ASER's contribution to ensuring learning for all is achieved by 2030 in Pakistan

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As part of the new set of sustainable development goals, world leaders have committed to ensuring all children and young people, regardless of their background, acquire relevant learning outcomes by 2030. This is just one aspect of an ambitious set of education targets, but is vital as a first step on the ladder to others. A child who is unable to read or write, or do basic mathematics, is unlikely to acquire other important skills that are needed to enable them to achieve their potential, or to contribute productively to society.

ASER Pakistan data provide an invaluable resource to understand the extent of the learning crisis, and to give a focus on what needs to be done. Importantly, the data enable an identification of the groups who need particular support to ensure they are not left behind. The latest ASER data from 2015 present a stark picture of the challenge ahead. They show that, by age 6, when children should be in grade 2, hardly any can do division – whether rich or poor (Figure 1).

Figure 1: In Pakistan, learning gaps between rich and poor widen as children get older
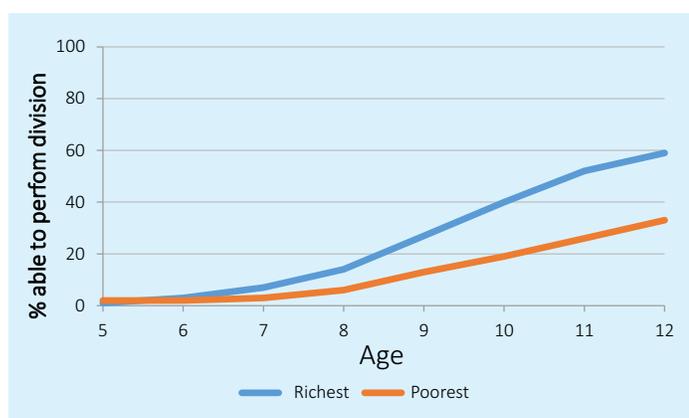
Source: ASER-Pakistan, 2015

After age 6, some of the richest begin to have a chance to learn. However, even their progress is gradual. By 12 years, the age at which children should have completed lower secondary school in Pakistan, still only 59% of the richest are able to do division.

The situation is even more dire for the poorest. The increase in the proportion achieving the basics in mathematics is much slower such that, by the age of 12, just one in three are able to do division. This leaves two out of three young people from poor households who are still unable to reach a basic standard in mathematics which they should have achieved by age 6 (when they should have spent two years in school). It further results in a widening gap between the richest and poorest who are able to achieve the basics.

The analysis illustrates the long way to go to ensure all children even achieve one of the most modest of the sustainable development targets. In particular, it puts the spotlight on the need for reforms to start in the early years of primary schooling when learning gaps begin to form. It also highlights the importance of focusing attention on the poorest who have the furthest distance to travel if they are all to be able to achieve even the most basic skills by 2030.

As ASER data are collected at the household level, they provide important insights into all children's learning, not just those in school – testing only those in the classroom (as is the case with many international, regional and national assessments) is likely to under-estimate the scale of the problem. According to the latest ASER data, around 40% of the poorest children of primary-school age are not in school in Pakistan. These children would be missing from school-based surveys, and yet we know they are least likely to have achieved the basics.

It is of course not enough just to identify the scale of the learning crisis. ASER's focus on community-based solutions is equally important. Putting the data into the hands of disadvantaged members of the community helps to give them the power of information to hold schools and government officials to account, and to work together with teachers and others to identify strategies to provide their children with opportunities to learn. Such strategies are essential and need to be prioritized if we are to accelerate progress such that no child is left behind by 2030.