

What do we know about the use of ASER and how can we improve it?

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Surveys, such as ASER, feel the pulse of our education system in much the same way as the medical diagnostic tests assess the state of our body. We go for diagnostic tests either when asked by a physician or for voluntary periodic checks of the state of our health. If these assessments indicate presence of a disease in our body, we seek treatments to free us of the disease. If the treatment is successful the diagnostic tests following it should indicate absence of disease. Most individuals take the results of their diagnostic assessments seriously as they know that doing otherwise can jeopardize their health and well being. But do we also take the results of a diagnostic assessment of the health of our society as seriously?

One doesn't have enough evidence to make any solid claims about how various stakeholders in education are responding to the yearly ASERs. In fact, if it is not already doing it, I suggest that ASER team should find ways of documenting its impact in terms of use of its results in other publications and its influence on education policy at the provincial and district level.

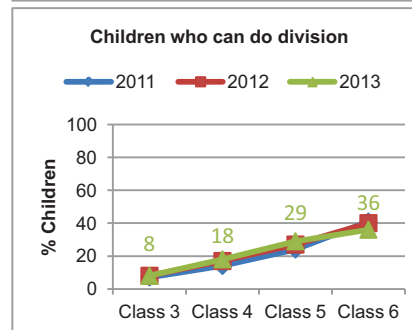
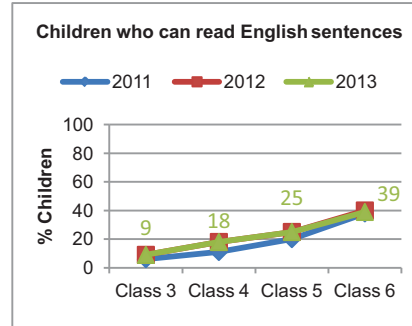
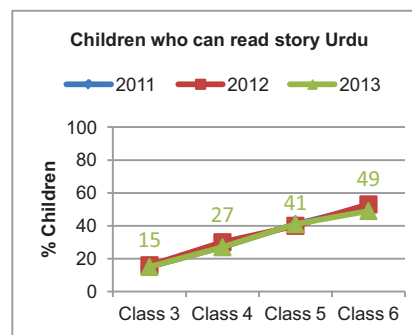
The need for such a study notwithstanding, the preliminary experience suggests that we are perhaps not making the optimal use of these assessments and the invaluable longitudinal and comparative data that they are making available. Here I am not referring to the usual series of policy dialogues conducted after the publication of each ASER, but to its regular use by the educational leaders at various levels as to take notice of the state of education in schools under their watch and take measures to improve the learning outcomes. I am also raising a question about the use of ASER by the academic and policy research community.

ASER is essentially a comparative report of the state of education. The provincial leaders, politicians and government servants, can potentially use it to develop a horizontal as well as a vertical sense of the educational health within their respective jurisdictions. The horizontal comparisons would involve comparing the results for their province with other provinces and the vertical assessment would imply looking at changes in the state of education of their province over time.

Imagine how useful this report could appear to leaders who cared about the state of education in the schools

under their watch. Wouldn't they be deeply alarmed at discovering that 15% of girls and 14% of boys were found out of school? Wouldn't they have sleepless nights after finding that 40% of class 3 children in the government schools of their province could not read a sentence in Urdu and that this has been the case for the last three years? Imagine the civil society campaigners waving these results in the face of the public representatives and civil servants and demanding improvements. The governments, under such pressure, would seek advice from the concerned educators, members of the public, and civil society organizations on the steps they should take to make the next assessment look better. How could things not improve if so many well meaning, smart, and dedicated citizens had joined hands to change the state of education of their society.

Yet, if you look at the ASER data year after year, hardly anything has changed at the level of aggregates. For brevity, consider the charts below which show year wise comparison of percentage of children who could read a story in Urdu, read English sentences, and do division from the province of Sindh. As shown below, the data points showing the provincial aggregates for class 3-6 for the last three years are almost coincident. Its as if these data points were frozen in time.



To cut to the chase, while the policy dialogues organized by the ASER team play their role in making the provincial leaders aware of the state of education in their province, they can only go thus far. ASER is only

a diagnostic service. Those who provide diagnostic services are not usually the ones who also prescribe the medicine and certainly not the ones who must take the treatments as prescribed in order to improve the state of their health. By reading the educational pulse of the nation every year, ASER is providing a free feedback service for the institutions and individuals who are responsible for the delivery of education. They are the ones who must be held accountable for improving the educational outcomes of the schools under their watch. They should take the report cards produced by ASER much more seriously than they currently do. They should be used more frequently and more widely as reference points for improvement by the provincial departments of education and a basis for campaigning and advocacy by other civil society organizations.

At the district level the ASER report cards could be even more useful. In the form of a report card for his/her district, the EDOs have access to an independent assessment of the performance of schools within their jurisdiction on some key indicators of learning. As in the case of the provinces, the EDOs also have comparative information about the performance of their districts over time and in relation to other districts. If they notice that children's ability to solve simple division problems have declined over the past two years, they could request the teacher training resources within the province for a focused training of teachers on teaching division of whole numbers. They could also compare the percentage of the out of school children in their district with other similar districts in Punjab. EDO from, say, Chiniot could query EDO of Hafizabad about the strategies used in the latter's district to increase enrolment and retention. Thus, ASER can be used in the districts to raise questions, address problems, and create opportunities for sharing experiences between the districts, etc. ASER team should ask themselves as to what can be done to catalyse the use of ASER for improvement in the educational outcomes at the district level.

ASER team should also raise questions about how ASER is being put to use by education researchers at universities and non-governmental research organisations. Data can be collected about the use of the yearly reports to get a better sense of the impact of ASER on the work of policy researchers. On the basis of

limited and anecdotal evidence, it seems that ASER is not used as much as much for raising questions and conducting in depth investigations at the district level. The longitudinal data now available with the ASER team can be used to discern various inter-provincial and inter-district comparative patterns. These should be documented and in-depth investigations can be designed to develop useful and policy relevant insights about ASER findings.

A glance at the citations of ASER India shows that its results are being referenced in a variety of publications on varied topics related to education. In Pakistan, the results of ASER are so far largely mobilized in the comparative studies of public and private schools. The comparative studies of public and private schools, as I have also argued in an earlier article¹, are have had the unfortunate effect of making the performance of public schools a reference point for the performance of private schools. When interpreted in this manner, such comparisons have created a dynamic in which both types of schools are framed by a futile debate that does not support improvement in either type of school. Data produced by ASER could also be used to generate debate about the performance of public schools independently of the private schools. Districts and schools that work could be compared with those that were not performing well. Further data could be collected from households, where children are sent to the schools operating under Public Private Partnership (PPP) agreements. Opinions about such schools suggest promise of improving public schools without through PPPs. In a nutshell, there are various ways arrangements under which the public schools have also been shown to work and it is important to gain more knowledge about the PPP arrangements. Insights developed through such studies can be used to inform the efforts to improve the public schools.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to once again congratulate the team of dedicated professionals who organize the publication of ASER. Conducting a high quality nationwide household survey is a daunting task, especially under the current security conditions in Pakistan. Yet, for this team no challenge has been big enough to become an excuse for a delay in the development of this publication. Congratulations to them on successful completion of the ASER 2013!

¹ Muzaffar, I. (2013). Public Private Comparisons: Can they help us improve the quality of both public and private schools Annual Status of Education Report 2012 (pp. 16-17): ASER.