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Scoping Review of ASER Pakistan's Content, Processes and Evidence Uptake: A Longitudinal Perspective

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Introduction

The Data and Research in Education-Research Consortium (DARE-RC) aims to understand the challenges facing Pakistan's education system and to expand the existing evidence base regarding 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: strengthening the accessibility of high-quality research on what works to improve education; promoting capacity building for in-country research; and enhancing 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 past and planned activities of the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan.

ASER Pakistan, established in 2009 (following a pilot phase in 2008), is the largest citizen-led household-based survey in the country. It is implemented through a rural (also known as national) survey and an urban survey. Both surveys are implemented and led by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA). 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). The survey 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 the ASER Pakistan survey 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, which it situates within the global context of similar and contrasting assessment efforts, to highlight key achievements, past challenges and potential ways forward for ASER Pakistan.

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 of, and design process for, the survey, as well as evaluating how the survey has 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 ITA's approach with similar data collection efforts.
3. **Key informant interviews (KIIs):** KIIs explored how the survey 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 21 November 2024 to 4 December 2024.

These interviews focused on ITA'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 the ASER Pakistan survey to explore how data are used (and by whom), to identify gaps in current research, and to guide future directions for the survey and broader education policy.

All four elements inform each of the three main sections in this report: (i) **content,** (ii) **processes, and** (iii) **dissemination, uptake, and complementarity**. The report concludes with a section on (iv) **recommendations and conclusion,** based on the findings from the three preceding sections.

Content

Drawing on the content analysis, comparative mapping, KIIs, and literature review, this section identifies the survey's objectives and indicators to evaluate the assumptions and theoretical underpinnings of the current survey and how they have evolved since the pilot phase in 2008. This section focuses specifically on the content-related strengths of, and gaps in, the survey in view of this conceptual framework, as well as what is needed to support current and future education research, policy, and programming in Pakistan.

The survey has three key objectives: to obtain reliable estimates of the status of children's schooling and basic learning in reading and arithmetic at the district level; to measure the change in these basic learning and school statistics from the previous year; and to interpret these results and use them to affect policy decisions at various levels (ITA, 2024). Table 1 below presents the sample description for each survey (both the national/rural survey and the urban survey) implemented between 2011 and 2023. As demonstrated, the reach of both surveys has significantly increased over time. In 2011, ASER sampled 143,826 children in 48,646 households across 84 districts for the national (rural) report. In the latest report in 2023, 212,537 children in 89,551 households across 151 districts were sampled. Similarly, while only 3,048 children in 1,147 households across three districts were sampled for the urban survey in 2011, 59,833 children in 22,552 households across 120 districts were included in the urban sample in 2023.

Table 2 below demonstrates that ITA has also significantly broadened the scope of the survey's data and indicator coverage. In line with other surveys, such as ASER India and UWEZO in East Africa, the ASER Pakistan survey has focused on enrolment and schooling status since inception, and continues to do so. However, more recent surveys have also included a focus on the quality of education and learning outcomes. Stakeholders interviewed for this review emphasised the importance of this shift and the resulting ability of ASER to spark dialogue about learning outcomes in a context where, historically, policy discourse has centred on enrolment. According to one ITA staff member, this shift in focus is deliberate and there is a recognition within the team that while getting children into school remains crucial, it is equally important to determine whether they are actually learning.

However, a recent newspaper article (Nawani, 2023) critiques ASER's approach in India, on which the ASER Pakistan survey is based, arguing that it fails to capture the dynamic nature of learning and instead focuses on specific, easily measurable indicators. While this article raises concerns around the survey's methods and approach, it may reflect a misunderstanding on the part of some stakeholders regarding the survey. ITA does not claim to provide a comprehensive assessment of children's learning; rather, the survey's focus specifically on foundational literacy and numeracy. This may imply that **ITA needs to strengthen communication around the scope of the survey and its underlying assumptions to ensure the findings are interpreted in line with their intended purpose.**

Educational economist Lant Pritchett has also recently highlighted the possibility that the ASER methodology may test for rote memorisation, rather than genuine understanding (Pritchett, 2024). **This suggests that, in addition to strengthening**

communication around their approach, ITA may also need to reflect on its design, or provide a strong justification for it to stakeholders.

