

# The journey of ASER: Some reflections for action

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When a group of forty people met at the first ASER preparatory workshop organized by South Asian Forum for International Development (SAFED) in August 2008, there were mixed sentiments – few of us enticed by the simplicity and magic of ASER India tools and stories were adamant that it can be done, at least we should give it a try. Others were sceptical about the practicality of doing household-based learning levels measurements at such a wide scale in a limited time. Yet there were those who rejected the very idea favouring a more conventional “classroom” based testing and “sanctity of research”. I distinctly remember an observer from an International Agency declared ASER methodology was akin to snake charmer, asserting that just because it was simple and participatory, it did not qualify as scientific research. It is for proving that citizens can come together and work in a collective sustained manner, more than any other thing, why ASER Pakistan becomes a success.

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has now become a familiar name not just in country level educational discourses, but also at international and global levels. The power of citizen-led learning assessment, momentum of multiple countries coming together and sharing their expertise and experience, euphoria of carrying out learning assessment at massive scale with limited resources, ASER family is a force to reckon with in the South-South region. With Global Monitoring Report and UNESCO Institute of Statistics linked to the ASER data sets and cards for thematic and disaggregated measurement of education indicators, academia and research community internationally has also endorsed the value and uniqueness of ASER initiative. Of course, a lot of credit goes to Pratham and ASER India team for not only sharing their methodology and expertise, but also their indefatigable spirit that became an inspiration for Pakistan and other countries who launched and persisted with ASER.

From 2008 to 2015, ASER has continuously generated information on students' learning and other aspects of educational system that was current, easy to understand and use, accessible to a wide range of audiences and stakeholders, and previously non-existent. The role of ASER in bringing the focus of policy debates on core learning issues cannot be overstated. Before ASER, a national dataset that could inform about learning levels of school age population was not available despite the

various institutional reforms and initiatives. While federal and provincial education departments compiled educational statistics such as number of teachers, institutions and enrolments, there was no way of understanding whether those enrolled are actually learning anything. ASER's diagnosis of learning issues highlighted the enormity of educational challenge as well as the need to go beyond the prescriptive formulaic solutions.

Going beyond the scope of a diagnostic survey, ASER also dismantled well-entrenched myths (often backed by commissioned research) while highlighting the forgotten issues. For instance, over a decade, private education was presented as an alternative and only solution for quality education. ASER findings cleared this misconception as the learning levels of children attending private schools were only marginally better (52% students of grade 5 cannot read story in Urdu/Pashto/Sindhi as compared to 67% in public schools as per ASER 2015 findings), and that too because with higher fee was paid. Moreover, 25-31% of private school students surveyed were taking additional tuitions. Teachers' attendance, physical facilities, multi-grade classes are some of the other aspects where secondary level private schools struggled more than public schools.

Early Childhood Education is another area in which ASER findings demolished systemic propaganda. Many official documents including the National Education Policy 2009 perpetuated the myth that the gross enrolment for Early Childhood Education has reached 99% when in fact, it was not even accounted for in the annual census. ASER highlighted that over 90% of children of age 3 and nearly 70% at age 5 remain un-enrolled across Pakistan while only 35% children of age 5 attend any kind of pre-service facility, majority of which attend public sector (which ironically is neither separately budgeted nor accounted for).

Another significant albeit unintended service of ASER is how it demystified research fulfilling the urgency and need for applied research sorely missing in education sector. Research initiatives on education, despite being few and far between, were perceived as “experts” jurisdiction. The notion of common citizens involved in research aimed at policy reforms, that too in voluntarily capacity, was unheard of in the education sector. During its

journey, ASER galvanized tens of thousands volunteers and built their understanding of ethics and norms of conducting research, learning assessment and reporting the findings to community members.

With the year for achieving Millennium Development Goals, ASER is also concluding. Before initiating the second generation ASER, it is also critical to take account of aspects where ASER has not been fully impactful. One such area is the feedback loop to the communities and commitment to improve the state of schooling and learning conditions for the children. Looking at Indian experience, this is a particularly strong area with multitude of instances where parents, concerned individuals and community organizations have been shaken by low learning levels of their children and sprung into action. Though ASER Baithaks aimed at similar response, however, Pakistan did not witness any dramatic instance let alone many of them where some concrete measure is taken. Passive acceptance of the findings is what we have largely seen across communities despite the increased interest in what is going on in the school or with their children. Partly it can be attributed to the general apathy, however, partly, it also calls for deepening the engagement with the communities and co-crafting ways of improving the learning conditions. The onus is not just on ASER team but all the civil society organizations and community groups that have partnered in the process of collecting information – the role needs to go beyond being the bearer of bad news. It is the moral and professional responsibility to ignite hope and cultivate options and solutions that will change the immediate learning conditions and systems for children.

A similar thrust on accountability at policy level is also required. Attending the ASER Report launch, few speeches or even endorsing the findings by including them in Economic Survey of Pakistan or different official websites is not enough. It will still qualify as passive, knee-jerk response to something as crucial and far-reaching as learning achievement. Year after year, ASER report has highlighted the supply-side issues, how the system is failing whole generation of children - those who are out of school, those who are attending state or non-state educational facilities. However, with all the legislations and evidence that can be needed, the response has been next to negligible. To use an analogy used by my esteemed colleague Dr. Irfan Muzzafar, it is like a patient is getting highly expensive diagnostic tests reports for free which tell the disease and its intensity, yet the patient is not paying heed to the advice. Policy makers, Elected-representatives and politicians and most importantly, educational bureaucracy and administration (including head teachers and teachers) are getting state-of-the-art research on learning for free, and there is little evidence of interest and responsibility to take any positive action whatsoever. With five years of evidence-based advocacy, it is fairly clear that dialogues, dissemination, communication, advocacy will not dent (let alone impact) the system and push the decision makers towards taking responsibility. A path has to be carved out which ensures accountability leading to action. That is the challenge not only for next generation ASER tools but every citizen of Pakistan.

