

# ASER Pakistan-2008-2015: Who counts-who does not-A journey of progress and challenges!

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The first encounter with ASER Pakistan (rural) in 2008 not too far from Lahore is unforgettable. Against the rich green rice fields stood the mud and 'pucca' homes of citizens innocently engaged in the pursuit of 'education', but firm in their belief that this was an important passport to a better life. Inside the homes the diversity encountered is equally etched in my mind, in terms of wealth, different abilities, aspirations, hope and despair. The citizens of one geography had welcomed citizens from other geographies, opening doors and hearts to investigating 'how their children learnt and how they could improve'. This was an important opening; Since 2008/9, 421,735 doors have been opened in this journey; 1,271,606 children assessed; 29,168 (70% government & 30% private schools) school profiles collected; 42,874 volunteers mobilized (mostly youth) to become part of an important social movement for education transformation. As many have said earlier the 'invisible became visible' through ASER and many others in Pakistan created more citizen led evidence based accountability drives (Alif Ailaan; I-SAPs; Pakistan Coalition for Education (PCE); Education Youth Ambassadors)

ASER's instruments of inquiry at the household, child and school level have stood the test of time, from 2009 to 2015 as an annual provocation and dissemination to create demand for an evidence based culture of reflection, planning and action, be it citizens or government. Creating culture and mind shifts has been the hardest part of the journey for altered pathways for education, placing learning at the centre as core enterprise for societal sustainability.

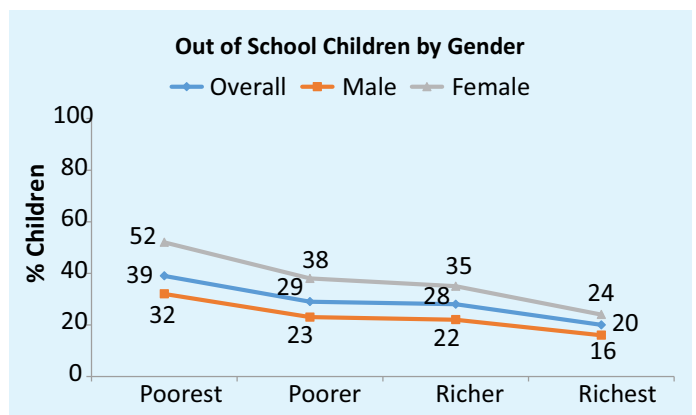
Citizen led assessments now conducted in 9 countries of the world have made a mark as a genre of testing that is non-invasive, low cost and high impact (depends upon how you want to measure impact). This genre of annual nationwide inquiry builds layers of evidence stacked against household and school characteristics as a call for action at the parental, societal and state level.

ASER Pakistan (2009-2015) has measured:

- Children's education across varied school systems –access
- Children's learning across subjects –quality
- Girls and boys access and learning –equity
- Parents education level – intergenerational learning
- Children participating in tuitions and coaching
- Children's disability trends
- Mother tongue spoken at home and preferred medium of instruction
- Household wealth (through proxy indicators)
- School characteristics –facilities by type of school
- Multi-grade teaching
- Attendance of children and teachers by type of school
- Teachers' qualifications by type of school

From 2008/2009 to 2015 when the ASER sample grew from 11 (pilot) to 146 districts in 2015, we have seen some repeated trends that need attention. The attention is urgent now in the wake of our national and global endorsements of article 25 A right to education for 5-16 year olds as a fundamental constitutional right, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and SDG –Goal 4 on education; both committed to learning across life or from early childhood education to tertiary, technical and alternative learning for ALL.

**ASER 2015 continues to inform us that wealth matters.** The children at the bottom of the poorest quartile, no matter where they are, will twice as likely remain out of



<sup>1</sup> Peoples Action for Learning (PAL) Network, collective for citizen led assessment ([www.palnetwork.org](http://www.palnetwork.org))

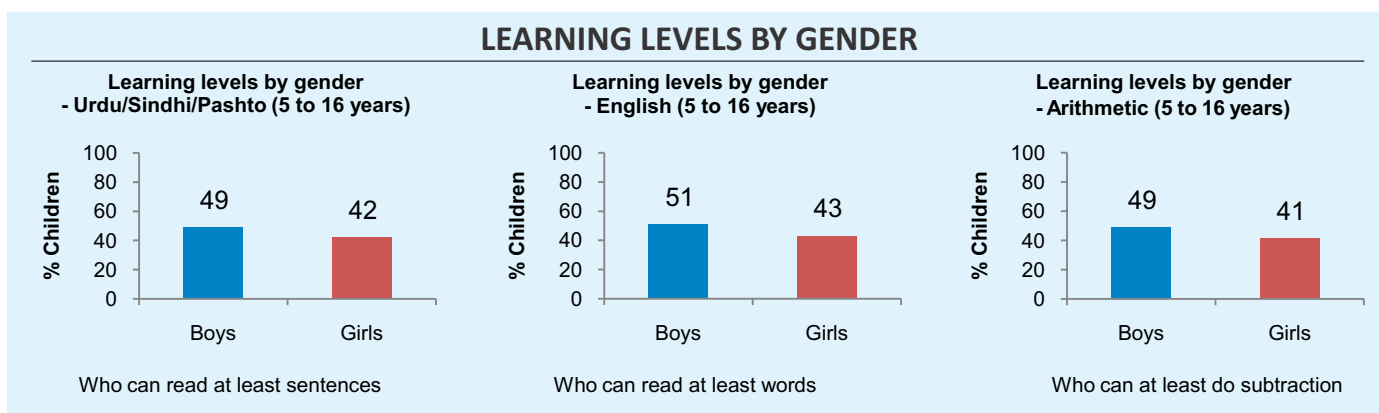
school as those from the richest quartile. It is more worrying to observe that the girls from the poorest quartile are 20% points more likely to remain out of school (52%) than their male counterparts (32%). It is clear we have to work harder, deeper and more intensively with those who are most likely to be left out –the poorest- the energy and resource has to be targeted for all players. ASER and the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) safety net program can join hands for precise targeting. A more aggressive and bigger waseela –e-taaleem program is needed to ensure that entitlements are met.

