Turning a condition into a problem: ASER's successful first ten years

Lant Pritchett[1]

In the late 1960s a political scientist, Matthew Crenson, went to Gary Indiana to study the workings of municipal government. One characteristic of Gary Indiana at the time was that it stank, badly, and the air pollution was terrible. As the location of a major US Steel plant the whole city smelled of sulfur and on bad days the air was visibly thick with particulates. Yet in his year-long study of the operation of local government - attending meetings, interviewing officials, examining agendas - the fact that the city had terrible air and stank badly just never once happened to come up. His book on this research was sub-titled "The Politics of Non-Decision Making."

The myth is that the policy making process consists of a group of people called "policy makers" (both politically elected and appointed officials and top administrative officers) who make decisions involving choosing among alternatives to address problems. In this formulation, influencing policy for the better consists of providing policy makers with better information about alternatives, such as providing evidence (perhaps even "rigorous" evidence) that this program or policy design provides "more bang for the buck" than the other. But this narrative, while charming, misses the main point: what is on the policy making agenda as a problem - and how that problem is constructed - have their own dynamics that may determine outcomes much more than "choices among alternatives."

How does one turn a fact into a policy problem? There are three steps, all illustrated in the case of ASER and learning outcomes in Indian schools.

First, one has to establish what the factual conditions really are in a way that can create a concrete and specific discourse about a problem that can be communicated to create a common formulation. Before ASER people might have asserted that learning wasn't good in Indian schools, but the framing of the issue wasn't concrete or specific (in which of many possible ways wasn't it good?) and hence could not lead to sustained communication. So, once every few years the government released (or didn't) a report on learning, or some academic or NGO would release a study (e.g. the PROBE report), but there was no sustained communication about learning results around which coalitions for action could build.

This first step is not easy as often powerful players - in particularly the existing providers of public schooling - had no interest in there being a commonly accepted set of facts about learning quality. And particularly they had no interest in losing control over the establishment and framing of those facts. But now, ten years into ASER, there is a massive body of assessments that have definitively broken the monopoly over the measurement of learning that the GOI attempted to maintain. Obviously the ASER itself, carried out at massive scale (over half a million children each year), at a district level of representation (not to be dismissed as not relevant India-wide), and repeated year after year after year convinced all who were convincible that mastery of basic reading and arithmetic skills was not only not universal among school goers, but often not even widespread. This has been supplemented by the use of the ASER instrument by others as in the India Human Development Survey; by the

more psychometrically sophisticated tools at grades 4, 6 and 8 in the Education Initiatives study across 18 states; by the participation of the states of Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in the PISA study; by large scale longitudinal studies in Andhra Pradesh. All of these, with different instruments and angles, tell a similar factual story of a learning crisis in India.

As with the example of Gary Indiana, it does not suffice that the facts about a condition be widely accepted, one still has to turn a "condition" into a "problem." In a country like India, with its limited economic, political and administrative resources there are many negative factual conditions that do not get onto the policy agenda as problems. Even once there is consensus on the facts, there are two more steps.

The next step is to convince people that the condition is not inevitable, that it is a fact but not a "fact of life." A condition can only become a problem if there is an idea of a solution (but importantly, not vice versa, having a solution is not sufficient to create a problem). As the old joke goes: "Everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it." No one did anything about it because there was nothing you could do. As the advocates of climate change have shown, one can turn even the weather into something people frame not as a condition but as a problem - something one can do something about.

Many have attempted to prevent the condition of low learning in Indian schools from becoming a problem by denying there was anything that could be done about it. This often took the very popular tack of blaming the victims by asserting that various types of children were just "uneducable." The fact that India had "first generation learners" or that India was just a "poor country" or that parents weren't interested in education became excuses to accept the fact that learning outcomes stank without that condition becoming a policy problem.

Finally, perhaps the hardest part of putting and keeping a problem on the policy agenda is to prevent the displacement of a real outcome-oriented solution by a set of "solutions" of the type government bureaucracies love - more inputs. Once low learning is accepted as a factual condition and it becomes a problem that people are willing to attempt to address, the tendency is to quickly turn the problem into a neatly implementable package of pre-cooked "solutions" and make the problem the lack of the solution. With that "problem into lack of solution" sleight of hand accomplished, policy makers can go back into implementation mode.

This is obviously the challenge facing India today. The education bureaucracy, and some parts of the education movement, want the lack of identifiable, easily quantifiable, bureaucratically controllable inputs to be way in which the problem of education is framed. The whole education information system that has been mounted, the District Information System for Education, which the official bureaucracy is happy to label the "Report Card" on schools is a perfect example. The "report card" for each state has 817 pieces of information - and not one of them, not one, is about learning. Under the section "Performance Indicators" the DISE Report Card provides data like percent of schools with a boundary wall, percent with a kitchen shed. While these might be related to learning performance of students they are not the same as learning, and goals for meeting infrastructure targets are not goals for reaching learning targets. The Right to Education legislation doesn't in fact provide the right to education at all. It provides the right to attend a school. Whether that school actually provides an education - that apparently is not how some advocates want the problem framed. They want to define a "quality" school as one with a set of inputs and that is that.

The challenge of the next ten years of ASER is clear: keep everyone's eyes on the prize of improving learning outcomes for India's children.