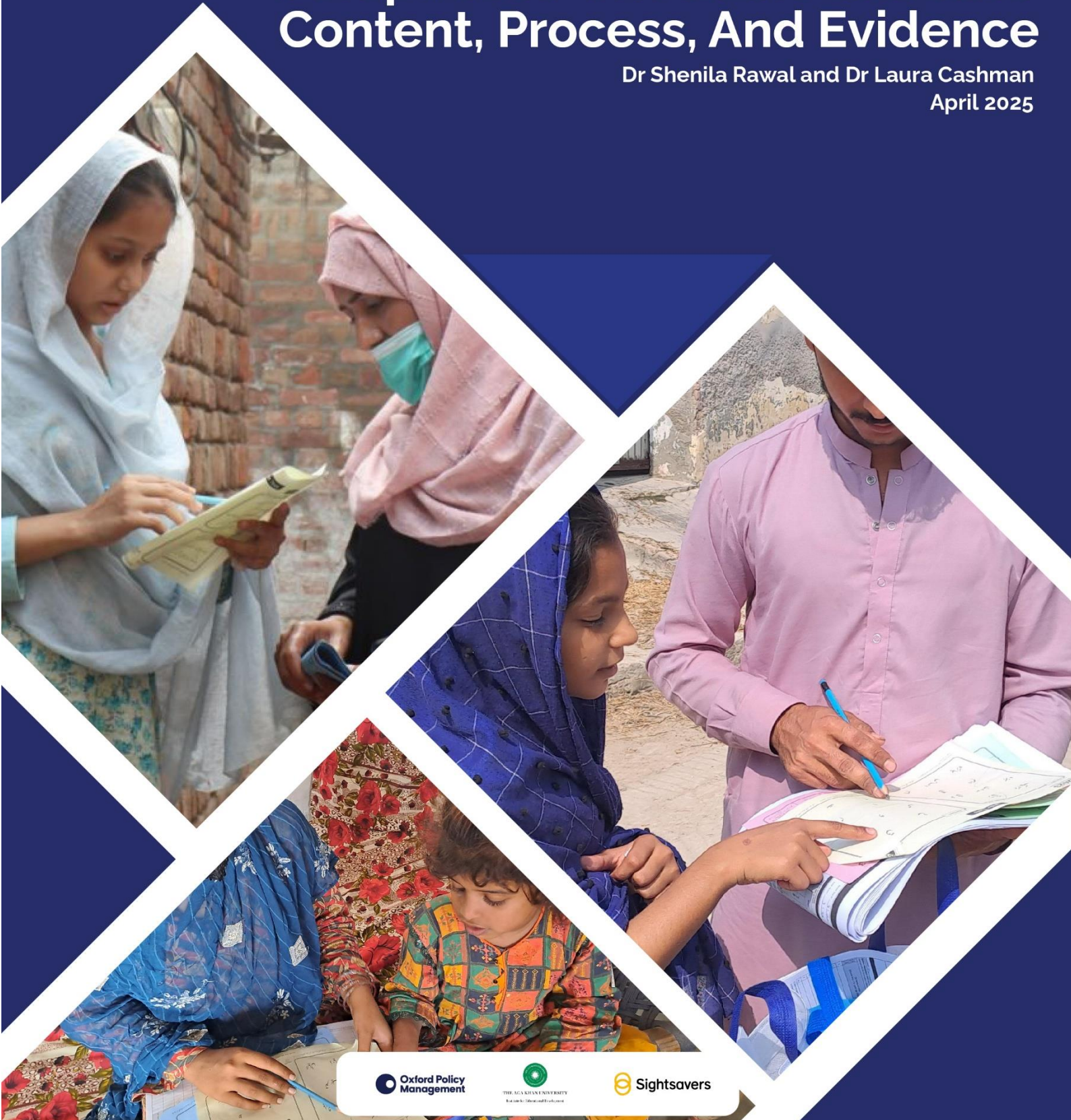




**DARE-RC**  
DATA AND RESEARCH IN EDUCATION  
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

# Policy Brief: A Longitudinal Perspective On ASER Pakistan's Content, Process, And Evidence

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The Data and Research in Education-Research Consortium (DARE-RC) aims to understand the challenges facing Pakistan's education system and expand the existing evidence base that explores potential solutions to these issues. Evidence developed under DARE-RC is made publicly available and shared with a range of stakeholders, including government partners, to improve education service delivery in Pakistan. The consortium undertakes three main activities to support these aims: strengthen the accessibility of high-quality research on what works to improve education, promote in-country research capacity-building, and enhance stakeholder engagement, communication, and dissemination of findings in Pakistan. This report contributes to all three of these activities by presenting a detailed scoping review of the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan's past and planned activities.

