

# In Need of Fresh Thinking: What Pratham's Experience of Mobilising Communities Says about Current Development Thinking about Community Participation in Education

**Masooda Bano**

## Abstract

For more than two decades, the international development community has advocated that establishing school-based management committees to involve communities to monitor and hold teachers, principals, and district government officials accountable would improve state schooling in developing countries; yet the evidence to sustain this claim to date remains questionable. Considering the case of Pratham, the largest education NGO in India, which is widely recognised as having developed a successful model to improve learning outcomes among children in state schools and is known for doing it through active community engagement, this paper questions whether the current development thinking on best modes of engaging communities to improve learning outcomes in state schools needs fresh thinking. The paper questions the validity of the two central assumptions underpinning the school-based management model: that better-informed communities will become involved in education activities with some mobilisation and training; and that engaged communities will be able to hold to account front-line state officials, starting with teachers and principals and moving on to the district government officials. Pratham's experience shows that dissemination of information about benefits of education does not automatically result in community engagement; instead, people are motivated to become involved on the basis of individual-based incentives. Equally, it shows that for a community to influence the actions of front-line staff, it is important to develop a co-operative and supportive relationship, instead of focusing on accountability. Pratham's experience thus shows that there is much scope for fresh thinking within the international development community on how to engage communities in developing countries in improving learning outcomes in state schools.

## **In Need of Fresh Thinking: What Pratham’s Experience of Mobilising Communities Says about Current Development Thinking about Community Participation in Education**

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## **Introduction**

Since the 1990s the international development community has placed a heavy emphasis on engaging communities to improve the provision of basic services – the education sector being no exception. A number of benefits of community engagement have been highlighted, in particular enhanced monitoring and accountability of state services (World Bank 2004). In terms of supporting actual interventions to enhance community participation in the education sector, the establishment of school-based management committees (SBMCs) to monitor school performance has been most popular (Westthorp et al. 2014). A number of factors have led to the promotion of this model. First, it has been easy to package as part of the decentralisation framework that international development agencies have supported since the late 1990s across the developing world. It is argued that these committees can hold government front-line providers accountable, i.e. principals and teachers and also, with time, district government officials (World Bank 1996; Patrinos et al. 2007; Westthorp et al. 2014), creating pressure for higher performance. Second, unlike the non-formal schooling models, which are often NGO-run and community-based, school-based management committees are expected to help improve the state schooling system, thereby promising more systematic impact, at a large scale. The limitations of these committees' attempts to encourage actual improvements in learning outcomes are, however, increasingly apparent: studies show that donor presence is often key to mobilising and keeping school committees active and ensuring that they have a certain degree of influence over government actions (Westthorp et al. 2014); further, there is still not enough evidence available to establish that the kind of monitoring of government staff conducted by these committees actually results in improved learning outcomes (Bano 2021). Even the recent studies that note positive impact do so at the level of school attendance or resource mobilisations (Levy et al. 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019); there is still limited evidence to sustain the claim that SBMC-led accountability can oblige teachers, principals, or district government officials to perform better or yield improved learning outcomes (Patrinos et al. 2007; Westthorp et al. 2014). Yet within the international development discourse, expectations from school-based management committees to improve state schools through increased accountability still remain high; consequently, recent studies which are seen to present a fresh political-economy conceptualisation of the learning crisis in the developing world also end up analysing community participation for improving learning in state schools through the narrow lens of school-based management committees (Levy et al. 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019).

This paper questions whether the current thinking on community participation and development to improve learning outcomes needs a fresh approach. In particular, it questions whether the international development community needs to look actively beyond school-based management models to identify other mechanisms and platforms by which communities might be able to contribute to improving learning outcomes in state schools. Are there alternative modes of engaging the community that might yield more systematic improvement in learning outcomes in state schools, rather than building expectations which across a number of countries are showing very similar limitations: donor dependence; engaging just a few community representatives and not the wider community; limited ability to hold state actors to account; and limited evidence of ability to contribute to improved learning outcomes ((Patrinos et al. 2007; Westthorp et al. 2014)? This paper explores these questions by closely studying the experience of Pratham, the largest education NGO in India today, which works with communities across all its education programmes. Pratham's case is particularly useful for exploring the limits of existing thinking within the international development community on engaging communities in the delivery of good-quality education, because its successes in improving actual learning outcomes and doing so through active community mobilisation is

well established. Thus, methodologically, it enables us to focus on analysing the deeper conceptual issues as to what can be learnt from Pratham's model of community participation, as it is distinct from the SBMC model of engendering community participation, instead of focusing on measuring success, which as explained below is already well recorded.

Firstly, Pratham, unlike many NGOs which focus on access, has a strong focus on improving actual learning outcomes: its teaching approach, Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), is today internationally recognised for its success in helping children learn to read and develop basic numeracy skills (Banerjee et al. 2007; J-PAL 2021). Due to its evidence of success, TaRL approach has been replicated by many state governments in India (Bano and Oberoi 2020), which is widely interpreted as a sign of success of Pratham's approach, and is now also being replicated in other countries (J-PAL 2019). Just as in the case of TaRL, Pratham's contributions through ASER to raise educational quality concerns at senior government levels and to gather this data through active community participation, is today widely recognised as a major success. ASER's methodological approach has been widely endorsed by international development agencies and it is being replicated by NGOs in other countries, such as Pakistan (Save the Children 2013).

Secondly, as is documented in detail in this paper, all its interventions, which range from helping communities to set up pre-primary early education centres to gathering data on education outcomes through its sister organisation, ASER (Annual Status of Education Report), or actually providing remedial teaching facilities to children in state schools, are implemented through active community participation. The multi-pronged nature of its interventions thus in itself shows that there are more ways for communities to support improvement in learning outcomes in state schools, or build effective demand for it, than merely focusing on monitoring teachers and principals, which remains the primary focus of the school-based management approaches.

Thirdly, Pratham has from the beginning been a highly reflective organisation, whereby constant experimentation, research, and reflection on what works and what does not work have been core to its own learning and development of programmes over time. This means that even today the organisation is constantly pursuing innovation in all areas that might contribute to improving children's learning experience: the teaching methods; the dynamics of working with the state; and ways of mobilising the communities to contribute to learning outcomes in state schools. An analysis of its new initiatives, in addition to its older programmes (especially its recent focus on engaging communities to support child-to-child learning, and the extensive community-based campaign that it has run during the COVID-induced lockdowns to ensure that while the schools are closed children keep learning through mobile-phone messaging, educational material circulated on WhatsApp, and videos made available on internet) enables us to recognise how the continued emphasis on community-based school-management models is preventing the international development community, and scholars who study community-based interventions in education, from identifying new ways to build community-wide participation to support children's learning— a process to which Pratham refers as creating 'learning communities'. It is important to note here that the objective of this paper is not to promote Pratham's approach globally; instead, the purpose is to use Pratham as an example to illustrate that other modes of engendering community participation to improve learning outcomes than establishing SBMCs, do exist and that international development community needs to explore these alternative models as that could lead to facilitating more effective modes of community participation.

