

INDIA

Better Data, Better Evidence, Better Lives in Tamil Nadu

The truth was that it was a slightly surprising finding – but one that would improve the lives of many elderly Tamil Nadu residents for years to come. Equipped with training from the **Center for Learning on Evaluation and Results for South Asia (CLEAR-SA)** on questionnaire design, data collection, and data quality assurance, the Government of Tamil Nadu deployed the very first survey of its elderly population. This *Elderly Panel Survey*¹, launched in 2019, uncovered the surprising fact that even in the context of India’s family culture, many elderly were living alone and over 80% of the elderly living alone were women. The survey also showed that the elderly living alone were worse off economically, socially and had worse mental health and cognitive impairment than those living with families. This finding led to Government to establish elderly resource centers across all 37 districts in the state. The survey also found that only 16% of the elderly surveyed were receiving their monthly pensions due to systematic issues, such as exclusion errors. Based on information from the survey, the government increased the budget allocation for the *Old Age Pension Plan* under its 2021 budget to help ensure that systemic issues were addressed, and more elderly were able to access pension benefits. The results of this landmark survey informed the draft of Tamil Nadu’s 2022 [Senior Citizen Policy](#).

As part of GEI’s mission to help strengthen national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems around the world, CLEAR-SA, an **Implementing Partner of the Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI)**, is helping to increase the use of data for decision-making in Tamil Nadu. Robust data and strong data systems are key for effective national M&E systems. A well-established data infrastructure ensures that accurate and timely information is available to policymakers, contributing to the effectiveness and efficiency of government initiatives and facilitating the assessment of policies and programs.

¹ A panel survey is a long-term study that is used to gain insights from the same group of participants over a period of time.

Tamil Nadu: Commitment to Inclusive Growth

Tamil Nadu is the second largest state economy in India. The tenth largest Indian state by area and the sixth largest by population with about 83 million citizens. Tamil Nadu is the home of the Tamil people, whose language is widely spoken and serves as the state's official language.

Tamil Nadu is one of the most industrialized states in India, with a strong manufacturing base and a large services sector. It also ranks second on the Human Development Index, among India's 13 largest states.² In other words, "the state has achieved high growth rates and economic transformation in combination with significant progress on social outcomes, which has been key for enabling broad swathes of the state's population to share in its growth."³ Successive administrations in Tamil Nadu have embraced inclusive widespread industrialization and development, while at the same time supporting reforms aimed at social welfare for inclusive growth.

However, there are still a number of complex challenges that the Tamil Nadu government is trying to address including women dropping out of the workforce (reflecting a countrywide trend); increasing anemia and nutritional deficiencies in the population; increasing rates of non-communicable diseases and mental health issues; and, low learning levels in students across the state.⁴ Although poverty has declined steadily in both rural and urban areas of Tamil Nadu since 1994, parts of the state still struggle with high levels of poverty.⁵ Elderly over the age of 65 will account for 22% of the population by 2051.

The Tamil Nadu Government is committed to improving the use of data and evidence in policymaking, as can be seen through its long-standing partnership with CLEAR-SA and its host institution, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab for South Asia (J-PAL South Asia). This partnership is centered around four main elements: contextualizing and applying existing research insights for policy development; designing and testing new innovations for the state's unique challenges; strengthening government capacity to generate and consume evidence; and, leveraging administrative data for use in policymaking.

"I think one of the critical elements in good governance is to make decisions based on sound data and sound analysis. And doing a lot of this research and analysis a priori or having a lot of access to good research and analysis is very important to make sound decisions. [Not having research and analysis up front] has a big cost on public money, that has a big cost on welfare, and it also makes for poor decisions in certain cases which you realize only much later. So, if you're able to do this analysis up front, then it certainly helps in making better decisions."

– Mr. S. Krishnan, Former Planning Secretary Government of Tamil Nadu

² Global Data Lab, Subnational Human Development Index, https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/shdi/IND/?interpolation=0&extrapolation=0&nearest_real=0.

³ "Tamil Nadu: The Role of Political Leadership and Governance." Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. <https://www.institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/inclusive-growth-tamil-nadu-role-political-leadership-and-governance>

⁴ "Tamil Nadu Health and Education Brief." World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/890821504176983145/pdf/119265-BRI-P157572-Tamil-Nadu-HealthEducation.pdf>

⁵ "Tamil Nadu Poverty, Growth & Inequality Brief." World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/380971504177733539/pdf/119267-BRI-P157572-Tamil-Nadu-Poverty.pdf>



Long-term Support, Deep Engagement

Supporting systems-level change requires long-term commitment and a multi-faceted approach. In a context where priorities may shift with each election cycle and where policy changes often take years, patience and persistence is paramount. A key feature of CLEAR-SA's approach towards supporting sustainable systems-level change in Tamil Nadu is long-standing and strategic engagements across multiple government departments, combining technical advisory, evidence sharing, and capacity-building efforts.

This multi-faceted approach is evident in CLEAR-SA's engagement with the aforementioned *Elderly Panel Survey*. For almost five years, CLEAR-SA has provided capacity building support and training workshops on sampling, questionnaire design, and data quality to enable rigorous and efficient data collection. For instance, in 2018, CLEAR-SA, conducted in-depth trainings that led to the state adopting digital data collection methods (through the use of iPads and tablet computers) and new quality assurance mechanisms to improve data usability for its survey efforts, which were implemented the following year for the *Elderly Panel Survey*. These improved data collection practices were also leveraged by the government in 2020 when it conducted phone surveys to understand the status of the elderly during COVID-19. The results of the phone surveys further demonstrated the vulnerability of the state's elderly and underscored the need for comprehensive reforms.

