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The Aspirational District Program in India and the Emergence of Innovative Practices for Local Governance

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Abstract

The Aspirational District Program is an initiative launched by the Government of India in January 2018 to accelerate the socioeconomic development of 115 districts nationwide. These districts have been identified as "aspirational" because they have shown the lowest indicators of development in the nation. The program's main objective is to improve the quality of life of people in these districts and reduce regional imbalances by targeting their development needs by converging central, state, and local government schemes and resources around five main pillars: health and nutrition, education, financial inclusion, and skill development, agriculture and water resources, and basic infrastructure. This paper examines five innovative practices for local governance that have emerged from this program, which can be replicated in other parts of India and other nations: the "Jan Andolan" approach, public-private partnerships (PPPs), capacity-building, technology and digital platforms, and convergence of schemes. The ADP's pioneering approach to local governance is an example of further development projects in India and the world.

Keywords:

Introduction

The Aspirational District Program is an initiative launched by the Government of India in January 2018 to accelerate the socioeconomic development of 115 districts nationwide. These districts have been identified as "aspirational" because they have shown the lowest indicators of development in the nation. The program's main objective is to improve the quality of life of people in these districts and reduce regional imbalances by targeting their development needs by converging central, state, and local government schemes and resources around five main pillars: health and nutrition, education, financial inclusion, and skill development, agriculture and water resources, and basic infrastructure. The program is being implemented in a mission-mode approach, focusing on results-based monitoring and leveraging technology to track progress and identify areas that need more attention.

Under the ADP, each district is assigned a team of officers, including a district collector, a superintendent of police, and officers from other departments, such as health, education, agriculture, and banking, who work in a coordinated manner to achieve the objectives of the

program. The program also involves the active participation of the local communities, civil society organizations, and the private sector to ensure sustainable development. The Aspirational District Program has successfully improved several development indicators, such as literacy rate, health infrastructure, agriculture productivity, and financial inclusion in the identified districts.

The Aspirational District Program in India has led to the emergence of several innovative practices for local governance. Some of the critical practices are:

Jan Andolan: The program's schemes have been implemented with the philosophy of Jan Andolan or "a people's movement"; this includes establishing committees at the village level to promote community participation and ownership in the development process and engaging citizens to participate in development schemes actively.

Public-Private Partnership: The program has encouraged the participation of the private sector in local governance. Several public-private partnership models have been developed to address the infrastructural gaps in aspirational districts.

Capacity-Building: The program has emphasized the capacity-building of local government officials, other stakeholders, and citizens. Several training programs are organized to reskill and upskill citizens of the districts to enhance their employability and entrepreneurial initiative.

Technology and Digital Platforms: The program has leveraged technology to enhance transparency and accountability in local governance. Several digital platforms, such as e-Gram Swaraj, have been developed to facilitate online tracking of development works and grievance redressal. Mobile apps have also been used to engage citizens in campaigns and initiatives.

Convergence of Schemes: The program has promoted the convergence of various government schemes and resources to achieve holistic development of the districts. For instance, other health, education, and agriculture schemes are integrated into the ADP to address the multi-dimensional challenges faced by the aspirational districts.

Overall, the Aspirational District Program has led to the emergence of several innovative practices for local governance, which can be replicated in other parts of India and other nations. These practices contributed to socioeconomic development in ADPs to drive improved quality of life for the people. What follows are reflections on these five innovative practices of the ADP across India and some illustrative examples of how these practices have been applied to support the notion of local governance.

The "Jan Andolan" Approach

The Hindi phrase "Jan Andolan" translates into English "mass movement" or "people's movement". Jan Andolan has been one of the driving ideas behind India's ADP and other government development schemes. Jan Andolan embodies the idea that the program treats citizens as beneficiaries of development and equal stakeholders by asking for their input in policies and projects, engaging them in communication campaigns, and tailoring services and

initiatives according to their unique needs. These programs thus created a space for collective identity among the citizens of the aspirational districts, uniting them through their shared goals and motivations for a brighter future.

Local committees play a crucial role in facilitating the Jan Andolan aspect of the program. Each district has set up local committees—also known as Jan Andolan Committees (JACs)—comprising community leaders, representatives from civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. These committees act as a bridge between the district administration and the local communities and help identify the key issues and challenges the communities to face in their respective districts. The JACs also help monitor the progress of various development projects in the district, provide feedback to the district administration, mobilize the community to participate in various development initiatives, and formulate the District Development Plans. These plans are vital to the program and are prepared in consultation with the local communities based on their priorities and needs. The JACs also organize various awareness campaigns and community mobilization activities, create awareness about various government schemes and programs, and encourage the community to participate.

