Annexure 13: Frequently Asked Questions about ASER

Contents

Overview

About sampling

About design

About tools and testing

29. Why does ASER assess only basic reading and arithmetic?
30. What guidelines are followed in developing the reading and arithmetic assessment tools?
31. What languages do you test in? Are the reading assessments comparable across different languages?
32. Why does ASER test children individually and in an oral format?
33. Why does the ASER reading assessment begin at the Std I passage level? Why does the ASER arithmetic assessment begin at the Std II subtraction level?
34. Why does the arithmetic testing process in ASER not include addition or multiplication?
35. Why are all children in the age group of 5-16 years assessed with the same tools? Why does ASER not assess children at their grade level?
36. What do we know about the reliability and validity of the ASER assessments?
37. How long does the process of testing a child take?

About implementation

38. Why does ASER rely on volunteers?
39. Which organisations partner with ASER? How do you find them?
40. Are the volunteers capable and well-equipped to do the survey? How do you ensure data quality?
41. How do volunteers collect the data?
42. ASER collects personal information about children and households. What are the steps taken to safeguard their privacy?

About ASER results

43. Why doesn't ASER provide district level reports on reading and arithmetic?
44. Why doesn't ASER rank states? How can I compare my state with others?
45. What if the data I am looking for is not in the published report? Is the raw data available in the public domain?

About impact

46. What impact has ASER had on education policy in India?
47. What response do you get from the parents of children you test, or from the community in general?
48. Has ASER had an impact in other countries?

About resources

49. Who funds ASER?
50. Can I volunteer for ASER or participate in any way?
51. How can I contribute towards ASER surveys?

Overview

1. What is ASER?

ASER stands for Annual Status of Education Report. It is a nationwide household-based survey of children's schooling and learning status. Schooling status is recorded for children in the age group of 3-16, and children in the age group of 5-16 are tested on their ability to read simple text and do basic arithmetic. This format of 'basic' ASER was conducted in every rural district of the country for ten years, from 2005 to 2014. Thereafter, since 2016, the annual basic ASER survey transitioned into an alternate-year cycle, focusing on different age groups and domains of education in other years. In 2017, youth aged 14-18 were surveyed on their ability to apply basic literacy and numeracy in real-life contexts; in 2019, children aged 4-8 were assessed on cognitive, early language, and numeracy skills; in 2023, the domains and age group of 2017 were revisited, with an added focus on digital literacy and smartphone usage.

2. Why ASER? Isn't information on children's learning outcomes already available?

For a long time, government policy and statistics focused on inputs and enrollment — how many schools and teachers, how many children in school, and so on. When ASER began in 2005, there was very little focus on what children were actually learning. It is true that today many more large-scale assessments are conducted in India as compared to 2005 when the first ASER survey was carried out, but most of these focus on grade-level competencies rather than foundational skills. PARAKH (previously National Achievement Survey or NAS) was conducted by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a central government institution in 2024, with children in Std III, VI, and IX. Additionally, State Education Achievement Survey (SEAS) was conducted in most states/Union Territories in 2023. However, prior to the central government's Foundational Learning Study (FLS) in 2022, ASER was the only large-scale assessment in India focusing on children's foundational skills. ASER remains the only regular source of data on children's foundational learning outcomes, with data that is comparable over the past two decades.

3. What is the geographical coverage of ASER?

ASER is a rural survey. Urban areas are not covered. ASER attempts to reach every rural district of the country (although in some years certain states have been excluded for logistical and security reasons, such as Jammu and Kashmir in 2010, Arunachal Pradesh in 2013, Goa in 2022, and Goa and Manipur in 2024). However, every year ASER is unable to reach some rural districts. Generally, this is due to natural disasters, or situations of unrest or conflict in the district. In 2024, ASER reached 605 districts of the country.

4. After completing 10 years in 2014, ASER changed its annual format. There was no ASER in 2015, and reports released in 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2023 highlighted different themes. Why these changes?

When we started ASER in 2005, we made a commitment to do it every year for five years because we believe that for data to feed into policy, it needs to be reliable, comparable, and available on a regular basis. At the end of five years, the consensus was that it was too soon to discontinue ASER.

In 2014, we completed 10 years and so we decided to take a year off to reflect and consolidate our learnings. In 2015, ASER was done only in two states — Punjab and Maharashtra — at the specific request of the respective state governments. There was no national ASER 2015 report.