In late 2021, CLEAR-SA and J-PAL South Asia organized several government convenings and workshops to share evidence from the *Elderly Panel Survey* to support the development of the *Senior Citizen Policy*, which was finally released in 2022 and is currently under review at the highest levels of government.

"One of the most important features of the [Elderly Panel Survey] was that field level functionaries of the department learned how to use tablets to collect this data. And we are happy to see that it worked well. Though the field officials of the department had not worked with such devices earlier, they did a very good job, and we were quite happy with the outcomes, both of the baseline, which was done in 2019, and wave one which was done in 2022. Both times the department officials have done a very good job, and I think it has institutionalized the use of such devices and software within the department."

- Dr. Girija Vaidyanathan, Former Chief Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu; Principal Investigator on the Elderly Panel Survey

Leveraging Administrative Data for Evidence-Based Decision-making

The Role of Administrative Data Systems

“Administrative data” is data that is routinely collected for operational purposes, ranging from educational data to tax collection transactions and agriculture and land record. This data has immense potential for use in monitoring and evaluation.

However, there are several challenges that constrain a government’s ability to translate the vast amount of data into insights for learning and planning. First, there is often an absence of standardized processes inside the government for each step of the data lifecycle: data collection, cleaning, verification, validation, compilation, analysis, sharing, retention, and use. Second, the lack of interoperable systems limits integration of data across multiple departments leading to limited scope for analysis and insights. Third, governments often have limited capacities and resources for adopting efficient data practices that generate evidence for decision-making, in a timely manner.

Another example of CLEAR-SA’s support to the Government of Tamil Nadu on increasing the use of data for decision-making is its engagement with the Tamil Nadu e-Governance Agency (TNeGA) where it is providing support on data documentation, data quality, and training on data use.

In 2022, the Tamil Nadu government issued the [2022 Tamil Nadu Data Policy](#), which provides a framework for data owners within the Tamil Nadu Government to make administrative data accessible to all stakeholders in a transparent manner and to improve policymaking and benefits disbursement through the innovative use of data. The *Data Policy* is a first step in instituting guiding principles for better administrative data use among departments. However, the operationalization of these principles and data processes requires greater sharing of data between departments, and the development of practical guidelines, training manuals and other relevant resources to empower government staff.

To support the operationalization of the *Data Policy*, CLEAR-SA systematically catalogued 56 datasets across 25 government departments and generated codebooks containing usability metrics. This work addressed a key challenge in using administrative data, which is a lack of knowledge on what data is available, and how usable it is. Even when data is available, it is often scattered, not maintained in standardized formats or its access is limited to only a few individuals. To facilitate greater use of data, it is important not only to know what datasets are available, but also the details about the data such as how it was collected, its level of quality and the existing use,

among other details. CLEAR-SA’s catalogue of 56 datasets and codebooks is helping address information gaps and is serving as a starting point for departments to improve the quality and sharing of their data across departments and programs. The catalogue is also serving as a resource for government officials to identify data gaps and formulate evaluation questions that intersect multiple themes, sectors, and programs. CLEAR-SA also created training and reference resources for TNeGA staff and of departments on how to catalogue metadata and generate codebooks for any new/additional datasets in the future, and trained government staff on cataloguing and codebook generation so that they could, in turn, train others using the resources shared.

In line with the objectives of the *Data Policy*, CLEAR-SA, also worked with the School Education Department to increase the accessibility of over 1000 administrative datasets collected from nine mobile and web-based applications of the department that were stored in the Education Monitoring Information System (EMIS). The EMIS is the “digital backbone of the School Education Department where information from every school, teacher and student in government, government-aided, and private school is maintained on a real-time basis.”⁶

⁶ “EMIS to Be Simplified to Reduce Teachers’ Burden.” DT Next. <https://www.dtnext.in/tamilnadu/2022/11/30/emis-to-be-simplified-to-reduce-teachers-burden>



The CLEAR-SA team created a catalogue of these administrative datasets, documenting key information contained in the EMIS and carrying out usability assessments on high priority datasets for further use in research and monitoring. Technical advisory was additionally provided on database management best practices for large-scale relational databases, and training was carried out for EMIS staff as a handover of the data documentation exercise.

The data catalogue is currently being used by EMIS staff to onboard new members and has been shared across all project management units within the department. It is regularly being updated with the latest information and, according to EMIS staff, has proven to be an effective tool for capturing the department's internal data systems and for coordination. The catalogue is also being leveraged by the government to gain insights on school dropouts, school management committees, resource allocation and school performance grading. It has also motivated new research on topics such as identifying high-potential students from resource constrained government schools and understanding gaps in higher education enrollment.

Future Work to Support Tamil Nadu's Development Goals

CLEAR-SA will continue to support the Government of Tamil Nadu in its efforts to make data and evidence more effective in meeting the state's development and social goals.

For example, to enhance the utilization of evidence from evaluations by line departments, CLEAR-SA will conduct workshops for officers from line departments and cadre-level officer trainees of the All-India Services on how to interpret and use evidence. This work will be conducted in collaboration with the Anna Institute of Management, the designated administrative training institute for the state. This collaboration will also involve designing courses/curricula on monitoring and evaluation.

CLEAR-SA will also be working with Tamil Nadu's new Sustainable Development Goals Co-ordination Center (SDGCC). The Center, housed under the Department of Planning and Development, was established in 2023 with recognition that a multi-departmental coordinated approach is required for data sharing and monitoring of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets and indicators. SDCGCC will play a pivotal role in developing indicator frameworks and will deliver capacity building, data collection, coordination, and analysis advisory support to government staff, while reporting and documenting progress on Tamil Nadu's SDG targets.