In addition to a focus on foundational learning, ITA has expanded in recent years to include indicators related to children with disabilities, school governance, and emerging policy concerns such as climate change and COVID-19. ASER data and reports on access to and the quality of foundational learning remain widely referenced, including in the National Education Policy, 2017 (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2017). The expansion of the survey's coverage of indicators enables ASER to remain relevant in light of shifting policy agendas. For example, ASER data around technological access and learning support during the COVID-19 pandemic were referenced in the Pakistan Economic Survey, 2021 (Ministry of Finance, 2021) and the District Education Performance Index Report used ASER data to ensure representation of private school students in 2023 (Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, 2023). In addition, ASER data around out-of-school children, learning disparities at provincial level, and learning disparities between those in private schools and public schools, have also been referenced by non-governmental stakeholders, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (UNICEF Pakistan, 2017).

Yet this expansion in the ASER Pakistan survey's coverage of different indicators has led to concerns around its long-term thematic approach and sustainability. KII respondents raised the issue of the balance between foundational learning indicators and additional indicators that respond to emerging educational challenges. An international academic who was interviewed claimed that 'there's always a trade-off: should you stick with focusing on where the unique selling point is and/or doing more or different things. My view is that 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 helpful but if that is done it shouldn't be done at the expense of the core.' Other interviewees, however, proposed a more adaptive approach, suggesting that ITA should maintain a consistent focus on learning, as well as cycling through topical deep dives annually (e.g. on teacher-related factors or the effect of climate change on access to education).

Moving forwards, it is crucial that ITA reflects on the strategic direction of the survey and communicates a clear rationale for the decisions made, and continues to engage with stakeholders on these issues. When doing this, it may also be beneficial for the team to reflect on the approach of similar surveys globally. For instance, like ASER Pakistan, ASER India has expanded in recent years to include variables around smartphone access and usage, as well as to test for children's digital skills. However, ASER India has largely maintained its original focus on enrolment and foundational skills (ASER India, 2024). On the other hand, while MIA in Mexico has also maintained a focus on foundational learning, it includes elements of socioemotional learning, including coexistence skills, collaboration, and creativity, in its associated intervention and survey. This suggests that MIA includes, within its conceptual framework, the assumption that socio-emotional learning (SEL) is an essential component of learning (PAL Network, 2017). These examples show that integrating additional sections or questions into the survey, while ensuring a continued focus on foundational skills, is possible. They also highlight, alongside other decisions around the survey content outlined above, the

importance of clearly communicating the underlying assumptions of surveys, as these can significantly influence how findings are interpreted.

Finally, similar concerns have been raised by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS), which contends that current PAL Network tools, including ASER surveys, do not adequately measure reading comprehension, and therefore should not be used for measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Montoya & Crouch, 2023). ITA is working towards adapting tools to meeting international eligibility criteria. These adaptations could fundamentally alter the tools and the sampling strategies used by ASER.

At the time of writing, ASER Pakistan did not communicate the current or potential conceptual frameworks for the study publicly. **Reflecting on and sharing this framework would ensure that stakeholders understand the rationale behind the study's focus, alongside the underlying assumptions.** Beyond the key areas of focus, this conceptual framework should also address the inclusion of household-level variables, such as parental education, and other variables that can be used as 'controls' in multivariate analyses. Without clear communication and consultation with stakeholders around why certain factors are included (and why others are, by default, excluded), there is a risk that key factors of interest are overlooked.

