

Aspirational Districts Programme

An Overview of the programme, progress thus far, best practices, and next steps

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Executive Summary

The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), launched by the Government of India in 2018, has been a highly successful initiative thus far. By prioritising outcomes over outputs, expanding the developmental focus beyond the economic indicators, and encouraging a sense of collaborative competition, the ADP should be considered in many ways a model for replicable & inclusive development. By early 2022, 95% of participating districts showed improvements on the five key socioeconomic themes that determine the delta rankings among all participating districts.

This paper provides an overview of the ADP system and outlines some of its key successes over the first several years of its implementation. While those outcomes deserve recognition, this paper also looks at a number of ways the programme can be improved. These included revisions to the priority indicators, how and how often they are measured, and how the rankings are compiled. Such ongoing revisions will encourage partnerships focused on the sectors and districts most in need of improvement and will provide greater nuance and distinctions within reported outcomes and rankings. As the GoI looks to expand the programme across a greater number of districts and at the block level, minor but impactful course corrections will ensure that the admirable improvements made thus far continue along the life of the programme.

Introduction and Overview

Social and income inequality has become an increasingly significant issue in India as the national economy has been consistently growing over the past several decades. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, the five richest states had a per capita income 400% higher than the five poorest states in 2018-19, a substantial increase from the 145% difference at the turn of the century. As part of its efforts to address these disparities and improve the country's least developed areas, the Government of India (GoI) launched the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) in 2018, a new initiative directed at improving and transforming the most underdeveloped districts across the country.

In selecting the initial cohort of participating districts, programme administrators examined a range of socioeconomic hardship indicators. These included such indicators as the number of landless households in a district that were dependent on manual

labour, health outcomes like stunting and wasting in children under five, educational outcomes such as student/teacher ratios and school dropout rates, and other household indicators like the number of households lacking electricity, toilets, or clean water access, among others. Initially, the aim was to have at least one district per state in the programme; every state except West Bengal is now participating in the programme.

The foundation of the ADP is a 3C model. This model prioritises convergence, collaboration, and competition among participating districts, based on constantly-updating delta rankings. Regarding **convergence**, the programme seeks to ensure a synergy between schemes and funding from the central and state governments. The focus on **collaboration** encourages and facilitates different government levels and departments to work together rather than in the silos they were often operating in before, as well as fostering critical working partnerships with private sector enterprises. The aspect of **competition** in the programme comes from the open data and regularly updated delta rankings of all participating districts.

These delta rankings, following on the baseline rankings taken at the outset of the programme, are based on the progress each district has made on five broad socioeconomic themes, under which there are 49 key performance indicators comprising 81 individual data points. These five key themes are:

- Health and nutrition
- Education
- Agriculture and water resources
- Financial inclusion and skill development
- Infrastructure.

In calculating the rankings, each of the above themes are weighted based on how much they impact individual economic output and individual quality of life, ranging from 30% weight (health and nutrition; education) down to 10% (skill development and financial inclusion; infrastructure).

Using this ranking system, the ADP's goal is for each participating district to first achieve the same level as the best-performing district in its respective state and then to meet the level of the best-performing

districts nationwide. By making the up-to-date district rankings publicly available, the ADP seeks to use data and outcome transparency to ensure progress on the ground. According to a review of the ADP by researchers at Harvard University, this is one of the foundational keys to the success of the programme, as it “infuses the spirit of competitive federalism among regions to drive efforts towards common goals,” encouraging participating districts “to outperform their peers but also learn from them.”

Progress of the ADP Thus Far

As a whole, the ADP has been remarkably successful over the 3+ years since its inception. Earlier this year, GoI Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman highlighted this progress, noting that 95% of participating districts have shown significant improvements on the key themes outlined above. A United Nations study of the programme found that, as of 2020, participating districts showed an overall increase in resilience and a corresponding decrease in socioeconomic vulnerability, demonstrating improvements in socioeconomic status and indicating the sustainability of current outcomes. Furthermore, when compared to their baseline status, four of the five indicators under education and five of the nine total health and nutrition indicators showed statistically significant improvements against the rate of recent progress before the programme’s inception.

Particularly notable improvements have been made on the most heavily weighted indicators of health and nutrition and education, which remain the closest to achieving their targets, though agriculture/water resources and financial inclusion/skill development were the areas most in need of improvement. A sample of notable statistics include an increase in the transition rate of children from primary to upper-primary school from 88% to 95% over the course of the first two years of the programme. Likewise, the percentage of schools with functioning toilets for girls has increased from a similar baseline of 88% prior to the ADP to an average of 98% by 2020.

Although the progress has been positive overall, measuring many of the more overarching indicators will take much longer to truly measure their impact; it may take years to recognize the full extent to which the inter-district and regional disparities have been reduced. Continuing to ensure that progress is being made will also require ongoing revisions to the KPIs and overall themes, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Lessons learned, best practices, and keys to success

One of the more unique successes of the ADP and an important lesson that can be taken to other government schemes and initiatives is the way it has shifted the focus of results from outputs to outcomes. Rather than basing its impact evaluations on the activities carried out under the programme, the ADP has been designed to prioritise evaluation of the benefits of those activities in broad and individual terms. Likewise, expanding the focus beyond just looking at economic indicators has shown that inclusive development requires a commitment to other social indicators as well.