One particularly successful program that utilized the concept of Jan Andolan was the Teach Gajapati campaign in the district of Odisha. A tribal district in eastern India, Odisha is plagued by teacher vacancies. The campaign recruited voluntary teachers to teach 15 days of class, administer one assessment to students, and evaluate their progress. The range of enrolled to-date teachers has included retired teachers and government officials, including the District Magistrate. The campaign also engaged ordinary citizens in initiatives to improve educational quality in the district, including awareness campaigns, cleanliness drives, plantation activities, and pledges to double citizen donation amounts.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

Public-private partnerships involve collaborations between public administration and private sector partners (corporations, NGOs, and other private entities) to advance development agendas. PPPs have developed recently as nations in the Global South advance towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and strive for inclusive, viable growth. Private partners share their financial, human, and technical resources to complement public sector development programs in the fulfillment of a public service objective. These contributions can be made through giving funds towards public projects, sending private employees to public offices, offering technical and soft skills training to public employees, or advising on implementing public projects. Private partners also assist in operating and improving public infrastructure and utilities. In return, public sector entities offer private partners more exposure, greater ease of access in implementing their development programs, and an opportunity to work towards the public good.

Both private and public entities share the same risks and profits while mutually benefitting from the expertise each can offer the other. These partnerships are guided by efficiency, accountability, responsiveness, transparency, effectiveness, and equity. It is crucial to note that these partnerships do not minimize the role of the government, as public entities in this

model act as regulatory bodies to ensure programs are being carried out in line with shared goals. Institutional frameworks are also crucial to ensure that these partnerships are carried out in an organized and ethical manner. Public-private partnerships in local governance have been crucial in promoting sustainable and inclusive development throughout the ADP. In

the ADP, private sector organizations not only contribute their resources and innovative financing mechanisms but also act as external knowledge resources to help fill gaps in governance due to structural challenges, which are prevalent in the aspirational districts.

In contrast to traditional models of development that see private organizations as contributing to government efforts to help citizens, the partner ecosystem model of ADP sees private organizations as one component of a system where citizens play an equal role in their development. Development partners are integrated directly into the district administration, with many such organizations have sent representatives to several districts' offices. In some cases, professionals from these development partners were even invited to give input on issues not directly within the scope of their organization, allowing for the formation of informal knowledge-sharing networks. These partnerships work in three core areas—creating capacity in personnel, creating innovative policy interventions in cooperation with public administration, and validating the reported data of the achieved social outcomes of the program through field surveys. Below are several steps the program has taken to encourage the participation of the private sector in local governance:

Development of PPP Frameworks: The program has developed PPP frameworks for various sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure. These frameworks provide guidelines for the participation of the private sector in the delivery of public services and infrastructure.

One such framework is the Distance to Frontier (DTF) framework proposed by the National Institute of Competitiveness. This six-point analysis and engagement framework aims to identify districts that need a higher degree of partner engagement. These districts' outcomes were compared to respective targets over 2019 to inform the partners of the progress of their interventions. The DPF allows development patterns to determine or adjust their interventions' domain, region, and points. For example, n the health and nutrition sector, the framework determined that districts such as Baramulla (Jammu and Kashmir), Gadchiroli, and Osmanabad (Maharashtra) exceeded their targets, allowing partners to ease back on their interventions as processes in this sector become institutionalized in the state. In contrast, none of the districts reached their intended targets for the education sector, informing partners that they should continue converging the scale and scope of their interventions in this area. The framework also informs partners on the niche challenges facing specific regions, such as extremist violence and a lack of school infrastructure that has affected progress in the education sector.

Project Identification: The program has identified projects that can be implemented through PPPs. These projects are based on the needs and priorities of the local communities and are identified through a consultative process involving the government, the private sector, and other stakeholders.

One such project was establishing a community kitchen program in the Nandurbar district in Maharashtra. Nandurbar is a primarily tribal district in Maharashtra, a region that faces high

levels of poverty and malnutrition. The district administration worked in collaboration with Stri Shakti, a private sector partner that has collaborated with the Indian government in various welfare schemes helping to empower women in lower socioeconomic statuses. Together, they set up a Centralised Kitchen to provide free meals to children in Ashram Shalas, state-run residential schools for children from tribal communities. Today, the kitchen serves 28 such schools, using advanced machinery to semi-automate the process and providing employment opportunities to residents.