Then in 2016, ASER began its second decade. Much had changed since 2005; there was far more awareness of the learning crisis, and learning assessments were being conducted regularly by the central and state governments. But the problem of poor foundational reading and arithmetic abilities was still widespread. Even in 2016, less than half of all children in Std VIII could solve a simple division problem.

Taking all these factors into account, we decided that for the next ten years (2016-2025), ASER would switch to an alternate-year cycle. The basic ASER would be conducted every other year — it was conducted in 2016 and again in 2018. In 2017, the ASER 'Beyond Basics' survey focused on the abilities, experiences, and aspirations of youth aged 14-18. In 2019, the ASER 'Early Years' report looked at the cognitive skills, early language, early numeracy, and social and emotional learning of children aged 4-8. The next basic ASER was scheduled for 2020, but could not be conducted due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. National-level phone surveys in 2020 and 2021 helped to understand how children were learning at home. As soon as the restrictions were lifted, ASER returned to the field in 2021 in Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Karnataka, resulting in three state-level reports on learning levels during the pandemic. In 2023, ASER conducted the 'Beyond Basics' survey again, with an added focus on the digital literacy and skills of youth aged 14-18.

In 2024, 'basic' ASER was conducted as scheduled to assess children's foundational learning levels, as well as generating representative estimates of the digital access and abilities of older children aged 14-16.

5. What is the survey calendar? Why was this timeline selected?

ASER is carried out in the middle of the school year – roughly between September and November. By this time, children's enrollment patterns have settled down for the year. Data entry and analysis take place in November and December, and survey results are released in January of the following year. This calendar is designed to ensure that ASER data for the current school year is available in time to be utilised for the district-level planning process of the following year. Planning for elementary education takes place at the district level, and before ASER, there was no source of district-level data on children's learning outcomes that could provide inputs into this process.

6. Who collects the data?

ASER is conducted by volunteers from local partner organisations in each district. A wide range of institutions partner with ASER each year. These include universities and colleges, non-governmental organisations, and government institutions, among others. For example, in 2024, ASER was conducted by students from the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) – the government teacher training colleges, in about 227 districts. The process of finding, training, and monitoring ASER partners and volunteers is led by ASER Centre, the research and assessment unit of Pratham Education Foundation.

7. What is the per-child cost of ASER?

The ASER survey costs about 200 rupees per child. Compared to other large-scale learning assessments, this is an extremely low cost.

8. How can ASER results help plan action to improve children's learning?

A close look at any ASER table of results shows that even within a single grade, children's ability to read or do simple arithmetic varies enormously. Teaching from a grade level textbook will not work for children who are not at that level. In traditional classrooms, these children get left further behind as they move to higher grades. Improving children's foundational learning levels requires an understanding of what children are currently able to do, so that teaching methods and materials can be designed to enable them to start from their current level and build towards the learning levels appropriate for their age and grade.

ASER data tells us where most children are struggling, so that resources can be allocated accordingly. Children from different grades who are at the same level of reading ability can be grouped together. This approach has come to be known as 'Teaching at the Right Level', in other words teaching children based on what they know and can do, rather than based on their age or grade. Many schools and education programs already implement this approach, as do several state governments. Understanding children's current learning status is the critical first step, and ASER results provide this. If data is required for a specific geography or group, ASER tools and testing processes can be easily used to generate this understanding for any class, school or group of children.

About sampling

9. What is the purpose of sampling, and why does ASER do it?

Assessing the foundational reading and arithmetic abilities of every child in India would be an enormous task, requiring a huge amount of resources. Fortunately, it is not necessary to do so. The careful selection of a sample of villages and households enables us to generate data that is just as accurate and reliable as testing every child in the country – provided that the process of sampling is done carefully by experts and strictly followed on the ground. Other than the Census of India, which is conducted every ten years, large-scale surveys always select a sample rather than cover every unit in their target population. In the case of ASER, the sampling methodology has been designed by experts and is standard for large-scale surveys.

10. Who designed ASER's sampling strategy?

The ASER sampling strategy was designed in consultation with experts at the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi. Inputs were also received from experts at the NITI Aayog (formerly Planning Commission of India) and the National Statistics Office (formerly National Sample Survey Organization).

11. What is the definition of 'rural' that is used in ASER?

ASER uses the Census village directory as the sampling frame. When we say ASER (rural), we refer to the definition of rural habitations as used in the Census. It does not refer to rural districts, since the Census itself does not define districts as either rural or urban.

