Expanding citizen voice in education systems accountability: evidence from the citizen-led learning assessments movement

Theme: Demand for education–What are stakeholders demanding from education systems? Can stakeholders provide demand-side accountability that drives up education quality?

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Abbreviations

ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
EFA	Education for All
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ITA	Idara-e-Taleen-o-Aagahi
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
PAL	People's Action for Learning
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
WDR	World Development Report

1. Abstract

Over the past decade, international and national education agencies have begun to emphasize the improvement of the quality (rather than quantity) of education in developing countries. This trend has been paralleled by a significant increase in the use

of educational assessments to measure gains and losses in quality of learning. As interest in assessment has grown, low-income countries have begun to adopt and adapt international and other large scale national assessments for a variety of uses, including comparing national quality with other countries, improving ways of measuring reading achievement, and furthering attempts to reach marginalized populations within a country (Wagner, 2012).

Amongst them, citizen led large scale house hold based assessments are gathering momentum by illustrating the power of informed citizenry to influence national and global agendas for education and learning. In 2018 alone, these national assessments covered over one million children in South-Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The results are representative at district, provincial and national level. The findings are disseminated at multiple levels to inform policy making at the national level and to mobilize district level education authorities and stakeholders to understand the extent of the problem and work towards measurable solutions.

The purpose of the paper is therefore to highlight how citizen led campaigns gathering hard core evidence are influencing governance and accountability at the community, provincial and national levels. It will explore how a community led approach to data gathering and analysis in context can bring about appropriate response from stakeholders, viz. local community, market forces and the government. Paper with the help of case studies from 9 countries (where these initiatives are being implemented currently) will illustrate, how evidence generated is playing its role in bringing a change in local reforms and efforts for improving learning at national and sub national level. It will also shed light on how the information is collected and what is being measured against other national assessments.

2. Introduction

For the first time in history most children are enrolled in school. Over the past 15 years, thanks partly to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for universal access to primary education and the Education for All Framework for Action, governments have taken the responsibility of formulating and implementing universal primary education policies, laws and strategies aimed at ensuring that all children enrol and complete primary school. In some countries, politicians came into office on election promises to ban school fees and ensure all children were able to attend regardless of their financial circumstances. Despite significant progress in getting more girls and boys into school, the most pertinent question is whether children are also acquiring the skills that will equip them to lead productive and meaningful lives in modern societies.

Although most developing countries have introduced national examinations and/or assessments to measure children's progress in learning and some also participate in regional or international assessments, these assessments have not yet generated the same level of accountability for learning as there has been for enrolment. The key gaps with these types of assessments are driven by the fact that: (1) these assessments are school-based and therefore do not measure learning outcomes of children who drop out of school, attend irregularly or go to non-formal schools; (2) these assessments are more often than not measuring outcomes too late (upper primary and secondary) when many children have already fallen behind; and (3) the vast majority of assessment results never reach ordinary citizens, and even if they did, they would be difficult to interpret and understand. What these assessments fundamentally fail to achieve is the meaningful engagement of citizens so that the intended beneficiaries of education services can identify and understand whether schooling is translating into learning.

This paper aims to discuss the extent to which another model of assessment – one that is led by citizens rather than governments, conducted in households rather than in schools and that measures whether or not children have mastered the fundamental building blocks for learning – helps to fill existing gaps in government and service provider accountability for delivering quality education. It illustrates how and what changes have occurred when key actors in the system – civil servants, principals, teachers, parents – are given better information about learning outcomes. It further examines the ways in which citizen-led assessments can strengthen accountability for learning outcomes based on case studies from the following organizations: Idara-e-Taleen-o-Aagahi (ITA) that implements Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan,; Pratham that implements ASER India; Twaweza that implements Uwezo in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania; Oeuvre Malienne d'Aide à l'Enfance du Sahel that implements Beekunko in Mali; and the Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Transformations Économiques et Sociales at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop that implements Jangandoo in Senegal. (More information about the citizen-led assessments movement and links to the country program websites can be found at www.palnetwork.org)

This article will describe how these citizen-led assessments of learning have addressed accountability and participation in education systems by:

1. Generating nationally representative and locally-owned data on children's acquisition of foundational skills that have helped re-orient the debate from school access to improved learning for all.

