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Policy Brief

1

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Bridging the Authority-Responsibility Gap: Strengthening the District Collector for Effective Public Service Delivery in India

Core Policy Message

The widening gap between the District Collector's growing responsibilities and shrinking authority is undermining grassroots public service delivery in India; closing this gap through restored administrative authority and stronger systems to carry out responsibilities is essential to effective district governance.

About the Policy Brief Series

The Policy Brief Series is a flagship publication of the Bharti Institute of Public Policy (BIPP), Indian School of Business, that translates rigorous research into concise, evidence-informed, and actionable policy insights for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and development partners. By synthesising research into accessible policy briefs, the series aims to bridge the gap between evidence and policymaking and support informed public decision-making.

This policy brief is part of the Human Development Policy Brief Series, a thematic collection developed under the PDRC Supplementary Grant. This series is based on the six Human Development volumes published under the Bharti Institute of Public Policy–Routledge book series, *Innovations, Practice and the Future of Public Policy in India*.

Each policy brief translates the evidence, implementation lessons, and policy recommendations from a published book chapter into a concise, practitioner-oriented resource for policymakers and development practitioners. Readers are encouraged to consult the original chapter for a comprehensive discussion of the evidence, methodology, and analysis.

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Original Chapter: The District Collector: The ‘Superman’ of Indian Administration: Institutional Strategies for Effective Public Service Delivery.

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Executive Summary

Policy Problem

The District Collector (DC) is the single point of accountability for almost all services in the district, yet the DC's authority has been declining while responsibilities have continued to grow. This widening gap is eroding the quality of grassroots public service delivery for India's 1.4 billion-plus citizens, particularly the poor and rural population, on whom these service delivery problems fall hardest (Jain & Jain, 2025).

Key Findings

The brief's diagnosis identifies five interlocking gaps behind this erosion in service delivery: the DC lacks power to transfer, post, or appraise many departmental officers, even while remaining accountable for their performance; political interference in routine administration is rising; inter-departmental coordination remains weak; low motivation persists among street-level officials under a seniority-based, outputs-oriented system, with little reward for performance; and negative public perception of bureaucracy undermines citizens' trust and willingness to engage with district administration. Together, these gaps show that the DC's institutional design has not kept pace with the scale of responsibilities assigned to the post.

Recommendations

The brief recommends rebalancing the DC's authority with responsibility, expanding digital and e-governance platforms and outsourcing routine tasks, and strengthening DC leadership, motivation-management, and outcome-oriented performance systems. Implemented together, these measures can restore the DC's capacity to function as an effective, accountable chief executive of the district.

Background and Context

The office of the District Collector (DC)/Deputy Commissioner/District Magistrate was created by the British in 1772 to collect land revenue and maintain law and order. Every level of administration from the sub-division, tehsil/block, down to the panchayat and village falls within the DC's jurisdiction, and each of India's districts has a DC, serving an average tenure of one to two years.

The DC simultaneously performs revenue, development, law-and-order, election, and decennial census functions (as Principal Census Officer), and acts as Chief Executive Officer of the District Rural Development Agency. They are the highest-ranking officer in the policy implementation chain who works directly in the field with the citizens and is also the first point of contact at the district level for the state or central government. Citizens are directly affected by the functioning of this office, especially the poor, rural, illiterate, and marginalised populations who depend on the DC's discretion and the field officials for entitlements and services. Departmental officers and frontline officials implement policy under the DC's nominal leadership, while the state and central governments rely on the DC for policy implementation.

The roles and responsibilities of the DC have increased over the years, the population they serve is expanding, expectations have grown, and technologies have evolved, but the resources at the command of DCs are not improving commensurately to tackle these challenges. This brief examines the structural gaps behind this growing strain and sets out corresponding recommendations to restore the balance between the DC's authority and accountability.