12. What is the sample size of ASER? How does this compare with other large-scale surveys?

ASER aims to generate district-level estimates of children's schooling status and basic reading and arithmetic abilities. Each year, ASER reaches close to 600 districts out of a total of 640 (as per the 2011 Census district list). In each district, 30 villages are selected and in each sampled village, 20 households with children in the age group of 3-16 are randomly selected. This gives a total of 600 households in each rural district. Depending on the exact number of districts surveyed, between 320,000 and 350,000 households across the country are sampled for each year's ASER. In each surveyed household, all children in the age group of 3-16 years are surveyed and all children in the age group of 5-16 years are tested, yielding a total of approximately 700,000 children tested each year. The same sampling process is used in all districts regardless of population or socioeconomic characteristics.

The National Sample Survey (NSS) conducted by the Government of India's National Statistical Office is the main source of official data for estimating poverty, employment, and other socioeconomic indicators. The ASER sample of villages is about twice as large as the NSS sample for rural India. In 2011-12, the NSS Employment Survey was done in 7,469 villages across India with 8 households per village. In contrast, ASER 2024 surveyed 17,997 villages with 20 households per village. The PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 (formerly NAS) conducted by NCERT was implemented in schools in 782 districts (as per the current district list) across all states/Union Territories. It covered a total of about 23,00,000 students from Std III, VI and IX.

13. Why does ASER select 30 villages per district and 20 households per village? How are villages selected? What happens if a village no longer exists, or has become an urban area?

ASER uses a two-stage sampling strategy which enables us to generate a representative picture of each district. Almost all rural districts are surveyed in ASER each year. The estimates obtained are then aggregated (using appropriate weights) to the state and national levels. In the first stage, 30 villages are sampled from each district using the Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sampling technique. From 2005 to 2014, villages were sampled from the Census 2001 village list. From 2016 onwards, the Census 2011 village directory has been used. In the second stage, 20 households are randomly selected in each sampled village following a procedure known as the 'every 5th household rule'. The total sample size for each district is thus 30 x 20 = 600 households. This two-stage design ensures that every household in the district has an equal probability of being selected.

In previous years, the 30 villages surveyed in a district comprised 10 villages from the preceding year's survey, 10 more from two years prior, and 10 new villages selected from the Census village directory using PPS. The 20 old villages and 10 new villages gave us what is known as a 'rotating panel' of villages, which generates more precise estimates of change. Having a rotating panel of villages means that every year some old and some new villages are included, which ensures that there is both continuity and change in the sample from previous years. Since 2016 was the first year of a new series of ASER reports that use Census 2011 as the basis for sampling, no villages from previous ASERs were retained. A fresh sample of 30 villages was generated from the Census 2011 village directory. ASER 2024 comprises a 'rotating panel' of villages – 10 villages from the 2018 survey, 10 from the 2022 survey and 10 new villages from the Census 2011 village list.

To maintain the randomness of the sample, which is important in order to obtain reliable estimates, every year ASER Centre generates the ASER village list from the Census village directory. This village list is final. However, every year there are certain situations where replacement villages are required, such as when a village is affected by natural disasters, or an insurgency, or if it has been reclassified as a town. In such cases, ASER Centre provides the name of a replacement village.

14. How does ASER select 20 households in each village?

ASER samples 30 villages in each district, and 20 households from each village, giving a sample of 600 households per district. Until 2018, 20 households were sampled randomly in the village using the 'every 5th household rule', which included households with no children. This allowed for the assigning of weights based on the population size of the village. Over the years, while the number of villages and households surveyed in ASER have remained similar, the number of surveyed children has been declining steadily due to decreasing fertility rates and family size.

To counter the falling number of children in the sample, the household sampling strategy was changed for ASER 2022. While ASER 2022 also followed the 'every 5th household rule' to randomly sample the households in the village, only households that had children in the age group of 3-16 were surveyed. A record was maintained for every household that the volunteers visited in the village, including households with no children, and households which did not want to participate in the survey. This record was used to calculate the weights. The same strategy has been followed in ASER 2024.

15. Can I find out which villages have been surveyed?

No, you can't. This information is not in the public domain; the ASER village list is confidential. In all large-scale surveys and research studies, it is standard practice to maintain the confidentiality of respondents. This means that all information that could enable someone to identify particular individuals, households, or villages is removed. This includes village names, respondent names and other identifying information.

