

Champions Of Change and The Transformation of Aspirational Districts in India

Sameer Gad, Dr. Laxmana Rao

¹Dayanand Sagar University

²Professor, Dayanand Sagar University

Abstract—This academic paper provides an assessment of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) with the help of the Champions of Change (CoC) Dashboard and looks into the presented results of the ADP for the year 2024 until the year 2026. The ADP encompasses 112 districts, utilizing the data-driven governance model reliant on combining government initiatives as well as working together in terms of various governmental institutions, and assessing the outcomes through various rankings known as the incremental or delta rankings. NITI Aayog states that the program makes use of 49 performance indicators.

Moreover, the advanced CoC 2.0 platform also provides various features connected with AI, geo-spatial features, citizen reporting, and project management.

This paper employs secondary techniques and administrative evidence in the form of documents. The primary sources include reports by NITI Aayog, the official portal of the ADP, the releases of PIB, and reviews of the program. The research design is descriptive and analytical rather than casual. The focus of the study is made on the changes presented in the year 2024 as well as in the years 2024-2025 and 2025-2026.

The evidence reveals four major results. Firstly, the program enhanced the administrative use of real-time and comparative data. Secondly, the targeted campaigns demonstrated rapid improvement in specific indicators, as demonstrated by the rise of Thonoknyu Block, Nagaland from 465th to 85th rank in the period of March 2023–September 2024 while registering the improvement of 100% saturation in five out of six targeted indicators. Third, the good practice and health service examples show that the local innovations can reach the unapproachable population, where Lakhimpur, Assam managed to reach 100% of diabetes and hypertension screening for 25,308 through mobile medical units and boat camps, while Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu managed to make sure that there were no maternal deaths during the April 2023 – March 2024 period after establishing a digital monitoring system for

high-risk pregnancies. Finally, the model developed its institutional architecture in 2025–26, among which there were quarterly delta rankings and Sampoornata Abhiyan 2.0.

The conclusion drawn in this paper states that the main contribution of the Champions of Change program is in how it modifies the way the district authorities find deficiencies, set priorities for intervention, follow progress and share results. Nevertheless, ranking-related evidence should not be viewed as evidence that the ADP is the sole cause of those improvements. Future studies should involve building a district-level panel data set of observations on CoC, accounting for national programs and macro trends, checking whether the results are sustainable and investigating if ranking improvements translate into tangible social welfare benefits.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's development issue is more than just a matter of overall economic growth; it also involves the question of growing influence and public services to reach which population and how fast to reach poor people in rural areas, and whether governmental bodies manage to address the shortfalls in the process of delivering their services. Different districts show distinctiveness not only in the geographical aspect but also in that of their administrative abilities, human development, infrastructure, social structure and opportunities to benefit from economic ventures. Therefore, a project that utilizes the same administrative instructions will have different outcomes in different districts. The Aspirational Districts Programme is an alternative strategy that is aimed at finding out the districts with the development gap by utilizing the common set of indicators and then trying to facilitate convergence of

the agencies and programs in order to speed up the process.

The Champions of Change dashboard serves as the key component in this model. According to NITI Aayog, it is a public platform that enables real-time data collection as well as continuous monitoring. The platform was publicly launched in April 2018 with the aim of making district performance transparent. Through the ranking method, the program focuses on incremental advancement instead of absolute progress. This is important as the historically disadvantaged district can considerably enhance its performance without exceeding more developed districts in relative terms.

The period of 2024 to 2026 is of great importance as it should be regarded as the transition from the development of the ADP model to comprehensive institutionalization of data-oriented district governance. In 2024, NITI Aayog initiated the Sampoonata Abhiyan, time-bound saturation campaign concentrating attention on a limited number of indicators. In 2025, CoC 2.0 and the data governance initiatives will place a greater emphasis on advanced analytics and the quality of data. In January 2026, Sampoonata Abhiyan 2.0 was launched for 112 aspirational districts and 513 aspirational blocks adhering to simple saturation campaign principles.

The paper presents the following core research question: What results can be noted regarding the Champions of Change and Aspirational Districts initiative in the period from 2024 to 2026 and what do they tell us about the approach to governance in the specific Indian districts based on data?