Any changes to the current survey content will also have to include planning for how this will impact the longitudinal analysis of data, which was also a key concern of stakeholders in the interviews. Balancing the introduction of new indicators with the maintenance of a consistent data collection framework will continue to allow for trends, progress, and challenges to be measured across time. This is an opportune time to engage in such planning. Data systems in Pakistan are maturing and, alongside this progress, the government is moving towards formalising the national assessment framework. ASER needs to reflect on how it can continue to best support the education system in Pakistan. As part of this, considering the content of the survey could be helpful, as could reflection on the survey procedures and processes.

Table 1. Sample description by survey year (national/rural and urban).

	Year	Districts covered	Villages/ blocks covered	Households covered	Schools			Children aged 3–16 years			
					Govt	Pvt	Total	Male	Female	Transgender	Total
National/ rural	2023	151	4381	89551	4388	1775	5067	117336	93244	1957	212537
	2021	152	4420	87415	4096	1602	5698	140755	106638	585	247978
	2019	155	4546	92008	4337	1986	6323	143710	111227	329	255266
	2018	154	4527	89966	4284	1171	5455	146439	113630	-	260069
	2016	144	4205	83324	4019	1521	5540	145299	109970	-	255269
	2015	146	4346	86328	4269	1513	5782	156167	108989	-	265156
	2014	144	4178	82837	3968	1532	5500	147656	104038	-	251694
	2013	138	4112	81672	3959	1694	5653	148165	101667	-	249832
	2012	136	4033	80209	3934	1660	5594	143241	101236	-	244477
	2011	84	2502	48646	2376	1090	3466	84939	58887	-	143826
Urban	2023	120	1154	22552	1120	582	1702	34462	25335	36	59833
	2022	22	850	15149	728	487	1215	21962	17630	-	39592
	2019	20	683	13549	544	399	943	18640	14985	8	33633
	2015	21	414	8222	351	306	657	11905	9509	-	24114
	2014	21	520	10259	334	401	735	15289	12444	-	27733
	2013	13	270	5372	251	228	479	8032	6126	-	14158
	2012	6	193	2312	183	167	350	4037	2312	-	6967
	2011	3	97	1147	88	88	176	1695	1353	-	3048

Table 2. Indicator coverage in survey (by year)

Year	Data collection elements					Indicators (children 3–16)		Indicators (children 5–16)			Household indicators												
Year	School survey	Household survey	Disability/health and functioning status (3–16)	School visits	Mother's assessment	Educational status	Schooling status	Reading (Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto and	Arithmetic	General knowledge	Paternal education	Mother's education	House type and ownership	Electricity	Toilet access	Household assets	Use of technology	Energy use (solar panels)	Cash transfer access	Barriers to education	Distance to school	Computer knowledge	Language information and
2023	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X					
2021	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
2019	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X					
2018	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X			
2016	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
2014	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X			X	X							X		
2013	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X			X	X							X		
2012	X	X		X		X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X					X	X	X
2011	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X							

Processes

This section explores the processes behind how the ASER Pakistan survey is designed, as well as how it collects, reports, and analyses its data, drawing on the content analysis, comparative mapping, KIIs, and literature review. By bringing together these perspectives, the section seeks to explore the extent to which ASER's processes align with its goals, to identify areas for reassessment (including survey length, clarity, and data utilisation), and to pinpoint ways to make ASER's processes both more efficient and more impactful.

Tool development and adaptation

Since its inception, ITA has made a concerted effort to adapt and revise the survey before each cycle, through a consultation process. An ITA staff member described this process during an interview, explaining that stakeholders and field staff are asked for feedback, which is then used to refine and improve the tool. A Pakistan-based academic, who has participated in this process over the years, highlighted the responsive nature of this approach: 'ASER is dynamic… ITA and ASER do workshops well before they do the survey to figure out if there are any sub-modules or questions that need to be added.' This process has not only led to the incorporation of emerging topics, such as climate change and digital learning, as outlined above, it has also led to the adaptation and modification of existing questions. This ensures that data collection remains relevant, reflecting the latest trends, challenges, and priorities in education, as well as the realities on the ground.