2. Creating new opportunities for key actors in the system such as teachers, parents, citizens, policy makers etc. to better understand the status of the children's learning so that they can decide for themselves whether governments are

delivering on promises related to equity and quality in education delivery. And how have they been motivated and mobilized to bring a change.

3. Promoting new mechanisms for evidence-based policy, proven program interventions and actions to improve learning.

3. Theory of Change

At the global level, citizen-led assessments have played an important role in reorienting the global education agenda through their assessment findings that have been widely cited and used to support discussions on learning (Bangay, 2015). By producing data that, over a 10-year period, repeatedly highlighted the severity of the learning crisis in children's foundational skills, citizen-led assessments provided evidence that helped to make the case for an inclusive and equitable life-long learning for all goal within the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the 193-member UN General Assembly in September 2015.

At the national or sub-national level, a variety of groups influence the educational decision-making process and ultimately educational change. In a survey of literature across the developing world, Kingdon et al. (2014) argued that access to resources ultimately affects which groups will be able to effectively negotiate change and concluded that the groups with the lowest access to resources are the ones in the weakest negotiating positions. The World Bank's 2004 World Development Report (WDR) identifies two routes for citizens to place demands on their governments (World Bank, 2003). Citizens following 'the long route' communicate demands to the State through voting and similar forms of general political accountability. While important, this long route is insufficient by itself because elected representatives ultimately delegate responsibility for service delivery to actors who do not face voter scrutiny and may behave opportunistically, particularly given the inevitable information asymmetries between them and the citizens they are supposed to serve. The long route for accountability must therefore be supplemented by 'the short route,' in which citizens mobilize at the local level and interact with service providers directly to express needs and demands and obtain better services.

A growing movement of citizen-led, household-based assessments takes the view that ordinary educated citizens can be mobilized for extraordinary actions empowered by evidence. Currently, these citizen-led assessments are being implemented by seven organizations in nine countries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Citizen-led assessments currently underway

2005 >	2008 >	2009 >	2011 >	2012 >	2014 >	2015 >
Annual Status of Education Report (**ASER**) launched in **India**	**ASER** launched in **Pakistan**	**Uwezo** launched in **Kenya**, **Tanzania**, and **Uganda**	**Beekunko** launched in **Mali**	**Jàngandoo** launched in **Senegal**	Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes (**MIA**) launched in **Mexico**	**LEARNigeria** launched in **Nigera**

One important feature of citizen-led assessments is that they directly engage parents and children – who are typically actors with the lowest resources – to become more empowered in seeking the attention of policymakers and service providers and hence, improve their negotiating positions. These assessments are based on following a very simple yet effective premise of building citizen pressure to hold the education system accountable for its dissatisfactory performance. Essentially, building citizen pressure is achieved through both the long and short route of accountability and can be described by the five important stages in the Theory of Change (see also Figure 2):

1. **Collect evidence on the learning levels of children**
   Each of the organizations implementing citizen-led assessments works with a network of partners across their respective countries to mobilize and train volunteers in the use of a very simple tool for effectively measuring children's basic reading and math levels. Citizen volunteers then visit households in a sample of villages and test every child within a given age range (see Table 1).

2. **Communicate findings**
   The findings are collated to provide estimates of reading and math abilities for children aged 6 to 16 years (or starting at age 5 in some countries and ending at age 14 in others) in every district and/or region/state and for each country as a whole. Considerable emphasis is placed on the communication of findings and the fostering of informed public understanding of and debate on children's learning and what can be done to address learning gaps. The results are widely disseminated through national and local media. In many cases, organizations also work at a local level to share findings with parents and communities during the assessment process itself and/or afterwards through local gatherings that often include local elected officials,

education officers, teachers and community members. The message is simple: citizens and governments alike must aggressively and creatively take action to improve the quality of education.

3. **Mobilize communities for accountability and action**
    The information is used to engage community and youth leaders, parents and others to take actions to improve learning on their own and through working with their local schools and leaders to advocate for change. As noted earlier, this is the short route for improving accountability for service delivery (WDR, 2004).

4. **Advocate for government action to improve learning**
    Similarly, the information is used to engage directly with national and sub-national policymakers to encourage the government to take steps to improve learning outcomes. In many cases, organizations work collaboratively with governments to offer solutions. This is the long-route for improving accountability for service delivery (WDR, 2004).