No less important are the three supplementary questions that should receive answers in the paper: (1) What are the measurable service delivery outcomes noted during the studied period? (2) How has the monitoring and ranking system aided the reform and (3) What communication issues should be taken into account in interpreting these results, providing them with the meaning of the program impact?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND POLICY EVIDENCE

The scholarly articles on the Aspirational Districts Programme discuss result-oriented governance,

decentralized execution and the significance of bureaucratic competition. NITI Aayog explains three main concepts: convergence, collaboration and competition. Convergence refers to the coordination of different departments and programmes according to the requirements of the district. The idea of collaboration connects national, state and district level entities. Under competition, public performance assessment is used to inspire quick improvement.

The initial design of the Champions of Change project was based on the measurement of 49 indicators of effectiveness and 81 parameters. The initial project description divided the significance between five categories, with particular focus on health and nutrition and education. This design embodies the change theory assuming that improved human development will increase household capability to participate in economic and social life.

Program evaluations from independent and quasi-independent entities have viewed the contribution of the program in bringing about administrative focus and measurable advancement, but it has also raised a caution about fast causal conclusions. A significant differentiation has been made with respect to "performance measurement" and "impact evaluation." ADP may lead to a district's progress, but other national initiatives or state-level reforms, economic developments or modifications in reporting may also produce similar effects. The dashboard can illustrate the progress but not the exact cause of it.

Hence, the program is part of a broader shift towards fact-based public administration. Its uniqueness is found in using both public measurement and administrative rivalry. Instead of waiting for a final assessment report, the district teams get the information on their performance continuously.

Abhiyan's objective was to select a small set of indicators that could be saturated within a restricted timeline. This is similar to results-based managerial practices that emphasize a narrow set of quantifiable results to achieve quick operational success.

- The literature indicates that data visibility and administrative accountability are important.

- On the other hand, changes in the extent of service availment, ranking and administrative procedures have been strongly supported by the evidence.

- For causal attribution, the situation remains weaker as the 2024–2026 period also presents a new theme in the literature: mission mode saturation. The

Sampoornata scheme is similar to other state and central schemes.

•The sustainability of initiatives taken rapidly also needs to be analyzed separately.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework employed in this research defines Champions of Change as an institution, not as a separate welfare program. The concept can be outlined as: Visibility of information→ identifying the gaps→ making administrative priorities→ convergence of programs→ innovation at a local level→ monitoring and feedback→ competition/learning→ better results in services.

The first stage is measurement: district administrations transmit the indicators via the dashboard. The second stage is diagnosis: data is used to indicate the places where the authorities perform poorly. The third stage is prioritizing: as district administrations operate under certain limitations, the indicators with the biggest gaps become priorities. The fourth stage is convergence: the existing government schemes can be redirected to work on the identified problem instead of functioning separately.

The fifth step consists of local innovation. The districts develop certain strategies according to the local geography. For instance, mobile medical units and boat camps would be a good measure to implement in flood-prone river areas. High-risk pregnancy digital portal is also a measure which attempts to solve the problems related to lack of information and coordination. The sixth step is feedback: it means that the dashboard indicates if the intervention is successful in showing the indicator.

In the end, competition and dissemination might be of help in encouraging others to implement the best practices. The model includes one more potential drawback which is measurement. Specifically, when the indicator goals are set, the focus may be shifted from trying to improve the recorded indicator and hence improve the wellbeing.

Based on the conceptual model for conducting empirical research, it is necessary to classify outcomes into three groups:

(A) the first type which comprises all the provider-related outcomes, such as coverage or screening; (B) the second type that includes all the outcomes with

regard to administration, ranking movement, data quality, and analytics utilization;

(C) and the last type which entails general benefits derived from AIDS/Mother-to-Child Transmission. The first two types are quite observable in CoC-related reporting, while the third type needs other data.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The main aim is to evaluate documented results regarding the framework of the Champions of Change/Aspirational Districts from 2024 to 2026. Additionally, to this, there are five research aims described in the research:

- (1) to describe the monitoring infrastructure,
- (2) to collect measurable outcomes presented in the course of the research,
- (3) to analyse certain district case studies,
- (4) to evaluate the changes in data-based governance, and
- (5) to detect research gaps for future causal assessment.

Research questions are as follows:

1. What observable outcomes were made from 2024 to 2026 in Aspirational Districts and Blocks?
2. What topics, such as health care, education, agriculture, financial inclusion, and infrastructure have shown the greatest impact?
3. In what way the Sampoornata Abhiyan and CoC 2.0 influenced the functioning of the system?
4. What are the downsides of applying rankings and administrative indicators?

