running the programme on the ground can alter strategies after accurate feedback.

In a way, the ADP is a big pilot programme from reorienting how government does its business of delivering development. A decisive shift in the paradigm of governance is likely to finally fulfil the many broken promises of the past.

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With limited resources and time, it is crucial for States to assess which skills policies will make the biggest impact

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