16. Is ASER data representative? At what levels?

ASER data is representative at district, state, and national levels.

17. Why does ASER aim to generate district-level estimates?

Most official statistics in India produce estimates only at the state and national level. Even poverty estimates in India, obtained from the National Statistics Office, are available only at the state or regional level, not at the district level. However, planning and allocation of resources is often done at the district level. For example, in elementary education, annual work plans are developed at the district level. While data on enrollment, access, and educational inputs are collected annually for each district, there is a significant gap in measuring children's learning outcomes. Learning estimates are neither available at the district level nor comparable over time. ASER seeks to address this gap by providing reliable, district-level data on children's foundational learning skills.

18. Do ASER estimates for a district also apply to individual villages or blocks in that district?

No, they don't. ASER estimates for a district are representative only at the district level, and provide a snapshot of children's schooling and learning status for the district as a whole. The sampling is not representative at the village or block level. The situation in individual villages or blocks can be different. To understand the status of a particular village or block, a different sampling strategy would have to be used.

19. ASER has been using the 2011 Census village directory to sample villages since 2016, whereas ASER 2005-2014 used the 2001 Census. Is data from ASER 2016 onwards comparable with earlier years?

ASER is representative at the state and district levels, and a change in the sampling frame does not affect this feature of ASER. ASER 2006-2014 provided representative estimates of state and district boundaries as represented in the Census 2001 frame, and ASER 2016, 2018, 2022, and 2024 do so for the Census 2011 frame. However, estimates for districts may not be comparable if geographical boundaries have changed. Census 2011 has added 31 rural districts, and in 2022, 10 new districts were added in Chhattisgarh. These new districts have been carved out of the old districts and are, therefore, not comparable.

20. Is enrollment data for children of ages 3 and 4 comparable across all years?

Due to a change in the way this data was collected in 2018, data for enrollment of children of ages 3 and 4 is not comparable with ASER years before 2018.

About design

21. Why does ASER test children at home and not in school?

The ASER survey generates estimates of schooling of children aged 3 and 4, and foundational learning levels of children in the age group of 5-16 in rural India. This includes children enrolled in different types of pre-schools and schools (government, private, and others) as well as children who are currently not enrolled in school. The first challenge with school-based testing is that there is no complete list of all schools in the country. In particular, many low-cost private schools are not found on any official list. Without a complete list of all the schools, it is not possible to select an unbiased sample of schools. The second

challenge with school-based testing is that not all children are in school. Some have dropped out, some have never enrolled, and others are absent from school on the day of the survey. Testing in school would mean that all these children would be excluded. ASER tests children at home so as to include all these different kinds of children. Household-based testing is the only way to ensure that all children are included.

22. How do you ensure that children are at home on the day of the survey?

The household survey is usually conducted on a Sunday and/or at other times (like holidays) when children are not in school. If a child is not at home at the time of the survey, volunteers are asked to note the child's details and return to the household at a time when she will be available.

23. Why is the target age group for assessment 5-16 years?

ASER was designed to capture the learning status of children in the elementary school age group. Many states allow children to enter Std I at age 5, but children can start school much later. They can also drop out and then return to school, repeat a class, and so on. Therefore, although the official elementary school age range that is specified in policy documents is 6-14, in practice, large proportions of children who are younger than 6 and older than 14 continue to be in elementary grades.

24. Why is the ASER survey not conducted in urban areas?

First, many urban areas have large low-income populations that are undocumented and therefore not included in the available sampling frames. These areas would be left out of a sample-based survey. Second, a representative sample of the urban population in any state would include not just metros but also a diverse range of urban habitations. Whereas for rural districts, the estimates generated by ASER can be shared with the district administration, there is usually no equivalent single urban authority in a state with whom educational planning can be discussed for the state as a whole.

25. Do you also collect information about the household?

Yes, in addition to children's schooling and learning status, some basic information about the household is collected (such as parents' education, number of family members, household assets, etc.). Additional household indicators vary from year to year. For instance, the ASER 2022 and 2024 reports specifically tracked smartphone availability in households, highlighting their growing importance in understanding access to online educational resources and the evolving digital landscape in education.

26. What is the relationship between household indicators and children's learning? Where can I find this data in the ASER report?

