

Frequently asked questions about ASER

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Overview

1. What is ASER?

ASER stands for Annual Status of Education Report. It is a household-based survey of children's schooling and learning status. Schooling status is recorded for children in the age group 3 to 16, and children in the age group 5 to 16 are tested for their ability to read simple text and do basic arithmetic. This format of 'Basic' ASER was conducted every year for ten years, from 2005 till 2014. Thereafter, an alternate-year cycle was introduced in which the 'basic' ASER alternated with a survey focusing on a different age group of children and a different set of domains. In 2017, youth aged 14 to 18 were surveyed regarding their activities, abilities and aspirations; in 2019 the focus was on 4- to 8-year-olds' cognitive, early language and early numeracy skills.

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

Traditionally, government policy and statistics have 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. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) is conducted by NCERT, a central government institution, every few years with children in Std III, V, VIII and X. Additionally, most states/UTs conduct their own State Learning Achievement Survey (SLAS). However, until the introduction of the central government's Foundational Learning Study (FLS) this year, 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 usually attempts to reach every rural district of the country (although in some years certain states have been excluded for logistical reasons, such as Arunachal Pradesh in 2013 and Jammu and Kashmir in 2010). However, every year ASER is unable to reach some rural districts. Generally, this is due to natural disasters, situations of unrest or conflict in the district.

4. ASER completed 10 years in 2014. Since then, the same report has not been coming out every year. There was no ASER in 2015 and different ones in 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2021. 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. So 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 (2016-25), 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 in the 14 to 18 age group. 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 to 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 situation permitted, ASER returned to the field in 2021 in Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Karnataka, resulting in three state-level reports on learning levels post-pandemic.

In 2022, we returned to the format of 'Basic' ASER to assess the children's learning levels after extended school closure.

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 mid-January of the following year. This calendar is designed to enable ASER data for the current school year to be available in time to feed into the district level planning process for 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, self-help groups, non-government organisations, and government institutions, among others. For example, in 2022 ASER was conducted by students from the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), the government teacher training colleges, in about 270 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 the 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 up through the system. 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. This is especially important in the current context, when children have returned to school after a long period of school closure.

ASER data tells us where most children are getting stuck, 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. So do several state governments. Understanding children's current learning status is the critical first step, and the ASER results can provide this. If data is required on a specific geography or group, the ASER tools and testing process can easily be 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 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 used has been designed by experts and is standard for large scale surveys.

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

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.

11. 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, basic reading and arithmetic. Each year, ASER reaches close to 600 rural districts (as per the 2011 census district list). In each district, 30 villages are selected and in each sampled village, 20 households 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 3 to 16 are surveyed and children in the age group 5 to 16 are tested, yielding a total of about 600,000 children tested each year. The same sampling process is used in all districts regardless of population or socio-economic 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 socio-economic 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 2022 surveyed 19,060 villages with 20 households per village. The National Achievement Survey 2021 conducted by NCERT was implemented in schools in 720 districts across all states/Union Territories. It covered a total of about 3,400,000 students from Classes III, V, VIII and X.

12. 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 all India levels. In the first stage, 30 villages are sampled from each district using Probability Proportional to Size (PPS). From 2005 to 2014, villages were sampled from the Census 2001 village list. From 2016 onwards, 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 fifth household rule'. The total sample size for each district is thus $30 \times 20 = 600$ 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 last year's survey, 10 more from two years earlier, 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 2022 again comprises a 'rotating panel' of villages – 10 villages from the 2016 survey, 10 more from the 2018 survey and 10 new villages from the Census village list.

To maintain 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, if it has been reclassified as a town or due to insurgency. In such cases, ASER Centre provides the name of a replacement village.

13. 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 fifth household rule', which included households with no children. This allowed for the assigning of weights based on population size of the village. While over the years, 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 fifth household rule' to randomly sample the households in the village, only households which had children in the age group of 3 to 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.

14. How can I find out which villages have been surveyed?

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, etc.

15. Is ASER data representative? At what levels?

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

16. 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 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 made at the district level. While information for enrollment, access, and inputs is available annually for each district, estimates of children's learning are neither available at the district level, nor are they comparable over time. ASER aims to help fill these gaps.

17. Who designed this 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 Planning Commission of India and the National Statistics Office (formerly National Sample Survey Organization).

18. Do the 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 2016 sampled villages from the 2011 Census village directory, 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, and 2022 do so for the Census 2011 frame. In the case of states, since there has been no change in geographical boundaries, the state estimates are comparable. 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 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 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 ages 3 and 4, and foundational learning levels of children in the age group 5 to 16 in rural India. This includes children enrolled in different types of pre-schools and schools (government, private, and others) as well as children currently not enrolled in school. The first problem with school-based testing is that there is no complete list of all schools in the country. In particular, there are many low cost private schools which are not found on any official list. Without a complete list of all schools, it is not possible to select an unbiased sample of schools. The second problem 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 for children's assessment 5 to 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 to 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 ASER not done 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.

26. 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 basic information on enrollment, attendance, staffing, and basic facilities available in schools. However, learning assessments are always done during the household survey, not in school.

