In many developing countries,

- There has been several decades of work on access and enrollment. Governments usually produce data on inputs and expenditures. Their focus has typically been on measuring and delivering inputs and infrastructure and not on outcomes.

- School enrollment levels are high and rising. Assumption is that schooling will lead to learning. Hence not much work has been done on the issue of children’s learning (either measurement or interventions for improving learning). Curiosity and capability not well developed for understanding and improving learning.

- Large majority of parents of children currently in school are illiterate or have had very little education. They understand schooling” but not “learning”.

- There is not much of a tradition or culture of measurement especially of outcomes. Neither is there a practice of looking at large scale evidence for informing policy, planning or implementation.
But available evidence shows that basic learning levels are very poor. Being in school does not seem to translate automatically into learning:

- According to the 2014 ASER survey in India, more than half of all Grade 5 children cannot as yet read even at Grade 2 level. Basic math is even worse. (ASER = Annual Status of Education Report)

- Similar trends can be seen in evidence from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda (Uwezo), Mali (Beekungo) Senegal (Jangandoo) and Pakistan (ASER Pakistan)

- Together these citizen led assessments now reach over 1 million children annually.
The problem

Existing learning measurements (measures, methods and mechanisms) have evolved over time in developed country contexts based on their needs and capabilities.

But ... are such models immediately appropriate, relevant or useful in current developing country contexts?

Purpose: Today learning measurements in developing countries have the huge responsibility of being “game-changers” and not simply play a supporting role in the education system.

The new assessments in developing countries MUST lead to changes in mind-sets and in national priorities in order to move children’s LEARNING to the centre of the stage in educational thought, practice & decision-making.

Methods/measures/evidence should be able to help policymakers, practitioners and parents:
- Understand the need to look beyond schooling to learning
- Identify the challenges faced by children for learning
- Enable immediate action based on data at different levels
Citizen led assessments are different ….. (1)

### Contextual factors & ground realities in developing countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where?</th>
<th>All children may not be enrolled in school. Many may attend unrecognized private schools or other kinds of schools. Daily attendance in school is variable.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What?</td>
<td>Basic learning outcomes are far below grade level for many children currently enrolled in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How?</td>
<td>Even after several years of schooling, many children may not have acquired foundational skills like reading. Without reading, a child cannot progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>Majority of parents of school-going children in India do not have any/much education. They understand schooling but not “learning”. Need to de-mystify “learning” to take parents “along”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Decisions & design elements in citizen led assessments

| To reach all children we must go to the household. All children cannot be found in schools. |
| Focus on few basic skills for all rather than on subject wise grade level outcomes for each grade |
| Children who cannot read cannot do written tests. Oral one-on-one individual assessment is the only option for a majority of primary school children. |
| Simplicity of tools useful in engaging wide range of people in understanding children’s learning. |
Citizen led assessments are different …..(2)

Contextual factors & ground realities in developing countries

| Unit? Level? | In India, in elementary education, the unit for planning, allocation and implementation is the district. There are 600+ districts in India. |
| Scale?       | India is a big country. To capture & sustain national attention and to represent all children, nation-wide coverage was needed. |
| When?        | To bring about a significant change in national priorities and mindsets, frequent, timely and current assessments were needed. |
| Who?         | Improving schooling & learning is not only the responsibility of the government. Widespread & large scale engagement & participation by citizens is essential to change policy & practice. |

To make data useful, ASER estimates are generated at district level (also state & national levels).

ASER is a national household survey that has been done every year. On average ASER reaches 560 districts & 650,000 children annually.

In India, ASER has been done annually for 10 years. Data is available for the current school year. Report is always released like clockwork in mid January.