Information on selected household indicators is included in an annexure in each year's ASER report. The body of the report focuses on children's schooling and learning status because these are the main objectives of the survey. While it is true that household information is collected in order to understand the relationship between household characteristics and children's learning, unpacking these relationships requires more time and deeper analysis. The ASER report simply presents the findings of the survey, but this data has been used by researchers in India and abroad to explore many important questions about the factors influencing children's learning.

27. Do you collect information about schools?

ASER has been doing school visits every year since 2009. Volunteer teams visit the largest government school with primary sections in each sampled village, and collect information on enrollment, attendance, staffing, and basic facilities available in schools. However, learning assessments are always conducted in households, not in schools.

28. Why don't you collect information on children with disabilities/special needs/working children?

The ASER approach is designed to be rapid and easy to do. Assessing children with special needs requires more time, training and expertise than ASER volunteers have. Additionally, since ASER is a household survey, the sampling may not be suitable for reaching working children. While it is important to have data on children with disabilities, special needs and working children, among others, ASER may not be the appropriate platform to collect it. ASER Centre has developed a

separate Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) assessment tool for children with disabilities called 'Assessment for All', details of which can be found on the ASER Centre website. This tool is not part of the regular ASER survey.

About tools and testing

29. Why does ASER assess only basic reading and arithmetic?

Since its inception, Pratham's work has focused on basic reading and arithmetic. Since the early years of our work, we noticed that a large number of children in primary grades were struggling to acquire these basic skills. Difficulties in these two domains prevent children from acquiring higher level skills. A weak foundation of basic learning also weakens performance in other subject areas and adversely impacts children's academic outcomes. When ASER started in 2005, no estimates of learning for primary grades were available in India. For these reasons, an assessment of basic reading and arithmetic ability came to be the primary focus of the ASER survey. While these two competencies are assessed every year, additional competencies have been assessed in some years. For example, basic English was tested in 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2022. Additional arithmetic questions were asked in 2008, 2010, and 2017, and the digital abilities of children aged 14-16 have been assessed in 2024. However, since our first priority is to ensure that the assessment process is simple and quick to administer, only a limited number of additional tasks are included in any given year.

30. What guidelines are followed in developing the reading and arithmetic assessment tools?

By design, ASER is a 'floor' test which aims to evaluate children's basic reading and arithmetic ability. The reading and arithmetic assessments are developed taking into account the state-mandated curriculum in each state. The content of the reading assessment, i.e., the selection of words, the length of sentences, and reading passages is aligned to the Std I and II textbooks in each state. At the letter level, recognition of only simple letters is assessed. At the word level, simple one and two-syllable words, which are commonly used and appropriate for Std I are included. In the development of Std I and II level passages, orthography-specific indicators such as the use of simple letters, secondary representations of letters, and conjoint letters are considered along with sentence and passage length. The vocabulary used in the reading passages is aligned to the state-mandated curriculum for appropriateness. Since ASER 2010, we have also calculated the type-token ratios for the reading passages as an additional index to ensure comparability. A type-token ratio indexes the lexical diversity of a text. It is calculated by obtaining a ratio of the total number of unique words in the text (types) to the total number of words in the text (tokens). A higher type-token ratio indexes greater lexical diversity, which is important in the measurement of fluency, as children who read passages with many repetitive words (lower type-token ratio) are likely to read faster and more easily than children who read passages that are more lexically diverse (higher type-token ratio) as they will have to decode a greater number of different words through the passage. The ASER arithmetic assessment measures children's foundational skills in numeracy such as one- and two-digit number recognition and the ability to perform basic arithmetic operations such as subtraction (with borrowing) and division (3-digit by 1-digit). The content of the arithmetic assessment is aligned to the state-mandated curriculum of Std I, II, and III or IV. 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division is expected of children in Std III in some states and Std IV in others.

31. What languages do you test in? Are the reading assessments comparable across different languages?

The ASER reading tool is available in 19 languages including English and Hindi. These languages differ in their orthographic complexity, written scripts, and verbal language acquisition, among other aspects. The ASER reading assessments do not aim to compare reading abilities across languages due to these limitations and differences. However, reading research suggests that all children move through similar stages while learning to read in any language. Hence, the objective of the tool is to assess the basic foundational skills for literacy acquisition, i.e., letter recognition, reading simple words, and reading words in connected text at Std I and Std II level in each language. Consequently, the inference based on the ASER reading assessment is not about comparing performance across different languages but to evaluate children's level of reading in relation to the state-mandated curriculum for Std I and II.

