Journey of Early Childhood Education in ASER Pakistan: Access & Quality 2010-2017

ASER is a citizen-led, household-based, large-scale assessment which measures the access of children to schools (age 3-4 years) and gauges the learning level of children aging 5-16 years. ASER disaggregates data by age and class and measures the access and quality of education in ECE (age 3-8 years).
Global Goals for Early Childhood Education & Development

Jomtien Declaration (1990): “Learning begins at birth. This calls for early childhood care and initial education. These can be provided through arrangements involving families, communities, or institutional programs, as appropriate.”

Education for All (2000): “Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children”.

Post 2015 Education Goal (proposed): By 2030, at least x% of girls and boys are ready for primary school through participation in early childhood development programmes, including one year of free [and compulsory] pre-primary education, with particular attention to gender equality and the most marginalized
The positive impact of investing in high-quality early childhood education programs that prepare children to succeed in school and later in life has been well documented. The period of a child's life from conception to age 8 is evidenced to be the most crucial period for well-being and development. It is estimated that 250 million children under age 5 are at risk of poor developmental outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (Early Childhood Development 2016: The Lancet). Poverty, nutritional deficiencies, poor health care, and insufficient learning opportunities are cited as the key factors underpinning these failings. Heckman's well-cited research and more recent evidence from the Lancet Series on Child Development and the Young Lives studies in several developing country contexts support the claim that inequalities and gaps that start early in life persist and widen through later schooling years. Addressing inequalities in both access to early learning experiences as well as the quality of any early learning programs accessed in early years, therefore, is an important agenda for policy makers. In recognition of its value, Early Childhood Education (ECE) has increasingly been made a priority in country driven sector policies, plans, and laws and is also reflected in the adoption of SDG 4.2 by UN member states.

The last 15 years have seen numerous initiatives in policy and implementation across Pakistan to make free pre-primary education and early childhood care for 3-5 year olds a reality. From the positive innovation of ECE service delivery across Pakistani government schools that incorporated targets and some resource allocations for provinces and other areas throughout the country to support ECE as an innovation through the Education Sector Reforms (ESR) Action Plan 2002-2006, the sub-sector is well articulated in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2009. While little research has been done nationally on availability and effectiveness of early childhood education services, the limited data available show that these initiatives have encountered challenges with system effectiveness and capacity of providers to deliver quality services, amongst other factors. The government commitment for ECE covers only ages 4-5, missing an important opportunity to begin supporting children’s learning and development in critical 0-3 years. All current Provincial Education Sector Plans (2014-2020) in Pakistan have included ECE, but largely as a one-year provision in government and public sector financed schools.

ASER Pakistan in recent years has taken a significant step forward in providing fresh perspectives into the scale of early learning progress and challenges both in terms of access and quality. The latest ASER data from 2016 on enrollment and learning present an interesting story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The national rural picture shows a consistent decline in the percentage of children enrolled in ECE, albeit more in 2015 than 2016. However, disaggregating the data by type of provider uncovers a mixed trend. Whilst the ASER data from the last 3 years have shown that more children are attending government-led ECE programs than private programs, the comparison between 2015 and 2016 shows an interesting pattern. Enrollment across government ECE programs rose sharply in 2015 from 51.1% to 70.1% where the gap between government and private appears the largest and then fell again in 2016 to 62.6%. In the same years, the enrollment in private ECE programs decreased in 2015 from 48.9% to 29.9% and then increased from 37.5% in 2016. There could be a number of explanations for the shifting patterns in government/private enrollment. Expansion of government-led ECE programs in public schools in 2015 is one possibility. Quality concerns in government ECE programs might explain the shift to private sector again in 2016. However, further research is needed to substantiate these assumptions and

1. UNICEF, Early Childhood Development: The key to a full and productive life
offer insights into what other factors could have contributed towards the shift nationally.

In addition to data on ECE access, the ASER 2016 data on learning assessments for class 1 children provide some insights into the types of skills children have around the time they begin formal schooling. ASER measures among Class 1 students the ability to read simple words in Urdu, identify letters in English, and recognize numbers 0-9. These tasks are stated as goals for all young children in Pakistan per the national Early Learning and Development Standards and National ECE Curriculum.

Table 2: Percentage of Class 1 children able to complete tasks Comparison of year 2014, 2015, and 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage able to read simple words in Urdu</th>
<th>Percentage able to recognize small letters in English</th>
<th>Percentage able to recognize numbers 1-9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above shows that only around a third of children can do the literacy tasks by Class 1, and in some cases there have been declines from year to year in the percentage of children who demonstrate these skills. Results for mathematics are more promising, but still 30% of children are unable to recognize single-digit numbers. Clearly there has been progress made in expanding access to ECE, but the ASER 2016 data raise the possibility that quality may have decreased as a result of this expansion.

An emphasis on access and learning must be present in efforts to expand early childhood education. This requires monitoring systems that collect accurate and meaningful information on children’s development, learning outcomes and general attributes of ECE program quality, such as how the teachers interact with children, what facilities exist, whether or not learning materials are available and used, and what pedagogical approaches are used with young learners. With ECE policy frameworks articulated in Sindh, Balochistan, and KPK and an upcoming one in Punjab which reiterates the governments' commitment to promote ECE, there is an opportunity for Pakistan to use data to inform service provision in ECE. While ASER provides a brief snapshot of access and learning outcomes in early childhood, we need more initiatives which take a deeper look at children’s development and learning outcomes in the personal and social domains as well as literacy/numeracy to determine what developmentally on track means in Pakistan. This will also help in supporting the foundations of Right to Education 25-A.
There have been multiple international definitions of early childhood care, development and education along with their alignment to relevant age groups\(^1\). Early Childhood Education traditionally caters to learning readiness of children from 3-5 years in time for formal schooling. However, the multidimensional poverty and malnutrition hindering children from reaping the benefits of early care and stimulation makes it imperative that we tackle this issue from a wider lens, and look at the concept of ECCE as holistic and multi-sectoral covering the period from birth to eight years old (Britto et al. 2014). The release of the report by the Education Commission, “The Learning Generation (2016)”, strongly recommends that every child is supported with at least two years of free, quality preschool. Research has proven that access to quality early childhood education directly correlates with improvements in school enrolment, performance, persistence, transition, social awareness, community engagement, better livelihoods and well-adjusted citizens, resulting in positive socioeconomic growth. Realizing these benefits, national policies and global commitments have been supporting ECCE since 1989 at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and later reinforced at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in 1990, at the World Education Forum (Dakar) and MDGs in 2000, and at the Moscow Framework for Action and Cooperation on ECCE 2010. ECCE is now an integral part of the Education Agenda 2030 and Sustainable development Goals (SDG 4.2) presenting a solid case to invest equitably in a child’s early years to impact not only an individual but families and society making ECCE central to achieving sustainable development.

