

A closer look at ASER-DIET partnerships

ASER's citizen-led assessment approach aims to foster community participation in education by empowering ordinary citizens to engage with the question of what our children are learning. Our partners — colleges, universities, civil society organisations, and teacher training institutions — make it possible to reach all rural districts of the country year after year. Survey tools that are simple to understand and easy to administer enable volunteers to collect data on villages, schools, households, and children's reading and arithmetic levels across rural India. The process exposes them to community-level challenges, sparks local discussions about educational practices, and can catalyse informed action in support of children's learning.

The importance of community involvement in education is echoed in national policies and guidelines such as the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat Mission, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023. NIPUN Bharat positions community participation as a central and overarching factor in planning, implementing, and monitoring the interventions of the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) mission. NEP 2020 highlights the importance of increasing community awareness about the quality of education and encouraging local engagement in monitoring and improving schools. The NCF-SE advocates for volunteerism and the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in community-driven approaches, which aligns with ASER's focus on mobilising citizens to strengthen educational outcomes.

At the global level, UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework stresses the importance of mobilising local communities for sustainable development. It discusses empowering communities by encouraging them to take an active role in identifying and addressing local educational challenges and environmental issues.¹ Similarly, the World Bank's Community-Driven Development (CDD) approach emphasises the importance of community mobilisation for fostering local ownership of development projects, including those related to education.²

Since 2005, ASER has partnered with over 4,300 institutions, including 2,325 NGOs, 974 colleges/universities, 405 District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), 117 teacher training colleges, 78 schools, and 402 others like self-help groups and the National Cadet Corps, with several of these partnerships spanning multiple years.

Partnerships with DIETs have been important for the successful implementation of the ASER survey. Established under National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 to decentralise education research and training, DIETs are government-run teacher education institutes at the district level in India. The 613 DIETs across India are centres for the training of future teachers, resource support, and research, with the primary aim to facilitate the effective delivery of central and state-level education schemes to the last mile.

Recognising the shared focus on goals such as strengthening the education system, building teacher capacity, and improving learning outcomes, ASER Centre began collaborating with DIETs from the inception of the ASER survey in 2005, first partnering with the DIET in the Nagaon district of Assam. Over the past decade, ASER has partnered annually with at least one DIET in Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh. Over the last 10 years, between 170 and 260 DIETs have participated in every nationwide 'basic' ASER. This year, ASER has collaborated with DIETs in 227 districts across 14 states.

These long-running ASER-DIET collaborations also speak to the goals of NEP 2020, which emphasise the significance of the capacity-building of teachers through culturally relevant training, as well as those of NIPUN Bharat and NCF-SE, which advocate for innovative, community-based approaches.

To better understand the experiences of DIET students who conducted the ASER 2024 survey, they were asked to fill out an online feedback form. Based on the responses of 1,940 students, we found that volunteering for ASER provides DIET students with practical experience in primary data collection and survey methodologies, skills that 66.8% of DIET volunteers report gaining. By becoming a part of the ASER survey, volunteers get an opportunity to observe ground realities — 86.1% of DIET volunteers said that they got a chance to understand the learning levels of children in their districts, and 82.2% reported understanding how different socioeconomic factors affect children's learning levels. The ASER experience goes beyond education-related understanding, fostering essential abilities such as decision-making (as reported by 80.8% of DIET volunteers), collaboration (71.9%), and problem-solving (62.5%). Interacting with children, parents, teachers, and community members during the survey helped 77.2% of the DIET students to further develop their interpersonal skills, preparing them to effectively

¹ UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development. (2018). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246270>

² Wong, S., Guggenheim, S., & Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience Global Practice. (2018). Community-Driven Development: Myths and Realities. Policy Research Working Paper (Report No. WPS8435). World Bank. <http://www.worldbank.org/research>

communicate with diverse stakeholders in their future roles. Teamwork during the survey also fosters coordination and problem-solving.

One of our DIET volunteers from Wokha in Nagaland shared,

This platform has been an influential experience for me. Through the ASER 2024 survey, I learned perseverance and dedication. Traversing challenging terrain and interacting with diverse communities taught me to adapt and push beyond my limits. ASER 2024 has given me a newfound sense of purpose. By experiencing the real-life conditions of the sampled localities and villages, I gained a deeper understanding of the diverse complexities faced by rural communities. This exposure has not only broadened my perspective but also instilled in me a sense of empathy and resilience. I am grateful for this opportunity which has equipped me with essential life skills to navigate the challenges ahead. I am confident that this experience will propel me towards achieving my aspirations.

While volunteering for ASER has many benefits for the students who participate, these partnerships are also extremely useful for the successful implementation of the survey itself. Since internships are part of the curriculum for second or third year DIET students and several of them have worked as field investigators on other projects and assessments, they often have experience working with children and are comfortable engaging with community members. DIETs have students who come from different parts of the district, making it easier for survey teams to reach sampled villages that are located in remote areas. These students are often familiar with the local dialects of their region, facilitating effective communication with the people in sampled villages. In villages, the admiration and respect that people often have for teachers is visible in the cooperation offered to DIET student volunteers.

While the ASER survey is one type of partnership, Pratham, ASER Centre, and DIETs have also collaborated on several other initiatives over the years to improve the quality of education and teacher training across India. These collaborations have focused on capacity-building programs aiming to support participants' understanding of how to use assessment data to structure teaching practices in line with children's learning levels. Notable among these was the DIET Partnership Program (2015–2018), a capacity-building program that worked with 12,000 future teachers from nearly 120 DIETs to assess and then work to improve the learning levels of over 100,000 children.³ Pratham has also partnered with DIET Jukhala in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh through the APJ Abdul Science Center, where it has a dedicated team that supports the Science Center's projects. The Pratham team also supports DIET Jukhala in developing projects such as a State Science Resource Centre that serves as a learning hub for the entire state. In July 2020, DIETs partnered with Pratham in 75 districts across Uttar Pradesh to implement its Karke Seekhna program, wherein Pratham trained approximately 19,000 DIET students to send text messages with simple activities that involved parents in helping children continue their learning journeys during school closures, reaching about 1 million children in primary and upper primary grades.⁴ More recently, DIETs participated in the Pratham-facilitated "catch-up" campaign of 2023 named CAMaL ka Camp, held across 165 districts in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. The campaign reached close to 145,000 communities, working with more than 300,000 youth to improve the reading levels of 3.4 million children.⁵

The enduring partnerships between ASER, DIETs, and other institutions underscore the power of collaboration in addressing India's educational challenges. By combining grassroots engagement, capacity-building initiatives, and innovative programs, these collaborations inspire a collective commitment to ensure every child has access to quality education. Through shared efforts, they pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape across the country.

³ Pratham Education Foundation. Internal report. Pratham Education Foundation's Partnership with District Institute of Education of Training (2015-2018).

⁴ Pratham Education Foundation. (2020). Internal report. Karke Seekhna: Partnership for Learning during COVID Crisis.

⁵ Pratham Education Foundation. (2023). CAMaL Ka Camp "catch-up" campaign: Summer 2023. <https://pratham.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Pratham-Summer-Camp-2023-India.pdf>