Mobilization of Private Sector Resources: The program has encouraged the private sector to contribute to developing underdeveloped districts, including mobilizing private sector resources such as funding, expertise, and technology. For example, efforts toward financial inclusion in the districts were traditionally handled by banking institutions since public offices did not have officials with expertise in this area. Under ADP, private development organizations have filled gaps in personnel by partnering with several districts to provide expertise in financial inclusion and microfinance.

Capacity-Building

The ADP has undertaken capacity-building initiatives to enhance the knowledge and skills of local government officials and private sector representatives in the design and implementation of PPPs. This includes training programs, workshops, and seminars on PPPs. Capacity-building initiatives have also been designed and implemented to help citizens in the aspirational districts enhance their employability and entrepreneurial skills while reskilling and upskilling them to excel in their chosen professions. Poverty and unemployment are core problems facing aspirational districts, being more persistent in rural areas and among youth. Issues facing rural areas, such as infrastructure problems, nutrition, and capital access, prevent rural citizens from completing their compulsory and secondary education. As a result, many youths migrate to India's urban centers or even abroad for employment opportunities. The ADP has emphasized capacity-building and skills development programs to help citizens of all ages develop their employable skills and entrepreneurial ability.

Whereas formal education focuses on certifications, literacy, and socialization, skills development and capacity-building empower individuals by focusing on a range of valuable individual skills combined in one holistic program. Although some of these skills focus on solving individual problems and issues, the capacity-building element focuses on a broader range of factors that empower individuals, such as developing confidence, self-efficacy, and decisiveness. Each initiative carefully considers each district's local culture, combining input from district administration, private partners, and local citizens. Pre- and post-assessment with performance indicators are also used to evaluate the effectiveness of each initiative and adjust them as needed. Overall, these initiatives have managed to empower not just individual citizens but entire communities.

The ADP's skills and capacity-building initiatives focus on acquiring skills through systematic, deliberate, and sustained effort in cognitive, technical, and interpersonal skills, which can apply to various professional sectors. One such area is agriculture, where the ADP has developed training programs to help farmers improve their skills in various areas.

Regarding the three core areas of skills, cognitive skills allow farmers to exercise better decision-making in issues related to their farming practice, and technical skills allow farmers to gain mastery of more advanced farming equipment and techniques. Interpersonal skills allow farmers to work more cohesively in groups and collectives.

With these three areas combined, farmers have learned more cost-effective, productive, modern, scientific farming methods, saving money and time while increasing their yields and profits. One such successful farming training program was the high-density farming program in the district of Kupwara (governed by Jammu and Kashmir), where farmers were taught through awareness drives and the conversion of seedling-based orchards into high-density orchards. Every 650 yards of land today caters to 100-150 plants, and the program is being replicated across other districts.

Schools have also implemented capacity-building initiatives to help students develop civil literacy, gain confidence in expressing their views, and collaborate with other students in civic projects. One such program is Bal Sansad, which has been established in more than 3,200 schools in the district of Shrawasti in Uttar Pradesh and replicated across many other districts. Students gain civil literacy in this program by engaging in discussions on school, family, society, and good values, participating in democratic processes by voting for school prefects and office-bearers, and collaborating on civic projects such as cleanliness drives and school assemblies.

Technology and Digital Platforms

The ADP has leveraged technology and digital platforms to enhance transparency and accountability in local governance. These initiatives have promoted better convergence of schemes and resources, enhanced citizen engagement and feedback, and facilitated online access to government schemes and services. This holistic approach towards using digital technology to aid local governance has boosted the program's outcomes and facilitated more citizen involvement in governance initiatives.

Mobile applications and online portals have been developed to facilitate citizen engagement and feedback. These applications enable citizens to provide feedback on the various initiatives of the program and report grievances. The applications also provide information on various government schemes and services. In other cases, mobile apps facilitated awareness-raising efforts in specific sectors. Online e-government portals enable citizens to apply for various schemes and services online and track their applications' status. The portals also provide information on the eligibility criteria, application process, and other details related to the schemes and services. Other e-government services include digitizing records and documents, online payment of taxes and fees, and online monitoring of government projects. Social media platforms have also been used to enable the program to disseminate information on government schemes and services and to engage with citizens on various issues related to local governance.

One particularly successful initiative was using digital storytelling through a mobile app to detect missing cases of tuberculosis (cases in which individuals are infected with the virus but have not presented to healthcare facilities) in the district of Nuh (formerly known as

Mewat). Active, community-based interventions consisting of awareness and mobilization campaigns have been proven to be cost-efficient ways to achieve improved treatment outcomes, reduced transmission and social stigma, and early diagnosis of TB. However, Nuh

faced numerous barriers to implementing such programs, such as a primarily rural population with a low literacy rate, low TB indicators (especially among women), and poor communication infrastructure that limits the amount of health information that can be transmitted to the community.

