

South Asia Hub Regional Convening

Country Highlights Brief | 4-6 August 2026, Sri Lanka



PAL NETWORK
People's Action for Learning

1. Background and Context

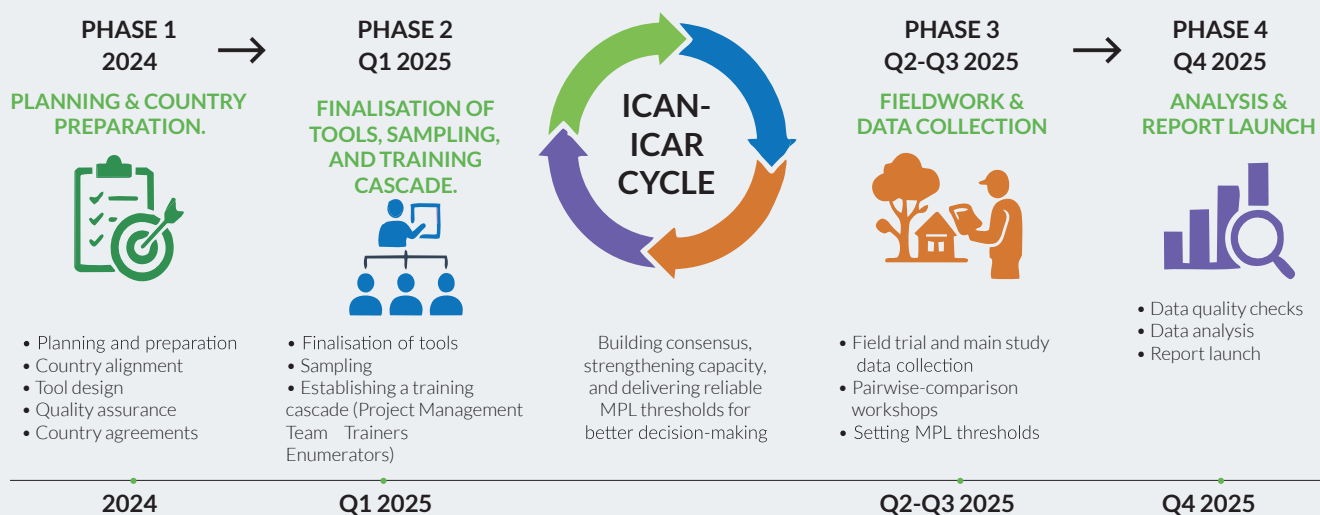
PAL Network is a South-South partnership of 17 member organisations across Africa, Asia and the Americas, delivering one-on-one, household-based Citizen-Led Assessments (CLAs), to measure children's foundational reading and math skills. Since 2005, when the model began in India, CLAs have reached over 9 million children; providing governments, civil society, and communities with a reliable, low-cost approach to track foundational learning independent of school enrolment.

SDG indicator 4.1.1(a) measures the proportion of Grade 2/3 children reaching a minimum proficiency level (MPL) in reading and math, per the Global Proficiency Framework (GPF), a core marker of progress toward the 2030 SDGs. PAL Network has spent the last decade evolving country-specific CLAs to international common assessments that speak directly to this indicator, producing ICAN-ICAR (International Common Assessments of Numeracy and Reading).

ICAN-ICAR keeps the CLA's citizen-led, oral, one-on-one, household approach, with a 36-item numeracy tool (ICAN) and 30-item reading tool (ICAR). It's a paper-based tool with digital capture, translated and adapted in 17 languages across Asia, Africa and Latin America, and assesses children between the ages of 5-16. It consists of two parallel test booklets and use adaptive "stop rules" ensuring children struggling with easier items are not asked harder ones, which keeps the assessment within the ability range. The ICAN-ICAR tool is also supported by a comprehensive contextual questionnaire at EA, households and child level; including the Washington Group Questionnaire on functional difficulties (difficulty in seeing, hearing, walking etc.) that help explain the relationship between contextual factors and learning outcomes. Sampling frames are built in partnership with each country's National Statistics Office (NSO), so results are nationally representative and can be used for country comparisons.

THE ICAN-ICAR CYCLE: 2024-2025

A four-phase approach to generate robust, country-led, and evidence-based MPL thresholds.