**ECCE and SDGs**

The world has entered a new era of human development in 2015 where ending poverty, lifelong learning with equity, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all is the key focus. The challenges for sustainable development in the Education Agenda 2030 are integrated: goals pertaining to poverty reduction, health, nutrition, education, sustainable agriculture and energy, gender equality, social inclusion, and development must be tackled together. There is a growing vocal constituency nationally and globally which maintains that doing ECCE right means reaching at least 11 different SDGs. The question is that how can ECCE drive the transformation we want to achieve by 2030? *If we limit ECCE to SDG 4.2, we limit the power of ECCE to transform individuals and societies*\(^2\). ECCE lays the groundwork for lifelong well-being and is the most cost-effective strategy to alleviate poverty and improve child and maternal health etc. It is a powerful equalizer as access to quality early childhood care and education can help all children start at an equal footing regardless of their background; without such action, being born into poverty could mean many children will never escape from it. Therefore, investment in child development is strategic to stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty as it reaps long-term returns leading to higher wages and greater productivity. Hence, countries must be committed to this position.

**Sindh**

Sindh has 4.25 million children between the ages of 3-5 years\(^3\), and even within Sindh there are huge disparities within district reflected in the *Katchi* enrolment as shown below in the SEMIS 2014-15 data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Tharparkar</th>
<th>Sujawal</th>
<th>West Karachi</th>
<th>Shaheed Benazirabad</th>
<th>Dadu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,291</td>
<td>2,530</td>
<td>3,448</td>
<td>44,576</td>
<td>53,989</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. ECE (0-6 & 3-5), ECD (0-6 & 0-3), ECC (0-6, 3-6 & 3-8), ECCE (0-6, 3-5 & 0-8) or ECED (0-3 & 0-6).
3. blog/why-early-childhood-development-is-the-foundaion-for-sustainable-development/
### Progress towards ECCE in Sindh over the years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>National Education Policy charts out the need for ECE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>National ECE Curriculum developed - Sindhi version of the revised National ECE Curriculum made available in 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>National Education Policy proposes that ECE is made part of mainstream education, integrated in all primary schools, and suggests action plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Sindh Right of children to free and compulsory education act 2013, the government of Sindh has taken ownership of the responsibility to provide free pre-school education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-18</td>
<td>SESP ECE is integrated in a sector-wide approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>ECCE policy notified establishing developmentally appropriate Pre-Primary ECCE that will support transition towards Primary school preparation to improve child outcomes in Sindh catering to the children between the ages of 0-8 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>SED approved comprehensive ECCE policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ECCE Policy

Sindh is committed to achieving the SDGs 2030 as it supports the holistic development of children and society. It is to the credit of the School Education Department and Government of Sindh for creating a cadre of Basic Pay Scale (BPS) 15 for the post of Early Childhood Teacher (ECT). This immediately elevates the ECCE sub-sector; however, teachers with appropriate qualifications in a nascent sector remain a challenge. SDGs 3, 4, & 5 synchronize with the ECCE policy agenda as illustrated in Figure 1.

### ECCE and Health

ECCE sets the trajectory for lifelong health. Programs including routine visits/examination for mothers and children, and immunization can help address multiple health issues including pre-natal care, post-natal care, mortality rate, and hygiene. It also plays a pivotal role in ending hunger as early stimulation with nutrition supplementation achieves better outcomes and tackles issues of stunting and malnutrition. UNICEF Pakistan Annual Report 2013 reported that in Pakistan, malnutrition accounts for 35% of deaths under the age of 5 while 40% of children are either moderately or severely stunted. According to MICS 2014, in Sindh, 48% children are stunted, and more than four out of ten children under the age of five (42%) are underweight. Early Child Development cannot wait in Sindh; it is awaiting urgent actions.

### ECCE and Learning

Under Article 25-A, Pakistan has promised to provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 5-16 years. After the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, the provincial governments have been empowered to make appropriate laws for the realization of the rights of children. The Sindh Compulsory and Free Education Act 2013 enacted by the government of Sindh has extended this age group to include children of the ages of 3-5 years as well (Article 9). Under the rules made for the right to free and compulsory education act 2013, the government of Sindh has taken ownership of the responsibility to provide free pre-school education. *“The Government may make necessary arrangements for providing free preschool education and early childhood care for the children above the age of three years until they join the school for education.”*
Currently according to the SEMIS data (2014-15), *Katchi* represents approximately 14% of school enrollment in both rural and urban areas of Sindh and the total enrolment in *Katchi* in government schools is more than half a million (585,718 children). ASER 2015 and SEMIS (2014-15) report that 63% of children aged 3-5 years are still out of school in Sindh. This highlights the urgency to work towards models of partnerships and alliances to incorporate ECCE for all.

In rural Sindh, learning levels reflected in ASER for children aged 5 in grade 1 (as a proxy indicator for ECE) reveal very poor results. It illustrates that children lack complete readiness skills when they enter grade 1. Govt. school data in 2015 shows that 60% children can read letters in their mother tongue, 20% can recognize at least numbers (0-9), and only 13% can read at least small letters in English.

