

## ASER Pakistan: The Raison D'être

### Research on Assessment in Pakistan: Context of Issues

By Amima Sayed

Assessment of children's academic or broadly speaking, educational attainments is a prime concern of a range of stakeholders including policy makers, academicians, parents, development and agency workers and so on and so forth. For one reason, assessment results provide a testimony to the system of education and all the investments (or lack thereof) – the worth of monetary resources spent as well as the functionality of system and relevance of policies and reforms become all too clear when gauged against the learning outcomes of children/youth. Since the stakes are multiple and high, the field of assessment is not only highly contentious, contested, controversial but the results and findings are largely inaccessible even to practitioners and policymakers in the education sector let alone a common citizen. Although parents are given a result card to inform them about their child's progress, they have usually no way of understanding what "48" marks out of 100 mean in terms of their child's learning of that subject.

The issues surrounding learning assessment are exemplified in Pakistan Education Sector. Time and again, people working for improvement of education in Pakistan have encountered one massive problem i.e. lack of easy-to-use, relevant and updated information on quality of learning and education. Redundant policies, poor planning, dysfunctional programmes or sheer inaction are some of the obvious consequences of this dearth of analysis. With increasing international pressure, some efforts for generating information for evidence-based planning have been made in recent past; however, they are few and far between.

Of the limited research conducted on quality of education, schools or teaching and learning in Pakistan, there is an overwhelming focus on the physical provisions, outputs and indicators like enrolment and attendance level. It is not to slight the importance of such indicators or schools equipped with physical facilities, however, they are not helpful in understanding the quality of learning outcomes of school-going population in Pakistan. The rare occasions that research focus is specifically on learning and educational quality, it takes eternity to have the research findings out even for dissemination. As a result, they can be used for an academic pursuit but relevance of the research findings for planning and policy making at any level-Is rather compromised. At another level, the understanding and use of research findings by educational players like teachers, school heads, parents, villagers, political representatives or general citizenry is negligible. This is mainly because they either do not get full access to results and findings or it is too technical and abstract for a range of stakeholders to make sense of.

### Purpose and Focus of ASER Pakistan

Launching an initiative like ASER Pakistan is critical to respond to the challenges discussed above. SAFED and its partner organizations decided to replicate ASER India because it provided concrete example of how as technical an information like learning assessment can be made simple for its users with immense impact on policy level-Initiatives. The vision of ASER Pakistan is that **each child is learning and learning well inside or out of school**. The strategy employed to reach this vision is to collect simple information on learning skills of children and make them available in such a simple form that people can use them and take action for improvement.

The key objectives of ASER Pakistan are as follows:

- Collect information on the learning levels of children (of ages 3-16) to demonstrate the 'current' state of affairs.
- Make the information on children relevant, simple and action oriented for parents, teachers, head teachers, community leaders.
- Use the information to plan and advocate for reaching the 'desired' level of achievement
- Keep the information synthesis quick, timely, simple and technically sound to increase its utilization by policy makers and practitioners alike.
- Generate qualitative insights into learning levels at scale to ensure the research can be used for large-scale policy reforms as well.

ASER India has practically demonstrated that achieving ASER Pakistan objectives is not only possible but keeping the cycle going will eventually lead to massive improvements in the quality of education at a national level. Also the vision for children's learning or the "desired" state will continue to enrich. ASER India started off with 19 rural districts in 17 states of India collecting information on 600 households per district. By 2008, ASER reached over 704,000 children in 16,198 villages in 564 rural districts out of the total of 610 districts in India across all states and union territories. It takes a gargantuan effort from over 32,000 volunteers to finish the survey in 100 days with findings disseminated well in advance before the decisions on educational budget allocations are taken.

ASER Pakistan admittedly missed the 100 days timeline to complete the survey owing to a plethora of security, geo-political, resource and capacity constraints. However, what ASER Pakistan has achieved is gigantic and exhilarating enough to have our belief strengthened in the need and significance of this initiative. ASER 2008 covered 16703 children from 600 villages and 6600 households in 11 districts of Pakistan. There have been occasions where parents and District Education Staff were shaken on how little they know about their children's learning skills leading to collective action for improvement. Another major achievement has been the mobilization of student volunteers to carry out the survey. It was mainly because the process of information collection was simple and immediately made it visible that merely sending to school was not adequate.

