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## **1. Aspirational District Programme: a New kind of Government**

### **Context:**

- The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) is one of the largest experiments on outcomes-focused Governance in the world. Spread across 115 of India's socio-economically challenged districts.
- 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.

### **What is Aspirational District Programme?**

- Launched in **January 2018** by **NITI Aayog**, the 'Transformation of Aspirational Districts' programme aims to quickly and effectively transform some of the most underdeveloped districts of the country.
- The broad contours of the programme are **Convergence** (of Central & State Schemes), **Collaboration** (of Central, State level 'Prabhari' Officers & District Collectors), and **Competition** among districts driven by a Mass Movement or a Jan Andolan.
- With States as the main drivers, this program will focus on the strength of each district, identify low-hanging fruits for immediate improvement, measure progress, and rank districts.

### **Focus of the Programme:**

- To enable optimum utilization of their potential, this program focuses closely on improving people's ability to participate fully in the burgeoning economy. Health & Nutrition, Education, Agriculture & Water Resources, Financial Inclusion & Skill Development, and Basic Infrastructure are this programme's core areas of focus.
- 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.**

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- Health outcomes in the mentored districts reveal significant improvements between the first and second third-party household surveys. 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.

#### Supplementary Efforts:

- While the initial evidence on the ADP's impact has been encouraging, there is always room for supplementing our efforts. **“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.
- **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. 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.

#### Conclusion:

- 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.

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- The programme has also **developed a lean data infrastructure** that smartly exploits complementary strengths of administrative and survey data.