**ECCE and Gender Equality**
ECCE interventions can promote gender equity by compensating for gender biases in nutrition, health care, or early stimulation that may occur in the home (Arnold, 2004, p.10). In Pakistan, discriminatory practices continue from infancy on, with girls receiving less stimulation, less quality of care and less attention. However, data from ASER 2015 indicates that between the age of 3-5, parents are more likely to send both the genders to school with negligible gender gaps in enrolment (51% boys and 49% girls). If we build on these gender equitable foundations that will also improve transition rates, it can help us target the overall problem of gender inequality in the education system as well.

**ECCE: Tracking Key Indicators**
Tracking ECCE indicators as agreed under SESP 2014-18 and SDG 4.2 is a major challenge. Whilst PSLM and provincial EMIS/AEPAM do capture enrolment/access indicators to some extent disaggregated by gender, the more critical indicator of SDG 4.2.1 or ‘the Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex’ needs systematic engagement, ownership, skills and resources. The thematic indicators for SDG 4.2 cover three streams: readiness to learn, participation and provision.

**ECE Budget & Allocations**
The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has supported this shift through its grant as reflected in the comprehensive Sindh Education Sector Plan 2014-18 where ECCE is integrated in a sector-wide approach with funding provided to the provincial and district governments. It is an accomplishment for Sindh that it was the first province to complete the ECCE Policy 2015 which has been integrated into the government organization structures, and budgetary allocations for ECCE in fiscal year (FY) 2016-17. The Percentage of budget allocated for ECE is 1.89% of the Annual Development Plan of the School Education Department (refer to ECE Reference document for detail).

**Challenges**
- The ECCE Policy 2015 covers and plans to address the entire period between birth and eight years of age. However, due to resource and institutional capacity constraints, currently ECCE only targets pre-primary education for one year prior to grade 1.
- Policy and theoretical planning has been completed and efforts are being made by the Government of Sindh for its successful implementation. However, due to lack of institutional structures and human resources to implement policy as there is low utilization of budgets allocated in FY 2015-16 and 2016-17, the implementation process remains slow and requires a significant push.
- Low inter-sectoral coordination among various government departments (Health, Social Welfare, Special Education) slows down initiatives such as Sehatmand Sindh as well as negligible networking among public, private sector, NGOs and INGOs further constrains the ECCE.
- The Government and the Development partners working on this sub-sector have been unable to propel good policies into actions due to lack of availability of qualified teachers and officials who meet the minimum standards. There is an urgency to set priorities for ECCE Implementation in the Province and synergize resources, efforts and initiatives to ensure targets set under ECCE are met successfully.
- As ECCE is being initiated for the first time in the Province by the SED therefore there are no ECCE specific teams to comprehensively address all qualitative measures of teacher preparation, curriculum, learning materials, assessments and quality assurance in Sindh through
which the informal Katchi may be transformed into formal ECCE Classes. Efforts are being made by the SED to formulate the Sindh ECE curriculum and teacher preparation materials for both pre and in-service to not only ensure better pedagogy with children and care givers, but also ensure positive learning readiness and outcomes.

4. **Teacher Profiles** need to be formed allowing flexibility in teacher qualifications. In the first phase (5 years), flexibility is required for recruitment with induction and modular trainings through endorsement of STEDA and PITE, NGOs, private sector training through universities need to be arranged leading up to degrees and diplomas. Moreover, workforce diversification is needed in ECCE beyond the EC Teacher to ECE Assistants and part time support teams for health, nutrition, early detection and inclusive needs. This approach will allow better use of resources for optimized outcomes.

5. **National ECE Curriculum 2007 needs to be reviewed and upgraded** diligently through a working group of practitioners of ECCE programs in the province and nationally. The standards for ECCE also need alignment with the curriculum and also for teacher preparation. The Importance of mother tongue language in ECE National curricula should be increased. There is a growing body of research indicating that community participation and educational success can be founded on early learning and schooling in the mother tongue.

6. **Expanding the ECCE Core Group from Policy to Implementation** by monitoring ECCE Indicators (SDG 4.2) and Actions under SESP 2014-2018. The Implementation also needs to be faster from the government’s side and a number of initiatives need to go to into comprehensive execution which requires the Core Group members list to be expanded in order to cover all dimensions in implementation.

7. **Expand the scope of ECE** as ECCE programs need to be holistic at pre-primary education level with logical links to primary years for continuity of the approach in pedagogy. This would emphasize ECCE’s logical support linkages with primary education while ensuring the use of developmentally appropriate pedagogies and indicators.

8. **There is an urgent need for Knowledge Generation and Partnerships** in this area, especially in Sindh and Pakistan to facilitate the continuous analysis and synthesis of ECCE interventions, evidence and research, identifying priority areas for further learning, and support. A knowledge portal for ECCE core concepts, indicators tracking, research, training and think tanks needs to be developed by SED with its partners and relevant bodies for the public to access in Urdu, Sindhi and English.

**Recommendations**

1. **Institutional Level Presence for ECCE** through a Focal point/Directorate at the Education Department needs to be urgently established that will also help to activate intra and inter departmental collaboration.

2. **Multi-sectoral opportunities for ECCE in Sindh** are imperative to work on early detection of disabilities and establish **ECCE and Inclusive Education** Links by working with the Special Education Department. Moreover, **ECCE, Health and P&D Departments** need to work together. Schools can be used as a medium for service delivery to improve health and nutrition programs targeting immunization coverage, and interventions for both mothers and children. The Health Department can also collaborate to hold informative sessions on prevention in schools for care givers, parents, teachers and children.

3. There is a need for **collecting Data and Mapping the ECCE Universe in Sindh** by identifying, taking stock, and tracking different ECCE initiatives on ground in order to collaborate and complement the work coverage and materials developed instead of starting from the beginning. In addition, profiles of teachers who have previously taken trainings in ECE and are working in this sub-sector need to be obtained and tracked both in terms of their skills and experience, and their qualifications.

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**Prepared by:** Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA), ASER & Right to Education Team – Sindh – in collaboration with The Reform Support Unit (RSU) School Education Department, Government of Sindh – The State of Provision and Financing of ECCE in Sindh.
Executive Summary:

A child's brain develops at a surprisingly rapid rate during early years to lay foundations for lifelong development. ASER Pakistan reveals that 61% (rural) and 42% (urban) children between ages 3-5 are out of school in Pakistan. This highlights an urgent need to address this problem and work towards partnerships and alliance models that incorporate necessary Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all. This policy brief explores the recent global target setting for ECCE under Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 and 4.4, analyzes its current status in Pakistan and calls for inclusive action at all platforms.