However, this approach also introduces the risk of an extended (and potentially unwieldly) questionnaire. As demonstrated in Table 2, the addition of questions and other indicators over the years has broadened the scope of the survey. However, it has also extended the time needed to administer it. ITA does not discuss the issue of administration time in survey documentation or methodological-based reviews. Therefore, we cannot easily compare administration time for previous iterations of the survey. Interestingly, increased administration time did not emerge as a concern in data collection for this report, including in KIIs. Yet administration time could raise the likelihood of respondent fatigue, reduce data quality, and reduce enumerator motivation. In light of these potential issues, **ITA needs to consider the balance between data coverage and respondent burden as it moves forward.**

It may also be useful for ITA to document and publicly share its process for tool development and adaptation, providing insights into what motivates change, how decisions are made, and what mechanisms are in place to evaluate potential trade-offs between data coverage and respondent burden. There is also little information around whether and how findings from past surveys inform future iterations and redevelopment of the survey. KII respondents were not aware of this and there is no publicly available documents discussing this process. Strengthening communication around these aspects could reinforce ASER's credibility and support its role as a dynamic, data-driven tool for education monitoring and reform.

Sampling

Like UWEZO in East Africa and ASER India, ASER Pakistan's targeted population ranges from early primary to secondary-level learners; it captures both in-school and out-of-school children and samples children from both private and public schools (see Table 1).

ITA adopts a two-stage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling approach (ITA, 2023a). 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. However, ITA's approach to sampling is somewhat controversial. During a KII, one former government official expressed reservations about this sampling strategy and the representativeness of the sample, particularly for urban districts: 'their [the government's] concerns were primarily about two or three issues. First, they thought that… the sampling and representativeness was not statistically robust enough, particularly the urban districts… The other concern was that the sampling methodology… between rural and urban was completely different and it was difficult to integrate them.'

This contention is supported by academic critiques that have underscored **a need for a reassessment of the sampling strategy and frames to strengthen ASER's credibility and reliability** (Siddiqui, 2019). However, ITA believes that it has greatly strengthened its methodology in recent years and plans to continue doing so, which may address some of these concerns. An ITA representative stated: 'We used to ask Pakistan Bureau of Statistics to do our sampling for the urban survey because we couldn't do it… We wanted to have one book so next year we will ask PBS [Pakistan Bureau of Statistics] to do both so we can make one national representative book… Then there are no questions. They cannot raise their eyebrows and say you've done it in a different way.' This is a relatively new development and perhaps not all stakeholders are aware of it. However, **addressing persisting concerns around sampling standardisation and transparency will be vital for safeguarding ASER's long-term credibility and utility.**

This could be ensured through a public-facing documentation process by ITA that communicates how decisions around sampling, survey length, and indicator selection are made. In addition, ASER Pakistan needs to critically assess the usability and length of the tool. This should involve discussions about which sections need to be dropped, modified, or introduced. This process should be aligned with the broader redevelopment efforts, in collaboration with PBS, to ensure that any changes are in line with ITA's long-term objectives.

Data collection

Over the past decade, the ASER Pakistan survey has established itself as an influential source of grassroots educational data and insights in Pakistan. Unlike many of the government-led surveys in the country, which often rely on large-scale, institution-focused sampling or standardised data collection protocols, ITA's approach is grounded in the community it serves. For instance, while national surveys – such as the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM), Pakistan Education Statistics (PES), and the Pakistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) – usually employ centrally designed and administered instruments, 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 ITA to capture nuances that may not surface in more standardised surveys. Volunteers can adapt as needed in real time, accounting for community norms and schedules, and ensuring that local languages and contexts are taken into consideration. ASER's community engagement 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.