32. Why does ASER test children individually and in an oral format?

Over the last decade, foundational reading has come to be recognised as an important skill, most recently in the National Education Policy 2020. The assessment of foundational reading can only be done orally and for each child individually. Assessments of foundational reading ability in other countries are also administered in this format, for example the Early

Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS, developed by the University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning)[1]. A typical pen-and-paper test assumes that the child can read, and is not a viable option for a child who is a beginning reader or a struggling reader as it places additional cognitive demands on the child to read and comprehend instructions. In ASER, to minimise the cognitive demands of reading and comprehending instructions and to maintain a standard administration approach, both the reading and the arithmetic assessment are administered individually and in an oral format. However, children are provided with a paper and pencil to solve the subtraction and division problems.

33. Why does the ASER reading assessment begin at the Std I passage level? Why does the ASER arithmetic assessment begin at the Std II subtraction level?

The content of the ASER assessments is aligned to Std I and II for reading and Std I, II, and III or IV for arithmetic. Since the same assessments are also administered to children in Std III or higher, an adaptive testing approach is used. Administration of the reading test begins at the Std I passage level and the administration of the arithmetic test begins at the Std II subtraction level. If the child performs to a satisfactory standard, the child is given the task at the next level, i.e., a Std II passage for reading and a Std III or IV level division problem for arithmetic. If the child does not perform to a satisfactory standard, then she is given the task at the lower level, i.e., simple words for reading and 2-digit number recognition for arithmetic. Hence, the level of the task administered is adapted to match the child's ability. In this administration format, each child attempts only two or three tasks for each assessment instead of all four tasks, making the assessment quicker to administer without compromising the objective of identifying the child's ability levels.

34. Why does the arithmetic testing process in ASER not include addition or multiplication?

Pratham's extensive experience of working with children indicates that when children are given all four arithmetic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division), almost every child who can do subtraction (2-digit operations with borrowing) can also do addition with carry over. It is a similar case with division and multiplication. These trends were also observed in preparatory data work done for the ASER survey and in other data collection efforts.

35. Why are all children in the age group of 5-16 years assessed with the same tools? Why does ASER not assess children at their grade level?

All children are assessed with the same tools as the objective of the ASER survey is to ascertain whether or not children have attained foundational skills in reading and arithmetic. This is irrespective of age or grade level. It is not designed to be a grade-level assessment, but to provide an understanding of school-aged children's foundational reading and basic arithmetic abilities.

36. What do we know about the reliability and validity of ASER assessments?

Reliability is the consistency with which a test measures any given skill and thereby enables us to consistently distinguish between individuals of differing ability levels. Given that the ASER assessments evaluate mastery at different reading and arithmetic levels, reliability here is the consistency of the decision-making process. Validity indicates whether the test measures what it aims to measure – in other words, is the inference based on the ASER reading assessment about children's mastery of basic reading valid? Is the inference based on the ASER arithmetic assessment about children's mastery of basic arithmetic valid? Three studies have been conducted to explore the question of reliability and validity of ASER measurements. The findings from these studies provide favourable empirical evidence for the reliability and validity of the ASER assessments. The findings indicate (a) substantial reliability of decisions across repeated measurements, i.e., consistency in the level assigned to a child assessed by the same examiner on two different occasions and (b) satisfactory inter-rater reliability, i.e., consistency in the level assigned to a child assessed by different examiners. In 2010, an impact evaluation study of Pratham's Read India program was conducted by Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)[2]. In this evaluation, the measurement of children's learning outcomes included several literacy and arithmetic assessments including the ASER reading and arithmetic assessments. This allowed us to correlate children's performance on the ASER assessments with other assessments of reading and arithmetic. This empirical study provided compelling evidence for the validity of ASER assessments.

[1] Technical analysis comparing ASER and EGRA is available in Validating the ASER Testing Tools: Comparisons with Reading Fluency Measures and the Read India Measures (Shaher Banu Vagh, 2009).

[2] See What Helps Children to Learn? Evaluation of Pratham's Read India Program in Bihar & Uttarakhand June 2011 (J-PAL, 2011).

37. How long does the process of testing a child take?

ASER is designed to be easy and quick to administer. Depending on the age and ability of the child, the assessment of reading and arithmetic takes an average of about 7-8 minutes per child.

