



ASPIRATIONAL DISTRICT PROGRAMME - GS II AND III MAINS

Q. The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) is focused on improving governance for accelerated and inclusive human development. Discuss (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *Nuh Placed 2nd In Niti Aayog Ranking Among 112 Aspirational Dists*

What's in the news?

- Under the aspirational districts programme, Haryana's Nuh district has moved from 30th position to second position in Niti Aayog's Delta ranking.

Aspirational District Programme:

- It was launched in 2018 to **improve the socio-economic status of 112 aspirational districts across 28 States.**
- These districts had witnessed the least progress along certain development parameters.
- **The districts accounted for more than 20% of the country's population and covered over 8,600 gram panchayats.**
- With this initiative, the Government has tried to change the development narrative by referring to these districts as 'aspirational' instead of 'backward'.

Objectives:

- It calls for **reimagining governance**, vesting greater ownership and accountability in the district administration, facilitating convergence and collaboration among stakeholders to contribute to the development process.

Nodal Authority:

- The Programme is coordinated by **Niti Aayog** with support from Central Ministries and the State Governments.

Core themes:

The **5 core themes** includes

- Health & Nutrition (30% weightage)
- Education (30% weightage)
- Agriculture & Water Resources (20% weightage)
- Financial Inclusion & Skill Development (10%)
- Basic Infrastructure (10%)



Features:

- The delta ranking of the Aspirational Districts combines the innovative use of data with pragmatic administration.
- The programme ranks districts based on the improvement achieved month-on-month through the Champions of Change dashboard (An online Dashboard).

Institutional Framework:

- NITI Aayog anchors the program at **Central level** while individual Ministries have been responsibility to drive progress in districts.
- The **States** are the main drivers of the programme.
- For each **district**, a central Prabhari officer has been nominated. He/she should possess a rank of joint secretary/additional secretary.

Core Strategy:

- Work on the strength of each district.
- Make development as a mass movement in these districts.
- Identify low hanging fruits and the strength of each district which can act as a catalyst for development.
- Measure progress and rank districts to spur a sense of competition.
- Districts shall aspire from becoming State's best to Nation's best.

Significance of the Aspirational Districts Programme:

1. Targeted local issues:

- It has ensured that States and districts have a greater say in their own development.
- Local challenges differ significantly across the country, therefore, State and Local Governments are best-positioned to recognize their development challenges, and design customized policy interventions.

2. Improved governance:

- Instead of making a dedicated financial allocation for the ADP, the programme has focused on improving governance, making use of existing resources more smartly and achieving better outcomes for the same amount of money.

3. Collaborative approach:

- Working collaboratively has enabled innovative service delivery approaches, currently limited to one or a few districts in the country, to be replicated in other areas.
- For instance, the smart classroom initiative being implemented in Banka, Bihar, to improve student learning outcomes, is being replicated in the aspirational districts across Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand.

4. Inclusion of private sectors:

- By collaborating with the private sector, philanthropic organizations and technical partners, the ADP is changing the deeply entrenched popular perception that development is the prerogative of the government alone.



- These partnerships are helping to infuse the programme with new ideas, and acting as force multipliers on outcomes.

5. Provoking competition:

- It has also spurred competition among districts by allowing them to regularly assess their position vis-à-vis other aspirational districts as well as the best performing districts in the country.

Achievements of the Aspirational Districts Programme:

1. Health and Nutrition:

- Model Anganwadi centres have been set up across districts to benefit women and children.
- The number of institutional deliveries has increased, along with a dip registered in the rate of severe acute malnutrition in infants.
- Poshan App has been developed for an aspirational district in Ranchi. It is a real-time data analytics digital platform. It monitors bed occupancy, child-growth charts and the inventory of every malnourishment treatment centre in the district.
- ADP also provided Assam's Baksa district with support to ensure that it can run mobile health ambulances during poor weather conditions so that access to healthcare service delivery is ensured.

2. Education outcomes:

- Innovation and digitisation have been the cornerstone of transformation in the education sector.
- The 'Hamara Vidyalaya' model adopted in Namsai, a remote district in Arunachal Pradesh has shown substantial improvement in learning outcomes and overall teaching practices. Under this model, a school prabhari is appointed for each school in the district to ensure monitoring, assessment and guidance. The model makes use of an online platform called 'Yathasarvam' for improving the outcomes.

3. Agriculture and water resources:

- District administrations have laid emphasis on improving irrigation facilities, yield, and farmer education.
- Several innovative paths have been adopted to create market linkages for products indigenous to the aspirational districts. Example: The farmers of Chandauli, U.P were encouraged to grow fertiliser-free organic black rice. The experiment was remarkably successful, with Chandauli adding to the thriving global market of black rice and exporting to countries like Australia and New Zealand.

4. Basic infrastructure:

- This pillar witnessed significant advancement especially in LWE affected districts. This ensured better connectivity and seamless movement from rural to urban regions e.g., Bijapur in Chhattisgarh and Malkangiri in Odisha have greatly improved the network of roadways and ramped up the infrastructure projects in their jurisdiction.



- ADP enabled Chamba district (Himachal Pradesh) administration to work with the Centre to ensure robust telecom connectivity in the hard-to-reach areas, which had remained under-prioritized until recently.

5. Financial inclusion and skill development:

- Micro-ATMs have been launched in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district to provide financial assistance to women self-help group members. They are provided with commission-based income on every transaction.

Issues associated with the ADP:

1. Inadequate Coverage:

- Although the program is highly inclusive in nature it fails to capture crucial variables like environment and gender.

2. Imbalance in implementation:

- Most districts channelised their efforts focused on health and nutrition, education and agriculture and water resources. They paid less emphasis on the sectors of Skill Development and Financial Inclusion.

3. Budgetary Constraints:

- ADP is affected by the issue pertaining to insufficient budgetary resources. This sustains the lack of human resources and dearth of technical capacities at the district and block level.

4. Issues in Coordination:

- NITI Aayog plays a mentoring role in 27 districts in eight states.
- 12 Central Government Ministries have similarly adopted the remaining districts. Implementation involving multiple ministries leads to a lack of coordination.

5. Shortcomings of Delta Ranking:

- It is largely focused on assessing quantity (that is, coverage of access) rather than quality e.g., timely delivery of textbooks in schools is part of the ranking index however very less weightage is given to the quality of education rendered in these districts.

WAY FORWARD:

- It is imperative that aspirational districts formulate strategies for saturation of indicators. **Special focus is required in sectors like health, nutrition and education** to recover lost ground due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Governance mechanisms** in challenging districts need to be strengthened. For instance, analysis has shown that districts perform better when the tenure of key officials like the District Magistrate, Chief Medical Officer, District Agriculture Officers etc. are stable. It is also crucial that vacancies for these key positions are regularly filled by the state authorities.
- Emphasis must be placed on extending the ADP template to **under-developed blocks** and districts which are lagging behind in social indicators.



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- The First UNDP appraisal of the Aspirational Districts Programme has recommended a **realignment of sectors under the program**. It calls for the addition of topics such as **environment and gender**.

The success of the Aspirational Districts Programme has been testified by national as well as international agencies. It is a flagship initiative for **improving the lives of citizens residing in most backward regions of the country**. The need of the hour demands overcoming its challenges and realizing the vision of **'SABKA SATH, SABKA VIKAS'** for **ensuring inclusive development**.