Background

Recent upsurge in research on the development of a child's brain underscore the need of early childhood care and education, especially in developing countries. Studies reveal how a child's brain develops at a surprisingly rapid rate during the early years thereby laying foundations for lifelong development. These foundations allow for successful adaptation and effective learning that ‘become building blocks for healthy and competent adulthood, responsible citizenship, economic productivity, strong communities, and a just and sustainable society’.

Research firmly supports that ECCE can compensate for disadvantage and vulnerability, regardless of underlying factors such as poverty, gender, race/ethnicity, caste or religion (UNESCO, 2006, p. 113). ECCE helps level the playing field for disadvantaged children as they enter primary school, empowering them to be confident and successful in later education and employment. Most young children at highest risk of educational failure - those experiencing poverty and related circumstances that may limit early learning experiences - benefit the most from high quality early care and education programs. Barnett & Heckman propose mechanisms through which preschool can powerfully contribute to fight against poverty.

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⁴ Heckman, J., Malofeeva, L., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P., Understanding the mechanisms through which an influential early childhood program boosted adult outcomes, University of Chicago, 2010.
The 1990 Jomtien Declaration and the 2000 Dakar Framework for Education for All vouch for expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) facilities world-wide, but the goals have been constantly subsumed by the basic provision of primary education for all. However, the post 2015 agenda across the 17 proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) builds a sharper case for ECCE urging to strengthen means of implementation and revitalize global partnerships for sustainable development. The proposed SDG target 4.2 mentions that “by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. Similarly, the Incheon Declaration 2030 states “...we also encourage the provision of at least 1 year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education that all children have access to quality early childhood development, care and education”.

Being part of the global commitments and endorsing Article 25-A, Right to Education, Pakistan included at least one compulsory year of early childhood education in its National Education Policy 2009 and developed a National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education. According to the National Plan of Action, the goal is to enroll at least 50% boys and girls in pre-primary by 2015. However, so far only 36% children are enrolled in ECCE - males 23% and females 40% (ASER, 2014).

Investigation of Early Childhood Education in Pakistan – Evidence from ASER

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan is a citizen-led household assessment gauging access to schooling and learning competencies of children aged 5-16 years. Using the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2014 dataset, this policy brief delves into three core components regarding Early Childhood Education: (i) access of children to early childhood schooling (ii) early childhood schooling access along socio-economic lines and (iii) whether or not these issues are translated in transition from pre-primary to primary education in terms of learning levels. For the purpose of investigating the impact of socio-economic conditions upon the enrollment of children in pre-school, ASER wealth index was created using the household indicators tapped during the survey. The data below analyzes the results of ECE as depicted by ASER 2014 along socio-economic lines and explain the preparation of children for transition from pre to post primary.

Trends in Enrollment and Learning

ASER 2014 covered 144 rural districts and 21 urban districts across Pakistan. Using the population of children aged 3-5 years; we examine the proportion of children enrolled in different types of institutes and those not enrolled at all.

ASER 2014 rural results for early childhood education show that 61% of the children are not attending any type of pre-schools whereas only 39% are enrolled in schools. 20% are attending public schools and 19% are going to non-state institutes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2000 (before target setting)</th>
<th>Target to be achieved till end of 2015</th>
<th>ASER 2014 Findings (Rural)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25% (boys)</td>
<td>50% (boys)</td>
<td>36% (boys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18% (girls)</td>
<td>50% (girls)</td>
<td>40% (girls)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: ECE Enrollment
Figure 2 illustrates access to early childhood education by socio-economic lines. Results show that only 31% of the children in the poorest households are enrolled in early childhood schooling in rural Pakistan whereas 52% of the children from the richest families are attending pre-schooling. Similarly, the highest out of school percentage of children belong to the lowest quartile i.e. the poorest (69%). The least percentage of children out of school is in the richest quartile. However, approximately 50% of the children of the richest families are also not enrolled in pre-schools.

Figure 3: Enrollment by Type of School

Additionally, the enrollment in ECE by type of institute portrays an interesting picture - the highest percentage of enrollment in government school prevails in the poorest quartile whereas the highest enrollment in private school exists in the richest quartile.

With over 60% children not enrolled in any pre-primary program in rural areas - specifically a large proportion being out of school at ages 3 and 4. This problem becomes more pronounced when it translates into poor learning levels in lower primary grades at school.
ASER learning assessments (figure 4) show that only 38.2% children in class 1 could read at least letters in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto and 15.9% class 3 children could read story based on grade II level curriculum. Similar trends are shown in English and Arithmetic assessments. Only 23.7% class 1 students could read small letters in English and only 14.0% class 3 children could read sentences. Arithmetic results are the weakest of all assessments. 29.9% children enrolled in class 1 could recognize numbers (10-99) and 10.9% children enrolled in class 3 could do division.

The above evidence and analysis compels us towards the need for investment in early childhood education. Pakistan faces two-fold challenge – access to early childhood schooling and the long lasting effects it has on the learning abilities of a child. There is urgent need for action to be taken at the national level to promote learning of children from early age for building lifelong learning skills. Rigorous evaluations internationally have also established that investment in ECE programs have high rates of return. They demonstrate that children with quality ECE experience tend to advance to higher education, obtain employment, have higher earnings as well as savings, provide higher contributions to social security, and are less likely to be on public assistance and commit crimes.

Recommendations:

Provision of quality early childhood education can help offset such low learning levels of children in schools. Realizing this need, strategic and low-cost solutions to provide quality early childhood education to all could include:

- With the implementation of Article 25-A and one year of ECCE class included in the formal National Education Policy 2009, ensure enrollment of ALL children in one year ECCE program before entering primary schools.

- Advocate stronger policies in the National Education Policy 2016 to counter the problem of inadequate and inequitable access to early childhood programs in the country; train teachers and community members to understand the needs of ECCE and develop a useful social skills set; fill the gap between demand and supply of ECCE teachers; use low-cost buildings/equipment and voluntary efforts to counter budget problems.