About implementation

38. Why does ASER rely on volunteers?

ASER is a citizens' initiative, implemented by partner organisations in every rural district across the country. One of the major aims of the survey is to generate awareness and mobilise people around the issue of children's learning. The entire design of ASER thus revolves around the aim of reaching and involving 'ordinary people' rather than experts. All tools and procedures are therefore designed to be simple to understand, quick to implement, and easy to communicate.

39. Which organisations partner with ASER? How do you find them?

Participation in ASER is open to any institution, organisation, or group that can provide volunteers who are comfortable spending time in rural locations. Many different kinds of institutions participate. In the months leading up to the survey, ASER Centre associates travel extensively around their respective states to find institutions that are interested in participating and meet the criteria required of all ASER partners. Institutions often partner with ASER for more than one ASER cycle. Partner organisations sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that lists their responsibilities and those of Pratham. A complete list of ASER partners is published in each year's report.

40. Are the volunteers capable and well-equipped to do the survey? How do you ensure data quality?

Yes! Volunteers are trained intensively prior to the survey, including a field pilot where they practise every procedure that they will be required to implement during the actual survey and a quiz to verify their understanding of the survey process. During training, their performance is carefully monitored and documented. Once the survey is underway, trainers monitor their performance and resolve any problems that are encountered. For more details, a training report is available on the ASER website.[3]

Even though ASER tools and procedures are simple and intuitive, enormous effort is dedicated to ensuring that the data produced by the survey meets stringent quality standards. Quality control and monitoring processes have been put in place at every stage of the survey process, from the training of trainers and volunteers, to monitoring survey implementation in the field, to multi-level rechecking of the collected data. Every year these procedures are carefully reviewed, refined and improved. Details of ASER's quality control processes are available in each year's report. For more details, a quality control report is available on the ASER website.[4]

41. How do volunteers collect the data?

To conduct the survey, a pair of volunteers is assigned to each sampled village. They work together to complete the survey of 20 households over a period of 2 days. Usually, information about the village and school is collected on the first day, and the household survey is conducted for the rest of that day and all of the next day. In each household, the volunteer team records basic household information and the schooling status of all children aged 3-16. They then conduct a one-on-one assessment of the reading and arithmetic abilities of all children in the household aged 5-16.

42. ASER collects personal information about children and households. What are the steps taken to safeguard their privacy?

The ASER report does not digitise or publish any data with personal identifiers like names, phone numbers, etc. All volunteers, trainers, partners, and Pratham/ASER Centre associates involved in the ASER survey are signatories to the organisation's Child Protection Policy (CPP), and their responsibilities under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023. Additionally, photographs, videos, or voice recordings of adults and children are collected with their or their legal guardian's written consent.

[3] For more details see: https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER-Survey-Training-Guidelines.pdf

[4] For more details see: https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/QUALITY-CONTROL-FRAMEWORK.pdf

About ASER results

43. Why doesn't ASER provide district-level reports on reading and arithmetic?

District-level data is not published in the ASER report due to space constraints. However, divisional estimates are included in the report and district-level data is available to download on the ASER Centre website.

44. Why doesn't ASER rank states? How can I compare my state with others?

ASER doesn't rank states because state rankings will vary depending upon the indicator that is selected – for example, children in Std I and II might be doing better in one state relative to others, but children in Std VII and VIII may be doing worse. Or, the proportion of children who can do arithmetic in a state could have improved, but the proportion of children who can read may not have. By providing the data, whoever wants to compare states can choose the parameters on which to do so. However, the inference based on the ASER reading assessment is not about comparing performance across different languages but to evaluate children's level of reading in relation to the state-mandated curriculum for Std I and II.

45. What if the data I am looking for is not in the published report? Is the raw data available in the public domain?

The ASER report includes selected estimates at the district, state and national levels. There are also ASER Trends over Time reports on the ASER Centre website which present data on selected indicators over different time periods. All of this information is available for individual states as well as for India as a whole. ASER reports can be downloaded from the ASER Centre website (www.asercentre.org). Some additional data is available on the ASER Centre website, including estimates at the district level. Beyond these options, ASER Centre makes the ASER data sets available for research purposes upon request.

