

**I**T HAS BEEN over three years since India initiated an experiment, the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), to support its most underdeveloped pockets. Recently, a mid-term evaluation study of the ADP was released by Professors Michael Porter (Harvard University) and Scott Stern (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), which found that the districts have made significant improvement in health, nutrition, education and infrastructure parameters. The study noted that the ADP is generating social as well as economic impact, and relentless efforts in improving data quality will produce sharper insights. So, what is it about this programme that has caught the attention of international experts?

The wisdom that moulded the design of the ADP primarily recognised two important realities. First, lack of funding was not the sole or even the primary cause for these pockets' backwardness, as due to poor governance funds available under existing schemes (both central and state) were not being effectively utilised. And second, prolonged neglect of these districts had created a vicious cycle of low motivation amongst district officials, which further decelerated growth and development. Breaking this cycle through the infusion of data-driven governance was the key towards unlocking the potential of these districts.

This understanding was reached after a thorough analysis of the efforts of some state governments in the past that had run targeted programmes to provide inclusive growth to every block in the state. The ADP extended evidence-based policymaking to 112 'aspirational districts', which span across 26 states and one Union territory. By monitoring these on 49 key performance indicators and 81 data points, the ADP ranks these districts on their delta (incremental) progress across multiple sectors every month. NITI Aayog's 'Champions of Change' platform is the fulcrum of the ADP, which has gamified development activities in India's most underdeveloped districts by integrating competition with the much-valued principle of cooperative federalism.

The Prime Minister's vision for the development of underdeveloped districts is rooted in his firm belief that no systemic and behavioural change can be effectuated permanently without a 'jan andolan'. The ADP follows a triple-C framework, which is aimed at creating a mass movement.

#### Convergence

Under the ADP, districts are supported by a team of sectoral experts in identifying and formulating appropriate project proposals for filling critical gaps and in effectively utilising all available sources of funds: central schemes, state schemes, additional allocation by the NITI Aayog, district mineral funds (in mining districts) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds. The efforts of respective central ministries are also aligned—some have especially made short- and long-term plans for the 'aspirational districts' with time-bound targets. Such a multi-pronged support mechanism allows the districts to capitalise on all available sources of funding while channelising them in key gaps areas, like building healthcare capacities and improving learning outcomes of students.

#### Collaboration

To facilitate the convergence of ideas and funds, the ADP operates on a three-tier collaborative model. For each 'aspirational district', there is a Central Prabhari Officer as well as a State Prabhari Officer. These two, along with the district administration, work with a



ILLUSTRATION: ROHNIT PHORE

**AMITABH  
KANT**

The author is CEO, NITI Aayog.  
Views are personal



# An aspirational journey for our less developed pockets

The three-year-old Aspirational Districts Programme—following a triple-C framework of convergence, collaboration and competition—has set an example for state governments to extend this template of development to the block or gram panchayat level

host of development partners on various development parameters.

Many districts are encumbered with unique problems that require targeted and sustained efforts. For instance, all 'aspirational districts' have been able to improve their learning outcomes in schools by improving infrastructure through assured electricity, building toilets for girls and implementing the Building as Learning Aid (BaLA) concept. On other hand, districts lying in challenging geographies, such as in the North-Eastern states or those affected by left-wing extremism, offer complex challenges that require nuanced solutions.

The role of development partners is crucial in the formulation of these solutions. With their extensive experience on the field and sharp understanding of the pulse at the grassroots, they infuse policymaking, as well as its implementation on the ground, with more rigour and purpose.

#### Competition

The third pillar of the ADP rests on the foundation of a strong culture of data-driven governance and instigation of behavioural change through gamification. Both these ends are achieved by the Champions of Change dashboard, whose primary purpose is to put the monthly data collected on 49 key performance indicators in the public domain and rank all 112 districts based on their overall and sectoral performance. The ADP deliberately adopts a strategy of using delta rankings as they capture and reflect the incremental progress made by the district in the past one month. The best-performing districts (both in overall and sectoral terms) are given due recognition every month while making them entitled to additional untied funds from the NITI Aayog. These funds are utilised by the districts to fill critical gaps, thereby further accelerating their improvement in the indicators where they lag.

In July 2020, this dashboard was upgraded to an autonomous data platform hosted on cloud infrastructure, armed with a number of new functionalities like a data visualisation tool, machine learning tools for predictive analysis, a robust citizen feedback channel and experimental tools like GIS-maps for land-use planning. It is also designed to send real-time automated alerts to district collectors, prabhari officers and the NITI Aayog on the districts' monthly performance, along with data quality reports.

Several best practices emerge from these states that can be replicated by other districts. Instead of expecting every district to reinvent the wheel, dissemination of such innovative ideas allows them to learn from each other and provides a head-start in finding solutions to common challenges.

Data-driven policymaking and seamless coordination amongst all stakeholders for its implementation had traditionally not been a feasible option for governments. Non-availability of required data streams and accessible tools to analyse them were persistent challenges. The technology of our times has provided us with the required apparatus to not only streamline this coordination, but also channelise the efforts in a targeted manner. In fact, the Aspirational Districts Programme has internalised these learning sets in its triple-C architecture and is proving to be an example for state governments to extend this template to the block level. The ADP's genesis was inspired from the policy experiments of state governments and is now in turn becoming a model for them to replicate back at the block or gram panchayat level. It is proving to be a shining example of cooperative-competitive federalism.