

ASER 2019 - MILESTONE GAINS - BUT NO ROOM FOR COMPLACENCY

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ASER 2019 (rural) Pakistan is a milestone report for several reasons; it has become a non-rivalrous global public good, as a citizen led assessment with data at scale on learning, through nationwide capacity building and large networks (Education Commission 2018). Although, Pakistan is not out of the woods with complex 'learning crises', there is evidence revealing that there are signs of the needle moving, attributable to both demand and supply side efforts at the level of household/parents and the government. ASER trends from 2014-2019 are encouraging in terms of some upward movement on learning levels and independent choices being made by households to enroll children across public and private service delivery systems in rural areas. As a tracker of age group 5-16, ASER serves as a mirror to the fundamental right to education or Article 25 a of the constitution of Pakistan and SDG 4; its goal, target 4.1 and indicators in particular, 4.1.1.

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Target 4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Indicator 4.1.1 Proportion of children and young people: **(a) in grades 2/3;** (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex.

ASER 2019 is the first report since the SDG 4.1.1 indicator has been upgraded to Tier I or the highest classification of definition and measurement (Addis Ababa 2019). Tier I is achieved when the meaning of the indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards, and data are regularly produced by at least 50% of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant' (UN Stats; 2019). For ASER to be a contributor to such a classification is humbling since it was launched in 2009/10 in Pakistan. The ITA/ASER teams have made relentless efforts at local and global levels to ensure that learning for grades 2/3 is recognized as a vital assessment space for early detection of children at risk leading to actions for learning improvement. ASER Pakistan through its unique methodology and its first principles has been above all a call for action for primary caregivers/parents, communities and governments alike.

The ASER Tool is embedded in the principle of simplicity to be easily understood by all citizens, but by meeting rigorous requirements of capturing 'minimum proficiency levels (MPLs)' with clear descriptors for SDG 4.1.1 agreed globally. The latter need to be embraced by all assessment /education experts and SDG tracking units. These are presented below.

1. <https://www.r4d.org/wp-content/uploads/Investing-in-Knowledge-Sharing-to-Advance-SDG-4.pdf>

Descriptors & Minimum Proficiency Level Definitions for grades 2 & 3:

Grade 2 Students read and comprehend most of written words in an instrument given to them, particularly familiar ones, and extract explicit information from sentences.

Grade 3 Students read aloud written words accurately and fluently. They understand the overall meaning of sentences and short texts. Students identify the texts' topic.

Grade 2/3: Mathematics Students demonstrate skills in number sense and computation, shape recognition and spatial orientation, with an increase in proficiency between Grades 2 and 3. (UIS/Montoya 2019)

ASER 2019 Trends

Learning Levels 2014-2019, for grade 5, mapped to lower primary assessment tools (grade 2 level), have registered an improvement of 13% to 17% from 2014 to 2019 respectively. This is no mean overall achievement and must be celebrated. The challenges at sub-national levels deserve an urgent attention (Sindh: 44% children in grade 5 can read story in Urdu/Sindhi)

National (rural) Learning Gains Recorded for Grade 5 from 2014 to 2019

Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto (story):	from 46.4% in 2014 to 59.1 % in 2019
English (sentences)	from 42.3 % in 2014 to 55.4% in 2019
Arithmetic (2 digit division)	from 40.4% in 2014 to 56.9% in 2019

ASER 2019 presents, for the first time, formal reporting on learning with comprehension and numeracy with word problems. The good news is that children who manage learning better also do it deeper – e.g. amongst 59% children of class 5 who could read a story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto, more than 85% could answer questions related to the story orally.

Little room for complacency

Whilst we record and must celebrate better learning trends in Pakistan, ASER 2019 illustrates that 41% children in grade 5 cannot read simple story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto. More importantly if we look at learning at grade 8 or lower secondary 14% children are still unable to read a grade 2 level story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto. This is unacceptable, amplifying the call for action to the fundamental challenge that 'enrolment/schooling does not mean learning'!

ASER publishes and reports data on learning by grade as well that are part of the agreed global mapping for SDG 4.1.1. If we look at the learning levels in 2019 for grades 3, 5 and 8 for the ASER (grade 2 level learning tools), the national rural results are as follows:

Who can read (Class Wise % of Children)						
Class	Nothing	Letters	Words	Sentences	Story	Total
3	10.4	8.9	35.5	27.0	18.3	100
5	9.4	3.4	9.3	18.8	59.1	100
8	3.1	1.3	2.8	6.6	86.2	100

Pakistan has made notable gains but the fact that 14% in grade 8 and 41% in grade 5 and 82% in grade 3 cannot read a story with comprehension in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto is a major crisis. The learning crisis in these grades indicates a foundational learning gap for early years in the country education system (ECE and Grades 1 and 2)! It is time to give attention to the basics in literacy and numeracy at the right time, where children learn as much through social-emotional and cognitive nurturing reading to building of executive functions.