In learning from Pratham, it is also very clear that to successfully mobilise communities to contribute towards improving state schools, especially when in most contexts those members of the community who can afford it have already quit state schools in favour of private schools and thus have no personal interest in working towards improving learning outcomes in state schools, it is important to correct a popular assumption in the development literature that has supported the establishment of school-based committees: that the communities, once informed of the benefits of education and of appropriate channels for building pressure on local district government officials, would become actively engaged. Instead, as this paper will demonstrate, Pratham's experience has shown that information about the benefits of education, or about government operations or complaints mechanisms, in itself does not lead communities to become engaged; instead, communities need to be convinced of the low learning levels in state schools and shown how contributions of individual community members can make a difference. Pratham's experience shows that communities can be mobilised at large scale – but through activities and opportunities that allow individuals to contribute individually, instead of having to co-ordinate their inputs through collective-action platforms. A closer look at Pratham's success in ensuring community-wide participation shows that effective community mobilisation requires the offering of a mix of incentives that can cater for the interests of different actors. Second, Pratham's experience also shows that the assumption that school-management committees consisting of different actors from within the community would be able to hold state-school teachers, principals, and district government officials to account is misleading. As other recent studies have also acknowledged (World Bank 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019), bottom-up pressures for increased accountability on their own have limited impact in countries where the direct routes of accountability are weak, unless there is also pressure exerted from the top. Pratham experience shows that in such contexts in order to work with the state schools one is dependent on engaging *with* the state actors, not lobbying *against* them. Thus, whether the targets are teachers, principals, or district government officials, it is often increased engagement and co-operation, and not increased monitoring or accountability, that results in community-based interventions being successful in improving education provision in state schools: lobbying for change is important in Pratham's approach, but such efforts are best directed at creating pressure for national-level change, as does Pratham through its annual ASER reports.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the conceptual framework outlining how the existing international development programmes aimed at mobilising communities to support education in state schools have mainly conceptualised community as primarily being capable of playing a monitoring or resource-mobilisation role. Section 2 explains the research method and the nature of documents consulted to supplement the fieldwork conducted in India, which was interrupted due to COVID-related lockdowns. Section 3 traces Pratham's activities over the past 25 years, starting from its establishment in 1995 to documenting the wide range of educational activities that it performs today to support learning in state schools, all implemented through active community engagement. Section 4 highlights how Pratham's experience of engaging the communities complicates two central assumptions shaping the establishment of school-based management committees: firstly, that communities once informed of the benefits of education and of the relevant district government authorities responsible for the delivery of education would actively engage in activities aimed at improving learning outcomes in state schools; and secondly, that engaged communities would be able to hold teachers, principals, and district government officials to account and thus encourage higher performance. Presenting an analysis of the different categories of actors that Pratham is able to mobilise within the communities, and the different nature of contributions made by different actors towards supporting learning outcomes in state schools, Section 5

demonstrates that successful community-wide mobilisation requires offering a mixed set of incentives that motivate a range of different actors, thereby highlighting the need for community-participation models to be based on realistic assumptions about human behaviour, rather than being guided by expectations of altruistic intent on the part of the community members. Section 6 documents the new community-supported learning initiatives being trialled by Pratham which help to illustrate that the current development thinking on community engagement for improved learning outcomes is in need of fresh thinking.

## **Section 1: Community Participation and Improving Learning Outcomes: Dominant Thinking in International Development**

Since the late 1990s, international development agencies have strongly emphasised community participation as a way to ensure improved delivery of basic social services, given the governance challenges prevalent in many developing countries. The 2003 World Bank report, *Making Services Work for the Poor*, made a useful conceptual distinction between long and short routes of accountability. 'The long route' refers to the standard channels of accountability expected to function under democratic regimes, whereby the elected representatives are expected to preserve the interest of the electorate by ensuring the efficient working of state actors and the efficient delivery of basic social services. In many developing countries the democratic culture remains weak, and ordinary members of the public seem unable to hold the elected representatives accountable. The World Bank report argued that when this traditional approach, referred to as the long route of accountability, fails to work, the short route of accountability, whereby the public is enabled to hold to account the front-line service providers who are physically close to them could be more effective in improving service delivery. This thinking became highly influential within the development agencies, especially as it boosted support for decentralisation, as well as supporting enhanced community participation. Noting how this thinking has had a major influence in shaping international development interventions, Banerjee et al. (2010: 2) explain: 'International aid agencies such as The World Bank not only advocate such policy initiatives (World Bank 2003) but also increasingly require development projects they fund to include "beneficiary participation" components, such as the constitution of users' committees, parent-teacher associations, and the mobilization of beneficiaries to participate in those components.'

This focus on decentralisation and community participation as a way to increase the accountability of front-line government officials has led to a number of interventions; but international development agencies have primarily backed investment in the establishment of school-based management committees. These committees are expected to hold the teachers and principals to account and thus achieve improved quality of education provision and improved learning outcomes. Yet studies have shown that the assumed benefits of school-based management often do not materialise, especially in poorer countries (Patrinos et al. 2007; Westhorp et al. 2014). Evidence from a number of countries suggests that even when government endorses the establishment of SBMCs, they rarely become functional unless supported through a development agency's programme (Westhorp et al. 2014). Further, even when functional, most of these committees are unable to improve the school learning environment or children's actual learning outcomes. These committees might be able to monitor teacher and student attendance and mobilise resources for school infrastructure-improvement projects, but in most contexts they are unable to influence the actions of the teachers and principals. In some cases, attempts to create pressures on teachers and principals through such communities have actually led to a lowering of students' learning outcomes (Asim 2019). Recent studies are thus recognising that the local political-economy dynamics

vary across contexts and have a major influence on the nature and extent of such committees' potential impact (Asim 2019; Hickey and Hossain 2019). However, the overall weak evidence in support of communities' ability to establish functional school-based management committees without active donor intervention, and the low ability of even functional committees to make a visible impact on learning, shows that the underlying assumptions guiding current thinking on the establishment of school-based management committees need rethinking.