27. 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. Also, 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 on working children, among others, ASER may not be the appropriate platform to collect it. ASER Centre has developed a separate Foundational Literacy and Numeracy 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

28. 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 noted 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 for learning for primary grades were available in India. For these reasons 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 now in 2022. Additional arithmetic questions were asked in 2008, 2010, and 2017. Because 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.

29. 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 for 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, II, and III 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, commonly used every day 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. 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 Std I, II, and III or IV of the state mandated curriculum. 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division is expected of children in Std III in some states and Std IV in others.

30. 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 that are of Std I and Std II level for 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.

31. 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 of comprehension 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 in an oral format. However, children are provided a paper and pencil to solve the subtraction and division problems.

32. Why does the ASER assessment of reading begin at the Std I passage level? Why does the ASER assessment of arithmetic 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 Std I passage level and the administration of the arithmetic test begins at Std II subtraction level. If the child performs to a satisfactory standard, the child is given the task at the next level, i.e. Std II passage for reading and Std III or IV level division 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 two-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

¹Technical analysis comparing ASER and EGRA is available at: https://img.asercentre.org/docs/Aser%20survey/Tools%20validating_the_aser_testing_tools__oct_2012__2.pdf

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 reading and arithmetic level.

33. Why does the arithmetic testing process not include addition or multiplication?

Pratham's extensive experience of working with children indicates that when children are given all four basic numeric 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.

34. Why are all children in the age group 5 to 16 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 rather to provide an understanding of school aged children's foundational reading and basic arithmetic ability.

35. What do we know about the reliability and validity of the 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 Jameel Poverty Action Lab (JPAL)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 the additional assessments of reading and arithmetic. This empirical study provided compelling evidence for the validity of the ASER assessments.

36. 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 seven-eight minutes per child.

About implementation

37. 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 designed to be simple to understand, quick to implement, and easy to communicate.

38. 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 staff travel extensively around their respective states to find institutions that are interested and willing to participate and that 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 that lists their responsibilities and those of Pratham. A complete list of ASER partners is published in each year's ASER report.

²See <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/research-paper/Read%20India,%20What%20helps%20children%20to%20learn.pdf>

39. Are the volunteers capable and well trained 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. During training, their performance is carefully monitored and documented. Once the survey is underway, trainers monitor their performance and sort out any problems that are encountered. For more details, a training report is available on the ASER website at www.asercentre.org/p/136.html

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 monitoring processes have been put in place at every stage of the process, from training of trainers and volunteers, to monitoring survey implementation in the field, to recheck of the data collected once the survey is complete. Every year these procedures are carefully reviewed, refined and improved. Details are available in each year's report. For more details, a quality control report is available on the ASER website at www.asercentre.org/p/136.html

40. 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 two days. Usually, village and school information 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 schooling status for all children aged 3 to 16. They then assess the reading and arithmetic ability of children in the household aged 5 to 16, one at a time.

About ASER results

41. 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 for download from the ASER Centre website.

42. 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.

43. 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 district, state and national level. There are also ASER Trends over Time reports on the website which presents 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 district level. Data queries on some key parameters can also be run through the query function on the website. Beyond these options, ASER Centre makes the ASER data sets available for research purposes on request.

44. ASER collects household information, so why does the ASER report not publish it? What is the relationship between household indicators and children's learning?

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 these data have been used by researchers in India and abroad to explore many important questions about the nature of the influences on children's learning.

About impact

45. 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 the Economic Survey of India. Most recently, ASER data has been used in following reports: NITI Aayog's Three Year Action Agenda for 2017-18 to 2019-20, Economic Survey of India 2021-22, and World Bank's World Development Report 2018 to make the learning crisis visible and to advocate for remedial steps towards improving learning outcomes. 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. A great deal remains to be done to ensure that every child in India is in school and learning well. But the first step is for the problem to be recognised. The second step is to have reliable evidence on the nature and extent of the problem. Only then can workable solutions be found.

46. 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 as 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 lagging behind.

47. Has ASER had an impact in other countries as well?

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

First, the 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. The People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network was established in 2015 to coordinate and support the work of these organisations, which were spread across 15 countries and 3 continents in 2022.

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 brought out by UNESCO, the Learning Metrics Task Force (coordinated by Brookings Institution and UNESCO Institute of Statistics), and other UNESCO-UIS documents such as the recent 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, the ASER tools have been extensively used by governments, international development organisations, and civil society groups in many other countries and contexts. For example, 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 children of Syrian refugees.

About resources

48. Who funds ASER?

ASER is a citizens' initiative, designed and coordinated by Pratham Education Foundation/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 local travel and food costs. The ASER survey receives support from a variety of sources including foundations, development agencies and corporates. Significant funding also comes from individuals. Each year the names of the partner organisations and sources of support are listed in the ASER report.

49. 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 best you can join in this effort.

50. 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 lac of rupees (Rs 1,50,000) to conduct ASER in a district. While ASER reports and tools are available free of charge, donations of any amount are welcome and will help us continue to generate evidence on learning outcomes in India. For online payments, please visit: <http://www.pratham.org/get-involved/donate-now>

For cheque payments, please send to our mailing address: ASER Office, 2nd floor, B4/58, 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.