

States of health: On NITI Aayog's first Health Index

The NITI Aayog Health Index should trigger a wider public debate

Unsurprisingly, States with a record of investment in literacy, nutrition and primary health care have achieved high scores in NITI Aayog's first Health Index. Kerala, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu are the best-performing large States, while Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh bring up the rear. Health-care delivery is the responsibility of States; the Centre provides financial and policy support. Being able to meet the Sustainable Development Goals over the coming decade depends crucially on the States' performance. Yet, health care is not a mainstream political issue in India, and hardly influences electoral results. The Index, with all its limitations given uneven data availability, hopes to make a difference here by encouraging a competitive approach for potentially better outcomes. For instance, with political will, it should be possible for Odisha to bring down its neonatal mortality rate, estimated to be the highest at 35 per thousand live births – worse than Uttar Pradesh. A dozen States with shameful under-five mortality rates of over 35 per 1,000 live births may feel the need for remedial programmes. What the Index shows for the better-performing States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu is that their continuous improvements have, overall, left little room to notch up high incremental scores, but intra-State inequalities need to be addressed. Coming soon after the announcement of a National Health Protection Scheme in the Union Budget, the Index uses metrics such as institutional deliveries, systematic reporting of tuberculosis, access to drugs for people with HIV/AIDS, immunisation levels and out-of-pocket expenditure. The twin imperatives are to improve access to facilities and treatments on these and other parameters, and raise the quality of data, including from the private sector, to enable rigorous assessments. At the same time, as NITI Aayog points out, data on other key aspects such as non-communicable diseases, mental

health, governance systems and financial risk protection lack the integrity to form part of a good composite index. Both the Centre and the States have the responsibility to scale up their investment on health as a percentage of their budgets, to be more ambitious in interventions. While the NHPS may be able to address some of the financial risk associated with ill-health, it will take systematic improvements to preventive and primary care to achieve higher scores in the Index. As the experience from countries in the West and now even other developing economies shows, socialisation of medicine with a reliance on taxation to fund basic programmes is the bedrock of a good health system. If the NITI Aayog Health Index leads to a mainstreaming of health on these lines, that would be a positive outcome.

Source: xaam.in