As we will see in this paper, examining Pratham's experience of engaging communities through a wide range of activities aimed at improving learning outcomes in state schools, it is possible to identify two such assumptions. One of these is that, once informed about the importance of education and the channels and mechanisms available to hold school teachers and principals and district government officials to account, communities will become engaged. Pratham's experiences, as recorded in this paper, show that this is a flawed assumption. While existing studies have highlighted the importance of recognising that communities are not monolithic and consist of a range of different interests, and that even poor communities have local elites (those slightly more influential, better educated, or better connected) who might try to hi-jack the agenda of collective platforms such as school-management committees (Hickey and Hossain 2019), closer examination of Pratham's engagement with a wide range of actors in given communities shows that different actors within the community respond to different incentives, and that action often takes place in response to individual incentives, rather than through motivating actors to support a collective initiative. The school-based management committee models assume that, once empowered through provision of detailed information about the working of state institutions and how they are to be held to account, communities will automatically work together to secure the collective goal of improving the quality of education provision for all children. This is, however, a simplistic assumption. There is a rich theoretical literature establishing the challenges to undertaking collective action, given the propensity of individuals to 'free-ride' (Olson 1971). Expecting communities to work as a team to address the challenge of providing good-quality education in state schools is expecting altruistic intent on the part of many community members. Instead, as the theory would predict, Pratham's success with mobilising communities shows that winning community-wide participation requires the provision of channels and opportunities that can incentivise individual members of the community to contribute towards different activities which might have a value for them. The inputs of these individual members to a range of activities aimed at supporting education provision result in generating a much more dynamic model of community engagement than has been recorded for efforts aimed at generating collective action through these school-management committees.

The second assumption underpinning the school-based management models which also needs to be questioned in the light of existing evidence is that engaging community members in monitoring teachers and principals would enable them to hold them (and gradually also the district government officials) to account. In reality, however, holding ground-level government staff to account, or creating pressure on them to improve their performance, remains an insurmountable challenge for most communities when the power to confer punishment and rewards remains in the hands of higher-tier government officials. The ability of these committees to actually hold such officials to account is thus highly limited and is heavily contingent on the local political-economy dynamics. In a few contexts, communities have been successful in initiating an occasional transfer of a poor-performing teacher or principal (Westhorp et al. 2014), but such cases are an exception rather than a norm; in other contexts, such efforts for increased monitoring of teachers and principals have resulted in actual declines

in student learning outcomes (Asim 2019). Thus, one can train SBMC members to monitor whether a teacher is turning up for work or not, but to put pressure on the teacher so that she actually changes her behaviour or increases the level of effort that she invests in her teaching remains beyond the reach of the community. At best, communities can report low-performing teachers or principals to the local district-government education authorities. The evidence suggests that these authorities normally take action only if the wider system is in favour of education reform and pressure is exerted from the top. Overall, there is growing recognition that bottom-up accountability works best in political contexts when there is also top-down pressure for improved service delivery (World Bank 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019). The short route to accountability has limited impact on improving service delivery or changing the behaviour of front-line government officials in systems where the long route is malfunctioning.

With this growing evidence regarding the limitations of school-based management models of community participation, it is important to ask if there is scope for considering alternative mechanisms to engage communities to enable them to contribute to improving learning outcomes in state schools. As we will see in the analysis presented in this paper, Pratham's example suggests that there are: by building community and parental awareness about monitoring actual learning outcomes; by recruiting volunteers from the community to provide remedial teaching support outside the regular school hours; and by engaging communities through social media as well as through local events aimed at promoting learning so that they become part of creating a community-wide learning environment.

## **Section 2: Research Method**

This paper presents a case study of Pratham to examine its experience of undertaking community-mobilisation work to support improvement in learning outcomes among children in state schools in India. This is the second RISE study of Pratham; the first focused on studying how Pratham has worked with state governments to embed its Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology within state education machinery (Bano and Oberoi 2020). Both these processes, embedding innovation with state agencies, and mobilising communities, are critical to Pratham's work philosophy, and in many ways they are interlinked; yet each is complex enough to require detailed analysis. Both these RISE studies draw on in-country fieldwork conducted with Pratham teams, state and district government officials, and communities between January and early April 2020. The three-month in-country fieldwork drew on in-depth interviews with Pratham staff in its office in Delhi, as well as in its regional offices in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and with district government officials. In addition to holding detailed interviews with Pratham's staff members on the dynamics of engagement with states and communities, this phase of the fieldwork involved gathering ethnographic observations: Pratham staff members were accompanied on visits to government schools, in order to meet the principals and teachers and to observe the relational dynamics between them and the Pratham staff; they were also accompanied when visiting the communities, in order to better understand their approach of community engagement and the response of the community members and parents to them. The fieldwork helped record Pratham's success in making the state government of Bihar adopt TaRL's methodology as well as recording evidence of extensive community participation (Bano and Oberoi 2020).

The in-country fieldwork was conducted under Oxford University ethics protocol, under which this study has been approved. Anonymity of respondents and informed consent, whereby the respondents are fully informed of the objective of the study and given a choice whether or not to participate, are the core guiding principles. Interviews and group discussions were conducted in Hindi and then translated into English. In terms of data protection, in accordance with Oxford



University data-protection policy, the interview transcripts and diary notes were saved on a computer with an encrypted password. Also, in accordance with Oxford University ethics protocol, all respondents were promised anonymity unless they themselves expressed a desire to be quoted.

While this three-month fieldwork remained primarily focused on studying how Pratham works with the state directly (see Bano and Oberoi 2020), it did allow for observing the nature and extent of community engagement that Pratham is able to mobilise across a whole range of educational activities which directly contribute to learning in state schools, whether through its volunteer-led data-collection activities in the form of ASER; or through programmes such as READ India campaign, which mobilise community volunteers to work as teachers to provide supplementary education to children in state schools; or through training illiterate mothers to monitor their children's learning levels and actively engage with teachers in state schools to express their concern about their children's lack of academic progress. Because it was not possible to pursue further ground-level fieldwork due to COVID-related lockdowns in India, in order to identify the factors that enable Pratham to successfully engage communities, the methodological focus of this study shifted to undertaking online interviews with Pratham team members and undertaking close study of Pratham documents and reports which captured both the extent of its community participation across different educational activities and the ways of working that enabled it to engage with different actors within the community. It soon became clear that Pratham senior management has been very effective at documenting its experiences as evidence of proof of success but equally as a means to facilitate internal reflection in order to continuously refine the interventions and develop new programmes. This thus meant that the need for online interviews was dramatically reduced as the written documentation was very useful and easily available.

Highly informative in particular were the extensive set of writings by Rukmini Banerji, the co-founder of Pratham, detailing how Pratham's thinking on community participation has evolved, and expounding the lessons learned from community engagement work over time. The availability of these documents made it possible to trace the origin of each one of Pratham's major programmes, examine the extent and mode of community participation, and review the lessons learned about what works and what does not. These writings can be categorised in three types: first, reflections by Banerji on lessons learned from community- mobilisation work; these writings often share the history of an intervention and an honest assessment of any challenges faced, often drawing on detailed anecdotes from the field; second, qualitative articles published in academic as well as non-academic journals or book volumes, again often authored by Banerji in collaboration with others, summarising the experiences or core lessons learned from various interventions; and third, major journal articles, published in leading economics journals recognised for publishing articles showing strong methodological rigour, often drawing on randomised controlled trials developed with the J-PAL team in India. In the last category, a particular study developed with the J-PAL team to measure communities' response to information campaigns to support education through participation in village-level education committees is particularly important, as its results challenged dominant wisdom about the role of information in encouraging communities to take action, as well as the communities' ability to hold front-line government officials to account (Banerjee et al. 2010).

