LEARNING POVERTY AND ASER 2019

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Thanks in part to the enormous efforts undertaken by the team behind ASER, the world has realized that there is a learning crisis. In low- and middle-income countries, 53% of children cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10. In Pakistan, this figure is substantially higher: 75% of children in Pakistan cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10. The World Bank calls attention to this problem by calling it 'learning poverty'. 'Learning poverty' bears some resemblance to economic poverty. Being 'learning poor' (i.e. not being able to read and understand a basic text) gives you several important constraints in life. Without being able to read by age 10, a child will not be able to learn much of the curriculum, will not be able to access government services, and will not even be considered for most formal jobs.

As you can see in Figure 1 below, learning poverty in Pakistan is higher than is predicted by Pakistan's level of economic development. In fact, there are several countries at similar levels of development that have virtually eliminated learning poverty (look at Vietnam, for instance). It is also substantially higher than the average of South Asia, which is at 58%.

Figure 1: 'Learning Poverty' and economic development (GDP per capita)
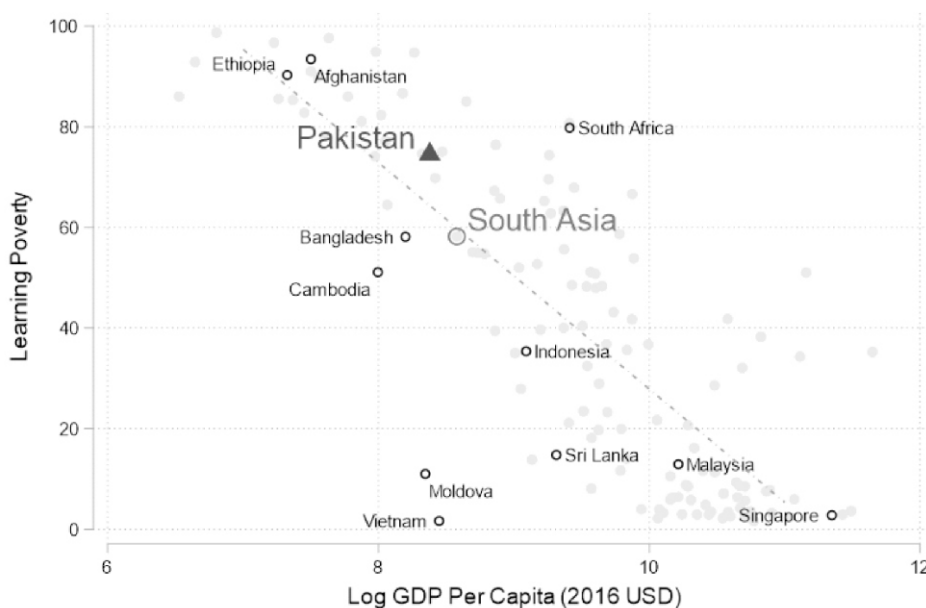

We should eliminate learning poverty, and I believe that we can, if only we take this issue seriously enough. Just like we aim to end hunger, stunting and extreme poverty by looking at the data and concentrating our efforts. In fact, eliminating learning poverty is a crucial step towards the broader goal of SDG 4, which aims to provide basic functional literacy and numeracy skills for all children. The World Bank has launched an agenda to at least cut the levels of learning poverty by half by 2030, and we hope that governments and civil society will join us in that effort.

I can think of at least three reasons why the 2019 data provided by ASER is invaluable towards eliminating learning poverty. First, ASER collects data on the two underlying factors of learning poverty: (a) the large out of school population, and (b) the low-quality education that children receive when they are in school. Secondly, it is the only dataset in Pakistan through which we can get a somewhat granular picture of learning poverty, considering that this covers all districts in the country. And thirdly, perhaps most importantly, the ASER team uses this data as a call to action. This is not data that is meant to sit on a hard-drive or in someone's desk drawer, it should be on the desk and in the minds of every policy-maker in Pakistan.

The data has told us that there is variation in geographies: in Punjab, learning poverty consistently hovers at around 50%, while learning poverty in Balochistan hovers at around 80%. But the main takeaway has been that learning levels remain consistently too low. There is little variation in learning levels between years, and where there is variation (e.g. in Sindh), there is no clear trend (see Figure 2). This means that learning levels will not improve magically: hard effort is needed to bend these figures downwards in the coming decade.