ASER Pakistan, established in 2009 (following a pilot phase in 2008), is the largest citizen-led household-based survey in the country. The survey measures a diverse range of indicators related to educational access, quality and learning outcomes, ultimately exploring the fundamental question: "are our children learning?" (ITA, 2025). ASER Pakistan was inspired by the success of ASER India's citizen-led assessment model, first implemented in 2005, which also measures children's basic reading and numeracy skills. It has since been linked to other initiatives such as UWEZO in East Africa and Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes (MIA) in Mexico through the People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network, a collective working to improve learning outcomes worldwide. As ASER Pakistan matures and evolves, understanding the scope, methods and uptake of the survey will be important to assess past impact and identify opportunities for improvement. This report explores these key areas, situated within the global context of similar and contrasting assessment efforts, to highlight key achievements, past challenges and potential ways forward for ASER Pakistan.

The report on which this brief is based covers content, processes, dissemination uptake and complementarity of ASER Pakistan.

## Study methodology

This review employed a four-part methodological approach:

1. **Content analysis:** A content analysis systematically examined the scope, focus and design of the ASER 2023 survey and previous iterations. This included assessing the key assumptions and design process of the survey, as well as evaluating how the survey evolved longitudinally since the pilot phase in 2008.
2. **Comparative mapping:** A comparative mapping of other education-focused data repositories and surveys in Pakistan and globally allowed us to contrast ASER Pakistan's approach with similar data collection efforts.
3. **Key informant interviews:** KIIs explored how ASER Pakistan meets current educational research demands in Pakistan and beyond. A group of 11 interviewees, including representatives from Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA), academics both within and outside Pakistan, donors, former government officials, and data users, were interviewed from November, 21st 2024 to December, 4th 2024. These interviews focused on ASER's methodologies, its influence on educational discourse, data quality and accessibility, and potential future developments.
4. **Literature review:** Finally, a literature review assessed the uptake and analysis of ASER Pakistan to explore how ASER data is used (and by who), identify gaps in current research, and guide future directions for the survey and broader education policy.

## ASER: Mapping of scope and content

**ASER Pakistan has three key objectives:** (i) to get reliable estimates of the status of children's schooling and basic learning in reading and arithmetic at the district level; (ii) to measure the change in these basic learning and school statistics from the previous year and (iii) to interpret these results and use them to affect policy decisions at various levels (ITA, 2024).

**The reach of the survey has significantly increased over time** from a sample of 143,826 children across 84 districts in 2011 to 212,537 children across 151 districts in 2023 (Table 1).

**Data and indicator coverage has also significantly broadened over the life of the survey.** There has always been a

focus on enrolment and schooling status since inception as well on measuring learning outcomes. Later surveys have expanded to include indicators such as those on children with disabilities as well as on other emerging policy concerns such as climate change and Covid-19 (Table 2).

*"...there is always a trade-off: should you stick with focusing on where the unique selling point is and/or doing more or different things... it's really important to stick with the focus. If there are resources to extend, for example, to socio emotional learning, early years etc that's all. My view is that helpful but if that is done it shouldn't be done at the expense of the core."*

- International Academic

**Collecting data on learning outcomes within households provides a comprehensive picture of the learning levels of all children whether they are in school or not.** This allows for

coverage of even the most marginalised children.

**Disaggregated data allows for analysis of intersectionality** where various dimensions of marginalisation exacerbate the learning of children. Over the years, ASER Pakistan have collected data on aspects including age, gender, disability/health status, parental education, type of school, location, household wealth, all of which allow for intersectionality to be investigated.

**This expansion has led to concerns around the long-term thematic approach and sustainability of ASER.** Evidence from this review raised the issue of balance between foundational learning indicators and additional indicators that respond to emerging educational challenges and the potential trade-off thereof. All stakeholders proposed an adaptive approach, maintaining a focus on learning as well as including topical deep dives on policy relevant aspects such as teachers and climate-change.

**There have been concerns that the surveys do not adequately measure learning and therefore, should not be used for measuring progress towards the SDGs** (Montoya & Crouch, 2023). Interviews with ITA stakeholders suggest that they are working towards meeting international eligibility criteria.