**Building Constituencies around Learning -ASER as a Political Tool for Entitlements:** ASER has upgraded the space for action by identifying the 'hot spots' for attention and progress. The gender disaggregated data set not only paints a picture for the most marginalized children but also illustrates learning achievements for boys versus girls (figures below). The case for addressing the learning needs of the poorest girls should be the highest priority followed by the poorest boys to ensure that learning and transition from one grade to the next go hand in hand for the 'excluded'. Can Pakistan continue to afford this level of vulnerability- a highly perforated and porous system of education, that has upgraded education as a fundamental right through Article 25 A? How will transition be ensured for ALL children 5-16 years of age from pre-primary to primary and post primary? Can we encourage governments/politicians to especially target the poorest in every district and local constituency? That is our lowest hanging fruit, or our 'sweet spot' for showing results. That is where addressing equity will bear the highest return to investments; it can be measured and reported annually to

**Enrolment Trends by Type of Schools – Is the Public Sector Responding Faster?**

Whilst a lot may not have changed on learning there is a trend that is worth sharing that may be widely shared and applauded as a story to shout about! In ASER 2015 we not only see a modestly improved enrolment of 6-16 years from 79% to 80.5%, but after many years the public private enrolment proportion records highest shift of 6% points in favor of public sector and drop in private sector size including madrassah enrolment that reveals a modest declining trend from 2.7 in 2012 to 2.0% in 2015. Is this good news or a cause for concern?

For many years research on public and private trends (ASER/LEAPS) reported headlines about higher learning outcomes in private sector even when controlled for differences. There has been an exaggerated bias in our conversations on 'what is happening right in private sector' and exploring aggressive policy options that support a popular interpretation of the state as a 'financier enabler' and not a preferred provider of education services. However, it is refreshing to see that in provinces backed by active political champions and political will there is a push for a better performing public sector pushing for implementation of sector plans, targets and stocktaking. According to ASER 2015 attendance rate of teachers across the two sectors has been more or less bridged (public 89.2% and private 91%); teachers' presence was the one big factor to account for differences across learning outcomes across public and private schools. Missing facilities in public sector schools have also witnessed an overall increase in provision as recorded by ASER 2015 data. The students' attendance rate (primary)



the public for accountability and action. ASER helps to pin point groups by gender, class and geography, targeting households, villages and district constituencies. As we brace for the 2018 elections, there is a defined opportunity to showcase swelling vote banks around learning gains!

has improved (public sector 84% private 90%), but what continues to drag this indicator in public sector schools is students abstaining from attendance in Sindh schools. Their attendance rate has dropped further from 68% in 2014 to 65% in 2015. Similarly, from 41% of children enrolled in ECE classes in 2013 the number has slipped to 37% in 2015. Can Pakistan afford this lack of investment

and attention to its youngest for sustained improvement at primary and post primary levels? This can only be reversed with improved confidence of parents and children in the quality of public sector services right at the outset.

Looking at access, affordability and enrolment, public sector still remains the largest education service provider in rural areas and this emerging trend can act as a key performance indicator to accelerate public sector efforts, morale and political will to improve its services. Therefore public sector provision needs to be strengthened and better resourced focusing on improvement in quality of learning through partnerships and innovative approaches that teach at the right level; recruitment of sufficient and trained teachers and higher number of learning contact hours in these schools. This comprehensive whole school and systems based approach combined with prioritizing districts/sub-districts, collaboration with BISP and intermediary partners and above all with communities most in need will produce even higher outcomes and boost confidence in public sector provision committed to

ALL children in schools, learning better and staying longer. ASER Pakistan has cast a footprint that has been leveraged by many partners as an open source, using the raw data and report cards for planning, research and policy in Pakistan and globally. ASER, through Idara-e-Taleem-o\_Aagahi (ITA) and its alliance partners, has accomplished the first important goal as an 'attention getter'. What needs to be worked out now are the learning solutions or moving from evidence to action. ITA is actively preparing, along with its partners second generation ASER or ASER II that resonates well with the challenges of article 25 A as a comprehensive right to quality education and SDG -Goal 4 articulated so compellingly, "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning

