Mobilizing Citizenship  From ASER Surveys to ASER Baithaks...
Citizens on the march for quality education

Baela Raza Jamil
Coordinator, SAFED
Director Programs, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aaagahi (ITA)
Director, Institute for Professional Learning (IPL)

“I did not know that this tool would give me such power and skill. I did not know that I could access villages and households with such ease, fill 82 columns of data and use the learning tools for 6 children and two mothers! I felt like a ‘special messenger’ in that household with expectations of diagnosing and healing!”. Such is the story of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan 2010 survey encounters, where the ordinary must become extraordinary. Willing educated citizens (mostly youth) are mobilized to conduct the household survey to measure learning levels of children 3-16 years and mothers literacy. ASER Pakistan 2010 -2015, as a continuous annual happening has all the ingredients of a movement for social change, mobilizing thousands of volunteers across the country. In 2010 it mobilized 2000 volunteers, armed with a powerful methodology and three simple instruments to test 52,046 learners in 960 villages across 32 districts of Pakistan. They volunteered without compensation, without the dreaded TA/DA! They were high achievers in every sense of the word.

In each district 60 volunteers are mobilized to survey 30 villages in pairs. A five day annual engagement with high quality purposeful volunteerism defines the changing face of Pakistan. Three days are dedicated to intensive field based training and two days to the field survey and plenty of empowerment in between. As pairs drop reach each identified village selected through the PPS technique, they are compelled to follow the logical steps of the method: Reaching the centre point of the village, speaking to the local people making a participatory village map to profile facilities and get their coordinates straight; confirming humbly with the community before they set off for the household survey to 20 homes in the four quadrants selected. Demystifying access, overcoming all sorts of geographies and sub-cultures through logical skill based, people to people contact is indeed a powerful way to earn respect from fellow citizens for understanding the problem of learning as a basis for social change and improvement. Yes the ASER volunteers, overall earned tremendous respect from fellow citizens who had never been asked the question or enabled to understand what their children learn. or how well do they read and count! The two large national and provincial tests (NEAS and the Punjab Examination Commission/PEC) are school based. The ASER Tools are citizen led and household based with complete access by the citizens. Even a daadi nani (maternal and paternal grandmother) knew the test craft and its basic logic: from letters to words to sentences to para; even they wanted to be tested!

The ASER Pakistan experience from September 20 to November 15, 2010 was immediately followed up by a series of ‘reflection’ sessions that were aptly coined as ‘ASER Baithaks’ (ASER gatherings). This happened very spontaneously when our friends from the Open Society Institute (OSI) on one of their visits in mid November, soon after the ASER field survey, suggested if they could meet with the ASER volunteers and perhaps some surveyed households representatives. The ASER Pakistan team felt that this should not be a problem since the friendships had been struck profoundly. One call by the ASER Secretariat mobilized 30 people from Nankana, Sheikhupura, Kasur and Lahore districts. This was followed up a series of informal baithaks in Islamabad with volunteers from Charsadda, Mardan, Swabi, Nowshera, Peshawar, AJK, Mianwali, Rawalpindi and ICT assembling 40 people from across provincial and area boundaries. Sukkur, Ghotki, Khairpur Rahim Yar khanwalas had another session of reflections in Khairpur for upper Sind/South Punjab.

The meetings were great moments to share emotional, critical and inspirational reflections from the volunteers, or rather the apprentices committed to becoming superb researchers over a five year period for ASER Pakistan. These baithaks were spaces for inter provincial integration, sharing of experiences, recalling problems and offering solutions for the next rounds! They all had a sense of being baptized into very important roles in their neighbourhoods, homes and society to become catalysts of education improvement for their country. It made us all feel that we will surely transform from being a mere population to being a society, determined to overcome the challenges of learning for living and well being; of being governed to self governance; of inertia to empowerment of “I can and I will”.

