

A NEW KIND OF GOVERNMENT

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The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) is one of the largest experiments on outcomes-focused governance in the world. Spread across 112 of India's socio-economically challenged districts, the ADP is Niti Aayog's flagship initiative to improve health, nutrition, education, and economic outcomes. Initial evidence suggests that the ADP has already contributed towards improving lakhs of lives. If successful, the ADP can present a new template for governance. It is therefore critical to try and get it right.

The ADP's theory of change rests on three pillars: Competition, convergence, and collaboration. Competition fosters accountability on district governments for final outcomes (instead of inputs) using high-quality data. Convergence creatively brings together the horizontal and vertical tiers of the government. Collaboration enables impactful partnerships between government, philanthropy and civil society. Of the Aspirational Districts, Niti Aayog plays a mentoring role in 27 districts in eight states, home to about 60 million people. Twelve central government ministries have similarly adopted the remaining districts.

Health outcomes in the mentored districts reveal significant improvements between the first and second third-party household surveys (in June-August 2018 and January-March 2019). We see increases in registering pregnant women into the health system (from 73 per cent to 86 per cent), institutional delivery of babies (66 per cent to 74 per cent), and anti-diarrheal treatment via ORS (51 per cent to 67 per cent) and zinc (34 per cent to 53 per cent). These rates are significantly faster than the usual trajectory for these indicators.

While a deeper mixed-methods analysis is required to clearly understand what explains these results, we hypothesise the following four factors play a role. One, pioneering state and district-level initiatives in both the ADP and non-ADP districts in areas prioritised under the programme. Two, spurred by competition on outcomes, local governments target their efforts and improve programme implementation and design. Three, the focus on outcomes enables local experimentation based on a firm appreciation of ground realities. Four, partnerships between various philanthropic and civil society organisations with district governments augment local capacity.

While the initial evidence on the ADP's impact has been encouraging, as is true of any programme of this scale and scope, there is always room for supplementing our efforts.

As our colleague Karthik Muralidharan has argued, "High-performing organisations are characterised by autonomy to front-level officials on [processes], combined with accountability for outcomes." The ADP is built precisely on this mantra, and the district-ranking index can be improved further to fully reflect this. Some process-level indicators, such as on-time delivery of textbooks in schools, are part of the ranking index, based on which districts' socio-economic performance is assessed. Textbook delivery may or may not be a problem in districts, and its role in improving learning outcomes may be tenuous.

A simplified ranking index — with few but carefully chosen output and outcome measures — will more clearly signal national development targets, while providing autonomy to local governments.

High quality administrative data is critical to improve programme implementation and design at the local level. The poor quality of administrative data is usually due to capacity issues at the ground level as well as incentives to inflate performance. To help improve data quality, we use independent surveys to validate administrative data. Building each district's internal capacity to produce reliable and actionable data, and promoting a culture of data use, can be made a priority for the ADP.

ADP is a laboratory of various cutting-edge governance reforms. First and foremost, the programme has shifted focus away from inputs and budgets to outcomes, such as learning and malnutrition, at the highest echelons of the government. It has also introduced non-financial incentives to encourage government officials to deliver results and actively encourages forging partnerships with philanthropies and civil society to create better impact using the same amount of budgetary spends. The programme has also developed a lean data infrastructure that smartly exploits complementary strengths of administrative and survey data.

Each of these initiatives is a radical shift from the status quo in governance today. Therefore, it is critical to carefully document and learn from the ADP's experiences.

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