5. **Re-set the education agenda to focus on learning**
    Over time, the results are used to highlight trends and persistent gaps to make the case for global and country-level goals, targets and indicators related to learning outcomes. This process of consensus building around global priorities is believed to focus donor and national government resource allocations, policies and program interventions, and to create a universal accountability framework for tracking progress.
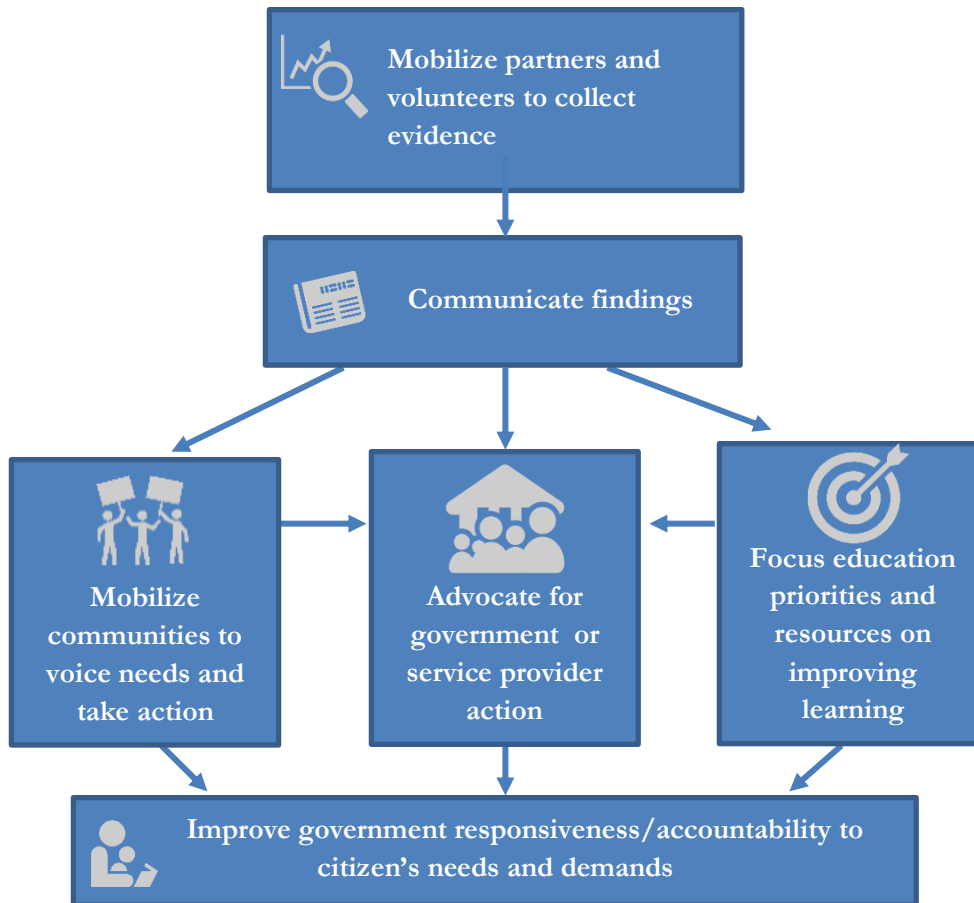
Table 1. 2018 citizen-led assessment coverage

	Districts/Regions	Volunteers	Communities	Households	Schools	Children
ASER India	577	25,000	16,497	341,070	15,206	569,229
ASER Pakistan	165	10,000	4,698	93,096	6,235	279,427
Beekunko (Mali)*	216	975	1,080	21,251	2,259	79,079
Jàngandoo (Senegal)	14 (regions)	450	239	9,928	856	26,014
MIA (Mexico)	21	480	187	2,400	187	3,100
Uwezo						
Kenya	158	9,300	4,521	62,089	4,441	135,109
Tanzania	131	8,253	3,930	78,600	3,688	104,162
Uganda	80	4,800	2,372	34,013	2,353	87,339
Total	1,364	59,258	33,505	642,447	35,225	1,283,459

Data for Beekunko are from 2015

Figure 2. Theory of Change underpinning citizen-led assessments

As indicated by the Theory of Change, citizen participation is built into the very design of the assessment process. The tools are designed to be simple so that parents, teachers, schools and community members can both conduct the assessment themselves and understand the findings with ease. The approach is led by local organizations and involves thousands of local volunteers, which embeds another element of ownership and citizen participation. Accountability is part and parcel of the ultimate objectives of these assessment exercises that aim to engage citizens everywhere in understanding their situation and taking action to influence education policy and practice from the ground-up.