Most of the data sources used in this study are based on official public documents like NITI Aayog annual reports for 2024–25 and 2025–26, the NITI Aayog ADP/ABP website, NITI Aayog publications on Champions of Change, PIB releases explaining Sampoornata Abhiyan and district results, and government reviews such as the Jal Jeevan Mission year-end review. This makes the source reliable, but creates a publication bias as these government sources are based on actual achievements and selected success stories only.

Descriptive longitudinal synthesis is the method employed for the analyses. In cases where a before-and-after figure is available, before and after changes

are noted and the absolute percentage point increase is calculated. In the example discussed in the text, rural tap water coverage in Aspirational Districts increased from 7.78% at the time Jal Jeevan Mission was launched to 78.22% in December 26th, 2024, which is an increase of 70.44 percentage points. This is mentioned as a coverage result rather than an ADP cause effect.

Another method is case comparison. Cases are selected based on numerical results reported from official records. Examples of such cases are Thonoknyu block, Lakhipur district/block, Virudhunagar, and water-service coverage in Aspirational Districts. The researcher will then establish a generic understanding of the mechanism used in various cases.

Ethical and methodological rule`` states that there will be no imputation for missing values in the dashboard. The paper clearly mentions this limitation when 2024-2026 district-level panel data is not obtainable from the used sources.

Champions of Change Architecture in 2024–2026

At present, the ADP is operational in 112 districts. According to NITI Aayog, performance is assessed based on 49 indicators of performance, which are divided into five broader themes: Health and Nutrition; Education; Agriculture and Water Resources; Financial Inclusion and Skill Development; Infrastructure. The ADP is designed using the delta-ranking method, which essentially means that the districts are evaluated based on a percentage of growth.

Theme	Role in the programme	Examples of outcome domains
Health & Nutrition	Human capital and service access	ANC, immunization, nutrition, screening, maternal/child indicators
Education	Learning environment and participation	School infrastructure, teacher adequacy, enrolment/retention
Agriculture & Water Resources	Productivity and resilience	Irrigation, soil health, water access, farm practices
Financial Inclusion & Skill	Economic participation	Banking, insurance, pensions, SHGs, skills

Development		
Infrastructure	Basic enabling conditions	Roads, electricity, connectivity, household services

NITI Aayog characterized CoC 2.0 during 2024-2025 as a platform that has been upgraded through the inclusion of various features such as Citizen Reports, Citizen Feedback, Advanced Analytics, Project Management, Geo-Spatial Maps, and AI/ML technologies. The Citizen Reports comprise three primary viewpoints, including performance since inception, delta rankings, and progress on the indicator level across themes. The use of automated mailers assists in detecting any possible inconsistencies, while pre-scheduled reports are sent to the senior managers.

This structure is vital since it transforms static evaluation into a continuous cycle of management activities. A district can determine its position alongside its counterparts, investigate which indicators require action applying measures, and watch whether the indicator changes. In addition, the system's public nature generates pressures related to reputation, and at the same time, learning from other districts establishes a platform for the dissemination of innovations.

The CoC model, according to NITI Aayog, is set to evolve by the fiscal year of 2025-2026 by moving to dynamic quarterly delta rankings and further robust data-quality and analytic functions. This marks a key institutional transition whereby the program shifts from monthly public ranking to a more comprehensive governance model.

2024: Sampoonata Abhiyan as a Strategy

The Sampoonata Abhiyan was one of the major initiatives that was undertaken in the year 2024. The initiative was launched by NITI Aayog for a period of three months from July 4 to September 30, 2024. The aim of the initiative was to promote the attainment of selected key social sector indicators in poor-performing Aspirational Districts and Aspirational Blocks. However, the initiative was expected to provide support to the broader monitoring mechanism of ADP/ABP by concentrating limited amount of administrative attention to a small number of specific priorities.

The most important aspect of the campaign is the fact that it has created a natural intensity phase in the system. The campaign was actually aimed at narrowing down the scope of intervention rather than asking the administrations to improve dozens of indicators at the same time.

2024 campaign element	Description
Duration	4 July – 30 September 2024
Geographic scope	112 Aspirational Districts and 500 Aspirational Blocks at launch
Core approach	Time-bound saturation of selected indicators
Administrative tools	Convergence, awareness activities, camps, local monitoring
Community tools	Gram Sabhas, health camps, nutrition events, awareness activities

The Sampoonnata Abhiyan was one of the major initiatives that was undertaken in the year 2024. The initiative was launched by NITI Aayog for a period of three months from July 4 to September 30, 2024. The aim of the initiative was to promote the attainment of selected key social sector indicators in poor-performing Aspirational Districts and Aspirational Blocks. However, the initiative was expected to provide support to the broader monitoring mechanism of ADP/ABP by concentrating limited amount of administrative attention to a small number of specific priorities.