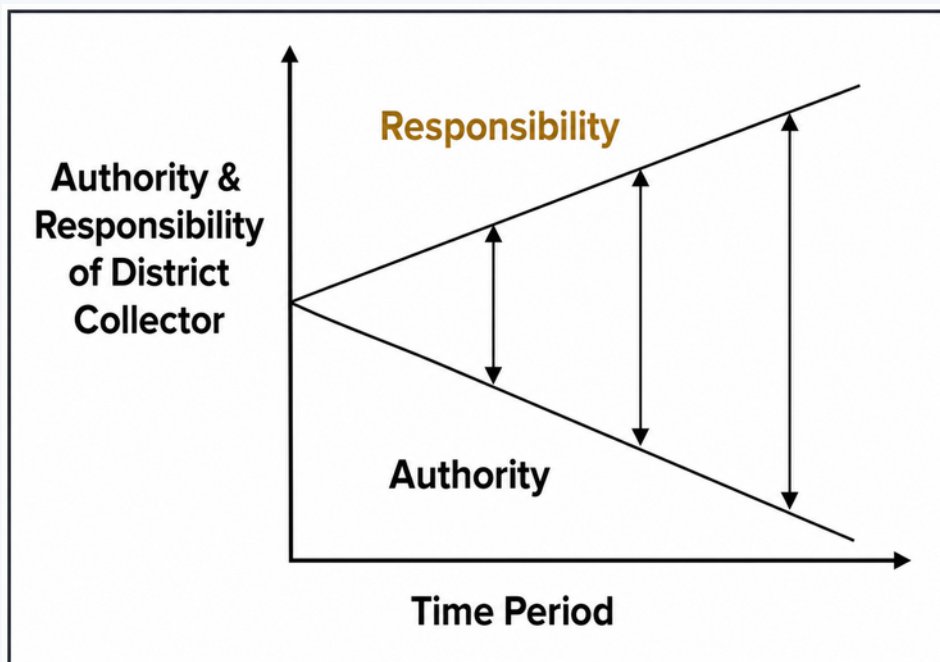


Figure 1: Increasing authority-responsibility gap hypothesis of the DC

Problem Diagnosis

The following undermines the DC's ability to deliver effective public services at the grassroots level.

Gap 1: Erosion of Authority over Departmental Officers

Evidence: The DC's responsibility has grown with new development and governance mandates, while authority has declined as political actors have taken on a greater share of decision-making, alongside judicial activism, centralisation of authority, and the growing role of non-state actors. Despite exercising powers under 200+ legislations and heading over 100 committees, the DC lacks power to post, transfer, or appraise most departmental officers.

Implication: The DC remains accountable for district outcomes even as the authority to control them diminishes, weakening administrative efficiency.

Gap 2: Political Interference in Administrative Decision-Making

Evidence: Political interference in the day-to-day functioning of the DC has been rising. Local elected representatives sometimes act as 'super administrators' directing officers including the District Magistrate (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). Untimely transfers can create pressure to align with political agendas (Mishra, 2006).

Implication: This compromises equity, fairness, and rule-of-law-based decision-making, contrary to the institutional vision for India's civil services (Jain, 2022).

Gap 3: Weak Inter-Departmental Coordination and Control

Evidence: The DC must coordinate with more than 50 departments at the district level but has direct authority over only some of them and is sometimes formally junior in rank to officers such as the Superintendent of Police or Divisional Forest Officer.

Implication: Officers not subject to the DC's transfer or appraisal powers may deprioritise coordination requests, slowing service delivery that depends on multi-department cooperation.

Gap 4: Low Motivation of Street-Level Officials and an Outputs-Oriented Culture

Evidence: The DC must coordinate with more than 50 departments at the district level but has direct authority over only some of them and is sometimes formally junior in rank to officers such as the Superintendent of Police or Divisional Forest Officer.

Implication: Officers not subject to the DC's transfer or appraisal powers may deprioritise coordination requests, slowing service delivery that depends on multi-department cooperation.