Having survived the first round by learning the ropes, ASER Pakistan is going to be smooth and rapid in the coming years with its utilization also increased. While the organizational collaborations for ASER 2008 have been phenomenal also, it is expected that serious partners in the education sector will join hands to make ASER Pakistan a tool for social accountability and well-thought out, evidence based educational reforms.

#### **Place and Significance of ASER Pakistan in the Assessment Initiatives in Pakistan**

True to the tradition of research and inquiry, ASER Pakistan was questioned for its need, significance, methodology, sampling techniques, credibility of initiative and findings, and similar other concerns. These queries were addressed by SAFED and even on occasions, the technical partners Pratham and ASER Institute India responded to the concerns in light of their vast experience.

It is of critical importance to specify at the outset that ASER is neither a duplication of formal Assessment done in schools or at national level; nor is it a grade wise all encompassing psychometric analysis of students' achievement levels. While the methodology is technically sound and tools piloted and tested, ASER Pakistan does not want it to be confused with tracers' study or national assessment and examination and the likes.

ASER is simply looking at the basic level of reading and arithmetic skills of every child falling under its sample population irrespective of the child's enrolment in school or academic excellence. The intention is to improve the basic because if the foundations are strong, the level of learning achievements will be good as well be it for a child studying in Class 1 or Class 9 or 16 years old out of school youth.

As discussed earlier, the attention of research initiatives or even educational census is on gauging access and inputs and the findings are used for estimating inputs to schools. In India, interestingly even at the village level and within households, the major thrust of discussions was on inputs (such as teachers or scholarships) rather than on learning outcomes whereas in Pakistan, the basis and opportunity to have such discussions is limited to begin with. Notwithstanding the trend, the assumption at macro and micro levels appeared to be that if a child went to school, s/he would be learning.<sup>3</sup>

ASER Pakistan wants to explore whether such an assumption is relevant and connected to the micro level realities of Pakistani Education system.

<sup>3</sup> Abhijit Banerjee, Rukmini Banerji, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster, Stuti Khemani : **Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India** DP6781. Discussion Paper Series. Centre for Economic Policy Research. The World Bank. 2008. <http://www.cepr.org/pubs/new-dps/dplist.asp?authorid=168029>. Also see 2007. Abhijit Banerjee, Rukmini Banerji, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster, Stuti Khemani, and Sendhil Mullainathan : **Can Information Campaigns Raise Awareness Local Participation in Primary Education?** Economic and Political Weekly Vol 42. No 15. April 14 2007.

The measurement of basic reading and arithmetic does not in any way negate the importance of all other subjects and higher levels of learning. Moreover the scope of ASER Pakistan, just like its predecessor in India, is not static, as the country’s children move well beyond this basic threshold, measurement of increasingly higher skills will be integrated into ASER<sup>4</sup>

In Pakistan, some other assessment systems, such as the National Education Assessment System, are already in place. As illustrated below, these systems focus on formal-grade-specific testing and therefore, do not provide national estimates or a district-wise picture of basic numeracy and literacy levels.

