



Unlocking the Power of Administrative Data: Strengthening Decision-Making and Programme Delivery in Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana (SAY)

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As the Government of India and several state governments increasingly invest in large-scale economic inclusion programmes, the ability to effectively generate, analyse, and use data has become central to programme effectiveness. Across participating states in Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana (SAY), vast amounts of administrative data are generated through participant identification and enrollment, household profiling, livelihood planning, coaching and mentoring interactions, programme monitoring, financial transactions, and convergence with government schemes.

This wealth of information provides a unique opportunity to strengthen programme delivery and support data-based decision-making. But, how is this robust, rich data being used to inform programme decisions?

Historically, administrative data systems have been designed primarily to meet reporting requirements, monitor implementation progress, and ensure compliance with programme guidelines. While these functions are important, they represent only a small portion of the potential value that

administrative data can offer. When systematically collected, analysed, interpreted, and integrated into decision-making processes, administrative data can become a powerful tool for improving targeting, strengthening accountability, identifying implementation bottlenecks, enhancing service delivery, and enabling adaptive programme management.

As SAY enters a period of expansion and institutionalisation within NRLM 2.0, strengthening the use of administrative data is no longer a technical aspiration, it is now a strategic necessity. The success of SAY will ultimately depend not only on the number of households reached, but also on the programme's ability to use data to monitor quality, support timely course correction, improve implementation effectiveness, and ensure that scale is accompanied by sustained impact.

Why does administrative data matter for SAY?

Administrative data occupies a unique position within the SAY programme ecosystem. Unlike periodic surveys, evaluations, or research studies, administrative data is generated continuously throughout programme implementation. It provides real-time information on participants, programme service delivery, and performance.

Its value lies in its ability to inform decisions at every level of the system. On the frontlines, the coaches can use this data to identify participants who require additional support, track progress against livelihood plans, and monitor participant engagement. At the district and state levels, programme managers can identify implementation bottlenecks, monitor delivery quality, and prioritize areas requiring corrective action. At the national level, policymakers can use administrative data to assess programme performance, understand implementation trends, and make strategic decisions regarding programme expansion and resource allocation. Administrative data serves as the critical link between frontline implementation and strategic decision-making. This link becomes more critical as SAY scales in size.

As programmes expand to serve hundreds of thousands of households, maintaining quality becomes increasingly difficult. In such contexts, administrative data becomes one of the few mechanisms capable of providing continuous visibility into what is actually happening on the

ground. Rather than asking only how many households have been reached, administrative data can help answer more meaningful questions. Are coaching visits occurring as planned? Are livelihood plans being updated? Are participants actively engaging with programme activities? Are convergence pathways functioning effectively? These questions shift the focus from outputs to programme quality and participant outcomes. Administrative data is central to achieving this objective. If used effectively, it can become the foundation for adaptive management, continuous learning, and data-based decision-making at scale.

A governance challenge, not a technology challenge:

One of the greatest misconceptions in development programmes is that improving the use of administrative data is primarily a technology challenge. The common response is to invest in new dashboards, digital platforms, mobile applications. While these tools are important, they do not address the fundamental issue. Most programmes, including SAY, already generate substantial volumes of administrative data through programme activities. The challenge is not the absence of data. The challenge is that data is often collected, reported, and archived without being systematically used to inform decisions.

Responsibilities for data collection are generally well established, but responsibilities for analysis, interpretation, decision-making, and follow-up action are often unclear. As a result, administrative data frequently becomes trapped within reporting systems rather than functioning as a tool for programme management. Critical questions remain unanswered: Who owns the data? Who is responsible for analysing it? Who has the authority to act on emerging findings? And who is accountable when available data is not used to improve programme performance? Without clear ownership, accountability, and decision-making responsibilities, even the most sophisticated data systems will have limited impact. The challenge is not collecting data; it is ensuring that data influences action.

As the Sarathi¹ application is in place, the programme must move beyond a culture of compliance and reporting towards a culture of learning. This requires clear data governance structures, defined roles and responsibilities, stronger analytical capacity across all levels of implementation.

