Annual Status of Education Report
اثر ASER PAKISTAN 2025
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NOTES ON ASER

From Learning Recovery to Learning Acceleration: What Must Change by 2030?

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Global education systems have been battered by a series of shocks in the last few years. The Covid-19 global pandemic hit every education system in the world in 2020, albeit with differential intensity. More recent years have seen many education systems grappling with severe impacts of climate change and increasingly, of conflicts. Pakistan's experience of the Covid-19 pandemic was exacerbated by already deep-rooted educational inequalities. The Annual Status of Education Report from various years bears testament to these structural differences – with educational outcomes persistently low especially in certain parts of the country, in rural areas and for certain demographic groups (e.g. children from low socioeconomic status and those with disabilities). The ASER report in 2023 showcased the worrying effects of the floods in 2022 where the education systems in Sindh and Balochistan, in particular, were especially affected with many schools damaged and closed for several months. Since then, Pakistan has experienced another severe episode of flooding in 2025, numerous smog and heat-related school closures and school closures due to increased conflicts and regional tensions.

When faced with such challenges, policy-makers are necessitated to focus on 'learning recovery' – to prevent dropouts of vulnerable children, to provide some form of learning continuity and address any learning loss that extended or repeated school closures may have caused. However, this note makes the case that Pakistan needs to plan to move beyond recovery and focus on learning acceleration – where students learn effectivity and efficiently and are not just 'recovering' from some set-back; where the entire education system's focus meaningfully shifts to a focus on learning and quality enhancements rather than simply improving access; and where the education that is provided to children is meaningful and prepares them sufficiently to prepare for economic and climate-related shocks and challenges. This is important for two main reasons: 1) Pakistan's learning crisis is deep-rooted, historic and not simply the outcome of the global pandemic or recent shocks; and 2) Unfortunately, Pakistan stands to face continued climate-related and other disruptions in schooling. I discuss each of these in turn.

Pakistan's learning crisis is deep-rooted and structural, requiring a focus on learning acceleration rather than repeated efforts at recovery

Pakistan finds itself in the midst of a national education crisis. There are around 26.2 million children of school age population out of formal schooling. Learning levels in the country also remain persistently low for large sub-groups in the population – as reiterated by various ASER reports over the years. The latest Annual Status of Education Report (2025) reiterates some of the critical challenges the country faces - in 2025, 7.7% of children across Pakistan are reported to be out-of-school and around 7.5% of children have never been enrolled in a school. The latest ASER data from across the country also shows that only 12.4% of children in grade 3 can read a grade 2 level story in Urdu/Sindhi and around half (52.3%) can read the equivalent in grade 5. Arithmetic learning levels of grade 3 and 5 children are similarly low – with only 9.1% children in grade 3 and around 49.6% in grade 5 able to do two-digit division respectively. These assessments cover up

to grade 2 level competencies that have been mapped to the National Curriculum of the country and the fact that a large percentage of children are unable to achieve them in higher grades as they progress is a cause for concern. The latest ASER data also identifies differences in learning levels by school type and by gender. Children enrolled in private schools have better learning outcomes as compared to their government school counterparts: 57% children enrolled in class 5 in private schools are able to read at least a story in Urdu/Sindhi as compared to 50% in government schools; 54% of children enrolled in class 5 in private schools were able to do division as compared to 47% class 5 children in government schools. The differences by gender are not so stark: around 48% boys and 49% girls aged 5-16 years could read at least sentences in Urdu/Sindhi and 53% boys as compared to 54% girls were able to do grade 2 level subtraction (aged 5-16 years).