ITA employs a data collection approach that mirrors the approach applied by ASER India, MIA, and UWEZO. These surveys are widely recognised for having a unique community-based approach to data collection. The model they apply involves enlisting local volunteers to administer the survey and is 'balanced on the shoulders of citizen volunteers spread across the huge geographic area … to engage more people, communities, and parents' about the importance of measuring the education levels of children' (Banerjee and Mutum, 2014, p. 24). This citizen-driven approach offers several advantages, according to recently published academic literature, which focuses specifically on PAL Network data. Firstly, it enables the survey to reach households in geographically remote or conflict-affected areas, as local volunteers are familiar with the environment, allowing them to navigate and engage with communities more effectively. By involving citizens in data collection, analysis, and dissemination, this approach also promotes community ownership of the data and democratises understanding of the status of education in the country (Alcott *et al.*, 2020). Engaging local volunteers may also foster a level of trust that might be harder to achieve when data collectors are outsiders. A shared sense of community may also make respondents more comfortable speaking openly and truthfully.

Yet this model naturally raises questions around data reliability and consistency, in light of the lack of professional enumerators, which may introduce bias into the testing process. ITA has put mechanisms in place to mitigate risks in this area. For example, the frequently asked questions document that accompanied the 2023 report states that '80% of the surveyed districts are monitored on the day of training as well as on the day of survey to ensure the presence of master trainers and volunteers. Moreover, volunteers and master trainers are called daily from ASER head for tracking and monitoring' (ITA, 2023b). However, this remains an ongoing challenge as ITA needs to balance the benefits of community-driven engagement with the demands of rigorous, high-quality data collection.

Finally, ITA may also want to consider (and communicate clearly) the assumptions and trade-offs that they have adopted in its decision to administer tests in a household setting. Conducting tests at home could mean that children are more at ease. As one international academic who participated in a KII for this review noted: '[Having it at the home] helps to move away from a high stakes testing approach. Because if it's not being done at the school, it's not teachers feeling like they are being monitored and so on. I hear from ASER colleagues that, in the household and community, it's seen to be fun not as something coming to check on you.' This may encourage children to engage more openly with the assessment, making it a more positive experience. However, home settings can also introduce variability. Distractions from family members, household responsibilities, or noise could influence children's concentration and performance. Additionally, parents or siblings may unintentionally prompt or assist child respondents, potentially inflating performance levels.

KII respondents also raised concerns around ethical protocols in data collection, particularly concerning child respondents. As one funder explained: 'We have been supporting ASER for 15 years. In that time, to my knowledge, there has never been a safeguarding complaint… we regularly challenge the team on e.g. what are your reporting mechanisms? How trained are enumerators and downstream partners on issues of safeguarding? Do they know they won't be reprimanded? Do they know they have to report every concern, both to ASER and funders? It is something we regularly raise but I am not aware of a report. I think this is something that needs further attention.' This raises questions around the training of volunteer enumerators. As ITA reflects and plans for the future, **a systematic review of this training could be useful.**

A systematic review of this kind should not only ensure adherence to ethical protocols but also ensure – and develop confidence in – the reliability of data collection processes more broadly. Outside of some basic information online, ITA does not provide an in-depth overview of its training and monitoring processes to the public. The recommended review should cover topics including the ethical issues that surround working with children, engagement with sensitive topics, and how to ensure data accuracy across diverse contexts, amongst others. Additionally, considering the upcoming redevelopment of the survey's sampling approach, this review should include a reassessment of training protocols to ensure that volunteers are prepared for methodological shifts and the issues that could accompany these. Finally, this review should consider potential gaps in capacity among data analysts and ITA staff involved in tool design and development.