In every district, a local organization or institution conducts ASER. 25,000 citizens participate each year.
Example: ASER in India – Scope & Scale

Reach:
- 577 rural districts
- 16497 villages visited
- 341070 households reached
- 569229 children surveyed

Sampling:
- 30 randomly selected villages in each district
- 20 randomly selected households per village
- All children age 3 to 16 in the household

People involved:
- 500 + district level organizations
- 1000 + master trainers
- 25000 + volunteers

Cost:
- ~ 1.2 million USD in 2014

Time Frame:
- August: Kick off
- Sept-Oct-Nov: Field work
- Mid Jan: Report released

ASER national survey in India has been done every year - 2005 to 2014.

Citizen led assessments in the 6 other countries in Africa & Asia have similar patterns of scope & scale.
Reading is a basic foundation skill. Without learning to read, a child cannot progress meaningfully through the education system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ASER 2014: All India rural % Children enrolled in different grades who can at least read Grade II level text.

- This tool is in Hindi. Similar ones also for maths.
- In ASER 20 similar regional language tools are used.
- Each child is assessed one on one/individually.
- The highest level that the child can read is recorded.
- Other citizen led assessments in Africa & Asia have similar tools for assessing reading and arithmetic.

After 5 years of schooling only half can read. Not much change since 2005.
Example from India: Impact of ASER on policy

**Evidence:** % Children who can do subtraction

Cohorts over time: Std III-VI
ASER All India (rural)

Data shows: Learning levels are low. Learning trajectories are flat over time & each subsequent cohort doing worse than previous cohort.

**Policy change:** National & State

2008: Allocations by central government for district annual work plans in elementary education for “learning enhancement” programs.

2011: 12th Five Year Plan stressed:
- Measuring learning in schools
- Improvement of basic skills

In 2013-14 & 2014-15 almost all states have done state level assessments (some have ASER like tools).

Since 2013: Many states have embarked on remedial programs, learning improvement interventions & a focus on basic skills in early grades.

Every year with ASER, there is:
- Widespread media coverage
- Public debate in many forums/levels
- Questions in Parliament
Example: Impact of ASER on practice

**Evidence:** ASER data for state of Bihar for Grades 3, 4 and 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Std</th>
<th>Not even letter</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Level 1 (Std I Text)</th>
<th>Level 2 (Std II Text)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Acknowledgement/Awareness:** State govt sees the problem & decides to act.

**Assessment:** ASER tool used by schools to assess children in Grade 3, 4 & 5

**Action:** Learning improvement program - Teaching at the Right Level
- Children grouped by level rather than by grade in each school for two hours a day during school day.
- Teachers allocated to group rather than by grade.
- Instruction in each group using appropriate methods & materials
- Quick progress in basic reading & maths

Similar state wide programs in several states. JPAL evaluations of effectiveness of such programs conducted.
Concluding thoughts

Learning assessment data for developing countries needs to be relevant & appropriate for bringing learning to the centre of the stage and for providing information that is actionable for improving children’s learning.

In order to identify and implement actions to improve children’s learning, we need to assess where children are today and build from there, rather than assess where we think they ought to be.

- Where are children? *Many are not regularly in school*
- Where are they relative to the curriculum? *Many are several grade levels behind*
- Where are they with respect to foundational skills? *Many have not acquired basic skills even after several years in school. If a child cannot read, pen-paper tests will not work.*

Evidence should be relatively straightforward to generate & to comprehend. Only then can it lend itself to action. Data needs to be easily understood by those who must act - whether policy makers, teachers or parents. Start simple. Tools & interventions can evolve over time as children make progress & as capability in the country rises.
Other citizen led assessments

People’s Network for Learning
www.palnetwork.org

Pakistan:
www.aserpakistan.org

Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda:
www.uwezo.net

Mali: Beekungo
www.omaes.net

Senegal: Jangandoo
LARTES-IFAN - UCAD,
Dakar University

Also: MIA Veracruz - Mexico
medicionmia.org.mx/

For more information about ASER in India:
ASER Centre/Pratham
www.asercentre.org
www.pratham.org
contact@asercentre.org

Wilima Wadhwa:
wilima.wadhwa@asercentre.org