- Proactively advocate alliances for public and private partnerships to create a consolidated and well funded early childhood education system, including building alliances with young mothers, livelihoods, research, health and education.

- Establish Child-Parent Centers in public and private schools which offer early education and support to the low-income families for enrolling children in early education schools. This will expectedly results in better school achievement and completion, and significantly lower rates of remedial education, juvenile delinquency and child maltreatment.
Early childhood care and education is considered as the main foundation for holistic human development. Evidence suggests that there is a significant cost for both societies and individuals if children fail to develop foundations in linguistic, cognitive and social skills. This policy paper, in the light of ASER 2013 findings, points towards slow progress in expanding ECD provision in Pakistan followed by recommendations/steps that can lead towards early childhood care and development.

Background:

In spite of the compelling case for a standalone ECD (0-8 years) goal in the post-2015 development agenda, there is a concern that it will be subsumed across several goals of health, nutrition, and education. Over 200 million children under 5 years of age in low-income and middle-income countries will not reach their full developmental potential due to a range of risk factors, most notably poverty; poor health including HIV/AIDS and malnutrition; abuse and inadequate levels of care and learning opportunities. For Pakistan, the case of ECD awaits the first drops of attention.

The links between early childhood care and education are strong and mutually reinforcing. The linguistic, cognitive, and social skills that children develop in early childhood are the foundations for lifelong learning and wellbeing. Compelling evidence from economists and neuroscientists, educators and health professionals, shows the impact of good quality ECD interventions on immediate outcomes for children, mothers and indeed families.

Despite this evidence, progress in expanding ECD provision has been slow – often because of government and development agency’s indifference, competition for scarce resources from other levels of education and/or other priorities etc. Ensuring that ECD is included in the plethora of post-2015 documents, debates, and consultations and in any new versions of the MDGs and EFA is therefore critical.

Evidence from ASER: a) National / Region Wise Enrollment Trends (3-5 Years)

Reaching 263,990 children (3-16 years) in 87,044 households, 4,382 villages/urban blocks in 2013 alone, ASER Pakistan is a powerful accountability movement resting on the theory of change that ordinary educated citizens can be mobilized for extraordinary actions empowered by evidence for action. The data reflects student learning levels, enrollment, attendance, teachers, facilities etc while revealing emerging disparities in learning with respect to language barriers, public/private provision, gender and wealth. ASER 2013 also highlights that the basic issue of access to Early Childhood Education is not being addressed.

Almost 59% children between the ages of 3-5 years do not receive any formal or informal education focusing on the core domains of holistic development. This is highest for children...
of age three i.e. 89%. While the percentage of out of school children significantly drops at age five, 33% of these five year olds are still found to be out of school, hence, the Right to Education ensured by Article 25-A is unfortunately not fully realized. For the pre-primary age group (3-5 yrs), provincial figures are even more alarming with the lowest range at 42% out of school children in Azad Kashmir and highest at 81% in Balochistan. The findings are summarized in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territory</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>Rank* OOSC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balochistan</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATA</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sindh</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgit-Baltistan</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khyber Pakhtunkhwa</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamabad-ICT</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azad Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) Sector Wise Enrollment Trends
Of the 41% of total children (3-5) enrolled as per ASER National findings (Rural, 2013), 27% are enrolled in a government school while 13% enrolled in non-state facilities (with the highest in private schools i.e. 12% and 0.8% and 0.4% in Madrasahs or other type of non-state facility respectively). Amongst all the provinces, the percentage of children going to government schools in Sindh is the highest i.e. 90% and those going to private school is the lowest i.e. 10%. The findings are summarized in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pvt.</td>
<td>Madrasah</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pvt.</td>
<td>Madrasah</td>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azad Jammu and Kashmir</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balochistan</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATA</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgit-Baltistan</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamabad-ICT</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khyber Pakhtunkhwa</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sindh</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results as depicted in the graphs illustrate the learning status of children in three basic competencies i.e. Language, English and Mathematics. Attending a high quality pre-school lays the foundations for learning and helps children make a smooth transition to primary school but findings from ASER 2013 demonstrates that the children are not adequately prepared and hence may be more prone to drop out in higher classes.

d) School Facilities

Moreover, the data on indicators pertaining to school facilities in public and private sector reveals the quality of ECE service provision as well. For instance, the average number of rooms available in government schools is 2.5 whereas for private schools it stands at 4 at primary level. Similarly, only 29% government primary schools and 34% private primary schools are found to have a playground or a safe play area. The readiness of schools for young learners is fairly questionable, considering the state of provision of physical spaces and security. Do schools, private or public, provide a learning environment which is conducive to their holistic development and if not that, only cognitive development? It is a question that merits serious deliberations and concrete steps.

The need of the hour is to ponder over why it has been so difficult to develop and implement legal frameworks for providing ECE despite the endless process of policy formulation within Pakistan? Are the political and systemic forces unconvinced of the good quality impact early years' education can have? It is imperative to seek answers to these questions and also ensure that State looks into the provision of at least one-year of quality Early Childhood Education as it is mandated by Article 25-A of the constitution.

Recommendations:

- Increasing equitable access to pre-school programmes of good quality can play a significant role in supporting children’s success in primary school.
- Reforms on expansion of affordable facilities should be initiated and be included in the sector plans.
- Legislation that makes pre-school compulsory can increase enrolment if it is complemented with measures that expand supply and demand.
- Creating separate budget lines for ECE, projection and resource allocation for setting up and regularizing ECE classes across the public sector is critical.
- Separate teaching positions along with trainings need to be created for ECE along with basic provision of learning resources.
- There is a serious lack of coordination and alignment of targets. For ensuring that policies within and across ministries are implemented in their true spirit, it is critical for various stakeholders to come together and review the numerous documents, frameworks and collapse them into few, decipherable and achievable plans.
Early Childhood Education, for children of age 3-8 years, is seen as the essential basis for holistic human development with supporting research evidence from economic, sociological, neurological, medical, and human development perspectives (GCE, 2012). Through multidisciplinary research, it is demonstrated how healthy development in the earliest years of life builds the foundations of successful adaptation and effective learning that lead to better outcomes in academic achievement, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, and economic and human development (Shankoff, 2010). In addition to the societal and human gains, there are strong rate of return for investment in services in the early years. According to Nobel Laureate James Heckman, delayed investments in ECE massively diminish economic benefits as can be seen in the following figure. Internationally, the World Bank and other agencies have estimated the rate of return at $3 for every $1 spent, and returns double when the most vulnerable children are targeted.