In addition, Pratham's website is itself a rich source of information on Pratham's past and present activities. Apart from providing access to many videos documenting the evolution of its different programmes and approaches, the website provided constant updates on a major community-based initiative launched by Pratham during the COVID lockdowns to support

continued child learning as schools closed. This article thus also draws on the analysis of the extensive material that Pratham developed to share with communities in the form of online videos and WhatsApp and mobile messaging material during the 2020 lockdowns to support continued child learning through community engagement. Finally, Skype interviews with selected Pratham staff helped to fill the analytical gaps where necessary. Thus, a combination of methods, including online interviews, exhaustive review of Pratham's own documents and research studies, and material available on its website helped to complete this study.

### **Section 3: Supporting Versus Monitoring: Pratham's Approach to Engaging Communities in State Schools (1995–2020)**

As discussed in Section 1, the school-based management models are based on the premise that involving communities in monitoring state schools would lead to increased accountability of teachers and principals and result in improved learning outcomes. The complex set of activities that Pratham has engaged with in 25 years of its working, all implemented through active community engagement, instead show that communities can contribute to learning in state schools in multiple ways, instead of primarily focusing on monitoring the teachers and holding them to account; equally important, its experience shows that communities might be able to influence learning in state schools more effectively if they adopt an engaging and supportive attitude towards front-line educational providers instead of trying to act as monitors. In order to appreciate the significance of these points, it is important to trace the history of Pratham's engagement with the communities. A recent paper by Banerji (2020), *Can Communities Mobilize for Schooling and Learning? Bottom-up Perspectives from Pratham in India*, helps trace the evolution of Pratham's programmes from the very beginning and provides an opportunity to analyse how engendering community participation through multiple platforms has been critical to its success.

Pratham launched its first initiative in 1995 in the slums of Mumbai; the focus was on improving student learning in primary schools by providing them with access to pre-school (*balwadi*) education. Although accessed by parents from middle-income families, pre-schooling facilities were not affordable for families living in the slums. Pratham's pre-schooling programme aimed to build children's foundational skills to prepare them for entering primary grades in state schools. These pre-school initiatives were made possible through active community participation: in common with many non-formal schooling models, Pratham required communities to provide a venue where children could be taught; further, a teacher from within the local community was trained by Pratham to run these centres for a very small payment. Children received 2.5 hours of education per day. This programme, which became very popular with the slum communities, gave birth to Pratham's next initiative, which focused on supporting children in state schools who were seen as lagging behind: these might be children who moved from the pre-schools to state schools, as well as older out-of-school children whom Pratham started to prepare to enter primary grades in state schools. Again this work was made possible by Pratham's success in mobilising volunteers from within the community who were willing to act as volunteer teachers and follow Pratham's teaching methodology to develop these children's foundational skills. This work on bridging the gap between these children and state schools, led to a recognition within the relevant government agencies of Pratham's ability to support learning abilities among weaker children or children seen to be lagging behind. Gradually, increased numbers of municipal government schools in Mumbai asked Pratham for help with providing additional support to children seen to be lagging behind. Pratham responded to this demand by further engaging volunteers from within the communities and training them; the volunteers were paid only a very small token sum. By

1998-1999, almost all the 1,200 municipal schools in Mumbai had a Pratham volunteer working with them (Banerji 2020).

Encouraged by its success in supporting learning among weaker children in municipal schools, Pratham started a series of interventions with children of ages seven, eight, or higher with a focus on ensuring that children learned to read and develop basic numeracy skills within a five-week period— a revolutionary achievement in a context where the majority of the children cannot read, or do basic arithmetic, at a level expected of children in their grade (Banerji 2020). First called ‘Learning to Read’ (L2R), this methodological approach introduced by Pratham is today widely referred to as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). Apart from its success in enabling children to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills in a short period, TaRL is also known for using a very simple method, so that the community volunteers could be easily trained to use it. As part of this approach, it is critical to first assess a child’s level of literacy and numeracy skills before embarking on the educational plan. As will be discussed in detail in Section 4, having very simple instruments to do this basic assessment itself has been key to gaining community participation.

As Pratham gradually moved to expand its services in the rural areas, its first emphasis was thus on developing accurate assessments of student learning levels. On moving into rural communities, the first thing that Pratham teams did was to develop village report cards, whereby the literacy and numeracy levels of all children in the village were assessed (Banerji 2020). This process of developing village report cards, which helped to demonstrate to the community the low learning standards in local schools, became a prelude to another major national-level educational initiative for which Pratham is today internationally known: the 2006 launch of ASER, a community-led annual survey which provides estimates of basic learning (reading and arithmetic) for a large sample of children in India aged 15–16 (Banerji 2020). The annual ASER report, launched in mid-January each year, takes 100 days from design to data release. More than 550-600 community organisations and more than 25,000 volunteers take part each year in the production of this report (Banerji 2020). The annual survey covers 300,000 households and between half a million and three quarters of a million children. No other citizen-led education data-gathering exercise of this scale and quality exists in India; the data are collected using standardised and reliable methods that are simple enough for everyone in the community to understand them (Banerji 2013b).

Thus, although Pratham does not engage communities to form school- or village-level education-management committees to monitor teachers and principals to hold them to account, it has a strong focus on monitoring high-level government authorities who are responsible for ensuring the effective delivery of education. Seen this way, Pratham’s approach is more geared towards fixing challenges to the long route of accountability, as it focuses its efforts on lobbying top education decision makers in Delhi and state governments, instead of trying to fix learning challenges in state schools by focusing on obtaining the transfers of weak-performing teachers, which is often the kind of success associated with active school-management committees. As Banerji (2013a) notes: ‘ASER takes the following three-pronged approach: measure to understand; understand to communicate; and communicate to change.’ In another study (Banerji 2015b: 221), she notes, ‘The purpose of Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) launched in 2005 was to make people recognise the challenge of children not learning. ASER was designed to influence policy at national and state level while at the same time creating a mass movement for improving children’s learning.’

In another study, Banerji (2015b: 222) notes: ‘Over time, the findings [from ASER] have received a great deal of media attention nationally and in the states. In particular, ASER has brought to the fore the fundamental importance of reading as a skill that is needed early in order for children to make progress through the education system. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what leads to changes in policy, it is fair to say that relentless public pressure exerted by ASER at any levels is at least one major influence on shift in the central government’s policy on children’s learning.’

This community-led educational data-gathering work, which started with the production of school report cards and developed into ASER, in turn led to the launch of the Read India campaign. Launched at the ASER annual event in January 2007, the Read India campaign was a major movement to mobilise community volunteers across India to provide remedial education to younger children in their village or communities to improve their literacy and numeracy skills using TaRL methodology. By 2008 at least one one-month summer camp was held in almost half of all villages in India.