## **ASER: The process behind the design, collection, analysis and reporting of data**

### **Tool development**

**ASER tool development and adaptation process has been consultative and**

**collaborative.** Since inception, ASER Pakistan have made a concerted effort to adapt and revise the survey before each cycle through a consultative process including running workshops with key stakeholders. This has been done to ensure that data collection remains relevant, reflecting the latest trends, challenges, and priorities in education as well as the realities on the ground. This process has not only led to the incorporation of emerging topics such as climate change and digital learning, as outlined above, but also the adaptation and modification of existing questions. This review highlighted the need for ASER to document and communicate its process for tool development and adaptation.

**The balance between data coverage and respondent burden remains a challenge as ASER moves forward.** Whilst the addition of questions and other indicators over the years has broadened the scope of the survey, it has also extended the time needed to administer it. This raises the likelihood of respondent fatigue, reduced data quality and lowered enumerator motivation.

### **Sampling**

**ITA adopts a two-stage Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sampling approach** (ITA, 2023). This method ensures that the probability of selecting a unit is directly proportional to its size and guarantees a minimum threshold of representativeness for each district. The target population of the survey ranges from early primary to secondary-level learners, captures both in-school and out-of-school children and samples children from both private and public schools (see Table 1).

**The sampling approach has been criticised in terms of its representativeness particularly for urban districts.** Both government and academic representatives have underscored the need for a reassessment of the sampling strategy to improve ASER's credibility and reliability. However, addressing persisting concerns around sampling standardisation and transparency will be vital for safeguarding ASER's long-term credibility and utility.

### **Data Collection**

**ASER has established themselves as an influential source of grassroots citizen-led educational data and insights in Pakistan over the past decade.** Unlike many of the government-led surveys in the country, which often rely on large-scale, institution-focused sampling or standardised data collection protocols, ASER's approach is grounded in the community it serves. ASER Pakistan's data collection teams are made up of trained community volunteers who are familiar with local languages, norms, and social dynamics. This closer engagement with local communities enables ASER to capture nuances that may not surface in more standardised surveys. It also demonstrates "how school systems and education policy can be influenced at the grassroots level" (UNESCO, 2021). This sustained, community-level involvement in data collection which can generate greater buy-in and more accurately reflect the situation on the ground contrasts sharply with other data sources in Pakistan.

**Data reliability and consistency have been questioned in ASER survey.** The lack of professional enumerators may

introduce bias into the testing process. ASER Pakistan have put mechanisms in place to mitigate risks in this area for example through enumerator training, accompanying training manuals and regular tracking and monitoring. The informal setting of testing within the household has also been highlighted as potentially influencing children performance both negatively (through distractions) or positively (through unintentional prompts from family members).

### **Concerns have also been raised around ethics and safeguarding protocols.**

These are critical concerns given ASER's work with child respondents, volunteer enumerators and data collection within households. ASER stakeholders demonstrate confidence in their adherence to safeguarding and ethical considerations. However, given the lack of any safeguarding incidents being reported over the last 15 years, the efficacy of these reporting mechanisms has been called into question.

## Data Reporting and Analysis

**Generating raw datasets is one of the two core data management objectives of ASER Pakistan.** Raw data must be requested directly from the ITA team. However, a public facing dashboard or online portal where users can access data

*"I think the key question is how are ASER results presented and available for users to actually engage with and play with the data. . . The fact that I don't know all the indicators ASER offers and what I can do with them means there is a gap in terms of how useful it is to a lot of stakeholders."*

directly would be more useful and more efficient. ITA representatives confirmed that a data portal is in early stages of development.

**Producing reports and the analysis of data are the second data management objective for ASER.** ASER Pakistan produces district-level and provincial reports that are widely used by researchers, NGOs, and government agencies for planning and advocacy. The current structure of these reports has been criticised as being primarily descriptive in nature and whilst providing breadth of topic coverage, they provide little depth or rigour of analysis. More advanced reporting would require capacity building within the ITA team and greater collaboration with external researchers.

## ASER: Dissemination, uptake and complementarity

**ASER data and reports have been referenced and widely used** across a range of official and non-official outputs, from government policy documents to reports produced by international NGOs, like UNICEF. Academic researchers often rely on ASER Pakistan data also to

explore how different factors influence children's educational achievement.