The most important aspect of the campaign is the fact that it has created a natural intensity phase in the system. The campaign was actually aimed at narrowing down the scope of intervention rather than asking the administrations to improve dozens of indicators at the same time.

2024 Outcomes: Infrastructure, Water and Last-Mile Health

The 2024 data appear most convincing where programmatic schemas furnish quantifiable indicators. A notable instance of this is seen in the quantity of households provided with water directly through a tap in the 112 Aspirational Districts.

According to the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation's review of the year- end operations, on December 26, 2024, 2.15 crore out of the total 2.74 crore in the same district were being provided with water through taps, which corresponds to 78.22%. In contrast, when the Jal Jeevan Mission was initiated, the number of households receiving water through a tap was but 21.38 lakh households or only 7.78%.

It follows then that the change in coverage from 7.78% to 78.22% means an increase of 70.44 percentage points. This means there was approximately a tenfold growth in relation to the initial level of coverage. What is more remarkable is that by the time period of the reference date December 2024, as many as 15 out of the 112 Aspirational Districts have achieved 100% coverage post the connections of households with tap water.

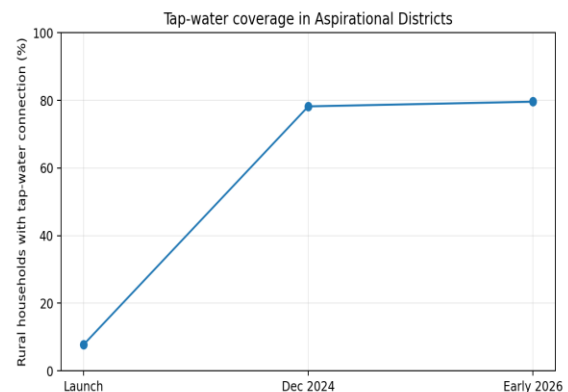


Figure 1. Source values: Government of India, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation year-end review. The figure describes water-service coverage in Aspirational Districts; it should not be interpreted as an isolated causal estimate of ADP.

Health service outreach serves as yet another type of outcome. In Lakhimpur, Assam, mobile medical units and boat camps were deployed over 1,176 sites between April 2023 and December 2024. The outcome indicated that there was 100% screening coverage for diabetes and hypertension among the target group of 25,308 people. The critical point here is not only the percentage but also the way this service model was developed to deliver health care in a riverine setting.

The cases discussed indicate that the most prominent outcomes of 2024 were often achieved due to combining existing programs with innovations implemented at a district level. Champions of Change serves as a monitoring and accountability system that

helps officials track and report on the innovations they have introduced.

2024 Outcomes: Ranking Improvement and Administrative Saturation

Rank movement is one of the most visible results connected with Champions of Change. However, rank is a relative concept: some districts may rise up in rank simply because they improve quicker than others while an absolute indicator can improve independently of significant rank changes.

Thus, in a context of research, rank should be regarded as a signal of administrative performance rather than a direct indicator of welfare.

The Thonoknyu Block case is a very clear illustration of this phenomenon. According to the report of the administration, Thonoknyu Block moved from rank 465 of March 2022 to rank 85 in September 2023 among 500 blocks. It should also be noted that the district managed to reach 100% performance in five out of six targeted indicators.

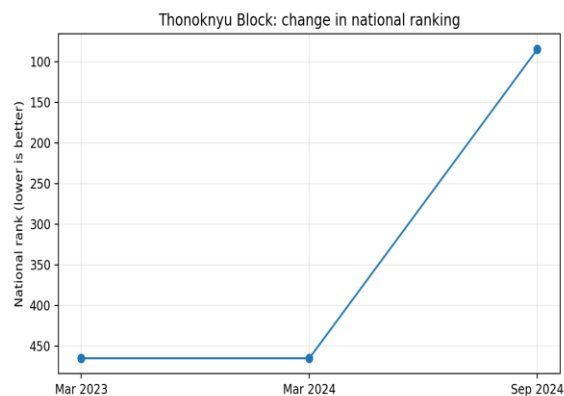


Figure 2. Thonoknyu ranking values are reported by PIB. March 2024 was described as 465th among aspirational blocks; September 2024 as 85th.

