

Bringing hard evidence to the table

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The ASER reports have performed a remarkable feat: bringing hard evidence to the table to measure outcomes of our elementary education system. To see the importance of this achievement, just look at the public discourse in various fields.

Most government schemes and budgets track allocation and utilisation of funds. A department that has utilised a large proportion of its allocated funds in a year is judged to have performed well, and gets further funding for the next year. This frequently results in significant spending towards the end of the financial year, as departments want to show “performance”.

In some cases, outputs are measured. For example, in a child immunisation programme, the measure may include (in addition to spending targets), the number of children who have been vaccinated. However, even this metric only measures the means to the end target of less disease or lower child mortality. Rarely is the desired outcome measured and even rarer is the link made with financial outlays.

Another example can be used to illustrate the lack of outcome measures. The MNREGS is one of the key poverty alleviation schemes of the government. The central government publishes periodic data on the funds transferred to each state and the amount utilised. There is some further measurement – the number of person-days of employment generated. However, the idea that the scheme is designed to be a safety net has been lost. Low utilisation can be interpreted in two ways: the government is unable to provide sufficient jobs to the job-seekers (bad result), or that there is sufficient availability in the economy for alternate jobs leading to low demand for the scheme (good result). The way to answer this is by asking whether potential NREGS job seekers are able to get jobs in the scheme. This can be obtained only by surveying people on whether they needed to access the scheme and whether they obtained jobs. The answer to this question is not available.

Indeed, data on many social and economic indicators are not even collected or reported at annual intervals. India must be one of the few large economies which have no idea of their employment levels – the only data comes from the National Sample Survey every five years; most countries provide such data on a quarterly basis. Most health statistics – such as child and maternal mortality, malnutrition, use of family planning methods – are collected in the NFHS surveys, at approximately five year intervals. Poverty levels are estimated every five years.

It is in this context that the ASER reports have become invaluable. These reports measure the learning levels of children across the country at annual intervals. There are two main contributions. First, time-series and cross-sectional (district-wise) data is available to researchers who can link this data to various inputs and see the effect of various policy interventions. More importantly, ASER has changed the discourse in the field of education from that of measuring outlays (money spent) and outputs (teachers hired, schools built) to that of outcomes (ability of children to read and do arithmetic).

This change has not been reflected in some policies, though. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act was passed in 2009 and brought into effect in April 2010. The Act guarantees access to schools – yesterday's problem that has been solved as evidenced by the 90% plus enrollment rates of children in first grade. The Act also requires all schools to have certain minimum norms – which are measured as physical infrastructure (building, library, kitchen, toilets), teacher-student ratio, teaching hours. What the Bill misses is a focus on whether the students are actually learning. Indeed, the Bill prohibits schools from holding back students in the same class if they do not perform adequately, but it does not provide for any special measures to be taken to ensure that no child is left behind. Hopefully, the data from the ASER reports will indicate the gaps and motivate policy implementers to deliver quality education to children. This means a shift of focus from inputs to outcomes such as ensuring that children in elementary schools are learning basic skills of the 3 R's, and developing the ability to think and create. Such skills will be essential for them to prosper in tomorrow's knowledge economy.

ASER has done an impressive job of measuring education outcomes. The skills built by the team in collating, assessing and evaluating data can be used to measure outcomes in areas such as health, livelihoods, and the effect of various government schemes. Perhaps, it is time for ASER Centre to expand to other socio-economic sectors.

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