About impact

46. What impact has ASER had on education policy in India?

ASER has had a major influence in bringing the issue of learning to the centre of the stage in discussions and debates on education in India. In 2005, when ASER began, most people – from parents to government functionaries – were concerned with getting children into school. The assumption was that if children were in school, they must be learning. Today, the fact that large proportions of children are not learning even the basics is widely recognised. For example, ASER has been cited in major Government of India documents such as the XI and XII Five Year Plan and is regularly reported in the Economic Survey of India. Moreover, ASER data has been referenced in various reports such as: NITI Aayog's Three Year Action Agenda for 2017-18 to 2019-20; World Bank's World Development Report 2018, 'How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic' by OECD and the World Bank in 2022; Global Education Monitoring Report 2022; SDG 4 Data Digest: Data to Nurture Learning, and Learning Outcomes at the Elementary Stage by NCERT, making the learning crisis visible and advocating for remedial steps towards improving learning outcomes. Over the years, ASER data has also been referenced in 105 parliamentary questions demonstrating its significance in policy discussions. Many state governments are now implementing their own learning assessments, sometimes using tools very similar to the ASER tools and other times in collaboration with ASER Centre.

47. What response do you get from the parents of children you test, or from the community in general?

In the village there is usually a great deal of curiosity and discussion when the ASER testing is being done. People crowd around to observe and talk about what is going on. The simplicity of the tool helps parents and community members to engage with the effort and also to engage with the question of whether their children are learning. Very often parents assume that because their children are going to school, they must be learning. ASER is sometimes the first time that parents become aware that their children may be struggling.

48. Has ASER had an impact in other countries?

Yes, ASER has had an extensive impact internationally. The simplicity of ASER's tools and processes coupled with the rigour of its sampling methodology and low-cost implementation makes it an appealing option for many countries with socioeconomic contexts similar to India.

First, ASER methodology has spread organically to organisations in many other countries, all of which follow the same set of basic guiding principles while adapting the model to their own context. Inspired by ASER, Nepal, Bangladesh, Kenya, Mexico, and other countries are conducting citizen-led assessments to understand children's learning. To coordinate and support the work of these organisations, the People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network was established in 2015. By 2024, the network had grown to include organisations in 17 countries across 3 continents.

Second, in the lead up to the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals, members of the extended ASER network in many countries made concerted efforts to ensure that indicators of learning and not just schooling are included. ASER and ASER-like initiatives are mentioned in documents of the Global Education Monitoring Report published by UNESCO, the Learning Metrics Task Force (coordinated by Brookings Institution and UNESCO Institute of Statistics), and other UNESCO-UIS documents such as the Data Digest. The importance of large-scale community-based assessments carried out by citizens has been recognised in international policy and advocacy circles as a viable alternative to other existing assessment models, especially with respect to providing data for Indicator 4.1.1a of the Sustainable Development Goals, which examines children's proficiency in reading and arithmetic in Std II/III.

Third, ASER tools have been extensively used by governments, international development organisations, and civil society groups in many other countries and contexts. For example, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has used the ASER tool to test children of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to understand the learning levels of children in conflict zones. Similarly, the International Rescue Committee adapted the ASER tool into Arabic to assess the children of Syrian refugees.

About resources

49. Who funds ASER?

ASER is a citizens' initiative, designed and coordinated by Pratham Education Foundation and ASER Centre and implemented each year by partner organisations in every rural district. About 30,000 volunteers participate in ASER each year. They donate their time to ASER and are compensated only for their travel and food costs. The ASER survey receives support from a variety of sources including foundations, development agencies and corporate institutions. Significant funding also comes from individuals. Each year the names of the partner organisations and sources of support are listed in the ASER report.

50. Can I volunteer for ASER or participate in any way?

Yes, you can; ASER depends on volunteers! You can reach out to us at ASER Centre by sending an email to contact@asercentre.org. Depending on your location, your interests, and your availability, we can figure out how you can best contribute to this effort.

51. How can I contribute towards ASER surveys?

As a user of good quality data, you will appreciate the effort that goes into collecting it. It takes about 1.5 lakh rupees (Rs 150,000) to conduct the ASER survey in a district. While ASER reports and tools are available free of charge, donations of any amount are welcome and will help us to continue to generate evidence on learning outcomes in India. For online payments, please visit: https://give.do/fundraisers/aser-centre

For cheque payments, please send them to our mailing address: Pratham Education Foundation Office, 1st floor, B4/59, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi - 110029. Cheques can be written in favour of "Pratham Education Foundation". All donations are eligible for tax exemptions under Section 80G.