Gap 5: Negative Public Perception of Bureaucracy

Evidence: There are instances of negative perceptions of district administration. In his 2008 Civil Services Day address, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that 'the most important challenge is of instilling confidence in the people that our civil services are fair, honest as well as efficient' (Singh, 2008).

Implication: Even sound administrative performance can be undermined by weak public perception, discouraging citizens from approaching the DC's office for entitlements and services.

Theory of Change



Policy Recommendations

The main policy recommendation is to bridge the increasing authority-responsibility gap by reducing responsibility and increasing authority. As shown in the following figure, the aim is to shift from blue Responsibility & Authority lines to Green Responsibility & Authority lines, whereby the authority-responsibility gap reduces from R1A1 to R2A2.

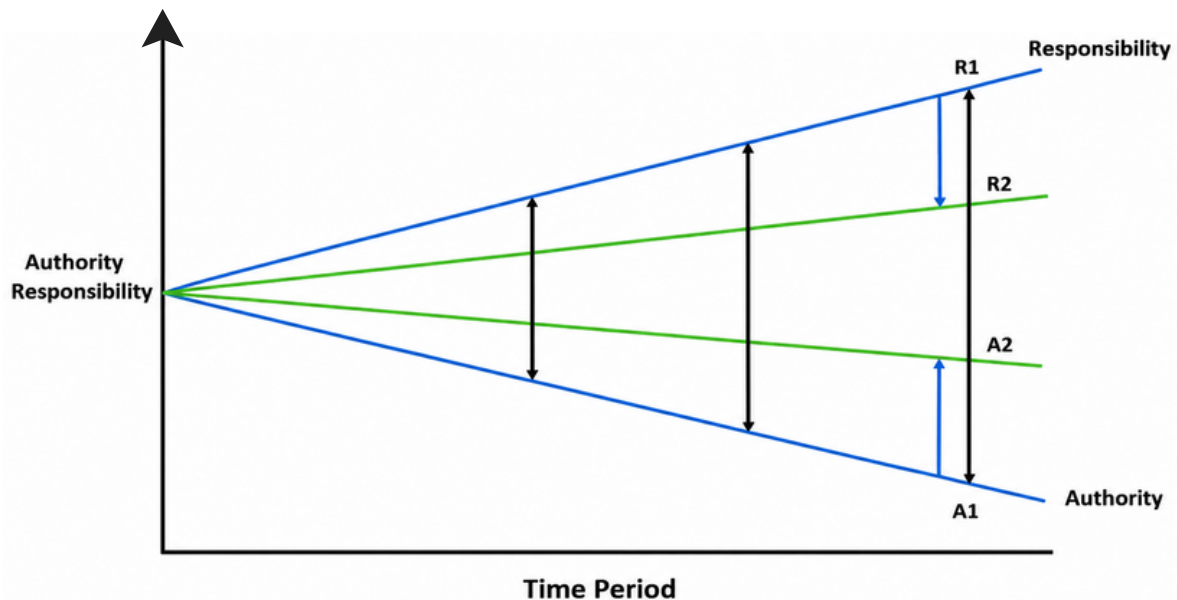


Figure 2: Bridging the authority-responsibility gap of the DC



Finding	Recommendation
Authority-Responsibility gap of the DC is increasing over time	• The authority of the DC should be increased, and responsibility of the DC should be reduced. This way the authority-responsibility gap would reduce. However, this should be done in a well-calibrated manner. • The DC should have more authority over functions, funds and functionaries for which he/she is accountable. It is like giving Indian cricket team captain not having selection power over team players, but at least power to decide batting and bowling order, field positions, and on-field decisions. • The responsibility of the DC should be reduced by removing non-core and non-critical functions while strengthening core and critical functions. DC cannot be held accountable for anything and everything in the district to anyone and everyone including humans, animals, living and non-living objects. • The district heads numbering around 50, should be held responsible for their departmental vertical where DC would retain overall leadership role in the district.
Erosion of Authority over Departmental Officers	• Vest the DC with power to write Performance Appraisal Reports of the district-level officers. • Leave applications of all heads of departments in the district should be sanctioned in consultation with the DC. • Where authority has been vested in local self-government institutions, accountability should be aligned with it, ensuring that the DC's authority and responsibility remain in harmony.
Political interference in decision-making.	DCs should direct subordinate officers to give every stakeholder a fair hearing, but base administrative decisions only on what the law requires, protecting routine decisions from political pressure.
Weak Inter-Departmental Coordination and Control	Strengthen the DC's supervisory authority over departmental heads. Reduce the DC's direct service-delivery burden through: • Outsourcing and digital delivery: Outsource routine services (pensions, subsidies, utility payments, certificates, court summons) via Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models; expand Aadhaar-based verification, Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), and frontier tech (AI, GIS, big-data analytics) to simplify processes. • Information systems and e-office: Develop Management Information Systems (MIS) at the sub-district, district, and state levels with regular dashboards, and extend e-office to all levels to cut delays in data management and reporting. This frees the DC's coordination and leadership capacity for core coordination and leadership functions.

Finding	Recommendation