The ECE picture in Pakistan does not take account of research insights and evidence despite the international and national commitments made over the years for improving and expanding ECE as reflected in National Education Policy, 2009, National Plan of Action 2001-2015). More recently, Article 25-A of the constitution guarantees free education for all children of age 5-16, which becomes binding decree for inclusion of at least 1 year of pre-primary education to every Pakistani child before s/he enters the primary schooling cycle.

ASER Survey 2012 once again highlights that the basic issue of access to Early Childhood Education is not addressed. Almost 63% children between age 3-5 years are not receiving any formal or informal education focusing on the core domains of holistic development. This is highest for age 3 children 91% of them remaining out of school. While the percentage of out of school children significantly drops at age 5, with only 62.2 attending the school, the right to education ensured by Article 25-A is not realized for 37.8% of children of the surveyed households across Pakistan. For the pre-primary age group (3-5yrs), provincial figures are even more alarming with the lowest range at 50% out of school children in Punjab and highest at 78% in Balochistan. It is important to reiterate here that these figures are based on the ASER Survey of 4,033 villages in 80,209 households in the country where a total number of 57,503 children (47% girls, 53% boys) were found in this age group. The estimates done by provincial governments are sometimes even higher than the trends shown through ASER 2011 and 2012 data (for e.g., Balochistan).

The real question that ASER 2012 points at is why it is so difficult to develop and implement legal and implementation frameworks for providing ECE at a large scale despite the endless process of policy advocacy, policy formulation, and availability of cutting edge curriculum, teaching and research.
capacities within Pakistan? Is it the lack of intent to secure better future for children of Pakistan and in turn strengthened citizenry? Or are the political and systemic forces unconvinced of the staggering impact good quality early years’ education has on not only achievement levels in later years but also life-long learning. It is imperative to seek answers to these questions and also ensure that the State looks into the provision of at least one-year of quality Early Childhood Education as it is mandated by Article 25-A of the constitution. If the State in general, and Departments of Education in particular, are unable to establish as many schools for the 5 year old out of school children, then alternative spaces and their funding mechanisms should be looked into. The jaded justifications such as lack of resources, systems’ capacity, political will and so on for continuing with the inaccessible and sparse provision of Early Childhood Education do not remain acceptable owing to the short and long-term significance of ECE on literacy, school completion, learning achievements and overall human development.

The quality of ECE provision for those 37.1% children of age 3-5 years attending some education facility is more often than not inadequate. Of the 37.1%, 26.2% are enrolled in a government school while 10.9% enrolled in non-state facilities (with the highest in private schools i.e. 10% and 0.6% and 0.3% in Madrasahs or other type of non-state facility respectively). Although gauging the learning outcomes for age 3-5 years is not in the current scope of ASER study, data on indicators pertaining to school facilities in public and private sector inform the quality of ECE service provision as well. For instance, the average number of rooms available in government schools is 2.3 whereas for private schools it stands at 4.1 at primary level. Similarly, only 31% government schools and 39% private schools are found to have a playground or safe play area where children could play.

Speaking of simply the physical spaces and security, the readiness of schools for young learners is fairly questionable. Do the schools, private or public, provide a learning environment which is conducive to their holistic development and if not that, only cognitive development? It is a question that merits serious deliberations and concrete steps.

Pakistan, in the last two years, has seen several efforts for educational improvement – some have only focused on missing facilities in schools, others have singularly targeted teachers’ professional development or increasing literacy rates. However, both the scope and scale of these efforts (even when successful in their own right), is limiting when it comes to setting strong foundations and getting it right at the very first step of learning ladder. The time has come to urge the public and private educational planners, policymakers and investors to look at the bigger picture and develop strategies that are nuanced to the needs of an early & solid start to education. The provincial education sector plans in most provinces have included ECE as a separate strand (for instance, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhawah and Punjab) since 2011. From one year to another, the rolling out of these plans again is made conditional to legislative approvals and budgetary resources. It is critical for the Civil Society to mobilize parents, children and every citizen of Pakistan to push the State to deliver. After all, another delay will not only jeopardize the promising start children must get to realize their innate potential but also deprives Pakistan a chance of becoming a peaceful, productive and conscientious nation vis-à-vis social and economic parameters.
The criticality and advantages of Early Childhood Education are now established from biological, social, economic, cultural and human development standpoints. The need for quality and encompassing ECE programmes is emphasized strongly because research proves that it positively impacts the physical, psychomotor, cognitive, social and emotional development of the child, including the acquisition of languages and early literacy. Children are active learners from birth, and the early years are vital to their success in school and later in life. Most importantly, investment in ECE and development programmes holds strong opportunity to break the cycle of inequities and poverty that has plagued millions of lives in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Pakistan’s education system stands at a critical juncture with the constitutional decree of Article 25-A declaring Education as the fundamental right for children of 5-16yrs of age. In addition to its own constitution, Pakistan is also bound by international commitments and treaties. The Jomtien Declaration for Education For All stated that learning starts at birth. Ten years later, the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action reaffirmed this and 180 world leaders signed up to the Education For All goals where Goal One is to expand early childhood care and education. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is the most extensive international treaty on the rights of children, commits states to ensuring the rights of all children on the basis of equal opportunity. Moreover, the UN Committee on the CRC calls on states to recognize that children are active participants in decisions affecting them and to pay special attention to the neglected area of early childhood. However, with all the international and national bindings, there is little progress that has been made to ensure the rights of children to education as war.

