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THE SUCCESS OF INDIA'S ASPIRATIONAL DISTRICTS

Since its launch, all 112 underdeveloped districts included in ADP have improved their performance

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Nagaland's Kiphire is one of India's remotest districts, located in a challenging hilly terrain. When I last went there, in April 2020, it took us around 30 hours of travel—through a combination of flight, helicopter, and road travel—to get to the district headquarters. Most people in the district are engaged in agriculture and related activities, with *kholar* or kidney beans being a popular choice. Recognizing the potential of *kholar* cultivation in improving the livelihoods of the locals, a packaging facility for the same was set up through the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP).

The facility was an instant hit with the farmers. Since then, *kholar* cultivation has taken off in a big way and Kiphire's kidney beans are now being sold across the country through the TribesIndia.com portal of the ministry of tribal affairs.

Similarly, towards the India-Bhutan border is Assam's Baksa district where Bodo indigenous communities live. Various parts of the district intermittently remain disconnected from the rest of the district due to torrential rains and flooding. This has made access to health-care services very difficult for the Bodo people. We provided the district with support to ensure that it can run mobile health ambulances when the weather is bad so that access to healthcare service delivery is ensured.

Incorporating the views of the local tribal council was paramount in taking this project ahead. What started as a link-activity has led to the district converting the single-use medical ambulance into running camps for various other activities as well. From the extreme North-East, let me take you to the Himalayas. Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh is the state's second largest district by area. At least two of Chamba's blocks have severe connectivity challenges, both in terms of all-weather roads, as well as internet connectivity. The Pantni block in a long drive even from the district headquarters, given the nature of mountainous terrain in the region. For six months, the block stays snowed, with access possible only via helicopters in some cases. The ADP enabled the district administration to work with the centre to ensure robust telecom connectivity in the hard-to-reach areas, which had remained underprivileged until recently. The programme acted as an excellent platform to diagnose and intervene in the problems being faced by the district.

Launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2018, the ADP seeks to improve socio-economic outcomes by reimagining governance, vesting greater ownership and accountability in the district administration, facilitating convergence and collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring tracking of performance indicators on a real-time basis as well as engaging citizens to contribute to the development process.

Since its launch, all 112 underdeveloped districts included in the programme have improved their performance. While some have surpassed the state averages on key indicators, many aspirational districts are now the best performing of all districts in their state.

The prime minister changed the development narrative by referring to these districts as 'aspirational' instead of 'backward'.

THE 3Cs APPROACH
Given India's size and diversity, it is crucial that states and districts have a greater say in their own development. Moreover, local challenges differ significantly

RACING AHEAD

Out of 10 indicators in Health, 73 aspirational districts have surpassed their state averages. In many states, an aspirational district is the best in state.

PERCENTAGE OF ANTE NATAL CARE (ANC) REGISTERED WITHIN THE 1ST TRIMESTER

State Name	State Average	Aspirational District is Best in State	State Best
Assam	88	Darrang	98
Chhattisgarh	89	Korba	97
Jharkhand	72	Godda	93
Odisha	89	Koraput	96
Telangana	72	Asifabad	92
Uttarakhand	81	Udhham Singh Nagar	92

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN FULLY IMMUNIZED (9-11 MONTHS)

State Name	State Average	Aspirational District is Best in State	State Best
Bihar	85	Nawada	98
Gujarat	86	Dahod	97
Madhya Pradesh	93	Barwani	92
Rajasthan	77	Sirohi	89
Uttar Pradesh	80	Balrampur	95

PERCENTAGE OF LOW BIRTH WEIGHT BABIES (LESS THAN 2.5 KG)

State Name	State Average	Aspirational District is Best in State	State Best
Bihar	12	Katihar	4
Chhattisgarh	13	Korba	6
Odisha	18	Dhenkanal	7
Rajasthan	15	Jaisalmer	6

(*Lower the better)

cantly across the country. State and local governments are therefore best positioned to recognize their development challenges, and design customized policy interventions. This move is grounded in evidence which shows that devolution of resources and responsibilities to lower levels of government can lead to better governance of facilities in the public sector, higher use of public services and greater achievement of desired socio-economic outcomes.

The broad contours of the ADP are Convergence (of central and state schemes), Collaboration (of central, state level *Pradhani* officers and district collectors), and Competition among districts through monthly delta ranking (the 3Cs approach), driven by a mass movement (*Jan Andolan*).

Aligned with this broad framework, district-level vision and action plans have been drawn up. These plans are based on a thorough analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of every district. To empower government officials who are closest to the ground to make decisions without having to wait for authorities at higher levels, district collectors have been designated as the focal points of this programme. They play a critical role in implementing and monitoring initiatives, based on the continuous evolving reality of their districts as captured in a dashboard.

Senior officials from the central government have been appointed as *Pradhani* officers to act as a bridge between the central and state governments. A committee including the administrative heads of key central government ministries and departments has also been created to refine existing programmes and resolve

any issues flagged by the districts.

Collaboration between all levels of government is enabling existing schemes to be channelled more effectively towards this programme. In fact, instead of making a dedicated financial allocation for the ADP, the programme has focused on improving governance, making use of existing resources more smartly and achieving better outcomes for the same amount of money.

Additionally, working collaboratively has enabled innovative service delivery approaches—currently limited to one or a few districts in the country—to be replicated in other areas. For instance, the smart classroom initiative being implemented in Banka, Bihar, to improve student learning outcomes, is being replicated in the aspirational districts across Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand. In Narayanpur, Chhattisgarh, motorbike ambulances are being deployed for bringing pregnant women to the nearest health centre in time for delivery. The ADP model emphasizes on the documentation, dissemination and replication of all such innovative and impactful practices.