Data reporting and analysis

The ASER Pakistan survey has two core data management objectives: generating raw datasets and producing reports based on these datasets. The dissemination of both of these is covered in the following section; however, this section first addresses how these data products are prepared and managed. A recurring theme across the KIIs was issues with the accessibility and usability of the raw data from ASER Pakistan**.** Currently, stakeholders must request raw data directly from the ITA team. Most respondents feel that the team responds to these requests efficiently. However, many respondents suggest that **a public-facing dashboard or online portal** where users can access data directly would be more useful. One data user explained: '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.' ITA representatives have confirmed that a data portal is in its early stages of development. One ITA staff member noted: 'We sit on really large pieces of data and sometimes I feel like we don't do justice to the data we sit on. … We were having a conversation, perhaps under the What Works Hub, to see if we can create a really rich data repository.'

Such a repository would allow researchers, policymakers, and civil society organisations to explore disaggregated data over time, as well to undertake intersectional analyses in line with their needs. However, ITA also acknowledged that sampling changes mean future datasets may not be directly comparable to older ones: 'You won't be able to do a comparison with our earlier datasets. That won't be possible. 2025 won't be comparable

with the last set we did in 2023… it's not justified to use an older sampling technique. We need to move on and that is why [we are prioritising changing the sampling approach over historical longitudinal analysis]'. As ITA progresses with plans to develop this portal, **it will be crucial to consult stakeholders in Pakistan and globally to ensure the platform meets their diverse needs.** Clear communication around any methodological shifts, particularly regarding longitudinal comparisons, will be essential.

This dashboard could be designed to enable intersectional analysis by allowing users to filter and cross-tabulate data across key variables, such as disability status, gender, and household-level factors. This could allow policymakers, researchers, and others to explore disparities in more depth, without requiring advanced statistical skills. While historical ASER datasets would be accessible through this dashboard, any future efforts to incorporate new intersectional indicators should be informed by stakeholder demand. During KIIs, stakeholders did not strongly express a need for intersectional analysis, suggesting that ITA should first assess demand before expanding the indicator set.

In terms of data analysis, ASER produces district-level and provincial reports that are widely used by researchers, non-government organisations (NGOs), and government agencies for planning and advocacy. However, stakeholders critiqued the current structure of these reports and highlighted that they are primarily descriptive in nature and provide breadth of topic coverage but little depth of analysis**.** Respondents felt that the graphs used in these reports are particularly basic and do not fulfil their needs as education stakeholders. Several stakeholders indicated that they would be interested in engaging with analyses that use advanced statistical methods or longitudinal designs. However, these approaches would require enhanced analytical capacities within the ITA team or greater collaboration with external researchers. The latter is something that the ITA team expressed an interest in during KIIs and is an action that several external stakeholders supported. A user-friendly online portal could support such collaborations by making raw data readily available to experts. Finally, several NGO and government partners also suggested that **ITA supplements or distils its findings into high-level summaries or 'one-page' briefs**. These shorter products could help policymakers and non-technical audiences quickly grasp critical insights, addressing the challenge that ASER's extensive reports can sometimes be overwhelming for users.

Dissemination, uptake, and complementarity

Like the previous sections of this report, the present section, on dissemination, uptake, and complementarity, draws on the results of the content analysis, comparative mapping, KIIs, and literature review. It explores how ASER data are shared, and how they are used by different audiences, as well as the extent to which the ASER survey has shaped educational discourse and decision-making in Pakistan and beyond. This will also allow us to explore gaps in ITA's dissemination strategy that could be filled, to better meet stakeholders' needs.

As outlined above, ASER data are referenced across a range of official and non-official outputs, from government policy documents to reports produced by international NGOs, like UNICEF. They are also extensively referenced beyond such policy and practice related documents. Newspaper articles periodically highlight ASER's insights on out-of-school children and gendered learning gaps, thereby shaping public discussion around critical educational issues (Hasan, 2024; Naqvi, 2024). Academic researchers also often rely on ASER Pakistan data to explore how different factors influence children's educational achievement (Gillani, 2022; Rind and Malik, 2024). These examples, and others, demonstrate that many stakeholders access ASER data, which are considered highly reliable and relevant. However, several opportunities for improved dissemination also emerged from this research. While the Government of Pakistan relies on ASER data, it has been critical of those data in the past, which may result in an weaker uptake in official policy implementation than there could be. As outlined above, there are indications that this dynamic is shifting as ITA engages with PBS around some methodological and sampling concerns PBS has, and fosters greater collaboration. If this engagement continues, it may help fill existing gaps in the ASER survey's policy influence.