While these are Pratham’s most well-established programmes, which today are already the focus of much international attention and state-wide replications within India (Bano and Oberoi 2020), Pratham’s leadership is currently involved in developing a number of new initiatives based on its continuous learning from the field experiences and experimentation. Pratham is now increasingly focused on the idea of supporting the development of ‘learning communities’, whereby community members are mobilised in their individual capacity to contribute towards numerous education initiatives which collectively create a conducive learning environment for children in the community. One such recent idea that it has developed is promoting child-to-child learning. Here children at a similar level of learning are grouped together at a venue secured through the community, where these children come together a specific number of times a week. A local community volunteer, which in some cases can be an elderly woman or man, not necessarily literate, is mobilised to take responsibility for ensuring that the children gather at the prescribed time. The volunteer is then supported by Pratham, through the provision of material and training, to ensure that the children follow the group educational activities designed by Pratham. Similarly, Pratham is increasingly focusing on holding educational events within the communities such as education fairs (*melas*), which are managed by community volunteers, and aimed at promoting community awareness of various educational initiatives which they can support. During 2020, Pratham showed its ability to work with communities by developing an extensive set of materials based on apps, social media, and the internet to support children’s continued learning when schools had to close due to COVID-related lockdowns. Section 6 details these new initiatives.

Looking at the range and types of educational initiatives led by Pratham, it is easy to recognise that Pratham’s understanding of how best to engage communities to support improved learning in state schools is very different from the thinking that guides the support of the international development community for the establishment of schools-based management committees. Instead of focusing on increased monitoring and accountability of teachers and principals in government schools, Pratham has focused on supporting teachers and principals in state schools by providing weaker children with remedial teaching support during out-of-school hours or in time slots made available by the state schools. This does not mean that Pratham does not recognise the need to make teachers perform better, or the need to put pressure on the state to take greater responsibility for providing good-quality education; but its approach is different. It focuses on supporting teachers and principals at school level instead of threatening them, while at the same time building pressure for state accountability and improved

performance at the highest level of national and state governments by means of its data-gathering and dissemination work through ASER. There are two questions that thus need attention: first, why has Pratham not actively engaged in supporting school-management models in state schools and instead focused on providing support in the form of remedial teaching?; and second, what has enabled Pratham to effectively engage communities across a whole range of activities and on an ongoing basis? The next two sections address these questions.

#### **Section 4. Imparting Information to Monitor Learning Outcomes not Front-Line Service Providers**

Like all education programmes based on community mobilisation, providing information to the communities has been a critical part of Pratham's engagement with communities; the nature of information provided has, however, been very different from that featured in regular development programmes aimed at establishing village- or school-based management committees. In line with its focus on improving learning outcomes, as manifest in its TaRL approach, Pratham's community-mobilisation work starts with educating the communities on how to actually monitor children's learning outcomes, using TaRL basic learning-assessment tools, instead of briefing communities on how to hold the state front-line education staff accountable. This focus evolved as a result of evidence-based research in which Pratham was involved, as well as due to its initial success in mobilising communities through the school report-card exercise.

The evidence in support of this came early on from a major research study that Pratham developed in collaboration with the J-PAL India team in 2005, designed to study whether information enhances community's willingness to engage in village education councils. This study, under which a randomised control trial was developed to assess the impact of three inputs—increased information about how to lobby state agencies; increased information on how to monitor quality; and the provision of means to act as volunteer teachers—was implemented in Uttar Pradesh, in the context of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme which promoted community engagement through the establishment of Village Education Committees (VECs) to improve the quality of education in elementary schools (Banerjee et al. 2010). A total of 280 villages formed the baseline, out of which 65 randomly selected villages received all three interventions, and a fourth group of 85 villages formed the control group. Three interventions were introduced, as follows: in the first, Pratham teams organised meetings where communities were given information about the structure and organisation of local service delivery, with a particular focus on explaining the functions of the Village Education Councils (VECs) and responsibilities of VEC members. In addition to providing this information, under the second intervention Pratham teams also trained community members to administer simple reading tests for children and to create 'report cards' on the status of enrolment and learning in their village. The third intervention consisted of the previous two plus the recruitment of one or more volunteers from each village; these volunteers were given a week's training in the pedagogical technique for teaching basic reading skills that Pratham used across India. These volunteers were asked to organise reading camps in the village, lasting from two to three months, with classes held every day. Unlike the first two interventions, this one was designed to provide committed individuals from within the communities with an opportunity and the competence to contribute towards improving children's learning outcomes.

The results from this study showed that none of these interventions increased community involvement in state schools. Several possible reasons for this were identified: community members might have such a pessimistic view of the governance system that, despite increased

information on how to hold state actors to account, they were not confident of their ability to do so; or there might be no mechanisms available through which local communities can shape actual decisions, such as the hiring and firing of teachers, in schools; or those who had voice and power within the community had already moved their children to private schools and thus were not concerned about the situation in state schools (Banerjee et al. 2010). Thus, neither of the two assumptions underlying school-based management models – that increased information and training would motivate community members to get involved in these committees, and that this involvement would lead to increased accountability of front-line government staff – was upheld. But, in line with Pratham’s overall experience, the results from the third intervention established that many community members were willing to become volunteer teachers in Pratham’s programme. Thus, there were many individuals within the community who were willing to contribute to this collective goal, but the best way to engage them was through individual initiatives rather than establishing a collective platform (Banerjee et al. 2010).

Pratham has thus in its activities remained strongly focused on improving the quality of learning in state schools through supporting, encouraging, and mentoring teachers and principals, instead of trying to make its field teams or communities act as monitors or auditors. Its main focus has thus remained on running learning camps for children in state schools, either during summer holidays or outside school hours, in consultation with the school principals/teachers. Further, as documented in detail in Bano and Oberoi (2020), when working directly with state governments to embed the TaRL system in the state-wide education system, its team enter state schools with a very humble attitude, not trying to prove the teachers or principals wrong but aiming to engage with them in a very supportive manner and win their confidence in order to gradually influence their style of working.

Banerji (2013b) herself has expressed a subtle critique of the focus on monitoring and accountability-based models of community participation, and has argued for the need to engage and support the state schooling system:

There is a lot of talk in the development world about accountability. But perhaps we need to work hard at a prior task, that of building engagement. Engagement means understanding. Engagement implies learning from our reality. To bring people in, engagement needs simple tools and methods and activities. Once we know what the problem is, we should also be able to think about what to do to solve it. Engagement means thinking about what 'I' can do and what 'we' can do, and figuring out what our children are entitled to and what we can demand. What our own children need is exactly what the children of the entire country need— a strong supportive home and a good, effective school.

In another place, she expressed similar emphasis on engaging with state schools, not as monitors but as owners and supporters of the process:

One of the biggest challenges that we face in our government schools is how to convert the sarkari [government] school into ‘my school’ or ‘our school’. We are citizens, not simply beneficiaries. We are the funders and the owners of the school. And we must behave as such. Only when something belongs to me, do I care. Only when it is mine, do I engage. If I realise that it is my money that funds the school, when I will watch carefully to see how it is being spent and what my children get out of it. Ownership is key to engagement; holding others responsible or accountable comes later. It is only

then that we will be able to give our children the education they deserve. (Banerji 2015b: 228).

