**Inclusive education**

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Education is widely recognised as a fundamental right for every child, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. However, in many parts of the world, including Pakistan, ensuring quality education for children with disabilities has proven to be a significant challenge. Pakistan alone is home to an estimated 13 million children with disabilities, and unfortunately, majority of them face extreme exclusion from basic education and learning opportunities.
The barriers preventing inclusion of children with disabilities in education are multifaceted. Some of the major obstacles include the lack of political will, inadequate learning environment, inaccessible infrastructure of schools, limited capacity of classroom teachers and inaccessible tools for learning assessment.
The overarching issue of learning outcomes not being inclusive further complicates the situation because, at the end of the day, whatever we do to bring children to the schools, the ultimate objective is to improve their learning outcomes. Nonetheless, this cannot be realised without making the assessment of learning outcomes inclusive for all children particularly, children with disabilities.
To address this persistent challenge, an innovative solution has emerged in the form of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). ASER is a citizen-led survey designed to assess the quality of education for children aged 5 to 16 years. The assessment evaluates competencies in reading, arithmetic, English, and general knowledge at the grade 2 level. Aligned with the global proficiency framework and the National Curriculum, ASER serves as a comprehensive tool to gauge foundational learning, access to education, equity, integration of information and communication technology (ICT), and the state of school facilities. Importantly, ASER also plays a pivotal role in shaping national policies and sector plans, while actively contributing to Article 25-A, which underscores the right to free and compulsory education for children aged 5 to 16 in Pakistan. Moreover, ASER’s efforts are in consonance with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG4 that is about inclusive and quality education.
Notably, organisations like Sightsavers, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA), and Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) have united to support children with disabilities and establish a comprehensive plan that ensures equal opportunities for them. Sightsavers has supported ITA adapting the ASER test materials in formats that are accessible for children with sensory impairments. These adaptations involve creating assessment tools and methods that can assess learning outcomes of children with sensory impairments while ensuring that they can effectively participate in the learning assessment process. By doing so, Sightsavers has played a pivotal role in making the ASER initiative more inclusive and representative of children with disabilities. Furthermore, guidelines for teachers and enumerators have been meticulously formulated to ensure their preparedness for inclusive learning assessment in schools and communities. These guidelines have undergone rigorous refinement, incorporating feedback from international experts, educators and children with disabilities who are already engaged in this field.
The outcomes of the ASER survey have been profound. This initiative has helped ASER survey effectively gathering comprehensive data on children with disabilities aged 5 to 16 in both rural and urban mainstream schools. By including children with disabilities in the data collection process, ASER has paved the way for performance tracking of children with disabilities and its meaningful comparison with their peers without disabilities. The overarching goal has been to amass educational data that empowers policymakers to design and implement inclusive education programs that cater to the diverse needs of children with disabilities.
In conclusion, the journey towards inclusive education for children with disabilities in Pakistan has been marked by challenges, yet solutions like the inclusive assessment have emerged as beacons of hope. By embracing citizen-led efforts, tailored adaptations, and comprehensive data collection, Sightsavers is shaping a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape for children who were once marginalized. This vital endeavor not only contributes to the fulfillment of a fundamental right but also aligns with global goals aimed at leaving no child behind in the pursuit of quality education.