Syllabus subtopic: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Prelims and Mains focus: about the key changes sought by the draft NSC bill, its significance; about NSC

News: Stating the need for creation for an independent “apex advisory body for official statistics”, the government has placed a draft National Statistical Commission (NSC) Bill for public comments that seeks to establish NSC as the nodal and autonomous body for all core statistical activities.

Background

The Bill comes at a time when several statistical reports such as the unemployment survey were withheld and consumption expenditure survey was decided to be not released by the government. In January this year, the then acting chairman of NSC, P C Mohanan, a career statistician, and J V Meenakshi, Professor at the Delhi School of Economics, had resigned from NSC protesting against the withholding of the NSSO’s first Annual Survey on Employment and Unemployment for the year 2017-18.

Key features of the draft Bill

- Along with retaining the advisory nature of NSC, the draft Bill states that the decision of the central government, whether a question is of policy or not, shall be final, a proposal which experts say goes against the long pending demand to grant more powers to the NSC.

- In a crucial change, the draft Bill also seeks to change the composition of the Commission by replacing NITI Aayog Chief Executive Officer with the Finance Ministry’s Chief Economic Advisor as the ex-officio member along with giving member status to Chief Statistician of India from the current status of secretary to the NSC.
As per the draft Bill, the NSC will have:

1. a Chairperson,
2. five whole time members along with Deputy Governor of Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Chief Statistician of India (CSI) as other members and Chief Economic Advisor, Ministry of Finance, as the ex-officio member.
3. The Chairman and the members of the Commission shall be appointed by the central government on the recommendation of a search committee, as prescribed, it said, adding that no appointment of a Chairperson or any member of the Commission shall be “invalid merely by reason of absence of any member in the meetings of the search committee”.

The draft Bill stated that the central government may, from time to time, issue directions to the Commission as it may think “necessary in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality”.

It also said that the Commission “shall in exercise of its powers or the performance of its functions, be bound by such directions or questions as the Central Government may give in writing to it from time to time. Provided that the Commission shall, as far as practicable, be given an opportunity to express its views before any direction is given.”

The draft Bill states that the government shall seek advice from the Commission on any matter relating to official statistics. However, central government or a state government may issue directions as necessary to any government agency under its administrative control along with a report on reasons for not accepting any advice to the commission.

A report on reasons for not accepting any advice of the commission shall be laid before Parliament or a state legislature for a total period of thirty days.

Outlining the general powers of the NSC, the draft Bill states that the NSC shall have power to review the statistical system of any government agency in the light of concepts, definitions, standards, methodologies and established policies, and recommend measures for enhanced performance;
to prescribe a code of practice. Also, the Commission shall participate in, and in consultation with the central government coordinate with, national statistical organisations on matters of statistical standards, methodologies and classifications.

- All nodal officers designated in central ministries/departments /state government shall be professionally responsible to Chief Statistician of India on core statistics, the Bill said.

**Way ahead**

The **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)** has sought comments and suggestions from the public on the draft Bill by January 19, 2020.

**About The National Statistical Commission:**

- NSC was **set up in 2005** following the **recommendations of the Rangarajan Commission**, which reviewed the Indian Statistical System in 2001. The NSC has **four Members** besides a Chairperson, each having specialization and experience in specified statistical fields.

- It is an **autonomous institution** (and does not come under CSO/ NSSO). The **main purpose** of setting up NSC was to **act as a bridge between CSO, NSSO and different state and central government departments in relation to collection of data**.

- It is generally said that NSC is not that effective as **it is not a statutory body** and previously there have been demands to make it a statutory body which would lend it more teeth.