State of ECE in Pakistan
ASER 2011 reveals that 32.3% of children at age 5 were not enrolled in any school facility whereas of 32,323 children surveyed in the 3-5 age group, 57.3% un-enrolled and only 42.8% were enrolled (girl’s enrolment also stands at 42.2%). Half of the critical period of Early Childhood years (0-8 age group) falls in the schooling age i.e. from age 5-8 years. While there is a growing emphasis on getting children enrolled in school, the real question is whether the schools are ready to induct young children and provide them with a thriving, curious, and positive learning environment. Are there adequate healthy spaces in the school to provide children breathing space? Is the teacher available to nurture and facilitate a batch of 35 or 50 young learners? Are there learning resources to make their experience challenging yet a fulfilling one? Do the teachers, if available, aware of the significance of ECE years and possess the skills and attributes of a quality caregiver for ECE? The findings from ASER 2011 respond to these questions to a large extent, and all the answers are in negative. The average number of rooms used for conducting classes at primary level in government schools was around 2 whereas in private schools, average number of primary classrooms was 4. Looking at as basic indicator as room availability, it becomes clear that providing a well-lit, ventilated, decent learning space for young learners to move around, engage in interactive activities and Plan-Do-Review cycle will be next to impossible. It is then no real surprise that ASER 2011 has found that more children in 3-5 age group are not enrolled in schools compared to ASER 2010 survey findings.

ASER 2011 also challenges the misplaced notion of ECE or Pre-Schooling as an urban phenomenon primarily catered through private education service providers. Of the total enrolled, 67.6% children were enrolled in government schools, 29.3% in private schools, 2.7% in madrasahs and the remaining 0.4% are enrolled in other types of schools such as non-formal day cares or literacy centres. Looking at the huge numbers approaching government schools for ECE, the public planning and financing wings cannot further delay action on the policy promulgations and provisions pertaining to ECE. It is the twelfth year since the National Education Policy called for regularization of Katchi in National Plan of Action and Education Sector Reforms-Action Plan, and third since the National Education Policy 2009 declared that “provision of ECE shall be attached to primary schools which shall be provided with additional budget, teachers and assistants for this purpose.” Pakistan has a tremendous advantage with a national ECE policy, research-based curriculum and local expertise in the field of ECE especially in the NGO sector for running effective, large-scale ECE quality programs. It must build on the available experiences and expertise to operationalize the national ECE framework. The failure to implement policies is a failure of political commitment and education system as such. Pressure must be generated from all sections of society in order for the State, public and private education providers as well as donor agencies to fulfil their obligations to young children.
Policy Recommendations

Pakistan has a tremendous advantage with constitutional provision, focused ECE National Plan and Education Policy, a cutting edge research-based National Curricular Framework that has been implemented both in diverse types of schools and has proven to be effective, and a valuable cache of experiences especially amongst the NGO sector to undertake teacher development and run large scale quality ECE programmes. With a shift in its educational financing priorities and evidence-based planning, the critical gaps can be closed that are currently impeding the expansion and improvement of Early Childhood Education. This will entail the following:

- Either through inclusion within the primary cycle or creating separate budget lines for ECE, projection and resource allocation for setting up and regularizing ECE classes across the public sector is critical. There is no hope for policy implementation until it is reflected in the budget documents of ECE, and that too in an integrated fashion. Separate teaching positions need to be created for ECE along with basic provision of learning resources. In the wake of RTE, this cannot be overemphasized as quality ECE experience cannot be provided without any teachers, space for children to breathe and move around, and learning resources.

- There is a serious lack of coordination and alignment of targets. For ensuring that policies within and across ministries are implemented in their true spirit, it is critical for various stakeholders to come together and review the numerous documents, frameworks and overlapping roles and responsibilities and collapse them into few, decipherable and achievable plans. Concurrently, determining the lead organizations/ ministerial units accountable for service provision and quality is imperative.

- There is no substitute for teacher training and provision of basic learning resources, if the purpose is to impart quality ECE in the public sector. Though follow-up support adds to the chances of uptake, however, the basic pre-requisites for running an ECE set up is that the teacher has an understanding and the skills to engage children in meaningful learning experiences. All existing and newly inducted teachers must be taken through a basic orientation of National ECE Curriculum 2007 and provided learning resources to ensure active teaching with young learners.

- Public sector has “developed capacities” for quality ECE programmes and their implementation at all levels trained hundreds from the cadres of teachers, supervisors and decision makers under a lot of NGO and donor-supported initiatives. It is imperative to properly channelize and build upon these capacities. The potential change makers are either working in isolation in some remote school or are too inundated with compliance duties that they do not use their potential and expertise. The jurisdictions, turfs and territories make it more difficult to pull the critical mass back together for planning and implementation of programmes. If these administrative hurdles are cleared out, the public sector has a very strong chance to emerge as a lead ECE implementing agency. Moreover, it can develop models of capacity utilization which other organizations can build upon.

Investment made now in ECE policies and programs will bring large future returns to individuals, families, communities, and nation at large. The damages of ignoring a critical phase of human development are irreversible as we are experiencing them today, and any defense mounted is not enough to secure the people and the nation. The malaise of poverty, terrorism, discrimination can be addressed by taking a proactive approach and protecting the next generations from it. The call for action is deafening as ASER 2011 findings demonstrate yet again. It is for each citizen, as a collective and an individual, to demand for political commitment and play a vital role in safeguarding children and giving them a promising future.
Early Childhood Education in Pakistan:
Two Steps Forward, One Step Back
Mahenaz Mahmud & Amima Sayeed
Teachers’ Resource Centre

The significance of Early Childhood Education at individual, community and societal levels has long been established through research and inquiry (GMR- UNESCO, 2007). Emerging scientific evidence and experience from the fields of neuroscience, education, human ecology, economic development, social sciences, child protection and health sciences make it crystal clear that quality ECCE is critical to creating a world with productive and strong communities that just, healthy and sustainable (Shonkoff, 2010). Recognizing the criticality, Early Childhood Education and Development has received an international academic and policy thrust; the very first goal for Education For All calls for expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education (Dakar Framework for Action, UNESCO 2000).

