

LEARNING LIES AT THE HEART OF RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND SDG 4

'Which then of the bounties of your Lord will you deny?' *Surah 55, Al-Quran*

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The most critical of assets for any country are its 'human resources' and Pakistan has these in abundance. Sadly its 'learning needs' remain far from met.

From 2008 to 2016 the ASER citizen-led learning accountability juggernaut has been mobilizing tens of thousands of volunteers each year, trained in rigorous household based survey skills knocking on over 80-90,000 doors, engaging one on one with children and informing the country on where we stand on basic learning with respect to languages and arithmetic. Is the evidence triggering action? The survey is pitched to grades 2 and 3 competencies only, corresponding with the SDG indicator 4.2.1 for tracking learning at the lower primary level. ASER is also a good barometer on Article 25 A of the constitution which declared education as a fundamental right in 2010. Seven years since, laws have been passed in each province so that ALL children aged 5-16 are provided free, compulsory quality education. Each year ASER Pakistan informs us that 'learning' is the most unresolved area of attention. Yes, the very same 'learning' agenda which lies at the heart of the education and capability enterprise, and is often seen as an enabling equalizer. And yet for generations it remains a never-elusive goal in Pakistan. Why is this so? If not learning, then what are the elements in our education system that seem to be more upward looking? If so, how clear are the trends and how important are they in the transformation journey for our society? Let us add up from ASER 2016 rural results.

ASER 2016 reveals important trends covering over 255,000 children from 144 districts.

NATIONAL (Rural)

Children (3-16 Years) 
255,269

Districts Covered 
144

Total Schools 
5,540

Villages/Blocks 
4,205

Govt.
4,019
Private
1,521

Households 
83,324

The ASER toolkit comprises of a household survey, learning assessment tools and school questionnaire (public and private). This year, ASER 2016 extended last year's disability survey in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and delved deeper within households and school facilities. The areas covered were trends on use of ICTs, alternative energy energy/solar panels, access to social safety nets and voter registration patterns. These dimensions not only give us better evidence on some of the SDGs/SDG 4 indicators and inclusion but also allow us to look strategically into the changing lives of citizens' through their 'voice' and to make connections between households and schools.

Learning: In Urdu/Sindh/Pashto, 52% children in grade 5 could read at story level dipping from 55% in 2015! For English it was 46% (49% in 2015) and for arithmetic, it was 48% in 2016 compared to 50% in 2015. In 2015 there was hope for the learning accountability movement, when ASER recorded an overall improvement of 7-10% across all areas compared to the 2014 results. Sadly this progress could not be sustained into 2016. ASER 2016 reveals that only in AJK there was a substantial improvement in English and Arithmetic of 17% and 29% respectively from 2015 results! Punjab too registered a slight increase of 1% in Arithmetic over 2015 scores, but all other provinces and areas reveal a slippage. Compared to government, private schools continued to perform better in 2016, as they have done over the years.

Shift in public/private enrolment: In AJK, significant learning improvements also coincide with a major shift in enrolment from government to private schools by 13%, with private school enrolment up from 37% to 50% as a proportion of total enrolment! Are the learning gains a coincidence? Compared to AJK, ICT and Punjab are the only two areas that registered a positive shift in enrolment into public sector schools from private sector schools by 22% and 3% respectively. Public sector schools in KP and Sindh maintained their share of total enrolment at 2015 levels (73% and 88% respectively). Enrolment in government schools of FATA and Balochistan suffered a 4-5% decline, a trend all governments are endeavouring to reverse with better performing state schools attracting more children.

Enrolment 5-16 years: ASER 2016 rural data reveals that enrolment remained static at 81% when compared to 2015. This is unfortunate as the SDG 4 goal and targets have been fully endorsed by the Government of Pakistan and its provinces/areas are committed to aligning their sector plans to the promise made both for SDG 4 (12 years of schooling) and Article 25 A (the right to education of 5-16 year olds). However, AJK, Punjab, Sindh, GB and FATA all recorded increases in enrolment ranging between 1.4% to 4.5%! Compared to 2015, Balochistan suffered a setback with a 7% fall (65%) in enrolment whilst KP dipped very slightly by 1% (86%) and ICT by 4% to 94% in 2016. Overall public sector schools enrolled 74.1% of all students, a drop from 76% in 2015 while the private sector's share is 26% rural children in 2016 (24% in 2015).



