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Social schemes are in need of a reboot

In 2013-14, India has budgeted around ₹ 2,00,000 crore for its flagship programmes - an amount intended to improve basic services such as education, health, sanitation, maternal health, electricity, housing and employment, among others.

These programmes range from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme with an outlay of ₹ 33,000 crore to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Rs 27,258 crore).

Food and nutrition schemes for children like the ICDS and the mid-day meal scheme have a combined allocation of over ₹ 30,000 crore. But the results have been mixed and quite varied across states and districts.

Various evaluations and assessments that have been done to improve the effectiveness of these programmes show that some states, like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Karnataka and perform well on almost all the programmes whereas some states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam perform much worse.

With this pattern of variability among states' performance, the question is: why should we expect consistent performance on nationally-designed programmes with standard implementation templates across states that are diverse in terms of administrative and institutional capacity, governance, geography and culture?

This is especially true in social sectors. Delivering quality education requires the coming together of a number of factors - infrastructure, qualified teachers, appropriate curriculum, mid-day meals, etc.

A lot of coordinated inputs, depoliticised decision making and monitoring are needed to ensure quality education. Similarly, in the healthcare sector, trained nurses, medicines and equipment, awareness, accessibility, basic hygiene, access to water, and electricity are vital for reasonably good health outcomes.

On the other hand, building rural roads and electrification have somewhat lower transactions and can be contracted out through a bidding process, if needed. It is also easier to measure and monitor output.

The same cannot be done for education and health. We need to think more smartly about how we will deliver education, health, or mid-day meals in a way quite different from how we deliver roads, electricity and water.

The mid-day meal scheme is an interesting mixture of very high transactions and a lack of specificity. It requires the meal to be cooked fresh on site, at a cheap price but not by a commercial company.

It also requires considerable local capacity to ensure that it can be delivered consistently and safely across thousands of schools. Where civil society is strong and where parents associations are involved, the scheme does well.

But in remote areas and places where these conditions do not exist, corruption takes place.

One solution is to do away with national schemes and transfer the funds to the states or to the sarpanch and leave it to them to provide these services. But, by itself, this will not solve the issue of variability of performance.

The same issues which bedevil national schemes - weak institutional capability, local political capture, lack of accountability - will devolve to the local level.

We need to think more creatively while designing national programmes which would have a more imaginative combination of standardisation, flexibility and incentives.

The current top-down model of national schemes being rolled out with pre-specified and rigid requirements and procedures need a rethink if India is to achieve its own national goals and the internationally accepted Millennium Development Goals.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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