Another result of governance is the increasing utilization of data for local issue resolution. The NITI Aayog for States Use Case Challenge, which ran from December 2024 to February 2025, received 250 plus entries from District Collectors/Magistrates across six categories. Districts were appreciated for their successful cases of utilization. This indicates a change from “ranking for efficacy” to “documenting and copying solutions.”

Use of ranking therapy and use-case data may be even more beneficial than either strategy by itself. Ranking shows locality of progress while use cases

help comprehend the way of achieving improvement. Lastly, this will give an opportunity to create an intervention database and also verify whether particular administrative practices result in better improvement of indicators.

- Outcome 1: measurable ranking process in chosen blocks;
- Outcome 2: saturation of targeted indicators in chosen areas;
- Outcome 3: implementation of data-based problem resolution;
- Outcome 4: higher visibility of the district performance via public dashboards.

2025: From Dashboard Monitoring to Data-Driven Governance

In 2025, the program began to focus more and more on data quality, advanced analytics, and replication. In the annual report released by NITI Aayog, CoC 2.0 is defined as a governance platform providing support to evidence-based decision-making as opposed to a mere dashboard. The data can be utilized through citizen reports, analytics, geo-spatial maps, project management, as well as AI/ML instruments. According to the annual report, district governments are able to compare their performance with the performance of other districts in the state and the aspirational districts showing the best results. Furthermore, they can compare the dashboard data with various additional data sources and upload the block or gram panchayat data for analysis.

The report for the year 2025-26 elaborates on quarterly delta rankings and automated data reporting. Reports generated by the system are sent to District Collectors/Magistrates, Prabhari Officers at district and state levels, and Chief Secretaries. Automated notifications are used to indicate the discrepancies in the data. These aspects help lessen the administrative burden of monitoring and increase the frequency of messages reaching the decision-makers.

Another important outcome in 2025, was the proliferation of Aspirational Blocks approach. The number of blocks expanded from the original 500 blocks to now 513. The programme covers various themes such as health and nutrition, education, agricultural and allied services, basic infrastructure, and social development. The block-level model matters because many service delivery barriers are

much smaller than a district and require intervention at the gram panchayat level or even the level of the village.

Therefore, the policy implications of the 2025 report is a matter of institutions rather than a single headline indicator. The programme is rapidly taking the form of a district level management information system linked to competition, experimentation, and administrative learning.

2026: Sampoonata Abhiyan 2.0 and the Next Phase

On 28 January 2026, the project Sampoonata Abhiyan 2.0 was initiated by NITI Aayog. The duration of the project spans from 28 January to 14 April 2026 (3 months). It has further improved upon the original well-established concept of the 2024 Sampoonata Abhiyan to implement saturation in 5 important KPIs in aspirational districts and 6 important KPIs in aspirational blocks.

The 2026 version also includes the same 112 aspirational districts, but extended the implementation to another 513 aspirational blocks. This shows that there is continuity in policy making. Instead of treating the 2024 campaign as a single event itself, NITI Aayog is using it as a basis for the next campaign.

Dimension	2024 Sampoonata	2026 Sampoonata 2.0
Time period	4 Jul–30 Sep 2024	28 Jan–14 Apr 2026
Aspirational districts	112	112
Aspirational blocks	500 at launch	513
Strategic emphasis	Selected indicator saturation	Sustained saturation of selected KPIs
Governance logic	Mission-mode campaign	Continuation and institutionalization

According to the annual report for the year 2025-26, there was an increase in the scope of the human capital and knowledge agenda. A pilot project on Early Childhood Care and Education was launched to the Anganwadis in 10 Aspirational Districts, signalling that development monitoring should be

focused on early-life results rather than simple service and infrastructure counting.

Therefore, the key to understanding the 2026 period is in the transition from rapid improvements to stable saturation. The essential point of research is whether the achievements of campaigns remain in place after the end of the campaign. If a district gets to 100% on some KPI during mission mode, but then some decline is experienced due to the lack of proper staff, funding or data system, the result of the intervention can be considered a temporary administrative surge rather than true development.

Thus, one of the main indicators of research in 2026 will not be simply the number of districts that became saturated, but rather the stability of the outcomes achieved during the subsequent quarters.