Figure 2:
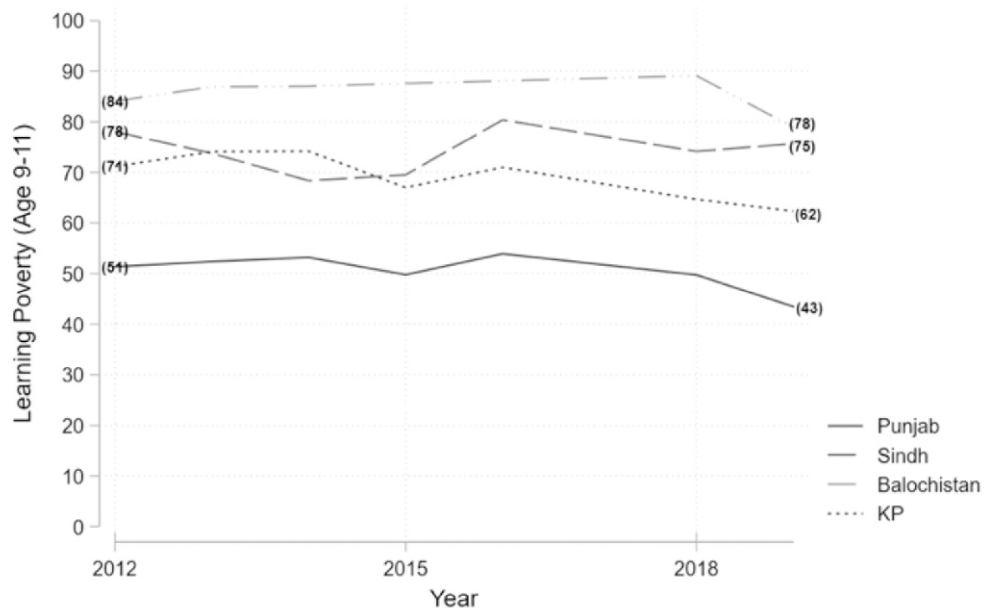
Source: ASER 2012-19 (Rural Pakistan Only)

The ASER data also has shown us that most children do learn to read, given sufficient time. By age 12, just over half of Pakistani boys and girls can read a basic paragraph. By age 16, nearly 80% of children can do so. This is a message of hope: children eventually do learn the language. Don't let anyone tell you that Pakistani children do not learn anything! The problem is that they do not receive the right instruction early enough.

Figure 3:
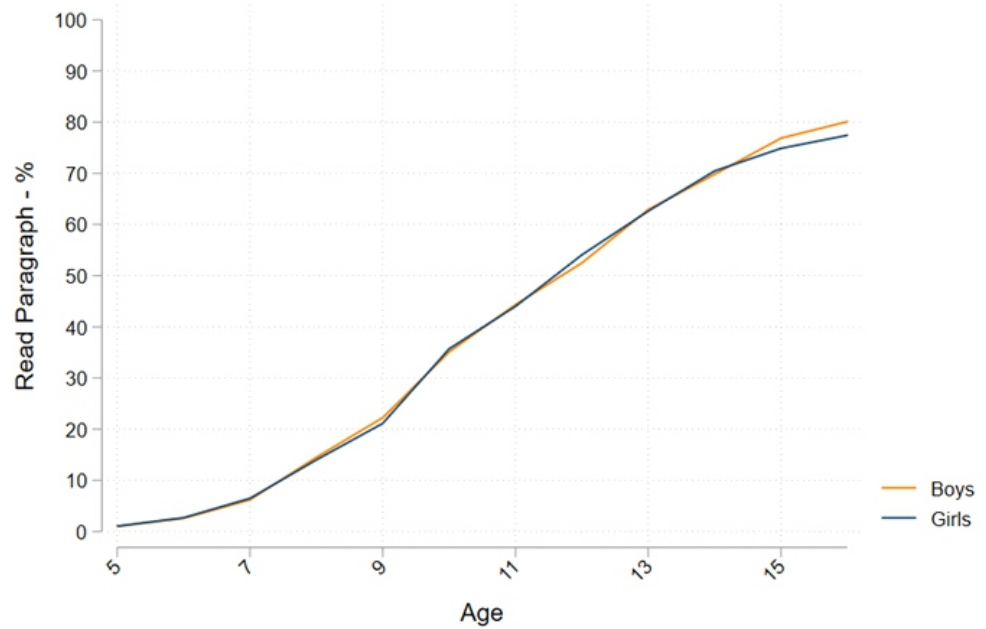
Source: ASER 2018

Learning to read at an appropriate age should be the core goal of education policy-makers in the coming years. Policy-makers seem to be converging on just such an agenda to improve the quality of schooling. This means more support for early learning, better instructional materials, better assessments, better management of service delivery to all children, safer and more inclusive schools, and most of all, better teaching in every classroom, especially in the poorest parts of Pakistan. This is a consciously broad agenda, from which we cannot prioritize (just think of how meaningless it would be to have a great teacher in school community that excludes the poor, or suffers from violence). This is the challenge that we face as a global community: implementing this agenda will require leadership from the highest political level down to every classroom.

But there are no shortcuts to achieving a learning revolution through better schooling. Let's remember that close to half of Pakistan's children grow up in illiterate families. Under-5 mortality rates (at 7%) and stunting (at 38% of all under 5 year-olds) are still extremely high. Even among the middle classes, Pakistani children do not learn the basics before entering schools, and do not have storybooks or picture-books to prepare them for the joy of reading. In this context, we cannot expect children to learn without first improving the schools.

In short, we desperately need the ASER data as a call to action and put it to use in our policies and programs. Researchers, policy-makers and civil society are all key users of the data. Datasets like this are generated through the generous participation of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of people. I would like to congratulate the ASER team for conducting another round of this invaluable survey, and will make sure to put the data to good use myself.