The ways in which the ADP emphasises its data-focused structure can also provide important insights to be scaled across other initiatives. The real-time collection of data and its publication on the Champions of Change Platform, a publicly accessible online dashboard showing how each participating district has improved or regressed on each of the 81 data points and 49 KPIs has been shown to provide several important benefits to the programme.

Providing open access to up-to-date data promotes overall government transparency and drives accountability both on the impact that certain initiatives are or are not having and in terms of encouraging officials to submit timely and complete information regarding the progress their districts are making. This also feeds into the competitive aspect of the ADP, allowing citizens to track their districts' progress compared to others and further hold their officials accountable. Furthermore, collecting this data at the district level – and validating reported results through household surveys carried out in conjunction with external partners – allows for local needs to be identified, thus helping policymakers and other stakeholders shape interventions to the unique contours of each district. In this way, the programme can avoid employing the kind of one-size-fits-all approach, often based on the needs of more populous or more economically relevant areas, that hampers many central government initiatives around the world. Finally, by encouraging public consumption of programme data, the ADP is simultaneously raising awareness of the particular initiatives impacting that data. This, along with specific initiatives dedicated to raising awareness of government schemes, has been shown to be a simple yet crucial part of the success of a number of government programmes. One example of this comes from Shravasti District in Uttar Pradesh, where awareness-raising campaigns around immunizations increased coverage from 31% in early 2017 to 72% at the end of 2018.

One additional area in which the ADP can provide a template for other programmes comes from the emphasis on collaboration across sectors, levels of government, and participating districts. This type of partnership approach facilitates learning and sharing of best practices and can help interventions be taken to scale across other districts. At the same time, it helps individual districts prioritise their specific areas of need and work with partners who can bring in outside perspectives and expertise. With that said, the collaboration model has some aspects that are in need of revision; these and other ways forward are discussed in the final section below.

Recommendations and next steps for the future of the ADP

Based on the success of the ADP thus far, the GoI recently identified an additional 213 low-performing districts and 500 low-performing blocks as candidates for scaling up the programme. In expanding the programme, however, there are a number of ways that it can be improved upon for new districts and blocks as well as those that have been participating since the outset.

Many of the potential improvements to the ADP are focused on the data, including how and how often outcomes are measured, some of the indicators themselves, and the competition and ranking system. Regarding the collection of data, some stakeholders are still unable to update results in real time due to a lack of or inefficiencies in digital collection or submission tools, resulting in delays between the surveys carried out to compile results, the processing of the data, and the updating of rankings. A stronger focus on digital data collection and analysis would streamline this process and provide greater insights.

The frequency of data collection and analysis should also be revised to account for certain indicators that would show improvements more gradually than others. Measuring all indicators at the same frequency can skew the results and the delta rankings which, in some cases, has prompted districts to develop their own data analysis systems that give local officials more nuanced and accurate information. Going forward, it would likely be more beneficial for indicators to be grouped by the projected timeline required for accurate results to be measured, whether this is on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis.

Greater distinction should also be made between participating districts in order to accurately gauge improvements and rankings. Starting from a lower base can lead to lower-performing aspirational districts showing more drastic and rapid improvements on certain indicators compared to the top performing districts, even when they still have a longer ways to go to meet the recommended threshold. Even among this overall grouping of aspirational districts, there are significant disparities across the various indicators which means that competition between districts is not always occurring on a level playing field. While continuing to compile overall rankings can still be a useful metric, dividing participating districts into smaller groups reflecting their initial baseline performance should provide a more accurate picture of their performance.

As the programme goes on, the indicators themselves should be continually revisited and revised as needed. Ongoing improvements will result in indicators reaching a full saturation point where their delta measurements are small enough that they no longer provide insightful information. New indicators can then be rotated in, including those focused on women's empowerment, gender,

environment and climate. The weight given to certain indicators should also be open for ongoing revision as those that are more heavily weighted in measuring performance will receive a greater focus from government officials and civil society and private sector partners.

Thus far, the indicators and sectors outside of the umbrellas of healthcare and education have led to fewer partnerships across all districts, which correlates with consistently lower performance in these areas. Along these same lines, the lower-performing ADs have seen less investment and partnerships from civil society and the private sector compared to ADs that began the programme at the top end of the rankings. As such, there is a need for the programme as a whole to encourage a greater focus on the indicators that have less weight in determining delta rankings; revising and reweighting indicators should help mitigate these issues. The GoI should also incentivize more and stronger partnerships in the lowest performing districts going forward.

Lastly, there is a risk of the ADP being disrupted by leadership changes in individual districts and among community leaders and other stakeholders on the ground. As such, continuous capacity-building and training should be prioritised along with succession

planning where needed to ensure there are no losses in data quality or collection frequency related to turnover in local administrations and staffing.

While there is room for these improvements to the ADP, it should still be held as a very strong and successful programme overall. The data collection, indicators, and rankings could be – and should become going forward – somewhat more nuanced, but the results thus far have been highly encouraging as is the Centre’s demonstrated commitment to expanding this model programme.

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