V. THEME-WISE OUTCOME ANALYSIS

Health and Nutrition. Health outcomes are one of the most important outcomes of the program. The 2024–2026 evidence suggests that there is an increasing focus on screening, antenatal care, maternal risk tracking, immunization, nutrition, and outreach services. As an example of overcoming geographical barriers through administrative adaptation, we can mention the example of Lakhimpur's 100% diabetes and hypertension screenings. For example, in Virudhunagar, zero maternal deaths have occurred during the period between April 2023 and March 2024, which shows the importance of using digital tracking for high-risk pregnancies. Despite the importance of these examples, they apply only to specific districts and cannot be generalized to all 112 districts without panel data evidence.

Education is an important area of the ADP implementation, as it puts much emphasis on education and human capital. According to the reports of the government, there have been improvements in school infrastructure and teacher adequacy in some districts. The main benefit of the CoC is that it provides the information about the educational gaps in the schools in the district. However, future studies should focus on the educational results, attendance, and retention, rather than infrastructure only.

Agricultural Production with Water Sustainability. This theme brings together the capacity for production and the security of resources. The

evidence from the water sector is particularly compelling: rural access to piped water in Aspirational Districts grew from 7.78% when Jal Jeevan Mission was launched to 78.22% by December 2024 and 79.60% in a subsequent report from the government. This shows a considerable expansion of the access to services for households. In the agriculture sector, more research is needed in the areas of yield, agricultural income, reliability and resilience of irrigation, instead of the focus on inputs only.

Financial Services Inclusion and Skill Formation. This initiative sees access to finance as a necessary condition for economic inclusion. Indicators related to banking, insurance, pensions, self-help groups and professional education can be affected by numerous national programs. The key question of the research is whether access leads to continued use of financial services and increase in income.

Theme	2024–26 evidence strength	Main research gap
Health & Nutrition	High for selected cases	Population-wide causal attribution
Education	Moderate	Learning and long-term retention
Agriculture & Water	High for water coverage; mixed for agriculture	Income/productivity effects
Financial Inclusion & Skills	Moderate	Usage, income and employment
Infrastructure	Moderate–high	Welfare effects and sustainability

VI. SELECTED CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1 — Thonoknyu Block, Nagaland has a notable upward trend, from 465th position in March 2023 to 85th in September 2024. The block has also achieved 100% saturation in five out of six Sampoornata indicators. This case shows that specific targeting, effective administration and active people's involvement lead to rapid change. However, ranking

is a relative thing, and the report does not give a good counterfactual.

Case Study 2 — Lakhimpur, Assam shows that riverine geography is a big constraint in healthcare delivery. From April 2023 to December 2024, Mobile Medical Units and boat camps were used at 1,176 places. The target population of 25,308 was screened for diabetes and hypertension in the whole area. This case is interesting because it illustrates an adaptive public-service delivery; the intervention changed the service delivery system as opposed to conventional methods.

Case Study 3 - Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu. The district started the Virucare digital portal for the monitoring of high-risk pregnancies. The objective of the portal is to cross-link monitoring of pregnancies with nutrition support for anemic mothers. As the result, there were no cases of maternal mortality from April 2023 to March 2024. The example demonstrates that administrative information systems can help to overcome coordination problems. However, it should be noted that maternal deaths are relatively rare outcomes, and more data and comparisons with other regions are needed.

Case Study 4 - Water Coverage in Aspirational District. This example with a group of 112 districts represents a wider experience regarding service access. Water supply to rural areas increased from initial 7.78% before Jal Jeevan Mission was rolled out to 78.22% in December 2024. The level of improvement suggests that national infrastructure programmes can help garner large improvements in service access. However, as the Jal Jeevan Mission is a national programme, it is not completely attributed to the work of Champions of Change.

Case Study 5 - NITI for States Use Case Challenge. From December 2024 to February 2025, more than 250 case studies from different districts were archived and 18 of them were awarded. Its significance lies in the creation of institutional memory as the program started to develop its collection of workable administrative solutions. With the help of it, the expenditures on the research for the development of policies can be minimized, as districts might benefit from replicating the experience in different local contexts.

VII. DATA QUALITY, MEASUREMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The credibility of the dashboard governance model is conditional upon the credibility of its data. The platform of Champions of Change utilizes district-level administrative data from local government offices in a significant way and, thus, may suffer from various kinds of errors: late updates, changes in definitions used by the governing bodies, missing data, differences in quality in terms of administrative capacities and the motives to raise performance level reported.

While CoC 2.0 solves partly this issue by employing mailers, which give alerts about inconsistencies in the information involved by means of pre-set logic, it also makes it possible to check the information against other databases like census or NFHS. This is significant since it leads to a higher level of data triangulation.

