

ASER Pakistan: A Bold Initiative

View from Pakistan Coalition for Education - PCE

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Ten years from now, when the target date for the Millennium Development Goals and EFA Goals has come and gone, we could be either grappling with questions about what went wrong or we could be rejoicing at timely smart decisions we had taken. The decisions that will impact the outcome ultimately depend on how serious the government, NGOs and donors are about the importance of conducting regular and widely disseminated assessments on learning outcomes.

In Pakistan the second largest share of budget spending goes to education after defense. As such it is crucially important to have high quality evaluations that just not inform but also improve democratic accountability of governments. The steady and reliable flow of information enhances the ability of civil society, and communities, and parents to push for improvements. ASER Pakistan aims to improve student learning through voluntary and cooperative professional efforts to significantly improve assessment of, (and accountability for), student learning outcomes.

ASER as a “public good”

Thanks to greater attention from the global community and concerted efforts of successive governments we have seen success in increasing access to basic education and raising completion rates. But what about the quality of education? Does a child attending class 3 or 6 know how to read and do simple arithmetic? Or a child, who has dropped out, has he or she retained what was learnt when in school?

ASER Pakistan is an ambitious and rigorous new effort in a right direction at a time when worldwide demand for reliable evidence to evaluate the impact of various social development programs is growing. In many developing countries these data are not available or not comparable over time, “what ASER Pakistan has achieved is gigantic and exhilarating enough” by producing a collection of baseline data in 11 districts of Pakistan.

This project is in response to the need to have simple, relevant and updated information on quality of learning and education for parents, teachers, head teachers, community leaders and policy makers. As such ASER is designed as a “public good” which we hope will act as a powerful catalyst, encouraging decision makers at all levels to commit to change in schools that are clearly letting their students down.

ASER Demonstrating A Collective Stewardship

ASER is more than one of the learning assessment approaches, it was a collective agreement from all participating stakeholders to commit some level of funding and time to a common effort, demonstrating *a collective stewardship* to the public. This is no mean feat when voluntary effort on this scale was unheard of before. With relatively small amounts of money at hand the volunteers were relentless in measuring educational outcomes and assembling information by travelling distances both accessible and inaccessible by road, sometimes under dangerous conditions. We are proud that Pakistan Coalition for Pakistan actively participated in 2 provinces namely, Sind and Punjab while it was not possible to conduct this survey in Baluchistan and NWFP due to deteriorating security conditions in these provinces.

ASER - As a Regional Cooperation in Finding Solutions to Common Problems

ASER Pakistan is not just a smart effective tool to measure whether “*each child is learning and learning well inside or out of school*”. It is a great proof to show how regional cooperation on best practices can effectively assist reforms in education sector in neighboring countries. The collaborative learning experience was widely welcomed and deeply appreciated. This kind of exchange enriches the knowledge base and understanding of what works in regional contexts.

ASER has successfully demonstrated that in order to really get at the root causes of the systemic problems ailing South Asian education sector requires a completely different way of operating. The

solutions demand cooperation rather than competition, collective action more than individual effort on the part of South Asian countries.

The Findings Have Serious Implications:

The testing of children in age group 3-16 is important as these are foundation years and as aptly described by the report “if the foundations are strong, the level of learning achievements will be good as well be for a child studying in Class 1 or Class 9 or 16 years old out of school youth.”

The issue is urgent. When 19% of the children tested in the age group 13-14 years cannot read para or level-I text and 23.1% cannot do subtraction or Level-I (arithmetic) or in the higher age group of 15-16 years about 27.3% are unable to read the story text (level -2) where as about 36.3% of all children them are unable to solve simple division (level-II), then there is something seriously wrong with our decision-making.

Studies that focus on assessments well can yield both welcome and unwelcome surprises. For example when children were unable to read or do simple arithmetic sums many parents were shocked, they took it for granted that children are on the right track in learning basics and fundamentals. Similarly the learning achievement in the schools would be so frequently abysmally low was not expected. While Pakistan may have some of the best results in the world, (e.g. Ali Moeen taking 22 As in Cambridge International A Level Examination and securing a place in Guinness World Records) it also has much of the worst.

In ASER 2008, Pakistan, the tables 3 and 4 in National report there is a pleasant surprise that in class 1 among those tested 4 % can do division and read story text while in class 8, 18% cannot read story text and 26% cannot do division. Did the former group have effective teachers well immersed in content knowledge and pedagogical skills, or parents were participating in their children’s learning process, or whether these children belonged to affluent families having access to first class private schools. These questions are not answered and do not fall within the scope of this report but definitely illustrate another benchmark.

The school education must catapult in coming years from the 18th to the 21st century through a truly remarkable crash program to upgrade the nation’s education.

The results also confirm what other researchers have shown. For example according to the Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS) survey included learning outcomes for 12,000 students in grade III. The overall students’ performance was low. The overall learning outcomes are far below the standards set at each grade-level (LEAPS 2007, p. iii). For example, 35 percent of students in grade I cannot subtract single-digit numbers, 76 percent of students in grade II cannot read. Analysis of the data shows that children in public schools are behind students in private schools by between 1.5 and 2 years (a child in private school in Grade III has the same performance as a child in public school in Grade 5) in the three tested subjects of English, Mathematics and Urdu (LEAPS 2007, p.31).

Why Make ASER Pakistan an Annual Exercise?

The ASER report draws no conclusions as to what are the solutions. But accumulation of results from this independent testing does suggest that enough evidence exists for emergency interventions. The Government needs to conduct a new policy analysis in the education sector and create a master plan rather than a patchwork of reforms.

What can be done to ensure that once children make it to school, they learn? What is needed to get children to learn? Teachers having good knowledge and skills in both content and pedagogy, good curriculum design, performance-based teacher bonuses, class room materials, management development, monitoring and evaluation and other key areas, how to weave this in a single plan to achieve demonstrable improvements in learning outcomes will require deep and continued non-partisan high-level political will to implement. Pakistan’s most valuable asset is its people, yet this asset is being wasted. If we want to be a nation which is better educated, more productive, more technologically advanced and more ingenious, we have to improve our schooling and learning outcomes, by investing in right programmes.

Pakistan is a weak state in terms of financial constraints and weak implementation environment as well as “weak” commitment to the expansion of quality education as a means of expanding basic skills in the population. Under these unfavorable circumstances the access to quality education for all will remain a dream. Producing ASER Pakistan at regular intervals has many advantages: not only would it contribute to improving parent participation and community involvement, but also has the advantage of being clear enough easily to hold the education officials accountable for education outcomes. Regular assessment of outcomes also helps in identifying and generating knowledge about how effectively and efficiently the resources are being employed.

International aid agencies are more and more focusing on performance/outcome based aid delivery. The Global Fund for Education as proposed by President Obama stresses the importance of education but also insists on a relentless focus on results across the whole education sector. ASER Pakistan generates knowledge that can be used to improve not only U.S. aid coming under Kerry Lugar Bill but also aid from other donors.

As there are too few incentives to conduct good assessment studies and too many obstacles, the efforts of SAFED to undertake an assessment of learning outcomes on this scale will promote genuine learning and could act as a powerful catalyst.