The remaining sections of this article examine the extent to which the Theory of Change has played out in practice. It looks at experiences in Pakistan and examples from other countries that shed some light on the extent to which citizen-led assessments have strengthened accountability through: (1) global and national-level agenda setting; (2) putting pressure on national policymakers to be more responsive to citizens needs based

on evidence of poor learning results in their country (the long route of accountability); and (3) creating opportunities for civil society organizations and citizen groups to better understand the problem and engage with service providers to develop solutions to improve learning (the short route of accountability).

4. Accountability of policymakers: the long route

Citizen-led assessments have helped change the environment from one where learning outcomes have been shrouded in mystery to one where they are visible for all to see. They generate widespread attention to the issue of learning in ways that make it impossible for national policymakers or politicians to ignore. The transparency of learning results creates a credible threat to politicians that begs immediate attention lest citizens exercise the long route to accountability.

There is persuasive evidence to suggest that citizen-led assessments have done a remarkable job of helping change policy agendas to focus more on learning by generating greater accountability between citizens and national policymakers (Plaut & Jamieson Eberhardt, 2015). To achieve this, citizen-led assessments have followed certain principles and practices to establish creditability and have identified specific pathways or opportunities to effectively hold policymakers accountable within their socio-political context. At the global level, their collective efforts also created a growing body of evidence and a groundswell to demand improved learning.

4.1 Establishing credibility, familiarity and reach of citizen-generated data

A recent survey of policymakers on the types of external assessments that influence policy suggests that three principles are important: establishing credibility, familiarity and reach through media. Evidence suggests that focusing on the 'agenda-setting stage' of policy increases the likelihood that these external assessments will later influence how policies are implemented (Bradley et al., 2015). Citizen-led assessments are implemented in alignment with these findings.

The first principle has been to ensure that the findings of the assessment are credible. Some organizations have done this by drawing on academics as well as government experts to engage in the process of developing the assessment tools. The citizen-led assessments in Mali, Senegal and East Africa (Beekunko, Jangandoo and Uwezo) have invited local elected officials, district education officers and others to participate in their assessments to see for themselves how the data is collected and to hear first-hand the communities' response during the dissemination of assessment results. Engagement during the assessment process has increased government faith in the results (Plaut & Jamieson Ebiehardt, 2015).

Second, the annual cycle of assessment creates a natural pulse of repetition where findings are regularly shared. This builds familiarity among national policymakers, civil society organizations and advocacy groups with the assessment and draws attention to the findings.

Finally, citizen-led assessments have capitalized on media coverage to ensure that many people hear about the findings and (in most cases) lack of progress. This includes not only traditional media, like newspapers and television, but also extended reach through local radio shows and social media. In Senegal, which was ranked by a 2013 McKinsey report as one of the top countries in Africa for digital openness/access, Jàngandoo has started to use social media in its campaign. In Mali, there has been more emphasis on local TV and radio, tapping into a rich cultural tradition of story-telling. In East Africa, India and Pakistan, the Uwezo and ASER results have likewise been covered extensively in national and local print, television and radio media.

4.2 Capitalizing on specific global and national policy opportunities

The credibility, familiarity and reach of citizen-led assessments have engendered policy responses that differ depending on the context.

At the global level, citizen-led assessments are likely to have a role to play in tracking progress towards achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDDG) #4. Because citizen-led assessments rely on data collected at the household-level, they capture the learning levels of *all* children – not just those enrolled in and regularly attending formal schools. These data have already and can continue to make an important contribution to better measuring and understanding gaps in equitable learning that otherwise would go unnoticed (UNESCO,2015. World Inequality Database on Education).

In 2015, the PAL Network joined with other civil society organizations to successfully advocate for the inclusion of an indicator for measuring learning in Grades 2/3 within the SDG Indicator Framework.

