

The story of ASER in the last five years has been a mixed bag for most Indian states. But whatever the tenor, every year since 2005, the story of “what is the status of education” in rural India has been heard, read and discussed by many.

What was different about ASER in 2009 was its adoption and adaptation in three East African countries – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This ASER like initiative in East Africa is called ‘UWEZO’ which means ‘capability’ in Kswahili. It is led by government, civil society organizations, and citizen groups to “promote learning in East Africa”. UWEZO seeks to adapt ASER methods to measure the learning competencies of children in literacy and numeracy. Like ASER, the UWEZO effort will generate information on children’s learning in a manner that informs the public, stimulates national debate and creates pressure for policy changes. The acceptance of ASER in other countries as an innovative example of how to engage citizens to measure progress towards goals of elementary education has been an impact in itself.

I was part of the ASER team from India that visited Tanzania to help start the process. Our task was to train a pool of master trainers who would train volunteers for the national assessment. The first such training was for the master trainers from the northern region of Tanzania. Besides giving an overview of ASER in India, we were not sure what else we could contribute. But our Tanzanian counterparts told us that our mere presence in the training workshop was crucial for the trainers to realize “it is doable; they have done it for many years”.

In the frenzy and intensity of doing ASER in India, we sometimes forget the core essence of the activity itself. But in a country thousands of miles away from India, ASER came across as an inspiring example for fueling another national citizen led endeavour. In many instances, during our visit, the scale of ASER in India was quoted to motivate Tanzanians and to convince them that they were embarking upon a mission that would prompt action based on real time evidence and informed discussion. Listening to these discussions we regained our confidence and realized that ASER was not just about training a pool of volunteers to collect data from the villages but an accomplishment that is seen as a means to push a collective force towards a national cause.

The approach for undertaking a large scale assessment such as UWEZO in Tanzania is very different than it is in India. In our country, any organized group can carry out surveys in the field. Also after several years of doing ASER in India, we do not find it daunting to mobilize substantial number of participants in every district. However, in Tanzania, a sequence of administrative processes needs to be followed. From seeking permission from the ward offices for conducting the survey, to ensuring that participants are compensated appropriately, the implementation of any ‘non-government’ activity in Tanzania is marked by a lot of clerical groundwork.

Given this backdrop, ASER as an uncomplicated, feasible platform for mass participation came across powerfully during the field visits. In our visits to semi urban areas and government schools, we found that school teachers, parents, government officials and youth were getting interested and engaged. This was reassuring for the UWEZO team members who were initially not sure how Tanzanian people would react to the ASER approach. As foreign observers we could not comprehend the actual conversations in the village about children, education, reading or math. However, we could see that the process of testing children in the household was sparking off discussions quite similar to those that happen in India. The simple act of testing reading in an easy-to-do and easy-to-understand way gave concrete shape to the problem and a definite direction to the solution. It helped people see that learning outcomes are measurable, simple tools are available and results can be generated instantly for immediate action. All of this helped UWEZO gain ready acceptance in the land whose first president was a teacher. The initial work with seeding UWEZO also led participants to see that community led, volunteer driven, large scale evaluations were possible. This was a revelation among civil society organizations in Tanzania since the ‘spirit of volunteerism’ is thought not to be inherent in the Tanzanian community. However, through our field visits in Tanzania we recognized a strong underlying current - it sets the stage for a united national campaign that can drive the wheels of change. In a country largely driven by foreign aid, this nuance of ASER and now a driving force of UWEZO was remarkable.

¹Asante in Kswahili means “Thank you”

As “doers” of ASER in India we have had many opportunities to discuss the data, list out its implications, drive community action, fight the opponents, disseminate the findings to a vast and varied audience and stimulate debate. After several years of experiences with ASER across the country, we had begun to take these key elements for granted. Getting caught up in this whirl was easy and therefore the characteristics of ASER became as a matter of fact for us. But as representatives of ASER in a country in East Africa we became mindful of the strength of ASER - speed, scalability and regularity; strengths which are now guiding UWEZO and becoming internalized by its “doers”. We realized that the UWEZO coordinators were conscious and sensitive of these unique traits of ASER and wanted to instill these in the UWEZO initiative. They made all efforts to ensure that their master trainees and core team members engaged in conversations with us to take full advantage of our visit. It became evident to us that the purpose of our visit was not just to impart technical knowledge about the survey to the UWEZO team members but also to inculcate in them the fundamentals of ASER.

Whether it is through UWEZO or through a similar activity in Pakistan in 2008, numbers from such national assessments tell us the status of how much or how little are children learning in school. But whatever the numbers; whatever the saga of elementary education in India or in Kenya or in Tanzania - what is extraordinary is the fact that ASER as a method, as a design, as a mass movement has no boundaries. Asante ASER!