The second issue is concerned with indicator change. When definitions or measurement methods change, one may observe apparent progress in measuring performance without any real improvements. Therefore, proper longitudinal research should create metadata for every KPI used, including its definition, numerator and denominator, and the agency it was provided by.

An additional third issue is the distinction between coverage and quality. In this respect, the district's claims about a service's availability do not guarantee anything regarding its reliability, timeliness and efficiency. For example, it is possible to extend a tap water connection to a household but the degree of its welfare would depend on water quality and usage continuity. Just like, for instance, having electricity connected does not mean that student learning experience has improved.

The fourth issue refers directly to the ranking mechanism. Delta ranking facilitates encouragement of the improvements while also presenting the danger of the strategic behavior when focusing on ranks rather than long-term benefits. Thus, the best use of the ranks is interpreting them as a source of information for further evaluation rather than end result.

- Maintain a versioned data dictionary for every KPI.
- Publish district-month observations where privacy and administrative rules permit.

- Triangulate administrative data with independent surveys.
- Track both absolute levels and incremental changes.
- Separate campaign-period outcomes from post-campaign persistence.
- Use citizen feedback to validate service-quality dimensions.

VIII. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: WHAT THE EVIDENCE CAN AND CANNOT ESTABLISH

The evidence shows that the Champions of Change has improved performance management at the district level. The project has made performance information visible, established a mechanism for comparison over time, and sparked local innovations.

However, the evidence does not support the claim that “ADP is the reason for all improvements.” The main reason for this is that many other policies overlap with ADP. Aspirational Districts receive help from national and state programs in the areas of health, education, water, road construction, financial inclusion, agriculture, and social protection.

The limitation of selection bias comes next. Publications promote performance by emphasizing successful areas. Intelligence, whether it ascertains the progress made, has to look at stagnant and downward-moving areas as subdivisions, instead of simply concentrating on the advanced areas. For that reason, it is crucial to assess accomplishments among all districts, providing an overview of changes that occurred in the entire collection of 112 districts.

The limitation of relative ranking follows next. The improvement in ranking could be due to lower indexes of other districts. Therefore, it is crucial to provide concrete figures along with the rank.

The last limitation is the time perspective. Certain outcomes of development may take years to achieve. It might be possible to reach results quickly with some minor advancements in entering people in the system of service provision, but it is difficult to achieve results in such essential fields as mortality reduction or education stage that has to be assessed many years after implementing changes.

The fifth limitation relates to external validity. An administrative solution that works in a remote tribal district may not be applicable in a district which is urbanizing. Thus, replication has to focus on

mechanisms rather than on direct copying of the intervention.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the programme has much research value. It generates a potentially rich longitudinal dataset and creates an unusually transparent connection between administrative action and objective measures. The next stage of academic work should move from descriptions with success stories to formal causal analysis.

IX. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Finding 1: The Champions of Change initiative has resulted in significant administrative attention to measurable gaps in terms of the outcomes achieved. The platform transforms the concept of district development into a regular management process. The transition from the conventional monthly delta ranking to the Champions of Change 2.0 version, through quarterly reporting, automated data-quality alerts, and improved analytics, explains the process.

Finding 2: Timed saturation can accelerate progress on certain indicators being targeted. This can be illustrated by the 2024 Sampoonnata Abhiyan and the 2026 Sampoonnata Abhiyan 2.0, where NITI Aayog increasingly uses mission-mode campaigns to mobilize administrative efforts. The example of the ranking movement in Thonoknyu and the implementation of five out of six KPIs illustrate the need for time-bound saturation.

Finding 3: Local adaptation is one of the major mechanisms used in the process. The example of the boat-based health delivery system in Lakhipur and the digital pregnancy monitoring system in Virudhunagar are concrete illustrations of how district administrations are able to interpret and adapt the common national goals into localized delivery systems.

Finding 4: Infrastructure and service coverage has seen a significant increase, but attribution has difficult. The increase in tap water coverage in Aspirational Districts is significant and of policy importance, but the intervention is part of Jal Jeevan Mission. Therefore, Champions of Change need to be considered as an enabler of governance rather than the only infrastructure outcome creator.

Finding 5: The programme is now moving towards becoming a learning system. The features of the NITI for States Use Case Challenge and CoC 2.0 show that there is an intention of finding out how problems are solved in districts rather than who is on top. This is a more sustainable type of competition because it can help in transferring knowledge.