Low Motivation of Street-Level Officials and an Outputs-Oriented Culture	- DCs should adopt low-cost motivation measures, such as direct engagement with frontline staff, performance recognition and awards, and addressing basic working-condition needs, alongside a shift in performance measurement from outputs to outcomes. - Investing in training and ethics-focused capacity building for public servants can further strengthen good governance (Goldfinch et al., 2013).
Citizen trust in district administration is shaped as much by perception as by actual performance	DCs should undertake periodic public relations exercises and interact with citizens and the media, including regular briefings covering departmental achievements and schemes. They should also involve citizens directly in planning and delivering services and build wider partnerships with citizen groups and other agencies (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000).

Stakeholder Roles

Stakeholder	Role / Responsibility	Mode of Engagement
Central Government	Provide policy guidance on adoption of frontier technologies (e.g., AI, big-data analytics) in district administration	National-level guidance through conferences/reports
State Governments	Grant DC supervisory authority over departmental officers. Govern transfers and promotions of senior civil servants through Civil Services Boards, with a minimum 3-year tenure, per the 2013 Supreme Court order	Implementation via state-level Civil Services Boards and administrative reforms
District Collector	Lead district administration; coordinate departments; drive digital adoption and frontline motivation; identify routine services for outsourcing; improve public perception of district administration	Direct implementation and leadership; chairs district-level committees and inter-departmental coordination meetings; oversees rollout of digital/MIS tools at the district level; engages with frontline officials; explores outsourcing contracts via PPP models; holds monthly press briefings

Monitoring Indicators

Suggested Indicators:

- Share of routine services (pensions, certificates, subsidy disbursement, utility payments) delivered via digital channels, DBT, or outsourcing/PPP.
- Number of district departments on e-office/MIS with active dashboard reporting.
- Number of officer transfers/postings made outside the Civil Services Board process or before minimum tenure.
- Extent of DC authority over departmental officers' transfer, leave, and appraisal decisions.
- Annual recognition initiatives (awards, staff engagements) for frontline/revenue officials.
- Whether DC-level performance appraisal criteria are framed around outcomes/impact rather than outputs.
- Number of public engagement exercises held per year.



Call to Action

Public service delivery is one of the most important and critical aspects of public policy implementation. The DC remains one of the most critical institutions for grassroots public service delivery in India, yet the widening gap between the DC's authority and responsibility, amid political interference and weak departmental control, warrants coordinated attention.

This brief recommends restoring the DC's transfer, leave, and appraisal authority; insulating routine decisions from political pressure; relieving operational burden through digital governance and outsourcing; and rebuilding frontline motivation through outcome-based performance management. Together, these reforms can restore the DC's capacity to function as an accountable chief executive of the district. State governments hold the primary levers for reform through policy and legislative action, while the Central Government can reinforce progress through digital governance guidance. Each year of delay further widens the gap and weakens the administration that citizens depend on most at the grassroots level.



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