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	4.1.1 Percentage of children/young people (i) in Grade 2/3, (ii) at the end of primary and (iii) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (a) reading and (b) mathematics

Source: UN Economic and Social Council Statistical Commission. December 17, 2015.

This reorientation of SDG #4, and the early grade reading and math indicator endorsed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators, can be viewed as a first step in a chain reaction to hold global and national-level institutions accountable for delivering on the promises enshrined in the 2030 SDGs. If approved by the UN Statistical Commission at its March 2016 meeting, the early grade reading and math indicator is likely to generate increased demand for alternative, low-cost and proven approaches for measuring children's early learning like the citizen-led assessments.

In India, the national government dedicated additional resources to what they call 'learning enhancement' programmes as well as to conducting a learning assessment of its own. In Kenya, the latest Education Sector Strategic Plan focuses specifically on a strategy to improve early reading and math skills and sites the Uwezo results (Plaut & Jamieson Eberhardt, 2015). Similarly, the East African Legislative Assembly called for improved standards and increased investments in education across the region in direct response to the Uwezo 2014 findings that revealed a lack of progress in equitable learning (East African Legislative Assembly, 2015). In Senegal, a special Presidential Commission on the Future of Education adopted many of Jangandoo's recommendations in its final report (Assises de l'éducation du Sénégal, 2014). In all these cases, citizen-led assessments have contributed to a shift in national dialogue and policies towards the prioritization of learning.

ASER Pakistan's household-based assessments have provided evidence of gaps in the implementation of Pakistan's Right to Free and Compulsory Education Article 25-A of the constitution by capturing data on enrolments and learning outcomes for all children (Right to Education Pakistan, 2015). ASER Pakistan initiated a Right to Education Campaign as its tactic to communicate assessment information and establish reach with the goal of creating grassroots citizen demand for the government to deliver on this constitutional promise. The campaign – an alliance with other national and global movements on education – focuses on equipping youth, parents, teachers, champions in government and influential people with facts on the status of children's learning and what can be done about it. In response, many local governments have now passed Right to Education Acts. The first was passed in the Islamabad Capital Territory in December 2012, followed by Balochistan and Sindh Provinces in 2013, and Punjab Province in 2014. The Right to Education Campaign's efforts continue in Azad Kashmir, FATA, Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Right to Education Pakistan, 2015). Case Study 1 describes how the campaign was organized and how it worked.

In some cases, citizen-led assessments have directly engaged government officials in the process of conducting the assessments so that they better understand the nature of the

problem and experience a first-hand encounter with their constituencies or clients, invoking empathy for how gaps in children's learning affect families and communities.

For example, in 2012 ASER Pakistan started a campaign called 'Politicians Knocking on Doors.' The purpose of this campaign was to put education issues on the election agenda, giving citizens a platform to demand better access and quality of education from their political leaders. Twenty-two prominent politicians were approached to participate and the 18 who accepted spoke to potential voters on the importance of education and visited their constituencies to observe first-hand the gaps in learning and service delivery. The politicians were filmed visiting their constituents' households and knocking on their doors to ask about the educational status of that household in terms of whether all eligible children were at school and if they were learning well. If the politician found that children were not attending school, they would take the child to the neighbourhood school for enrolment. This campaign's footage, along with a banner, was delivered to political candidates to ensure education issues were featured in their campaigns. Subsequently, during the ASER 2014 report launch, ASER Pakistan revealed the assessment findings and other study results that highlighted various aspects of the political economy of education and learning in Pakistan that required urgent public policy attention.

Case study 1: The Right to Education campaign in Pakistan

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Article 25-A was inserted in the 18th Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan on April 19, 2010, making it a state obligation to provide free and compulsory education for all children aged 5-16 years. The article was a breakthrough as it codified the state's commitment to fulfilling the fundamental right to education. To promote the implementation of Article 25-A, ASER Pakistan initiated a number of campaign activities.

First, ASER Pakistan spurred the One Million Signature Campaign, undertaken in two rounds over 13 months with two million signatures collected from both in-school and out-of-school children. The signatures were presented nationally and globally to Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education, and the Government of Pakistan in November 2012 and April 2013.

