Learning from ASER for Post-2015 Education Goals

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Globally, 250 million children are not learning the basics in reading and mathematics. Around half of these children have spent at least four years in school, suggesting that they are receiving an extremely poor quality of education (UNESCO, 2014)[1]. Children who are disadvantaged due to circumstances at birth are most likely to be amongst those who are not learning, whether because they are born into poor households, live in rural areas, have a disability, or are girls. It is, therefore, vital that post-2015 education goals focus on ensuring that all children, regardless of circumstances, complete primary school and are learning the basics.

The global pattern of learning inequalities is reflected in the experience of different countries around the world. Yet the ability to hold policymakers to account for these failures, and provide them with guidance on potential solutions, has been stifled by the lack of sufficient data on learning outcomes. In recent years, ASER Pakistan, along with partner surveys in India and countries in sub-Saharan Africa, has provided fresh perspectives into the scale of education challenges. These data have been significant in informing both national planning and the scale of the global learning crisis and, by extension, the framing of post-2015 goals.

The 2014 Pakistan ASER data reiterate the findings from previous years: namely that around a quarter of children who reach grade 5 in rural Pakistan cannot read sentences, a task that they should have been able to achieve by grade 2. It is striking that there has been little change in learning levels over the past three years.

It is important to delve deeper into these data to understand who is in school and, amongst these children, who is learning. Our recent analysis using ASER data identifies some striking results (Alcott and Rose, 2015)[2]. Firstly, in terms of school access, while the vast majority of rich girls and boys in rural Pakistan are in school, over 40% of poor, rural girls aged 10-12 have never even been to school.

ASER data further show that private schooling is a growing phenomenon in Pakistan: Between 2013 and 2014, the proportion of children enrolled in these schools has increased from 20% to 24%. However, our analysis shows that there is a distinction in who gets access to private schooling. Amongst those surveyed, only around 10% of those in school from the poorest households in rural areas are in private schools, compared with 40% of those from the richest households. In addition, there is a clear gender divide amongst the poorest. After controlling for other factors, in rural Pakistan, the poorest girls are 31% less likely to attend private schools than are the poorest boys.

Secondly, ASER data provide key insights into who is learning. Amongst 10-12 year olds in rural government schools, who should have reached grade 5, one-third cannot read sentences. While those in rural private schools are better, it is still a cause for concern that more than one-fifth of children in these schools cannot achieve this task, which they would be expected to have reached by grade 2. Overall, wealth is of far greater importance than whether a child is in a government or private school. More rich children in government schools are learning than are poor children in private schools. And within both government and private schools, poorer children are around three times more likely to be unable to read a paragraph than richer children in the same type of school.

There could be a number of explanations for the wealth gap in learning. One possibility that is commonly put forward is that children from richer households are more likely to be able to pay for private tuition to compensate for the poor quality of schooling. Our analysis shows that this is indeed the case in rural Pakistan: 18% of rich boys having access to private tuition compared to just 3% of poor girls. However, private tuition still does not wipe out wealth differences in learning, suggesting that other factors are important. The poorest performing groups of richer children (those at government schools who do not receive private tuition) outperform the best performing groups of poorer children (those at private schools who do receive private tuition).

[1] UNESCO, 2014. Education for All Global Monitoring Report. Teaching and Learning: Quality for All. Paris: UNESCO.
[2] Alcott, B. and P. Rose, 2015 'Schools and learning in rural India and Pakistan: who goes where, and how much are they learning?' Prospects

Overall, our analysis of ASER Pakistan data draws attention to the need for policymakers to focus their attention on government schools given that this is not only where the majority of the poorest children are studying, but also where learning levels are lowest. The fact that rich children in government schools are learning indicates that we ought not to dismiss out-of-hand the role that government schools can play.

Given evidence of this kind from ASER and related sources on low levels of learning, post-2015 education goals need to give greater emphasis to tracking progress on learning outcomes, with an emphasis on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. ASER tools can provide a sound basis for the design of measuring learning outcomes for this purpose. Part of the beauty of ASER is that the tools are simple to use, and that it is straightforward to communicate their findings – prerequisites for development goals.

It is, of course, also important that the data is reliable and valid. Recent work comparing ASER India data with the country's national achievement survey data shows that they do indeed meet the necessary standards[3]. Furthermore, ASER data has the additional benefit of differentiating between weaker learners, those who cannot read a sentence or a paragraph, for example. By contrast, national assessments often cater more towards those who are able to perform better on the tests, and so are not as informative for learning lessons on who is being left behind.

In sum, ASER tools and their data play a key role in shaping priorities for post-2015 goals, and in measuring progress towards these goals. Learning lessons from ASER will be a vital contribution to ensuring that world leaders fulfill their promises that all children, regardless of circumstance, are learning the basics by 2030.

[3] Comparison of ASER and NCERT's National Achievement Survey (NAS)–Class V: http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Bottom%20Panel/Key%20Docs/nas_stdvvs_aser.pdf