Further, by opening its doors to the private sector, philanthropic organizations and technical partners, the ADP is changing the deeply entrenched popular perception that development is, to a large extent, the prerogative of the government alone. These partnerships are helping to infuse the programme with new ideas, and acting as force multipliers on outcomes.

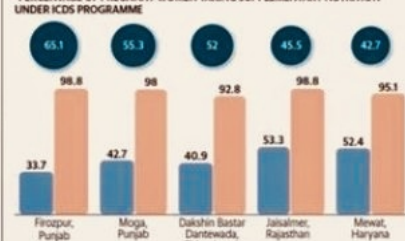
REAL-TIME MONITORING

One of the most powerful drivers of the programme has been the focus on leveraging technology, real-time data, and a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism. Under the ADP, key performance indicators (KPIs) have been identified on which progress is monitored on a real-time basis through the 'Champions of Change'

TRANSITION RATE FROM PRIMARY TO UPPER PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL



PERCENTAGE OF PREGNANT WOMEN TAKING SUPPLEMENTARY NUTRITION UNDER ICDS PROGRAMME



Source: NITI Aayog

platform. This enables government officials to make the requisite course correction in programme implementation. It also spurs competition among districts by allowing them to regularly assess their position vis-à-vis other aspirational districts as well as the best performing districts in the country.

A baseline ranking of all aspirational districts was released by NITI Aayog in April 2018 based on published data of 49 indicators. The KPIs were identified following detailed consultations with relevant government ministries and knowledge partners. These are primarily socio-economic outcomes in health and nutrition, education, agriculture and irrigation, financial inclusion, skill development and basic infrastructure.

To empower field officers, a primer was prepared mapping the 49 KPIs with existing schemes and listing specific actionable steps for improving the district's performance on every indicator.

The districts are ranked on the basis of improvements from the baseline, and the latest ranking on progress (delta) every month is announced by NITI Aayog. This helps to ensure that the rankings are not based on archaic historical accomplishments, or lack thereof. For young officers like district collectors, this real-time monitoring also serves as an incentive to go beyond their call of duty as they are able to show tangible results during their tenure in a district itself.

Capacities have been built on ground through continuous demand-based online trainings of field functionaries on critical data literacy aspects of governance. These include trainings in the use of data analytical tools, as well as improvement of formative understanding of indicators in the larger context of SDG goals.

THE STORY OF BANKA

In the north, and the north-east, have extreme conditions due to the moun-

tainous terrain, districts in central India have a distinct set of challenges. Many of these districts have been at the receiving end of a long drawn-out insurgency crisis that India has faced over the decades. In 35 of these districts, in partnership with the ministry of home affairs, the NITI Aayog has operated a closely monitored fellowship programme that supported the district collectors with bright, young, and motivated early career professionals—they acted as change catalysts in stimulating the development process in these areas.

I am particularly happy to narrate the story of Banka, an aspirational district in Bihar.

Keeping the importance of education as the prime driver of development, 'Unnayan Banka' is an initiative, that envisages 'quality education for all', using the latest technologies. It is a multi-platform model in which students receive

modern-day animated, contextualized and comprehensive videos on various technology platforms—LCD LED TVs, projectors, laptops, and mobile phones. Shifting from the traditional model of education of chalk and talk, Unnayan is reinventing education using technology. The model is based on the principle of 24*7 availability of learning material. The use of mobile phones, due to their immense penetration, is guaranteeing quality education, making it an 'anytime anywhere' model that is popularly referred to as '*Meri Mobile, Meri Vidyalaya*'.

In Banka, learning outcomes shot up from 17% to 54% and attendance rates of 90% plus were achieved. Following the success of this solution in Banka district, the model has now been successfully

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SHORT STORY

WHAT

The Aspirational Districts Programme seeks to improve socio-economic outcomes by vesting greater ownership and accountability in the district administration.

AND

By opening its doors to the private sector and philanthropic organizations, the ADP is changing the perception that development is the prerogative of the government alone.

NOW

The results have been encouraging. While some have surpassed the state averages on key indicators, many aspirational districts are now the best performers in their states.

implemented in all the districts of Bihar and other aspirational districts.

THE PATH AHEAD

The success achieved by the ADP has been globally recognized. The United Nations' Development Programme (UNDP) has appreciated the programme's 3Cs principle and recommended its replication in other parts of the developing world. Several independent experts have also lauded the programme's success in catalysing rapid improvements in performance in the areas of health, nutrition, education and infrastructure. Prof. Michael E. Porter of Harvard Business School, in his review, has opined that "true success requires the integration of competitiveness and social progress...the 2018 launch of the ADP has been a bold and promising strategic step towards this new agenda".

Going forward, it is imperative that aspirational districts formulate strategies for saturation of indicators. Special focus is required in sectors like health, nutrition and education to recover lost ground due to the covid pandemic. Further, governance mechanisms in challenging districts need to be strengthened. For instance, analysis has shown that districts perform better when the tenure of key officials like the district magistrate, chief medical officer, district agriculture officer and district education officer, among others, is stable. It is also crucial that vacancies for these key positions are regularly filled by the state authorities.

Finally, emphasis must be placed on extending the ADP template to underdeveloped blocks as well as other districts in the country which are lagging behind in social indicators.

The ADP has demonstrated that India needs to formulate policies and programmes which are grounded in data, and we need to significantly improve our data gathering capabilities. Secondly, we need to break departmental silos and converge government programmes. Thirdly, competition, ranking and putting ranking in the public domain improves performance radically.

Amrtaabh Kant is the G-20 Sherpa and the former CEO of NITI Aayog. Views expressed are personal.