Second, an Education Youth Ambassadors program is currently mobilizing Pakistan's youth to engage in activism with the goal to yield tangible results in combating the education crisis. The program builds on and strengthens the emerging worldwide youth movement for global education. It plans to form a network of 500 youth leaders in Pakistan with the passion and dedication to campaign in their schools and communities for actions to get all children into school and learning. To date, 400 youth ambassadors have joined the cause. Over the last year, Education Youth Ambassadors have organized and participated in a number of events, including hosting informative sessions to mark International Women's Day, planning vigils for the Peshawar school attack, and contributing to the National Education Policy by voicing their recommendations and expressing the changes they want to see in education in Pakistan. They have also written stories for the UNESCO Youth Global Monitoring Report as well as countless articles and blogs bringing to light some of the issues they have faced in going to school. The Education Youth Ambassadors have also helped mobilize more than two million petition signatures across Pakistan for A World at School's Up For School campaign – calling on world leaders to ensure that every child is able to go to school, without facing danger or discrimination. The campaign has gathered more than nine million signatures and has been presented to world leaders during the United Nations General Assembly for action on education.

Similarly, the Up For School signature campaign aims to remind governments around the world to fulfil their promise for Universal Education and bring the 58 million children out of school back into school and learning. The Ending Child Marriages program seeks to create child marriage free zones in Pakistan as a milestone in ensuring the Right to Education for all girls and boys. The campaign is actively involved in the implementation of the Right to Education Act throughout Pakistan with a strong presence and penetration into all the provinces.

5. Accountability of service providers: the short route

Regardless of *how* services fail – through inequitable spending, funding leaks or teacher absences that limit instructional time – there is now evidence that suggests that the effective use of education resources depends on appropriate incentives being in place within the system (Kingdon et al., 2014). In a recent book, Bruns et al. argued that the three core strategies for more accountable education systems are (2011, p. 13):

- Information for accountability – including the generation and dissemination of information on education inputs, outputs, outcomes and rights and responsibilities.
- School-based management – which works through the decentralization of school decision-making and autonomy to agents at the school level.
- Teacher incentives – which involves policies that link teacher performance to pay and tenure.

This paper focuses on the very first strategy for improved accountability: the generation and dissemination of information. This lies at the core of the Theory of Change developed by citizen-led assessment movements, which posits that information can improve accountability by informing school choice, increasing citizen participation in school oversight and enabling citizen voice. Thus, in addition to building global consensus and ensuring that equitable learning is on the national-level policy agenda, citizen-led assessments are also experimenting with pathways to influence how these policies actually get implemented where it counts: at the point of service delivery in communities and classrooms. This often starts with ensuring that state and local education officials, school leaders, teachers, parents, youth and others 'see' the problem and are motivated to take action to solve it.

Evidence of whether information campaigns on education influences accountability and learning outcomes is mixed. Where the evidence suggests a positive impact, it shows that information can create a feedback loop between parents (whose access to both information and resources is usually weak) and service providers. For example, national and regional report cards in Central and Latin America provide citizens with short, non-technical summaries that have increased public awareness on the performance of their countries' education systems (Bruns et al., 2011, p. 31). Andrabi et al. (2015) highlights the value of providing citizens with information on their children's test scores, which served to increase subsequent test scores by 0.11 standard deviations, decrease private schools fees by 17% and increase primary school enrolment by 4.5%. However, in another setting, a study in one district of Uttar Pradesh in India found that an intervention aimed at raising awareness of the Village Education Committee's role on improving learning through the use of community scorecards did not impact learning outcomes. The study found that the intervention had not increased parental knowledge nor changed

attitudes, suggesting that the intervention was not intensive enough to bring about change (Banerjee et al., 2008).