Finding 6: The remaining question is durability. Constant saturation campaigns help if they bridge long-lasting gaps, but the value of such campaigns in the long run depends on monitoring, staff, finances, data quality, and institutionalization after saturation campaigns are over.

In general, the evidence confirms the concept of administrative acceleration: if goals can be measured, processes will become more apparent, key officials get constant feedback, and some of the successful practices can be identified and disseminated, the local teams will be quicker in their reactions. The next empirical issue is whether this acceleration results in sustainable improvements in welfare.

X. CONCLUSION

The Champions of Change framework is significant in its effort to develop a system of decentralized governance based on data analytics in India. It provides an institutionalized process rather than just a ranking of agencies where districts are encouraged to reveal problems, bring together various programs, implement small-scale projects, evaluate their progress, and learn from the experiences of each other. The years 2024–2026 saw Sampoonnata Abhiyan and CoC 2.0 make substantial contributions to this process.

The Champions of Change framework is significant in its effort to develop a system of decentralized governance based on data analytics in India. It provides an institutionalized process rather than just a ranking of agencies where districts are encouraged to reveal problems, bring together various programs, implement small-scale projects, evaluate their progress, and learn from the experiences of each other. The years 2024–2026 saw Sampoonnata Abhiyan and CoC 2.0 make substantial contributions to this process.

The time span of 2025 and 2026 can be seen as the period of institutional maturity. CoC 2.0 extension

meant the introduction of new data quality checks and social reporting, and new project management and geo-spatial tools. Sampoonata Abhiyan 2.0 is implementing the saturation approach in 112 districts and 513 blocks since the beginning of 2026. The application of the programme is shifting from dashboards to performance management approaches. The only caveat of the review of the data is attribution. The majority of improvements showed in the data are the result of multiple public initiatives and local actions. Therefore, the Champions of Change should be treated more as a mechanism of governance that can speed up and coordinate development activities rather than a specific programme responsible for certain changes.

The program provides an exceptional opportunity for researchers to investigate interactions among data, competition, and administration. The next logical step is to assemble the needed longitudinal set, enrich it with the independent information about welfare and use a causal research design to reach credible conclusions. This will enable researchers to answer the question whether significant administrative development achieved in 2024-2026 results in the success of sustainable human development and economic development.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the main achievement of Champions of Change in the period of 2024-2026 was the establishment of a measurable, locally-based, and gradually data-consistent strategy of district development, though its real effectiveness should be evaluated in terms of the future sustainability of the improvements made once the rankings and competitions come to an end.

REFERENCES

- [1] NITI Aayog. Aspirational Districts Programme / Aspirational Blocks Programme. Government of India. Programme overview, themes, 49 KPIs and Champions of Change dashboard information.
- [2] NITI Aayog. Annual Report 2024–25. Government of India. Sections on Champions of Change, CoC 2.0 and Sampoonata Abhiyan.
- [3] NITI Aayog. Annual Report 2025–26. Government of India. Sections on Champions of Change, quarterly delta rankings, data quality, analytics and Sampoonata Abhiyan 2.0.
- [4] NITI Aayog. Deep Dive – Insights from Champions of Change: The Aspirational Districts Dashboard. Government of India. Foundational description of 49 indicators/81 data points and the dashboard framework.
- [5] NITI Aayog, DMEO. Champions of Change (Aspirational Districts Programme). Description of 49 KPIs, 81 data points and dynamic delta ranking.
- [6] Press Information Bureau. ‘Sampoonata Abhiyan’ launched by NITI Aayog. 4 July 2024. Government of India.
- [7] Press Information Bureau. ‘Transformation of Thonoknyu Block is an inspiration for others.’ Government of India. 2025.
- [8] Press Information Bureau. ‘The Rise of India’s Aspirational Districts.’ 19 May 2025. Government of India.
- [9] Press Information Bureau. NITI for States Use Case Challenge reporting. 2025. More than 250 submissions and 18 winning districts.
- [10] Press Information Bureau / Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation. Year End Review 2024. Data on tap-water coverage in Aspirational Districts.
- [11] Press Information Bureau. ‘Launch of Sampoonata Abhiyan 2.0 by NITI Aayog.’ 28 January 2026.
- [12] National Health Mission, Government of India. Aspirational District & Blocks Program. Theme weights and indicator architecture.
- [13] NITI Aayog. Data & Aspirational Districts Model. Discussion of data-driven governance, 3C approach and public monitoring.
- [14] Government of India. Jal Jeevan Mission data and year-end review material used for the Aspirational District water-coverage analysis.