In addition, respondents to this review suggested developing an online dashboard where users can not only download raw data but also perform basic analyses and generate custom reports. Some donor and government partners also expressed a preference for more consolidated, bite-sized reporting: 'What I'm interested in is this top-level information, pretty much this one-page of what ASER is telling me and I have everything I need on that one page.'

Beyond these process-related recommendations, stakeholders highlighted the fact that many uses hinge on a narrow set of indicators, specifically related to foundational learning. This underscores an opportunity for broader uptake of the wider ranging data that ITA collects as part of the ASER survey. The ITA team could support this by highlighting this broader range of indicators through the dashboard or bite-sized reporting outputs, but also by **offering or (enabling others to offer) targeted training and guidance for interpreting the full scope of ASER data**. Finally, while ITA has a public-facing system which tracks usage and citations of ASER data, it does not appear to be kept up to date. **Keeping this system up to date would allow ITA to better track how ASER data are used, and could inform improvements to the data and their dissemination.**

ITA has complemented the government's data collection efforts in education in the past by gathering information on areas needed to fulfil SDG reporting obligations, namely foundational learning, that was not collected through official government channels. However, the ongoing debate within the international education community around the usefulness of PAL-style data, like ASER Pakistan data, for SDG reporting has complicated matters. 'It was noted that well-known but newer efforts to measure learning (EGRA [Early Grade Reading Assessment], FLM [Foundational Learning Measurement], and the PAL Network tools) are generating data, but were designed primarily for advocacy and programme design, monitoring and evaluation, not for global reporting and comparison. Importantly, they were not explicitly aligned to the MPL[Minimum Proficiency Levels]/GPF [Global Proficiency Framework]. Their properties were not well documented' (Montoya and Crouch, 2024). ITA, and indeed the PAL Network overall, has responded to these comments (Edwards, 2024), which resulted in an acknowledgement from the UIS that PAL data could be used if they meet eligibility criteria. However, this debate has highlighted the ongoing importance of clear communication and dialogue with stakeholders at all levels to ensure that ASER data are meeting the needs of users.

ITA's collection of data related to emerging educational issues, such as climate change and education data, also complements the official data system 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 adapts to these shifts. Looking ahead, ITA should take the opportunity to reflect as Pakistan works towards developing and consolidating its national assessment system. **How ASER complements this system needs to be further reflected upon, including engaging with what the government plans to implement.**

The ASER survey 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 review's findings 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, ITA must consider how best to align with these new structures while maintaining its unique role in the education data landscape. In order to do this, ITA will need to assess these proposed changes, in order to be prepared to adapt to these. ITA 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. The survey's future relevance depends on proactively adapting to these shifts and strengthening engagement with policymakers, donors, and researchers. By engaging with these recommendations, the ASER survey 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

This research highlights the need for reflection and clear communication as ITA looks to the future. The ASER survey has continually provided insights that have shaped education policy, practice, and research in Pakistan since its inception in 2009. However, maintaining this relevance will require reflection on past successes and challenges, as well as thoughtful consideration of next steps. The following are nine key recommendations for the ITA team, grouped by short-term, long-term, and ongoing efforts:

Short-term efforts (immediate actions):

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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):

1. Reflect on the strategic direction of the survey with key stakeholders.
   The ASER team should 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 the survey remains responsive to their evolving data needs.
2. Align ASER's efforts with government plans.
   As Pakistan works to consolidate and expand its national assessment system, ITA 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):