One of the volunteers narrated an amazing action story during the ASER survey in Dhamanjho village in district Bagh, AJK. As the surveyors entered a household, one of the mothers had the presence of mind to immediately mobilize a visiting minister of housing who happened to be addressing a gathering in that village, Pir Murtaza Gilani. She complained that schools in that village and two neighbouring villages were shut due to lack of teachers since the earthquake of 2005, how could the children learn anything? Within a week three closed schools were re-opened with teachers appointed immediately in Dhamanjho, Tatha & Panjgranh villages. Wah! ASER in Kya ASER Kiya ! (what an impact did ASER make!)
Education is in a state of silent emergency across Pakistan. The citizens' demand for quality education is well established in more than 95% neighbourhoods of the country which is often met with disappointing arrangements that lead to early withdrawal of children. The ASER volunteers reminded us of people enlisting and signing up for emergency duty. It was as if they were responding to the call of action, reaching rural homes in unknown villages for assessing education profiles and learning proficiency of 3-16 year olds and their mothers. Little did we know that infact ASER Pakistan was soon to become ASER Flood Relief Pakistan 2010! It did

Soon after the national ASER Pakistan teams left for various locations to plan for the roll out the provincial and district trainings, on July 28th, 2010 the monsoons collided with the Indus fury. Nature planned things otherwise for ASER Pakistan teams. The flood unfolded its journey in Balochistan, and in a matter of days it had engulfed the entire country. 86 out of 138 districts and over 21 million population had been affected and 10,000 schools damaged or destroyed. 20 of the target 30 districts had been affected and the ASER Teams were calling from all corners for support. The ASER Secretariat became the flood coordination secretariat! SAFED, managed by ITA sent out an appeal across Pakistan and abroad. Instantly the bond was transformed from ASER Pakistan 2010 to ASER Floods Pakistan 2010. The volunteer teams reached out to each other in the finest manner possible. Peshawar, Charsadda, Nowshera; Swat; Mianwali; Muzaffargarh; Multan; Rahim yar Khan and Ghotki were all embraced by solid citizens who collectively reached out to 80,000 people, mobilized Rs. 7 million, working like 'jinn's' round the clock for the relief, recovery and rehabilitation phases of the flood, building even greater bonds and redefining their citizen DNA. Was ASER 2010 lost...Not at all! The teams waited on vigil for the waters to recede and displaced population to return, schools to re-open so that they could take the final decision on whether a district had to be dropped and replaced, or not. In the end only three districts were dropped/replaced out of 30 facing the challenges of terrain and continued displacement. These were Dadu, Muzaffargarh and Swat!

The ASER volunteers did not simply collect and distribute items for nourishment, clothing, shelter and illness, but soon set up healing and learning centres for the affectedees located in shelter schools. There were 31 healing and learning centres set up, catering for 3 to 30 year olds with early years, catch up elementary programs and vocational training sessions including mehndi and garment stitching! The affected families were kept occupied with activities that culminated in the Eid celebrations in time to return home with renewed vigor. Yes the ASER teams now became healers too! They accumulated the best citizenship skills prior to the ASER field survey, an experience that will stay with them for a long time to come.

As the district team volunteer leader from Nankana district Punjab aptly said at one of the gatherings: just as the setting sun announces the night and the setting moon announces the day light, if we want to compete and rise to the challenges of the world we live in, we shall have to understand and popularize ASER. It is in this movement that lies the sanctity of ourselves and that of our future generations. It is entirely possible that ASER will have the power to be a starting point, helping us to evolve and move forward towards improved learning that can be tracked. We need to multiply and prepare each year volunteers willing to give a few days of their time to the most empowering experience of a lifetime.

Mr. Nazeer Danwar, from the Education Department Khairpur district, was delighted by the ASER Baithak reflections on process and commitment to such evidence based initiative. Acknowledging that there are many flaws and bottle necks in the education system, where teachers are negligent and many government schools remain closed most of the time, he congratulated SAFED and its partners for being the pioneers in the country for introducing this unique survey. He was confident that this will definitely change positions of the Federal/Provincial Ministries to modify the policies and syllabuses. He volunteered for all support in the coming years for quality education.

Is ASER Pakistan about mobilization? Is it about measuring learning levels of children? Is it about empowerment or is it about governance, taking and tracking action? Is it all of these and more..?