As a response to international emphasis on ECCE, the National Education Policies (1998-2010 and NEP 2009 and the National Plan of Action on EFA (2001-2015) were developed identifying ECE as a separate policy focus. As a long term target, the NPA declared 50% enrollment for 3-5 yrs age group by 2015 to be achieved through a phased approach (20% in Phase I ending in 2006 and 40% by 2011 as Phase II target). The reason for keeping modest target was identified as low priority as compared to primary education and adult literacy (NPA, GOP, p. 63). The more recent National Education Policy (2009) made a significant departure from the strategy and targets laid out in NPA. NEP (2009) declares that “significant progress, and the EFA mid-term targets for ECE have been met with ” as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for Early Childhood Education (ECE) rose quite remarkably from 36% of all children aged 3-4 years in 2001-02 to 91% in 2005-0621 and 99% in 2007-08” (NEP 2009, Annex A, p. 65). While as a policy action, NEP states “provision of ECE shall be attached to primary schools which shall be provided with additional budget, teachers and assistants for this purpose”, it contradicts its claim of 99% enrollment by targeting universal access of “at least one year preprimary education” by the State to be “ensured within the next ten years” (Chapter 5, section 5.1, pg 35).

ASER 2010 data, collected over 10, 000 children of ECE age group (age 3-5) across Pakistan, clearly reveal that the NEP claims of 99% enrollment do not reflect on the ground reality. Of the total 10, 246 children 55.3% children are out of school with nearly 49% of girls. Of the 44.7% who are enrolled in some kind of ECE, the share of government school enrollment is 61.7%, therefore, the universal access as well as provision of ECE by State both seem as distant, almost unachievable targets. However, with the disparate strategies and targets in two core policy documents, the educational system does not have a clear focus.

Moreover, the ECE facilities are to be attached with primary schooling, as stated by the NEP. The budget for education is projected and allocated on the basis of sub-sectors such as primary, secondary and vocational education, and areas like teacher education and library. While the share of primary education in the total budget averages at 40%, it does not ensure that ECE is covered for. First, a major percentage (estimated at 90%) is utilized for teachers’ salary and operational expenses of schools such as building repair and utilities, leaving very little for programmatic expenses or even availability of basic learning resources.

Second, and more critically, the formula used for calculating the needs of a primary school, includes, 5 teachers for 5 years of primary, and a school (if at all) comprising of five rooms. ASER 2010 Survey indicates that average number of rooms used for conducting classes at primary level in government schools is 2.9. Data from elsewhere identify that teacher allocation in rural primary schools averages at 1-3 teachers for 6 classes. This formula for school-budgeting and allocation neither provides the resources nor the space for proper regularization and integration of ECE (Katchi class) as per the policies and commitments. The process of budgeting both at federal and provincial levels, is in itself so elusive with little or no involvement of teacher educators, ECE experts or programme staff, that determining the sense and educational value of allocations is often impossible.
Policy targets for ECE will stay at document level if they are not reflected and aligned with the budgets allocated for schools, and that too in an integrated fashion. Separate teaching positions need to be created for ECE along with basic provision of learning resources. As was witnessed with the ESR Action Plan, stand alone programmes and promises of resource allocation for initiatives like creating ECE centres are not realized. Either through inclusion within the primary cycle or creating separate budget lines for ECE, projection and resource allocation for setting up and regularizing ECE classes across the public sector is critical.

A major achievement on part of the Ministry of Education, despite a massive shuffling of policy makers and individuals involved in the initial process, is that it has retained the National Curriculum on ECE (NCECE) and its core philosophies. When the curricular review was undertaken in 2006, the Curriculum Wing, Federal MoE ensured that the NCECE is enriched keeping its central tenets intact. Similarly, doing away with paper-pencil examinations is another marked achievement in an otherwise jaded examination system. More recently, the NEP marks training of teachers according to the NCECE framework as core strategy for quality improvement. The ground reality again is different from the intended outcomes mainly because there is no strategic framework for the implementation of a well-researched, child-centred NCECE, with current fiscal and capacity gaps. The minimum requirement if the State is serious about expanding and improving ECE as per EFA commitments, is to teachers’ orientation to the National Curriculum and the fundamentals of ECE. Therefore, improving the capacities at planning level, especially to ensure the depth and quality of programmes, should become a priority. Many of the implementation hurdles will be overcome if ECE is integrated in the fiscal planning and operational systems.

ASER 2010 Survey indicates that over 36% of ECE enrollment is catered through non-state education facilities (with varying ratios across Pakistan e.g. Gilgit 82%, KPK 53%, Sindh 15.4% and Balochistan estimated at 9% enrollment). The participation of private education providers is significant in terms of their size; however, this does not guarantee quality teaching and learning (as reflected from ASER findings on learning levels across grades). Public sector does not only have the responsibility to create quality models and ensure their implementation across sectors; it also has considerable capacity in ECE implementation at classroom with a number of teachers trained through technical agencies in ECE. The issue remains that these capacities are neither properly channelized nor are their insights built upon. As a result, these potential change makers are either working in isolation in some remote school or are too inundated with compliance duties that they do not use their potential and expertise. The jurisdictions, turfs and territories within and across administrative units and provinces make it more difficult to pull the critical mass back together for planning and implementation of programmes.

For policy makers and concerned citizens, ASER findings on ECE group should act as a wakeup call. With every delay in policy or curriculum implementation, the future of Pakistani children is put in jeopardy. Along with losing the critical years for human development, they also lose out on the opportunity and potential for becoming a life-long learner and contributing positively to the society.
ASER Pakistan Secretariat

Lahore Office:
1/A, Canal Park, Gulberg II, Lahore.
Tel: (+92 42) 35711107-8, Fax: (+92 42) 35711109

Islamabad Office:
Office # 204, 2nd Floor, Dossal Arcade, Jinnah Avenue, Blue Area, Islamabad
Tel: (+92-51) 2342250

Karachi Office:
404, 4th Floor, Ibrahim Trade Centre, Adjacent Parsa Towers, Shahrah-e-Faisal, Karachi
Tel: (+92-21) 34322230, (+92-21) 34322231

www.aserpakistan.org