In the context of citizen-led assessments, early experiments suggest that providing parents with information on their children's learning during the assessment process does not systematically change parental behaviour (Lieberman et al., 2014). In other words, it has proven difficult to animate the short route of accountability through one-time visits to people's homes. That said, organizations conducting citizen-led assessments have been experimenting with other mechanisms for reinforcing the short route of accountability. For example, in Mali, Beekunko has been holding village level meetings to discuss the results and have the community and teachers jointly establish learning improvement plans. In East Africa, Uwezo is sharing the data at a local level more intensively through local champions and experimenting with ways to engage volunteers beyond the assessment process. In India this year ASER is running an ambitious Lakhon Mein Ek—or "one in one hundred thousand"—campaign that has involved finding volunteers in over 100,000 villages to conduct a complete census of children's learning levels. After completing the census, the results have been compiled into a report card that is shared with the village. Based on these results and with support from ASER and Pratham, the communities are now debating and deciding the types of actions they might take to improve learning in their village. (Mukherjee, 2016)

In both India and Pakistan, there have been promising efforts to work collaboratively with state and local education officials to use assessment results to inform the design of education programs to accelerate learning. In the Indian state of Bihar, for example, district and state education officials turned to Pratham, the facilitator of ASER India, for ideas on how to improve low learning levels. Pratham first helped state and local authorities improve their own assessment practices: Cluster Centre Resource Coordinators participated in a simple assessment of learners' skills to better understand learning gaps in the schools for which they were responsible. Pratham then introduced practical and proven solutions that these Coordinators could implement along with teachers and school heads. Since the assessments revealed that many children in Grades 3, 4 and 5 were still unable to read at a Grade 2 level, an hour of instruction a day was introduced where children were grouped by learning level and engaged in activities targeted at helping them to advance. In Pakistan, a similar project, Learning for Access, has been tested by ITA/ASER in 560 schools in Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab provinces. Learning for Access combines a 60-day participatory learning camp to accelerate learning for children who dropped out, never enrolled or are at risk of dropping out with efforts to upgrade schools to better accommodate and retain newly enrolled students.

These efforts to work directly with local officials responsible for service provision align with some of the recent literature in social accountability which suggests that, in some contexts, creating effective accountability relationships requires shifting from adversarial

interactions between citizens and public officials to 'co-creation of solutions' (Fox, 2014). Teachers and prospective teachers have also been a part of the co-creation process in India, Pakistan and Mali. For example, ASER India has involved pre-service teachers from the Teacher Training College in its recent survey as data collectors. Similarly, Beekunko has invited the Teachers Union in Mali to join in the national dissemination events, and school leaders and teachers are involved in the local dissemination events and action planning that follows. In Senegal, in response to very low learning levels in Arabic-medium schools, Jángandoo has worked with school supervisors and the decentralized school authorities in one region to develop, test and introduce remedial education guides that are designed to provide teachers, community volunteers and local organizations working to support children's learning with new instructional approaches and materials.

Case Study 2 describes in more detail how ASER Pakistan engaged local officials and teachers in co-creating solutions. In doing so, teachers are involved in the 'change' process and hence become critical agents for ultimate change.

Case study 2: ASER Pakistan village gatherings

ASER Pakistan introduced the ASER Baithaks, or village gatherings, as a pathway to sensitize and mobilize communities to address the education crisis and create demand for action at the grassroots level. An informal discussion with the community and teachers of a village surveyed under the ASER is an important component of ASER dissemination.

ITA's teams led by the ASER District Coordinator organize ASER Baithaks (Katcheries, Baithaks or Jirgas for Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa respectively). These gatherings are organized at school and/or community sites to share ASER findings, mobilize volunteers for education, and decide on actions with community members, youth, parents (including mothers), teachers and government field officers. They begin with the sharing of objectives of the conversation and reminding the attendees of the survey recently conducted in the village. The results are then shared, underscoring that while the survey is based on a sample of 20 households, the trends represent the whole village. This information then leads to many conversations and reflections in the community as they acknowledge gaps in taking actions for education, lapses in accountability and the role of the village school, its teachers and the larger system of education. The discussions are like a mirror for the community and parents: they begin to see more clearly the state of learning of their own children and education in public and private schools in their community.

Once the discussion reaches a climax, the ASER Pakistan facilitators give a call for action. Who will ensure that children are enrolled on time and brought to the school? Who will take turns to see if the teachers come to school on time? Who is educated at least up to Class (i.e. Grade) 12 and will volunteer to teach an eight to ten week accelerated literacy and numeracy program for out-of-school children and at-risk in-school children with the lowest learning levels? Who will write to the government with a request to improve the facilities and shortage of teachers?

In this way, the ASER Baithaks provide citizens with a platform to discuss problems of out-of-school children and low learning levels based on information that they can understand and that is relevant to them, and focus citizens on coming up with locally driven solutions. The community is roused into action and a passion for education is unleashed.