Early Childhood Education (ECE): This sub-sector has been historically tracked by ASER. From 2014 when ECE enrolment was recorded at 39%, it declined to 37% in 2015 and in 2016 it is 36% in rural Pakistan. Overall, government schools have witnessed a reduction of 7.5% (63%) in enrolment for ECE, whereas private sector has 37% of total enrolment with a commensurate enhancement of 7.5%

since 2015! ICT, GB, FATA and Sindh have recorded an increase in overall ECE enrolment from 15% (ICT) to 2% (Sindh) whilst Balochistan remains static at 22%. These low enrollment rates are a matter of concern. On the one hand there are laws/policy/framework and sector plans 'owning' ECE for foundational learning and as a part of Right to Education Article 25-A laws (ICT, Punjab and Sindh) and, on the other hand data reveals sluggish ECE enrolment patterns, with universal coverage committed to in SDG 4.2 target with clear indicators that cover quality, learning and access with equity in preparation for primary schooling.

Equity in ASER 2016: So far ASER 2016 reveals a mixed profile on quality/learning and enrolment. Equity is bound to suffer when this data is juxtaposed across household income levels. The poorest always suffer and, amongst them girls suffer the most even within the same income bracket!

ASER 2016 results highlight that the poorest quartile has the highest level of the children enrolled in government schools (77%) whereas the remaining 19% of the children are enrolled in private sector school. On the other hand, the richest quartile has the highest number of children enrolled in private schools (53%) and the lowest percentage of children in government schools (47%). Poorest quartile has the lowest learning levels (19% Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto, 17% English, and 16% Math) and richest quartile has the highest learning levels (44% Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto, 43% English, and 39% Math). 14% of females from the poorest quartile can read a story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto as compared to 22% of males from the same income group. 11% of females from the poorest quartile can do two-digit division sums and 12% can read sentences in English, whereas 20% of their male counterparts can read sentences in English and 19% can do two-digit division sums. The gender gap narrows up the income ladder; 43% females from the richest quartile can read a story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto, 42% can read sentences in English and 38% can do two-digit division sums, whereas 44% of the males from the richest quartile can read a story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto, 44% can read sentences in English and 40% can do two-digit sums. The gender dimension seems to be the most vulnerable for the poorest and the most potent area for progress.

Another discernible pattern is of where enrolment and learning gains at high enrolment thresholds. Does enrolment, when sustained at 85% and above for girls, translates into higher learning for girls? In ICT girls' learning levels have outstripped boys consistently in 2015

and 2016! With enrolment at over 85%, the learning gaps get narrower, as also seen in Punjab and AJK; it has implications for offsetting income inequality and learning inequities.

Girls Enrolment: Overall girls' enrolment (rural) has been increasing since 2014, from 35% to 38% in government schools and from 37% to 40% in 2016 in private schools. Albeit the increase is slow and girls remain behind boys in both government and private schools.







Education and the Political Narratives: The education narratives will be enriched no doubt this year through evidence from ASER data, as political parties craft their election promises in manifestoes, revisiting the education agenda and priorities. What is of concern to the ASER movement of Pakistani citizens is, whether the parties are at all serious about learning and quality? They promised

budget enhancement from 2.2% to 4-6% in the current political cycle as well as promises relating to many other areas of attention. However, achievements remain mixed; with provincial budgets substantially raised to 20-28% for education, and in some places missing facilities and teacher presence have improved, but performance spending remains a challenge and learning is the one milestone whose time is yet to come!

Facilities for Enabling & Safe Learning: Looking at the table below, the clear winners on facility improvement over 2015 are Punjab, KP and ICT while the rest remain below 80% coverage. Punjab has outstripped private sector facilities record and KP is not far behind! This is good news; safe and conducive environments will affect learning across public and private schools positively.