Thus, instead of telling the community members to hold the school teachers accountable, the mobilisation is about telling them that the school is funded by their taxes; it is they, not the government, that is paying teachers' salaries, so they need to get engaged and support the entire process.

At the same time, information dissemination remains critical to its community-mobilisation work; but the nature of information disseminated and its style of dissemination are very different. Pratham's current information-dissemination activities have been strongly shaped by its success in involving communities when it launched the village report-cards exercise on initially moving into rural areas, as outlined in Section 3. The village report-card activity acted as a census of all school-going children in the village and was essential in Pratham's view for understanding the local education context in each village before launching any kind of education-support programme; but the way this activity progressed also helped to establish the importance of educating communities about actually focusing on learning outcomes instead of simply on schooling. When Pratham's teams launched these village report-card exercises in villages, they often made a child take the test in the open. The tool used was very simple, consisting of a combination of simple words, sentences, and then a paragraph of text; and so was the assessment process, which focused on measuring a child's ability to read at these three different levels of increasing complexity. Taken in the open in front of the community members, this simple assessment exercise helped to demonstrate to the community the low level of learning among children. As Banerji notes, the community members were aware of challenges within state schools, but they still expected children to be learning: 'When the testing indicated that was not the case, it challenged commonly held assumptions. The counterintuitive situation caused a lot of debate and discussion. An invisible problem began to slowly come into the light' (Banerji 2014).

In Pratham's experience over time, engaging the community through this initial learning-assessment exercise continues to be key to getting community members involved. Holding these assessments in the open, where community members can gather around children and see for themselves how children are performing on basic literacy and numerous tasks, and also encouraging them to engage in this assessment process themselves by learning how to implement the assessment tools, builds community members' awareness and conviction that something needs to be done. Such a process of public assessment also helps to generate genuine amazement, discussion, and analysis, notes Banerji (2015b). And, although in Pratham's exercise this information and training on how to monitor actual learning outcomes and mobilisation does not necessarily result in making community members become part of formal platforms such as Village Education Councils, it has been key to Pratham's continued success in mobilising volunteer teachers for its programmes designed to provide remedial teaching support to children in state schools.

As Banerji (2015b: 219) notes, 'Schooling is visible, learning is not. As long as children are going to school, everyone assumes they are learning. In order to ensure children actually learn, Pratham recognised that the learning needs to be demystified. People need to be engaged in ways that they can learn to appreciate what learning is and how they might be able to contribute to improving it.'

Further, documenting personal observations from the field when the first report-card exercise was launched in Sultanpur in Uttar Pradesh, Banerji (2015b: 220), explains in detail the dynamics of the community response:

Stepping back and looking at the unfolding scene, one could see clearly that the actual activity to generate the information was critical for the entire process to unfold. ‘Self-discovery’ was essential. Someone had to hold a new type of mirror up so that people could see themselves in a new way. Information mattered. It was not just a report or numbers that came from somewhere. It mattered because it was about children that everyone knew and cared about. It mattered because the information that was generated was new. Before this, people had not known to look closely at children’s learning and did not know how to look at it in this simple way. It mattered because people had seen the information being generated before their own eyes and often had participated in creating it. The simplicity of the tool and the method enabled people of all types to participate or at least to observe. And, it was easy to digest the results— for their own children and for all the children in the neighbourhood. It was straightforward to see the ‘result’ for individual children and for aggregate – all at the same time. Whether people were literate or illiterate, it was obvious to all that their own school going children should be able to do these basic tasks.

It was observation of precisely these dynamics and their importance in getting communities involved in local education concerns that led this village report-card production exercise to result in the birth of ASER. As Banerji (2015b: 221) notes in an article in which she reviews the importance of ASER:

Children learning or even education is not only the responsibility of the school. It is a much larger issue and activity on which many more people must engage. The data collection is done in the village by community and with households so that across the country there can be conversations, discussions and debates as the ones we heard in the village in UP. We saw understanding and awareness, engagement and ownership, all beginning to happen in Sultanpur. We witnessed how the *Pradhan* [village headman] realised that he had a new challenge on hand. The ultimate objective of ASER was similar—that such catalysing and energising could happen in every district. The participation in ASER would lead to more people having first-hand realisation of the crisis in learning and that this experience would lead them to seek solutions.

Thus, dissemination of information remains key to Pratham's community-mobilisation work, as is normally the case in donor-support programmes aimed at mobilising communities to establish school-based management committees, but here the focus is on informing and training communities to monitor student learning outcomes, not the government front-line service providers, whether teachers, principals or district government officials. Further, its experience shows that information is really fully absorbed when the dissemination process allows mechanisms and opportunities for community members to get involved, as Pratham does by offering community members opportunities to engage in actual data collection on learning outcomes through village report-card exercises, or by contributing to the data-gathering process for annual ASER reports. This in turn requires that the actual tools for monitoring learning outcomes should be simple, so that ordinary community members can learn to use them and interpret their results. Only then can a genuine ownership of the process develop.

## **Section 5: Incentivising Communities: Something for Everyone**



A closer look at the array of activities in which Pratham has successfully involved community members shows that successful community mobilisation requires offering multiple incentives for participation, thus ensuring that a wide range of actors within the community find an incentive that works for them. The types of community participation that Pratham is able to mobilise can be grouped in three categories.

### ***5.1. Wider Community Participation: Through Specific Activities or Events***

In many of her writings on Pratham's community-mobilisation experience, Banerji notes the tendency of community members, including parents, to talk of entitlements and not receiving what they were due from the state, as opposed to actually focusing on children's learning outcomes. As Banerji (2015b: 223), notes:

The natural tendency of the groups [villagers] was to focus on inputs and entitlements and to blame the school or the Panchayat for not delivering the benefits that people were supposed to get. Initial rounds of talks often tended to be argumentative and aggressive. It was almost as if the entire discourse had to be aimed at the 'other'. We learnt from meeting to meeting how to move the tenor from conflict to collaboration or at least to a less confrontational stance. But, even apart from that, it took a great deal of persuasion and convincing to move the discussions away from benefits and to the issue of children's learning.

It is in this context that the success of the school report-card exercise in actually mobilising communities and getting them focused on learning outcomes was a big achievement. As noted in the previous section, as it unfolded, this activity attracted participants from across the community. The continued success of ASER in mobilising community volunteers to gather data on student learning outcomes in the local areas also shows that this is one activity that has been particularly effective in attracting community contributions. It is clear from Pratham reports that the reason for this is that the activity actually interests people: the surprise elements of the results, the resulting communication and discussion within the community, and the limited one-off nature of time investment, rather than being a formal weekly or monthly commitment, incentivise many people to get involved. This demonstrates how genuinely raising people's curiosity, providing opportunities to engage in activities that they find simultaneously fun and productive, and which give people some visibility, can incentivise community-wide participation for large-scale time-bound activities to support local education systems.