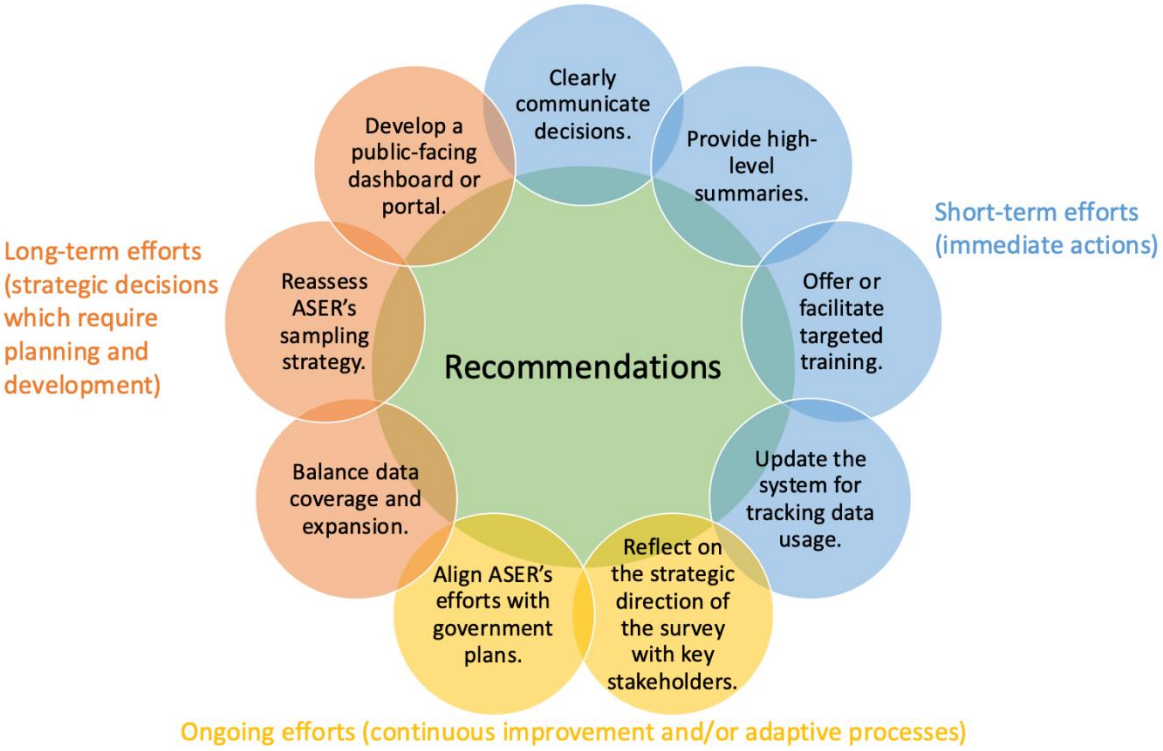
1. Balance data coverage and expansion.
   While the survey's expanding data coverage is recognised by stakeholders as a key strength, this must be balanced with the challenges that this expansion

introduces, including respondent burden and the potential risk of losing sight of the key aims of the study (foundational learning).

2. Reassess ASER's sampling strategy.
   ASER's 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.
3. Develop a public-facing dashboard or portal.
   Accessibility remains a key area for improvement in ITA'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, to ensure it addresses the diverse needs of stakeholders while remaining user-friendly.

This research highlights the pivotal role that the ASER Pakistan survey and ITA has played in shaping the education landscape in Pakistan. The nine recommendations outlined above provide a roadmap for ITA to continue to enhance ASER's impact, by addressing key areas such as strategic alignment, data dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and methodological rigour. By integrating these recommendations, ASER can strengthen its contributions to education policy and practice in Pakistan, ensuring that the survey remains a vital tool for advancing equitable and quality education in the years to come.

Figure 1: Report recommendations grouped by short-term, ongoing, and long-term efforts



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