**However, several opportunities for improved dissemination have also emerged from this research.** While the government relies on ASER data, they have been critical of it in the past which may result in an even weaker uptake in official policy implementation than there could be. There are indications that this dynamic is shifting as ITA engages with government around some methodological and sampling concerns and foster greater collaboration. If this engagement continues, it may help bridge existing gaps in ASER's policy influence.

**Development of the online dashboard, where users can not only download raw data but also perform basic analyses and generate custom reports, can improve uptake of ASER data and dissemination of findings thereof.** Keeping this system up to date would allow ITA to better track how ASER data is used and inform improvements to the data and its dissemination.

**ASER's collection of data related to emerging educational issues, such as climate change and education data, has complemented the official data systems in Pakistan.** However, the government's evolving plans around the data system in Pakistan could affect the continued relevance of ASER's efforts unless ITA proactively adapt to these shifts. Looking ahead, ASER Pakistan is met with an opportunity to reflect as Pakistan works towards developing and consolidating its national assessment system. How ASER complements this system needs further reflection that

includes engagement with what the government plans to implement.

## Conclusion

ASER has established itself as a widely recognised data source in Pakistan with substantial impact across education policy, practice and research. However, there is still significant potential for deeper and broader engagement with its audience. The findings of this review stress the value of enhancing user-friendly data access, highlighting the broad scope of reported indicators, and ensuring consistent tracking of data utilisation. As the government's own data plans evolve, ASER must consider how best to align with these new structures while maintaining its unique role in the education data landscape. To do this, ITA will need to assess these proposed changes to be prepared to adapt to these. ASER may need to reflect on whether adjustments in sampling,

assessment design, or reporting structures are necessary to harmonise with new priorities while preserving the survey's independence and community-driven approach. ASER's future relevance depends on proactively adapting to these shifts and strengthening


engagement with policymakers, donors, and researchers. In engaging with these recommendations, ASER will be well-positioned to sustain its role as a trusted, complementary data source that informs evidence-based decision-making in Pakistan's evolving education sector.




## Recommendations

### Short-term Efforts (immediate actions)


#### Clearly communicate decisions

 Any changes to the design or methodology of the survey need to be clearly communicated to stakeholders, especially if they affect the comparability of data over time.


#### Provide high-level summaries

 Several stakeholders highlighted the need for high-level summaries or “one-page” briefs that distil key findings. These outputs can complement existing detailed reports and outputs.

#### Offer or facilitate targeted training


 Understanding the depth and breadth of ASER's extensive dataset can be challenging. By offering or facilitating training sessions, ITA can empower stakeholders to interpret and utilise the data more effectively.

#### Update the system for tracking data usage


 ASER's public-facing system for tracking citations and usage needs to be consistently updated. This will enable ITA to monitor the survey's influence, refine dissemination strategies, and better align its efforts with user needs.

### Ongoing Efforts (continuous improvement and/or adaptive processes)

#### Reflect on the strategic direction of the survey with key stakeholders


 The ASER team must engage in a reflection process that evaluates the survey's purpose, scope, and alignment with national and global educational priorities. This includes consulting stakeholders, including government agencies, donors, academics, and practitioners, to ensure that ASER remains responsive to their evolving data needs.

#### Align ASER's efforts with government plans


 As Pakistan works to consolidate and expand its national assessment system, ASER must adapt to complement these efforts. Proactive engagement with government plans will ensure that this is possible and will sustain ASER's relevance within the broader education data ecosystem.

### Long-term Efforts (strategic decisions which require planning and development)

#### Balance data coverage and expansion

 While ASER's expanding data coverage is recognised by stakeholders as a key strength, it must be balanced with the challenges that this introduces, including respondent burden and a potential risk of losing sight of the key aims of the study (foundational learning).

#### Reassess ASER's sampling strategy

 ASER reliability and validity is dependent on the sampling methodologies it uses. Revisiting and strengthening these strategies is crucial, especially in addressing long-standing concerns about standardisation and transparency.

#### Develop a public-facing dashboard or portal

 Accessibility remains a key area for improvement in ASER's dissemination strategy. Developing an online platform where stakeholders can access raw data, perform basic analyses, and generate custom reports will greatly enhance this. This platform should be developed in consultation with users, ensuring it addresses diverse needs of stakeholders while remaining user-friendly.

**For more information**

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This policy brief is a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the complete evaluation report which is available at: <https://darerc.org/resources/>

For more information about the DARE-RC Programme please visit: <https://darerc.org/>

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