These trends resonate well and have been leveraged for the recent global term of “Learning Poverty” coined by the World Bank (2019) following on the heels of Human Capital Index (2018) as an attention getter to the ambition of learning targets to be achieved by 2030(SDG 4.1.1). For the ASER Pakistan team as well as all teams of the global South participating in citizen led assessments (Latin America, Africa and South Asia), the data has been well leveraged to produce the metric for 'Learning Poverty' by tracking learning for ALL 10 year olds in low and middle income countries who cannot read and understand a simple text, whether they are in school or out of school. Jamie Saavedra has raised a call for urgent attention to this “Silent Crisis” where governments have to urgently shift their focus, treating learning not as a consumption but an investment (2020).

Gender Gaps – Learning

Gender gap in learning continues: boys outperform girls (age 5-16 overall) in literacy and numeracy skills.

- 46% of boys and 38% of girls could read at least sentences in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto.
- 48% boys could read at least English words while 39% of girls can do the same.
- Similarly, 43% of boys were able to do at least subtraction whereas only 36% girls could do it.

Shifting Enrolment from Private to Public:

Enrolment choices at public and private facilities as recorded by ASER (rural) from 2014-2019, presents a clear shift in households opting for public sector schools; enrolment has increased from 70% in 2014 to 77% in 2019 with a commensurate decrease from 30% to 23% in private sector share! This trend speaks volumes for persistent government efforts over the past few years to improve public sector facilities, ensuring teachers' presence and merit based recruitments; this focus must remain front and center to the education enterprise in Pakistan.

Teacher Attendance Trends 2014-2019

Another nationwide effort by the public sector since the past 10 years has been of technology driven solutions for improved governance, through not just regular monitoring by third party school monitoring education assistants but also through

biometrics to ensure online capturing of who is in school and who is not! (teachers and support staff!). Technology driven and artificial intelligence driven initiatives neutralize human interpretations on accountability and transparency. The results have been encouraging sustained over the past three years with teachers presence in public sector schools overall at 89% and 89% at primary level compared to 89% overall and 89% at primary level in private schools. The closing of public private gap has been significant in teachers' presence across service providers, but must improve further.

Mothers with Primary Education (2014-2019) a rich untapped resource

Each time ASER field teams knock on the doors of random households in villages the enthusiasm of mothers and grandmothers has been refreshing as they are very interested in learning of the next generations, even if they themselves are not so literate! **They are the first port of call in ASER's citizen led household based one on one assessment methodology.** Mothers are always hovering over their children as the child friendly assessment is underway, anxious, but also reassured that someone is concerned about their children's learning. Since 2014 mothers with primary education has improved from 24% to 35% in 2019! This is a positive trend as mothers are the source of sustained demand for more and better schooling with quality learning for their children, both girls and boys.

ASER 2019 responded to the call by transgenders to ensure they are counted on learning: reaching 329, of which 80% were able to read story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto.

Health and Functioning

ASER 2019 probed deeper for disability cognizance by head teachers/teachers in schools and tracking disability. ASER 2019, as part of the school level survey, included a "Health and Disability" section under which the head teachers/teachers were asked a variety of questions pertaining to Children with Disabilities and Facilities for Children with Disabilities in their respective schools.

At the national level, 22.2% of the surveyed government schools were reported to be having children with disabilities while 16.6% of the private schools reported the same. in terms of gender, more boys (0.2% of total enrolled boys in government schools and 0.3% of total enrolled boys in private schools) were reported to be suffering from a disability when compared with girls (0.1% of total enrolled girls in government schools and 0.1% of total enrolled girls in private schools).

With regards to the types of disability as a percentage of schools with children with disabilities, the highest reported type was Physical (41.4%) followed by Behavioral (12.1%) and Multiple (11.8%).

Moreover, 2.1% of surveyed government schools and 2% of surveyed private schools had ramps regardless of whether these schools had any child with a disability enrolled in them. Similarly, 3.9% of surveyed government schools and 7% of surveyed private schools had disability-friendly toilets.

Hence, ASER 2019 is an unpacking, mapping and tracking instrument where the primary function is a call for action to improve learning for ALL children inclusively with equity, especially those who are most fragile by gender, geography, wealth and disability.

There are four takeaways from ASER 2019 on learning:

- We have improved in learning in grade 5 but the lower primary assessment tool reveals that learning remains fragile at grade 3 and even at grade 8. The learning crisis persists calling for URGENT ATTENTION at foundational levels ECE and grades 1 and 2.
- There is a clear shift in enrolment share from private to public schools – revealing that when government persists with positive interventions in facilities and better teacher recruitment and presence there are positive gains in citizens' choices.
- Investing in girls' education and that of young mothers is critical in Pakistan to not only reduce gender gaps for gender equality, but investing right for generational gains in learning and livelihoods.
- Over 20% of schools have Children with Disabilities. In order for these schools to become more inclusive, there is a need to ensure trained workforce, provide adequate disability-friendly facilities and support services.