**Box comparing ASER with NEAS and PEC**

Comparison of ASER with NEAS and PEC		
National Education Assessment System	Punjab Examination Commission	Annual Status of Education Report
<p>NEAS was initiated in the late 90s as a country-wide initiative to build assessment capacity at federal and provincial levels to measure learning outcomes, inform policy and improve the quality of education.</p> <p>NEAS is planned as a sample-based national assessment for grades 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> in four subjects: Language, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies.</p> <p>To date NEAS has conducted four rounds of subject-based assessments (<a href="http://www.neas.gov.pk">www.neas.gov.pk</a>).</p>	<p>PEC is a provincial initiative of the government of the Punjab set up in 2006 to address the Quality Challenge. PEC is to function as an autonomous body to administer examinations for grade 5 and grade 8 in all subjects, in public sector and private assisted or private unaided schools.</p> <p>To date three rounds of assessments have been held in 2006, 2008/9 2009/10 (<a href="http://www.pec.edu.pk">www.pec.edu.pk</a>).</p>	<p>ASER is a household based survey to measure reading, comprehension and numeracy skills for children between the ages of 6-14.</p> <p>Launched in India in 2005 by Pratham (an NGO) conducted consecutively for 5 years since 2005) across all districts of India. It is a rural survey</p> <p>Compared to NEAS and PEC, ASER is a household based survey focusing on numeracy and literacy skills equivalent to grade II.</p> <p>To date one pilot has been conducted in 11 districts in 2008 (<a href="http://www.safedafed.org">www.safedafed.org</a>)</p>

The findings of the ASER exercise are meant to be useful at national, state and district level. At the same time, the tools due to their simplicity and ease of use are used widely in schools by teachers and also in villages by parents or others. The local level use of ASER tools to understand the local situation is as important as the effort to inform the national debate. In India, over half of all mothers of children in the elementary school age are illiterate.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan does not fare any better when trends of illiteracy in mothers is compared. It is essential that parents not only send their children to school but also figure out how to support children’s learning. The ASER tool is a simple device that helps parents to understand where their children stand on basic abilities. This does not mean that ASER in any way devalues higher levels of learning that children must reach and master.

<sup>4</sup> In ASER 2006, fluent readers were asked comprehension questions. In ASER 2007, comprehension questions were asked of all readers.

<sup>5</sup> See ASER 2006 report ([www.pratham.org](http://www.pratham.org)) for details of mothers’ ability to read simple text and years of schooling.

### **Reliability and Credibility of ASER – A response from ASER India**

**Sample design and sample size:** ASER's sample design is based on the fact that it is a nationally representative survey. ASER was designed after consultation with statisticians at the Indian Statistical Institute and the NSSO.<sup>6</sup> Its sample size, which is larger than most surveys available for India, is determined by the decision to provide estimates at the district level. Most nationally representative surveys in India, do not give estimates at the district level, focusing instead on state and national estimates. While the sample size at the district level may require clubbing classes to get reliable estimates, at the state and national level, the sample size is extremely conservative and most variables of interest are estimated at very high levels of precision.<sup>7</sup>

**Comparison with international tests:** While there are a number of international pen-paper tests, there are fewer reading assessments that are used across countries. Among the well known ones are DIEBELS and EGRA which deal with reading ability in primary school grades. A recent study (2008) has looked at the properties of ASER vis a vis EGRA and DIEBELS and concludes that ASER items align well with items in the international standardized tests.<sup>8</sup>

**Method of ASER testing:** A fundamental element in ASER is local participation. Local groups volunteer time to carry out the survey. In each district, there is two days of training. One of these days is a field day in which all volunteers practice testing under supervision. There are training manuals that describe how testing is to be done. In 2007, training videos were also used. Although the testing process is relatively straightforward, care is taken to train volunteers to distinguish between the different reading levels and to ensure that children are at ease. In any testing exercise, there is the issue of inter-rater reliability. For ASER as well, separate studies are being undertaken in 2008 to examine this issue.

**Durability of the ability to read** is certainly being tested. Empirical research has indicated that the literacy gains of schooling can be sustained only if a person has been to school for at least 4 to 5 years. The ASER data provides evidence for this yet again. If we want all our children to not only go to school and learn well, then we need to provide not only access to school but also the opportunity to learn for children who have dropped out or have never been to school. Therefore, assessing children who are not currently in school is very important.

<sup>6</sup> The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), is the organization that undertakes all large scale, nationally representative surveys, of the government.

<sup>7</sup> We have undertaken a study to evaluate the sensitivity of sample estimates to variations in sample design.

<sup>8</sup> Study commissioned by MIT to study ASER test vis a vis EGRA and DIEBELS 2008.