As Banerji (2015b) notes, getting the communities excited about an activity is key to its adoption:

As always, children were very excited to get one-on-one attention and to be 'asked' to do a task. As each tried to read and to do simple calculations, parents and neighbours watched. They were proud when a child could do the task. But at times, they were shocked to see that their child could not do these simple assignments even though he or she had been in school for several years. This activity usually led to heated discussions — analysing the source of the problem, debating what could be done about solutions. For many parents, who had not had much education, this was often their first exposure and engagement and perhaps the first set of exchanges in how to think about their children's schooling and learning.

In a few days we were done. Every child and every family in every hamlet had been involved.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that winning such community-wide participation is possible only for specific kinds of activity which have an element of novelty and require a focused one-time effort. But there are numerous activities that can benefit from such participation, in addition to the data-gathering exercise discussed in detail in this section. Other examples include the hosting of village fairs (*melas*), which are targeted at involving the entire community in activities that they enjoy and which in the process mobilise some of the community members to support some of Pratham's educational activities on a long-term basis. Its active campaign to circulate learning material through WhatsApp, mobile messaging, and online video programmes, even in rural areas, during the COVID lockdowns similarly relied on adults within the communities being willing to receive this material and share it widely with children. This ensured that Pratham designed material with the aim of also amusing the adults; this was evident in the very title of the campaign: *Karona, Thodi Masti, Thodi Padhai* ('Do It: A Little Fun, a Little Study').

Thus, unlike the mobilisation work done for the establishment of school-based management committees, where the focus is on selecting certain members of the community to form a committee, and informing them about the benefits of education and training them to monitor school performance, Pratham's focus is on engaging the whole community through activities that can get them genuinely curious, excited, or engaged.

### ***5.2. Parental Participation: Through Increased Engagement with Schools***

Further, it is very clear from a survey of the range of Pratham's community-mobilisation activities that parents, especially mothers, form a distinct focus of engagement for Pratham. It is via the mothers that Pratham expects to make the more routine commitment of engaging with the state schools themselves. It is an area of work to which Pratham has paid increased attention, due to its work on pre-school education. Again one of the points that Banerji notes in many of the papers is Pratham's gradual recognition that like the wider community, the parents might also be simply focused on schooling rather than learning. Frequently illiterate, poor parents often perceive passing the grade as a sign of learning, rather than being able to monitor whether a child can read and write at a level expected of their grade. Further, as noted above for the wider community, Banerji notes how in Pratham's experience even parents can be more focused on getting promised entitlements from the school, such as school uniform and scholarships, as opposed to focusing on actual learning achievement.

She has shared one particular field experience to illustrate this point in a couple of papers. In the state of Bihar, during a visit to a state school where Pratham had been providing support for some time, she observed visible improvements in children's ability to read and was very pleased; yet outside the school she found some mothers aggressively confronting the principal over entitlements promised by the Bihar government at that time in a drive to raise students' attendance rates: uniforms and scholarships for children who attended school for at least 75 per cent of the time. Trying to convince these mothers of the value of education provided by the school, Banerji said to one mother: 'But, the child is getting something very valuable from the school. Unlike the uniform or the money that will finish, this one will never finish.' As she documents:

The lady looked at me belligerently. ‘What is that?’ she demanded and continued, ‘The school is useless. They eat up all the money.’ Unfazed, I continued, ‘Do you know that your daughter has learned to read? And now she can read very well.’ The mother looked unimpressed. ‘What use is that,’ she said and turned back to continue her quarrel with the school. (Banerji, 2015b: 217).

At the same time, there remains a genuine challenge posed by a situation where poor, illiterate parents of slow-learning children lack the education and thus the confidence to raise concerns with teachers in state schools. In recent years Pratham has done much mobilisation work to address this problem, especially with illiterate mothers. As Banerji (2013b: 30) notes in one paper:

ASER 2012 shows that approximately half of the mothers of children who are in school today have not been to school themselves. Roughly estimated, there are probably 100 million mothers who are like our blue sari mother in Bihar [this was an illiterate mother who, when prompted by Banerji to monitor her child’s learning, kept asking how she could do that when she was herself illiterate]. To enable such mothers to participate, new methods and mechanisms have to be innovated on a large scale to allow mothers to enable them to play a meaningful role in discussions of an action related to how children’s learning can be improved. Simple tools like those used in ASER are a good starting point. They help ordinary people understand where children are today and enable them to think about where they need to be tomorrow. These initiatives build our capacity as people, whether in the government or in family, to think about what we want and how to get there. They are building blocks in the process of understanding what works and what does not.

Pratham’s ongoing activities involve active mobilisation work with illiterate mothers to give them confidence and train them to use the basic TaRL tool to monitor the learning level of their child. In the case of mothers, Pratham also encourages them to engage directly with their children’s school and develop an ongoing relationship with the teachers and complain to them about their children’s slow learning progress. But, again the focus here is on building a relationship and a joint sense of responsibility between the parents and teachers, rather than aspiring to train mothers to formally monitor and report teachers, as is proposed under school-based management committees. As recorded in Bano and Oberoi (2020), during the fieldwork there was clear evidence that mothers of this profile were now much more confident in engaging with teachers to monitor their children’s learning progress.

Thus, in the case of parents who, unlike the wider community, have a personal incentive to engage with the school, Pratham encourages direct participation with the school and facilitates development of an active relationship between the parents and teachers by training mothers how to monitor their child’s learning and how to communicate their concerns to the teachers, even when the mothers themselves are illiterate.

### ***5.3. Volunteers as Teachers and Co-ordinators of Activities: Through Supporting Actual Learning***

Finally, constituting the third category of community actors who are essential to Pratham’s success are those individuals who come forward to commit to making an ongoing contribution to its education programmes – most visibly those who volunteer to become community teachers. As Banerji (2020) has noted, often these are young women or men. While some of these individuals might be driven by altruistic motivations, there are also tangible incentives

for them to participate which differ from the incentives recorded for wider community participation and parental involvement: they include personal capacity building, as Pratham trains these volunteers to teach according to its methods; improved prospects of finding paid employment as teachers, based on the experience gained with Pratham; gaining recognition within the community; or even just a means of passing time. These incentives are important in a context where many young people are unemployed.

Similarly, Pratham recruits volunteers of different ages from within the community to run many of its other activities, while the team provides the necessary guidance and educational material. They are all responding to specific incentives that work for them. For young people, who often agree to manage Pratham's educational *melas* in the villages, the project offers learning experience but also a degree of excitement and fun in a context where often there are not many other opportunities available and people often have much free time. For elderly women in the village who oversee some of the child-to-child study circles, the incentive could be direct, such as benefiting their own grandchildren, or it could be as general as finding a useful way to occupy their free time and feeling worthy member of the community.

