

THE ASPIRATIONAL DISTRICTS PROJECT IS TRANSFORMATIVE



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In a diverse country like India, balanced growth is a prerequisite for overall development. The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) is a radical departure from the previous development strategies in its scale, scope and ownership. Implicit in the design of the programme is the fact that the economy cannot sustain growth without improving human development for all its citizens. This programme recognises the disparities in development across states and districts. It focuses on transforming 115 districts across 28 states that have witnessed the least progress along certain development parameters. These 115 districts account for more than 20% of the country's population and cover over 8,600 gram panchayats.

The ADP brings together all levels of government, from central and state officers driving operations, to the district collectors implementing innovative measures on the ground. It also tracks progress through real-time data collection. A critical aspect of the programme's approach is its focus on district-specific strengths and the identification of low-hanging fruit. What are the areas that will yield immediate improvement in each district? In addition to tailoring interventions to districts, the programme is novel in four important ways: shifting the focus to socio-economic outcomes, placing data at the core of policymaking, emphasising collaboration across various levels of government, and partnering with civil society.

First, the programme shifts the focus away from output and draws attention to socio-economic outcomes. To provide an initial benchmark for the programme, the government has collected statistics on 49 indicators across five dimensions:

health and nutrition, education, financial inclusion, agriculture and water resources, skill development and basic infrastructure. Not all dimensions are considered equal in the construction of the composite index for each district, acknowledging the specific nature of India's development challenges. Second, through its efforts to collect, distill and disseminate data, the programme is grounded thoroughly in evidence. The NITI Aayog has created a dashboard to monitor real-time progress in the districts. Till date, no other developing country has undertaken a data-driven programme of this massive scale to advance the holistic development of one-fifth of its population.

Third, the ADP echoes the government's belief that states and districts should have a greater voice in their development. It truly embodies India's shift toward cooperative federalism. The local, state and central governments work together to design, implement and monitor measures to drive development in the districts. The strong belief that underlies this strategy is that each district's advantages and challenges are different. The local government is in a unique position to understand the complexities of the districts. They can experiment with different measures to enhance socio-economic development on the ground. Fourth, the programme is a collaborative effort between government, various foundations and civil society.

On April 14, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bijapur in Chhattisgarh. The district, affected by Left-wing extremism and poor connectivity, is one of 115 ADP districts. Despite challenges, the district has achieved progress. The PM visit acknowledged the importance of such districts for India's economy. Together, over 250 million people reside in these aspirational districts. Without improving human development and strengthening the economic situation of these regions, India as a whole cannot achieve significant progress.

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The views expressed are personal