Behavioural and cultural barriers to data use:

Even where strong technical systems exist, behavioural and cultural barriers often prevent effective data utilization. Oftentimes, programme teams collect information because they are required to do so, not necessarily because they see value in using it for decision-making. This creates a culture in which reporting becomes the end goal rather than a means of improving programme performance. Administrative data is submitted upwards through the system but rarely flows back down to support local decision-making. Unless data informs decisions, identifies implementation challenges, supports resource allocation, and enables corrective action, it remains an administrative exercise rather than a management tool.

Creating a culture of data use requires more than improving data systems; it requires leadership commitment and institutional change. Programme teams are unlikely to engage meaningfully with data unless they see a clear connection between data use and improved programme performance. Data must therefore move beyond reporting requirements and become an integral part of how programmes are managed, reviewed, and improved. Leadership plays a pivotal role in driving this shift. When leaders consistently use data to ask questions, identify bottlenecks, review performance, and guide decisions, they signal that data is not merely a compliance requirement but a strategic asset for learning and improvement. Data discussions should be embedded within routine management processes.

Incentives and accountability: Encouraging data use without distorting behaviour

Strengthening the use of administrative data also requires the right incentives and accountability mechanisms. Yet this remains one of the most complex and overlooked challenges in building a data-driven programme. The objective is not simply to encourage data use, but to ensure that incentives promote learning, adaptation, and better decision-making rather than compliance or target-chasing. Incentives matter because meaningful data use requires time, effort, and capacity. In the absence of clear expectations and accountability, programme staff often prioritize immediate operational responsibilities over data analysis and reflection. As a result, administrative data is routinely collected and reported but seldom used to improve programme performance.

Evidence from public service delivery, performance management systems, and microfinance programmes demonstrates that poorly designed incentives can create unintended consequences. When rewards become closely tied to numerical indicators, attention often shifts from improving outcomes to achieving targets. The result can be an excessive focus on what is measurable rather than what is meaningful.

The goal should not be to incentivize data reporting, but to incentivize data-informed action. Accountability systems should encourage programme teams to use data to identify problems, test solutions, make course corrections, and improve implementation quality. Success should be measured not by the volume of data submitted or the achievement of narrow performance targets, but by the extent to which evidence is used to strengthen programme delivery and improve participant outcomes. Ultimately, the most effective accountability systems are those that foster a culture of learning rather than compliance.

¹ Sarathi is a mobile and web-based tech solution designed to implement and monitor Economic Inclusion Programs based on the Graduation Approach. It serves as a task management app for the community cadre, enabling a large, non-expert field workforce to systematically collect relevant data, provide handholding support to households.

5 policy priorities for the next five years:

As SAY transitions from pilot implementation to large-scale institutionalization under NRLM 2.0, the role of administrative data must evolve from a reporting function to a strategic management tool. Realizing this shift will require a focused policy agenda centred on five priorities.

- 1. Strengthen data governance:** Clear ownership, roles, and accountability for data use must be established across all levels of implementation. Data should not only have custodians responsible for collection and reporting, but also designated actors responsible for analysis, decision-making, and follow-up action.
- 2. Reposition administrative data as a tool for learning and programme improvement:** Data review, reflection, and evidence-based problem-solving should be embedded within routine programme management processes rather than being undertaken solely to meet reporting and compliance requirements. Administrative data should be used as a strategic decision-making tool.
- 3. Invest in analytical capacity across the system:** The value of administrative data depends on the ability of programme teams to interpret trends, identify implementation bottlenecks, generate insights, and translate evidence into action. Strengthening these capabilities at block, district, state, and national levels is essential for effective programme management.
- 4. Redesign data systems around decisions, not indicators:** Dashboards and management information systems should move beyond displaying performance metrics and focus on generating actionable insights. The central question should not be what the data shows, but what decisions and actions the data should trigger.
- 5. Strengthen accountability for data use:** Accountability mechanisms should encourage evidence-informed decision-making, continuous learning, and adaptive management. Rather than rewarding the achievement of numerical targets alone, systems should incentivize the effective use of data to identify challenges, implement course corrections, and improve programme quality.

