

From Mumbai, Multan to Mombasa or Karachi, Kanyakumari to Kilimanjaro...!

Baela Raza Jamil ¹

In Lahore today (January 2, 2012), we kicked off our week-long training of 35 ASER district and provincial associates from all 9 regions of the country to build capacity for disseminating the results of ASER 2011. The spirit of ASER was buzzing with a unique chemistry of a youthful group. We decided to begin with personal statements on '*aser ne kya aser kiya*' (how did ASER impact me?) followed by names and backgrounds in that order. These confessional or declaratory identity markers are vital for the growing global ASER community, for defining ourselves in this unique program of citizen-led surveys. ASER is, after all, about citizens' voices on learning and accountability. It can only be captured through an extension of the personal and the public voice as one, and we at ASER Pakistan are practicing that art of expression that commits to the challenges of learning and improvement - from parents and teacher union members to elected representatives. ASER truly bridges the public and private divide, merging field, theory and practice to address the crises in and opportunities for education.

A journey that began perhaps as education tourism for the Pakistani civil society organizations in the summer of 2006-7 just outside Jaipur, Rajasthan and Delhi through open source sharing, truly hallmarked as the Pratham Way, has now been mainstreamed as an annual ritual for the measuring of education systems in Pakistan for the third year running. UWEZO in East Africa and ASER India are comrades in arms for informing and taking action for the EFA movement. With almost one million children surveyed in 5 countries annually, the methodology for literacy and numeracy measurement in ASER is neither 'quick nor dirty' but very rigorous. As the countdown to 2015 gets underway, the local, national and global community has come to expect that this survey will provide information about progress made and challenges remaining.

Dialogues are intensifying on: whole system/whole school reforms; what assessments tell us about learning gaps across gender and geographies; how to bridge inequality gaps; whether consensus is possible on the theme of 'quality' exacerbating the inequality and transition gaps at all levels of the education spectrum. The ever-widening relevance gap due to knowledge obsolescence in a world inhabited by 7 billion people compels us towards perennial renewal of 'learning' interfaced with local contexts and accessible technologies in classrooms and outside. While the centrality of the teacher as the universal *provocateur* and innovator cannot be minimized, what does this mean for countries diverse in terrain, practices and resources?

Like ASER India, or UWEZO in East Africa, we are deeply cognizant that ASER Pakistan is not about naming and shaming governments but really about calling citizens to action as the primary stakeholders – what is to be done for OUR children and what can we do NOW? On a popular note the India-Pakistan exchanges for ASER and *Chalo Parho Barho* (let's read and grow) initiatives are affectionately termed as the learning caravans 'from Mumbai to Multan'. As teams navigate the spectrum of emergent relationships from South Asia to Africa in 2012 these could be from Mumbai, Multan to Mombasa or from Karachi, Kanyakumari to Kilimanjaro! Either way, the collaborations for people-led research will generate new genres of monitoring and sharing of learning resources. We love them at ITA/SAFED and are proud of the emergent multiple and distributed centers of leadership triggered by ASER India in 2008, and would be happy to support other South Asian countries in this much needed people's enterprise of claiming their fundamental rights to quality education.

¹ Baela Raza Jamil is Director, Programs for Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) and Coordinator for the South Asian Forum for Education Development (SAFED), Pakistan