The government of Pakistan, in declaring an 'Education Emergency' has indicated that it takes these issues seriously. The National Education Policy Development Framework (NEPDF 2024) defines Pakistan's education problem as a learning crisis and recognises that increasing enrolment without commensurate efforts at improving learning will halter progress. This framework also identifies severe learning deficits across all educational levels with weak foundational learning a key area for concern. It notes that when children do not acquire basic reading, writing and numeracy skills, they fail to become independent learners and gain meaningful learning which impacts their life and economic outcomes. This learning crisis, in turn, is a threat for Pakistan's economic growth, productivity and global standing. Systemic issues within the education system have contributed to this crisis. These include poor teaching quality, a lack of sufficient resources, poor governance, weak curriculum and poor alignment of what is taught to labour market needs. In light of this, the NEPDF (2024) calls for improved learning to become the key reform priority with all efforts aligning to achieve this. However, despite this, ASER 2025 findings show that teacher attendance in far from universal across both government and private schools and schools across the country continue to grapple with meeting basic infrastructure needs, let alone focusing on the more critical needs of teaching quality: with almost 40% of the surveyed government primary schools not having functional toilets and usable drinking water and almost 29% not having complete boundary walls.

Pakistan is likely to face continuing challenges to the continuity of education due to climate-related and other disruptions and needs to build a resilient education system that can withstand these shocks

Climate change is emerging as a significant barrier to achieving equitable education globally. Pakistan faces a disproportionately higher vulnerability to climate-related incidents that are likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in the education system especially for the most vulnerable: girls, rural communities, persons with disabilities, and poorer households. In the past decade alone, Pakistan has experienced several large-scale climate-related incidents – with the floods in 2022 and more recently those in 2025 devastating several provinces, ruining educational infrastructure and disrupting education for many children. In addition to large-scale and longer term disruptions due to floods and pandemics, Pakistan is also increasingly vulnerable to shorter duration but repeated disruptions due to heat waves, smog and extreme rainfall. ASER data in 2025 that is highlighted in this report has shown that almost 4% of the householders were 'significantly'

affected by some natural disaster within the past year with almost 12% of all surveyed households 'moderately affected'. In terms of children's schooling, almost 3.8% of the households in rural areas and 5.2% in urban blocks reported that their children's schooling was extremely, moderately or somewhat affected by an event in the past year. There are clear disparities in these findings when disaggregating by province. Learning acceleration will require planning and building resilient education systems and moving the focus from 'recovery' to acceleration.

What needs to change by 2030?

Achieving learning acceleration requires a fundamental focus on transforming learning in Pakistan. This necessitates investing in the teaching workforce, a strong focus on building foundational literacy and numeracy and building resilience in the education system:

- The national focus must remain on ensuring foundational literacy and numeracy with a specific focus on the more marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Recent reforms like the Federal Foundational Learning Policy (2024), whilst aiming to ensure all children master basic skills by 2030, must remain linked very clearly with short, medium and long-term implementation plans to ensure these goals are met.
- Teachers remain the most critical input to ensuring quality learning and, therefore, the greatest accelerator of learning. Building teacher professional ecosystems by supporting teachers through effective professional training, digital teacher support platforms, and classroom observation systems linked with peer and other support mechanisms can be some of the ways in which this can be achieved. Providing training to teachers and educators on teaching continuity when faced with climate-related incidents is needed (e.g. on disaster education continuity plans).
- Covid-19 showed us that tech-based learning solutions can provide a great opportunity to provide learning continuity but also to reach some of the most marginalised. To do so, however, requires ensuring internet access and the development of effective and accessible national learning platforms and digital literacy training of teachers. Digitally-enabled classrooms with well-trained and equipped teachers and school leaders can help Pakistan ensure learning acceleration and move away from 'recovery'.
- Acceleration also requires building a climate-resilient education system in Pakistan. Climate crises destroy school infrastructure and cause significant disruptions and dropouts amongst the most vulnerable groups. Many schools in the country are still missing basic facilities and future planning must ensure these facilities and more are sufficiently provided (e.g. solar panels to deal with power outages and extreme heat, safe drinking water facilities, climate-resilient infrastructure and buildings).
- Learning acceleration cannot be achieved when millions remain out of school. Reaching the most marginalised requires very specific and targeted policy reforms that cater to addressing their specific needs (e.g. by addressing the barriers that are preventing them from attending and learning – conditional cash transfers to address socio-economic disadvantage or flexible schooling models/afternoon schools for children who work for instance). Efforts, therefore, must continue to attract, bring back and continue to retain the most vulnerable children into education.
- Pakistan must address critical structural issues in the education system including underinvestment in education and governance issues. Increased spending and using data-driven education planning can help it achieve that.