India will set new data standards in G20 stint

--Amitabh Kant

In the dense forests of Maharashtra, a novel data collection tool is changing the lives of children with malnutrition. Gadchiroli is an aspirational district with some of the highest rates of malnutrition in the country. However, in the last few years the ICDS officials in the districts have been able to contain and bring down rates of malnutrition with the help of the Poshan Tracker application. Developed by the National eGovernance Division, the Poshan Tracker app helps record real time data about the height, weight and vital stats of newborns, children up to the age of 6 and adolescent girls and is available in 22 different languages across India. This has phenomenally improved the delivery of nutritional interventions to malnourished children and pregnant as well as lactating mothers. In Gadchiroli, the data collected through the Poshan Tracker app helped the district administration to design and curate a hyperlocal special diet to tackle rampant malnutrition and this intervention proved to be very successful.

Five years ago, The Economist declared that data and not oil, is the world's most valuable resource. A slew of analyses, interpretations and projections followed. This month the former deputy prime minister of the United Kingdom, Sir Nicholas Clegg made headlines with his statement that data isn't finite and limited like oil, rather it is like air, which can't be contained. Many industrialists now hail data as the raw material for setting up any business. The indisputable dictum of the 21st century stands - data is too critical to be ignored. Data forms the bedrock on which today's knowledge pyramid rises towards awareness, understanding and finally wisdom which is essential for nuanced and effective policy making. For this wisdom to be democratically accessible, affordable, and available for nation states across the world, the G20 presidency of India will be pivotal.

The World Development Report 2021 asserts that there is a need for forging a new social contract for data which accelerates data use and reuse to realize greater value, creates equitable access to benefits, integrates national data systems and finally fosters trust such that people are protected from the harms of data misuse. We must construct new rules for this data age and the road ahead signals some critical but surmountable challenges. For instance, less than 20 percent of low- and middle-income countries have modern data infrastructure such as colocation data centers and direct access to cloud computing facilities. In India, public data remains inaccessible because many government officers don't want to put data out in the public domain. Data is also siloed across sectors. The quality of data available to researchers, academicians and policy makers is very critical. Real time data is key to the

success of policy makers. Ultimately, we are surrounded by data but starved for insights.

As we step into India's techade, data must be accessible by all citizens. We need to adopt a multi sectoral approach to collecting, integrating and interpreting data. This will strengthen service delivery by governments at all levels. Data should be presented in a simplified and decluttered manner so that the benefits can be maximized. Just like the example of Gadchiroli, real time data collection has helped transform all 112 aspirational districts in three and a half years which would otherwise have taken six decades in the absence of monitoring development indicators. The power of data was leveraged to bring in good governance in these districts across education, health, nutrition, agriculture, financial inclusion and basic infrastructure. Achieving developmental outcomes through competitive federalism is greatly aided by the availability of data in the public domain, as highlighted by the monthly system of rankings in the Aspirational Districts Program.

When it comes to data governance, India offers a range of best practices which can be emulated and advanced upon by nations across the world. For any government, a clear and nuanced visibility of the data when it comes to outlays (expenditure undertaken by government), outputs (what's bought with this expenditure), and outcomes (goals that these outputs achieved) is substantially important. In this context, India's NITI Aayog has prepared the Data Governance Quality Index (DGQI). This index enables government agencies to undertake a detailed self-assessment of their data preparedness levels. It helps ministries advance towards an optimal data driven outcome tracking and data governance architecture. Clarity on the outlays-output-outcome triad had been aiding ministries to bolster existing schemes and introduce specific policy interventions which have the potential to address any gaps in the way of realizing developmental goals. There is a huge amount of data churned out from multiple sources and every organization should be able to assess whether it is making the most of this available data or not.

Even as terabytes of data flows through the governments data pipeline involving collection, cleaning, processing, analysis, modelling and visualization, the pipeline is constrained with structural plaque. This plaque comes from databases being inaccessible and siloed, and data platforms being cluttered with complexity without any flexibility to innovate. To address these issues, NITI Aayog has also built a transformational open data platform called the National Data Analytics Platform (NDAP). This platform provides a framework via which datasets are converted from PDFs into machine-readable formats, standardised into a common schema, given the optionality to merge and

interoperate across datasets which is a very efficient tool for users. NDAP makes government datasets accessible, interoperable and interactive.

It is my firm belief that developing nations need to tap into the power of data for development in order to leapfrog into an era of progress. Today, the comprehensive mining and evaluation of data is driving some of India's leading policymaking success stories – from POSHAN Abhiyaan to Aspirational Districts Programme and is poised to deliver much more. Drawing upon its own collective experience and legacy and best practices of different countries, India's G20 Presidency is an opportune time to set a new gold standard for data. A gold standard which emphasizes on nations to invest in self-evaluation of their data governance architecture, calls for modernization of national data systems to incorporate citizen voice and preferences regularly, advances principles of transparency for data governance and finally brings to the forefront the need for strategic leadership on data for sustainable development.

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