6. What's next for citizen-Led assessments of learning?

What has been learned and what does it imply for the future of citizen-led assessments? First, it is clear that citizen-led assessments of learning have played a role in building a consensus to shift the global and national agenda towards learning. There is also clear evidence of their influence on national policies (the long route of accountability). That said, increased attention on learning globally and pro-education policies has not yet translated into learning gains. Furthermore, animating the short route of accountability has proven more difficult than anticipated (Plaut & Jamieson Eberhardt, 2015; Lieberman et al., 2014). In short, citizen-led assessments have strengthened accountability in significant ways but the expected outcomes described in the Theory of Change presented earlier have yet to be fully realized.

6.1 Gaps in the Theory of Change

Bangay (2015) argues that the consistent decline in learning outcomes across 10 years of the ASER in India is testament to the fact that information alone cannot affect change through presumed accountability. He cites the following reasons for the lack of progress in changing the status quo in learning outcomes: the need for more time to actually see change happen for large school-aged populations; citizen-led assessment findings losing their shock appeal after several years of bad news; communities *knowing* something not necessarily translating into them *acting* on it; and finally, that governments still are not fully engaged or sufficiently accountable to take action.

Moreover, Bruns et al. (2011) argue that while there is no arguing *against* greater information – one of the main objectives of citizen-led assessments – sometimes this intervention leads to unintended consequences like 'elite capture,' wherein information campaigns can only be understood by more educated groups of parents. A study by Banerjee et al. (2008) in India highlights this as a very real problem and as a challenge that necessitates unique solutions for the increased and sustained success of citizen-led reform movements. Another pitfall that Bruns et al. (2011, p. 73) specifically note with respect to information-for-accountability reforms is the reliance on test scores alone which may be heavily dependent on socio-economic background and other unobserved factors. Not suitably accounting for these can result in misguided interpretations which can undermine the value of such interventions.

6.2 Lessons learned and areas for future experimentation

There are important lessons that have been learned during the assessment process. The process has highlighted the fact that credible assessment can help reset and refocus policy agendas. It suggests the power and potential for expanding citizen participation in

monitoring service delivery outcomes, which can provide external checks on government services reliably and cost effectively. Finally, it underscores the importance of local ownership and engaging all education stakeholders at all stages of the process to create real opportunities for change.

Moving forward, there are clear opportunities for leveraging international agreements, such as the 2030 SDGs and the EFA Framework for Action, to reinforce action at the agenda setting stage and to create agreed indicators and processes for tracking country performance. Citizen-led assessments have a unique role to play in tracking progress for three reasons: (1) they are independent of government assessments; (2) they capture learning for *all* children not just those enrolled in school; and (3) they measure progress on early learning outcomes that are critical for future success.

Carlitz and Lipovsec (2015) identified the remaining challenge of finding new ways to unlock parental action by experimenting with new strategies for communicating information that is relevant and actionable to them. There is also the need to critically engage local elected and education officials, school and community leaders, and teachers as positive agents of change. This could, for instance, be achieved by experimenting more with how to create platforms for parents and other concerned citizens to work together to first jointly diagnose the problem and then create solutions. The citizen-led assessments are also interested in experimenting more with how to involve teacher training institutes to enhance teacher awareness and skills for using assessments to diagnose children's learning status and responding appropriately with strategies for their instruction.

6.3 Expansion and peer learning

The People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network (www.palnetwork.org) brings together seven civil society organizations working across nine countries (and growing) to assess the basic reading and numeracy competencies of all children, in their homes, through annual citizen-led assessments. The PAL Network was formally declared in July 2015 by a group of activists and thought leaders who aspire to create a movement where learning is at the centre of all education endeavours. The network offers a platform from which citizen-led assessments can continue to influence global accountability systems. As the network expands and citizen-led assessments proliferate, so too do the opportunities for promoting accountability for learning in new countries. Perhaps most importantly, the network offers an opportunity for citizen-led assessments to leverage experimentation and learning across many contexts to better understand ways in which these processes can strengthen local accountability relationships. As a result of the diversity of experiences across its network, citizen-led assessments can strengthen and refine the Theory of Change that animates their efforts to give citizens a voice in education system accountability.

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