SCHOOL FACILITIES 2016

	GOVERNMENT PRIMARY (%)						PRIVATE PRIMARY (%)					
	Grants %	Useable Water	Useable Toilet	Boundary Wall	Electricity	Solar Panels	Grants %	Useable Water	Useable Toilet	Boundary Wall	Electricity	Solar Panels
National	37	60	54	65	62	8	4	85	84	81	80	11
Punjab	81	95	96	94	92	9	5	95	91	94	90	12
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	63	85	82	86	72	23	1	95	92	96	82	19
Sindh	30	61	43	63	54	7	14	86	82	82	77	12
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	0	69	67	59	52	1	3	81	86	69	64	1
Islamabad-ICT	25	50	75	50	100	14	—	100	100	100	92	15
Gilgit-Baltistan	36	41	48	55	67	3	8	77	70	66	62	2
Federally Adm Tribal Areas	11	68	47	78	60	6	0	100	100	88	79	40
Balochistan	3	14	11	30	28	1	0	53	53	74	65	5

SCHOOL FACILITIES 2016	GOVERNMENT (%)			PRIVATE (%)		
						
	Smart Boards	Computer Labs	Solar Panels	Smart Boards	Computer Labs	Solar Panels
National	24	33	8	31	30	11
Punjab	40	59	9	33	31	12
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	19	27	23	29	32	19
Sindh	20	11	7	33	53	12
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	2	20	1	12	18	1
Islamabad-ICT	100	67	14	50	67	15
Gilgit-Baltistan	23	27	3	38	39	2
Federally Adm Tribal Areas	9	11	6	33	8	40
Balochistan	6	7	1	0	21	5

Household Facilities & Practices: At HH level, data collected on technology used (cell phones, SMS, WhatsApp, computers and laptops), solar panels presence,

social safety nets and voter registration brings out some interesting trends that must be factored in during our discussion on learning improvement challenges.

Household Facilities								
	Mobiles Users	SMS Users	WhatsApp Users	Computers /Laptops	Solar Panels	Social Safety Nets*	Female Voters	Male Voters
National	69	56	26	17	20	18	89	93
Punjab	77	57	30	20	13	8	89	93
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	74	61	29	24	29	22	90	94
Sindh	67	44	15	7	12	23	91	93
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	88	79	29	27	5	12	97	97
Islamabad-ICT	87	87	46	43	15	3	92	96
Gilgit-Baltistan	66	74	22	19	9	18	99	100
Federally Adm Tribal Areas	52	55	30	21	52	19	82	95
Balochistan	56	43	23	9	23	11	87	89

Looking at the composite evidence of 'learning assessment', household facilities, trends in use of technology and school facilities, is learning being explored too narrowly? Households are making practical, logical and progressive decisions: they are enabled towards high voter registration (89% females and 93% males) accessing social safety nets (18% BISP¹, Akhuwat, and PSPA²), they use cell phones (69%), SMS (56%) and WhatsApp (26%) to communicate pragmatically, and have resorted to alternative energy sources (20% overall with FATA at 52%, KP at 29% and Balochistan at 23%) to improve the quality of their lives. The evidence from ASER 2016 highlights dimensions of 'voice and choice' by households through transactions extended by both the state and the market. The evidence reveals that citizens have benefitted from the state's deeper penetration in terms of access to political space (voter registration), and social safety net as options for offsetting poverty. However, also significantly important are market-driven facilities such as the availability of cell phones, cheap alternative energy sources to become efficacious for livelihoods and social inclusion. In rural Pakistan coverage through cell phones is in 69% of households, whereas 17% of households have computers or laptops and 18% of the households are covered by social safety nets. If these were to be spread to the poor and poorest what would be the possibilities to

influence and extend learning opportunity more optimally to households, the children, youth and adults more directly? After all, SDG 4 is about inclusion, equity and lifelong learning - where homes and schools must become the nexus of dynamic learning - these spaces have a high potential for innovations and absorption that may be tapped more optimally.

In nature, human resources are the most privileged and intelligent assets who must be recognized for the value addition they can create once they have been enabled; learning is no different. Learning spaces need to be multiplied through diverse platforms schools-homes-market-communities as a fundamental constitutional obligation of the state. The usage of ICTs and solar energy reveals powerful trends, even in the most unlettered and fragile households. Once such facilities are expanded to a critical mass and combined with human agency, learning spaces are bound to be multiplied. For the human resource opportunity to be realized fully in Pakistan, schools and households need to be brought closer. The triad of the politician, civil servant and citizen has a vital role to perform; the dots for human development need dynamic connections for learning gains across the socio-economic and political spectrum, redeeming the blessings as envisaged by nature!



¹ Benazir Income Support Program

² Punjab Social Protection Authority