

How Ordinary Citizens Transformed the Education Agenda

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The ultimate measure of success in education is not whether or not children attend school, but whether they learn. And creating a system in which learning is valued requires finding out what children are learning and building broad awareness about it. It was these two principles that inspired ASER Pakistan's work to mobilize and train volunteers to conduct household surveys of children's learning. Their efforts have provided estimates of reading and math abilities—the fundamental building blocks for more advanced skills—for children aged five to sixteen, aggregated for every district and for Pakistan as a whole.

These same principles animated similar work on citizen-led assessments in eight other countries. ASER Pakistan, ASER India, Uwezo in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, Beekunko in Mali, Jàngandoo in Senegal, Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes (MIA), and LEARNigeria have come together as the People's Action for Learning Network, or the PAL Network for short. The PAL Network believes in the power of involving citizens in an assessment simple enough to be understandable by even illiterate parents. Collectively they involve nearly 60,000 citizens every year in assessing over one million children.

Thanks to ASER Pakistan and its counterparts in the PAL Network, education debates globally and across many countries are focused more on learning than ever before.

Although citizen-led assessments are by no means the first efforts to measure learning, they are the first efforts to measure foundational skills of reading and math independently and at scale. Their assessments have brought to light a broadly shared picture of progress in education that has sounded the alarm bell: access to schooling does not guarantee learning. An independent evaluation by Results for Development demonstrated that this wake-up call contributed to a shift in education discourse both within countries and internationally. It has helped to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals do not repeat the mistakes of the Millennium Development Goals—Goal 4 is focused on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all.

Not only have citizen-led assessments helped to shape what is in the Sustainable Development goals, they also provide insights on how those goals should be monitored. Here three points are important:

1. First, focusing on ensuring that children are mastering foundational skills and are doing so early in their education is critical. If we continue to leave children behind on these skills they will not have a fair shot at developing other deeper learning skills that are critical for their life chances.
2. Second, ASER Pakistan and its counterparts have proven that citizens can be reliable data collectors. Citizens can play a central role in monitoring whether their governments are making progress against their development goals—a form of external monitoring that will be crucial for reinforcing accountability.
3. The third and final insight is that learning assessment can be done meaningfully and affordably. Evaluations of citizen-led assessments have shown that even simple assessments provide reliable estimates of skills that matter—and they reveal whether goals of inclusion and equity are being met better than school-based assessments, which fail to capture children who drop out, attend irregularly, and/or attend informal schools. And they do all this at a fraction of the cost of other assessments, providing a clear model of the kind of meaningful, affordable monitoring mechanisms that will be needed for the new Sustainable Development Goals.

A remaining challenge for citizen-led assessments is to find new ways to unlock citizen action based on the assessment results. Groups like ASER Pakistan are experimenting with new strategies for communicating information that is relevant and actionable to parents and other citizens and engaging with local elected and education officials, school and community leaders, and teachers as positive agents of change. Greater engagement could, for instance, be achieved by experimenting more with how to create platforms for parents and other concerned citizens to work together to

first jointly diagnose the problem and then create solutions. Citizen-led assessments are also interested in experimenting more with how to involve teacher training institutes to enhance teacher awareness and skills for using assessments to diagnose children's learning status and responding appropriately in their instruction.

With their expansion to nine countries in as many years, citizen-led assessments are evolving into a citizen's movement with the aim to hold global institutions, donors and national-level policy makers accountable for delivering on their promises for equitable learning. Encouragingly, civil society groups in countries far beyond the current members of the PAL Network have expressed interest in implementing citizen-led assessments and expanding their role to put learning at the center of education. As we move towards achieving and monitoring SDG Goal 4, these efforts can help provide a stimulus for action and generate the feedback needed to track progress against our collective goals.