Thus, Pratham's mobilisation work is effective partly because the multiple platforms for engagement that it provides offer something personally meaningful to different members of the community. On the other hand, the school-based management models, where the membership structure is defined by a donor programme or is fixed in accordance with government guidelines, operate on the assumption that individuals recruited to these committees will have a shared interest in improving the performance of the school, whether or not they have a child studying in that school; and that they would be committed to investing their time and energy in the cause whether or not they had any direct incentives for doing so. It is thus not surprising that in some contexts members of donor-supported school-management committees start asking to be paid for their services (Cameron et al. 2016).

### **Section 6. Trialling New Ideas: Creating ‘*Learning Communities*’**

Finally, in learning from Pratham's experience of community-mobilisation work, it is also important to document Pratham's emphasis on constantly thinking afresh and experimenting with new ideas on the ground. This focus on innovation and constant learning from the field means that Pratham is currently trialling many new ideas to engage communities even more systematically to create a community-wide learning environment. The focus here is not just on what happens inside the state schools but also on how the learning process can carry on even outside the schools. Starting in 2018, Pratham expanded the scope of its READ India programme and named it *Hamara Gaon* ('Our Community'): the focus is no longer exclusively on providing additional support to students in state schools through the provision of remedial teaching by community volunteers, but on finding ways to create a learning environment in the community whereby parents, siblings, neighbours, and members of the wider community can contribute to creating a healthy learning environment for the children. In line with Pratham's focus on constant learning, Banerji (2020) notes, 'In order to do this [create learning communities], it was necessary to figure out who could engage, how they would engage, and a mechanism to understand whether the engagement was successful.' Pratham's thinking on this is constantly evolving, as are its number of planned activities. Four areas of its current activities, however, already indicate the scope for fresh thinking in how the international development community has conceptualised the role of community participation in improving learning in state schools.

The first area of work that is important to Pratham's current emphasis on developing learning communities is its active experimentation to find ways to enable illiterate mothers to support their children's learning through a variety of activities. A number of activities are being trialled, such as encouraging mothers to do activities together with their children; getting mothers to appreciate the importance of looking through their children's notebooks, even if they cannot read them, to develop within their children a sense that education is an activity that they care about; going through picture books and cards with their children. as in this case they can 'read' the content by looking at the photos; and accompanying their children to the school and asking the teachers to suggest ways to support their children's learning at home. Pratham's investment in these new ways of engaging mothers in their children's learning processes is a direct result of its conviction and experience that even illiterate mothers can contribute to their children's actual learning, as well as making government school teachers feel responsible for their child's learning.

The second noticeable area of work where much new thinking is happening within Pratham is support for community-supported child-to-child learning. Pratham is now constantly experimenting with ways to help children within the community to work together in groups and learn from each other. As Banerji (2020) notes, 'Just like groups who play together in their neighbourhoods, for a certain time in the day after school, groups also learn together. The idea is that children can help each other and that projects can be done together. Depending on the projects or tasks, others in the neighbourhood (like older siblings, parents, grandparents, or neighbours) help these groups.' These community-based child-to-child learning groups are being identified as a very dynamic area of work by Pratham leaders.

Thirdly, Pratham is placing increasing emphasis on holding periodic community events. Often held in the form of education fairs, such as maths fairs, science fairs, or school-readiness fairs, these events include activities in which all age groups can participate. These events help to involve the community in actual education activities that can contribute to children's learning even outside the schools. These *melas* are co-ordinated on the ground by community volunteers, while the Pratham team provides the educational resource material.

The final area of innovation which enabled Pratham to make a major contribution towards its goal of developing learning communities during 2020 is the extensive educational material based on social media that it ended up developing when schools had to be closed due to COVID lockdowns. In India, this meant that more than 300 million students were out of school for considerable periods; in poor and vulnerable communities, the loss of children's learning was expected to be even higher, as they are least able to get any learning support at home. During 2020, Pratham developed more than 3,000 videos, 300 games, and three learning applications across 11 regional languages to support student learning while schools were closed. All this educational material has been disseminated to children by actively engaging community members who have access to mobiles, WhatsApp, or the internet. Aiming to engage the interest of the wider community, the content developed was such that it entertains while it educates, so that it appeals to all ages. This focus on ensuring that the educational messages are conveyed in ways that are visually attractive and have an element of entertainment made them popular within the communities, thus ensuring their wider circulation and ensuring that they stimulate community-wide discussions. Though triggered in response to the educational crisis caused by the COVID pandemic, this initiative has ended up contributing to Pratham's goal of creating learning communities, and thus it is likely to become an integral part of its future work.



*Figure 1: Samples demonstrating the colourful and visually engaging nature of Pratham's online teaching material produced during the COVID lockdowns*

## **Section: Conclusion**

By undertaking a closer examination of the diverse set of educational activities in which Pratham has successfully engaged communities over time and across India, this paper has shown that its underlying philosophy and method of engaging communities in improving education provision in state schools is very different from those guiding the school-based management interventions widely supported by the international development community. Instead of focusing on increased monitoring and accountability of front-line service providers, Pratham's focus is on supporting them. Initially, this support took the form of providing remedial teaching classes in consultation with teachers and principals in state schools, especially to support the learning process for children lagging behind, but now the approach is even more comprehensive: there is additional focus on supporting a number of initiatives outside the schools that can create a community-wide learning environment so that expectations for improved learning, while still associated with activities inside the classrooms, are not solely restricted to enhanced monitoring of government teachers.

However, this focus on supporting the front-line service providers to perform better, instead of monitoring them, does not mean that Pratham does not believe in demanding that the state should fulfil its responsibilities better, but its approach is different. Instead of focusing on the front-line service providers, it runs the most influential people-led campaign today in India in the form of ASER, where pressure is put on the top-level politicians and bureaucrats at the level of federal and state governments, while simultaneously building awareness within the communities that the focus needs to be on improving children's learning outcomes and not just on getting them to pass grades. Thus, its approach is more focused on building pressure at the top and attempting to fix the long route of accountability, while supporting the front-line service providers to better perform their duties.

Given growing evidence that bottom-up accountability pressures exerted by school-based management committees have limited impact on changing the behaviour of front-line service providers unless there is also systematic pressure exerted from the top to improve service provision (World Bank 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019), Pratham's approach appears all the more promising. Pratham's case demonstrates that alternative modes of community participation can be effective in improving learning outcomes among children. Thus, the emphasis placed on the importance of short-route of accountability for improved service provision in World Development Report 2004 is justified, the reason we don't see the related assumptions translate into practice is that the development industry focuses on transplanting models (North et al. 2013; Pritchett 2013), most often from developed country contexts but sometimes within developing countries, instead of looking for organic modes of participation and strengthening them. These interventions help create an illusion of constant progress while in reality often disrupting or even blocking the organic participatory channels. It is important for the international development community to engage with these alternative models, such an

those which have evolved as a result of Pratham's engagement with communities, and identify new ways to engage communities if the goal of providing quality education to all children is to be achieved.

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