To design the proper intervention, the local district administration teamed up with private partner ZMQ Development, which was awarded TB REACH grant to use digital storytelling techniques for the intervention. First, ZMQ trained a group of women community healthcare workers who would use digital tools for healthcare services in the district, known as MIRAs (Mobile Integrated Resources for All Women Needs). ZMQ then developed digitally animated stories via an open-source mobile-based digital application called Your Story Teller (YST). These stories were developed in a participatory manner through community discussion groups, or "Story Labs", in which local citizens, particularly women and girls, healthcare workers, and local leaders, were invited to give input on local issues related to TB diagnosis, screening, completion, and stigma. The animations' concept, story, format, design, and voice-over were field-tested and adjusted before being finalized.

The resulting six animated stories were all under 7 minutes long and highly localized with characters and scenarios relevant to local life and voice-overs in the local dialect. The MIRAs screened these stories to the citizens in their care over a year and a half from January 2020 to June 2021 during individual check-ups and community screening sessions. For individual sessions, the story was carefully selected according to each individual's or family's needs, while the community sessions were carefully planned in conjunction with ZMQ workers, village leaders, and local influencers. The app also contained five pre- and post-assessment questions to assess if the stories resulted in knowledge gain.

The program was a great success, with the digital storytelling format able to break past literacy barriers. The majority of local citizens were greatly satisfied with the stories and exhibited higher amounts of knowledge gained. Nearly 20,000 individuals were screened for TB due to the intervention, and 255 cases were detected. The iterative, participatory process in developing the stories allowed local citizens to see themselves in the stories and empowered them to make positive decisions regarding their health. The collaboration between different public and private actors was also crucial in reducing the cost of the intervention and filling in human resource gaps in the public sector.

Convergence of Schemes

The ADP in India has taken several steps to promote the convergence of various government schemes and resources, leading to better coordination and implementation of both and thereby accelerating the pace of development in underdeveloped districts. The program has established District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committees (DDCMCs) in each district, which act as the nodal agency for converging various schemes and resources. These committees comprise officials from various departments and agencies,

and they work towards ensuring effective coordination and convergence of schemes and resources.

District Action Plans (DAPs) have also been developed in each district, identifying the priority areas for development and the schemes and resources required to achieve the desired outcomes. These plans are developed through a consultative process involving the local communities, government officials, and other stakeholders. Individuals involved in various levels of government are also given capacity-building training on convergence planning and implementation. The program has also leveraged technology to better aid this convergence, primarily by developing a dashboard that provides real-time data on the progress of various schemes and identifies gaps and overlaps in implementing schemes and distributing resources. The dashboard is also used to monitor the outcomes of different initiatives and identify strengths and weaknesses to improve initiatives with each implementation.

These tools help the ADP complement and intersect with other government schemes targeting one or more of the five pillars of the ADP. One such scheme is POSHAN Abhiyaan (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment), India's flagship program for ending malnutrition in mothers and children. Launched in 2018, the scheme has converged with the ADP in many respects to benefit both programs. Data generated from the ADP is used to inform the activities of the POSHAN Abhiyaan since the aspirational districts faced the most prominent struggles in health and nutrition.

POSHAN Abhiyaan also incorporates the multisectoral approach of the ADP, involving private partners, local district administrations, volunteers, and ordinary citizens in improving nutrition outcomes. POSHAN Abhiyaan also utilizes many of the digital technologies shared by the ADP, such as digital storytelling, social media engagement, and mass media campaigns. District leadership is also crucial in implementing POSHAN Abhiyaan's schemes, such as developing specific district action plans, coordinating district partners, training the relevant employees, representatives, and staff, assessing field activities, and dashboard reporting of the schemes' progress.

Conclusion and the Future of the ADP

So far, the ADP has yielded promising results in the four years since its implementation. Several of the districts under its care were more likely to meet SDG goal indicators than others, including access to essential services, clean fuel for cooking, and mobile phone and internet access. In recent years, the program has expanded to include other partner programs to further the goals of the original program. The government of India recently joined forces with private partner Piramal Foundation to launch the Aspirational Districts Collaborative to bring together community leaders, volunteers, citizens, and local government to establish campaigns to further the goals of the ADP. In January 2023, the government of India also launched the Aspirational Block Program, bringing the ADP to more blocks, the administrative subdivision below the district level. The ADP's pioneering approach to local governance is an example of further development projects in India and the world.

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