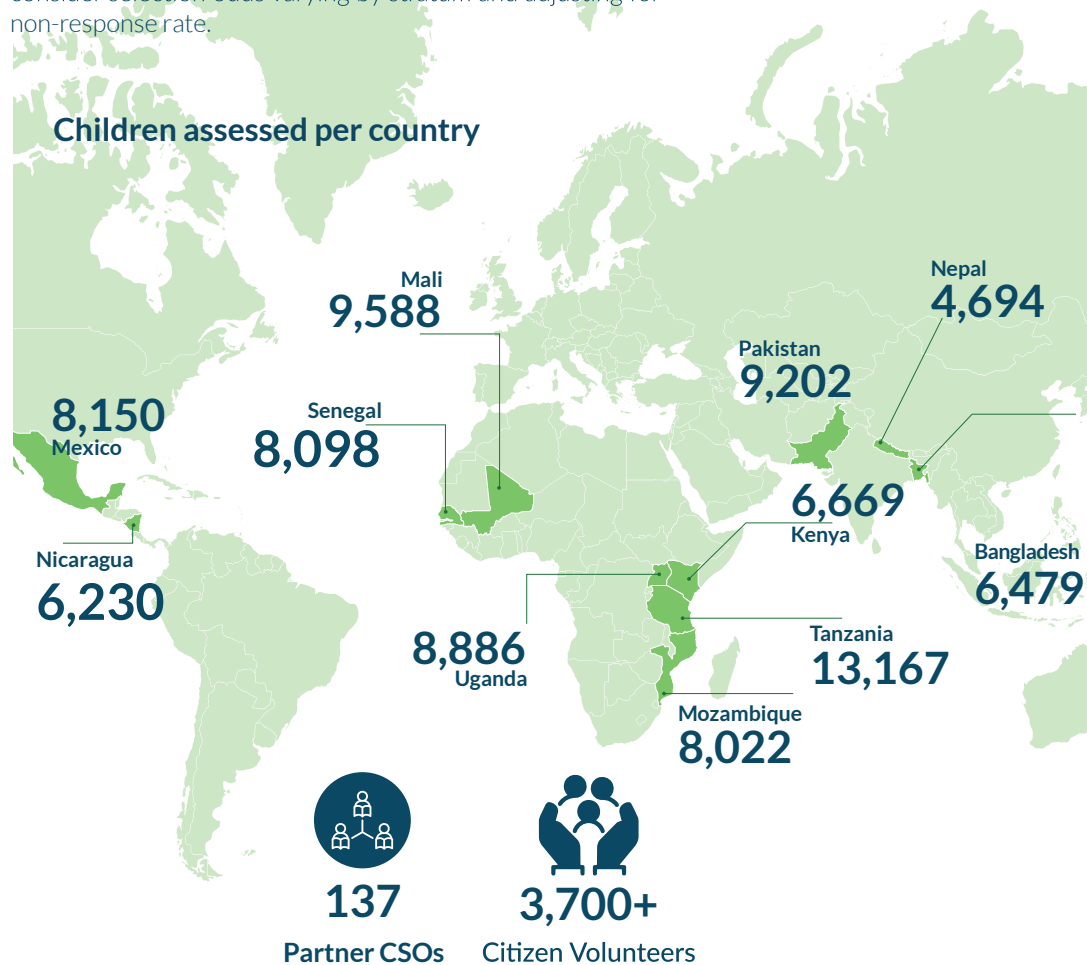
ICAN-ICAR tool is fully aligned with UNESCO's Global Proficiency Framework (GPF). It reports against the minimum proficiency levels (MPL) for reading and math. The assessment design, implementation protocols and technical documentation have been vetted by National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) as part of their pilot to review assessments that are suitable for reporting. The SDG 4.1.1 Data Readiness Review and Support Mechanism Vetting Report documents "the assessment design and implementation align with the UIS SDG 4.1.1 reporting criteria, and the data are considered to be suitable for SDG 4.1.1a reporting".

Since the report launch, the [ICAN-ICAR Global Report](#) has been downloaded more than 10,000 times across 4 languages. The [ICAN-ICAR Global microdata](#) is also now publicly available on the DataFirst Portal under a partnership with the University of Cape Town with persistent Digital Object Identifiers for long-term use. [ICAN-ICAR dashboard](#) is also live and facilitates researchers and policy practitioners to access country-wise disaggregated results.

2. Scale and Implementation

A. ICAN-ICAR 2025 scale

The ICAN-ICAR 2025 cycle was administered across 11 countries. Additionally, Botswana used ICAN-ICAR to explore its feasibility in school-based settings. Most countries implemented ICAN-ICAR assessments in August–September 2025 while factoring in the varying school calendars. Sampling in all countries was nationally representative and covered children aged 5–16 whether in school or not. Countries first selected Enumeration Areas by Probability Proportional to size (PPS), and then twenty households within each. Sampling weights were applied to consider selection odds varying by stratum and adjusting for non-response rate.



B. ICAN-ICAR 2025 Scale- South Asia Hub Snapshot

The South Asia Hub Countries- Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan each completed the full 2025 cycle at 100% EA completion, together, covering well over 15,000 households and 20,000+ children. The children were assessed across Bangla, Nepali, Urdu and Sindhi, supported by 16 partner CSOs and 849 citizen volunteers. India, only took part in the ICAN-ICAR field-test, an earlier, smaller-scale stage that preceded the main study.

Our Reach in 2025



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Metric	Bangladesh	Nepal	Pakistan
Enumeration Areas (EAs)	275	191	283
EA completion rate	100%	100%	100%
Households surveyed	5,499	3,820	6,318
Children surveyed	6,664	4,801	10,510
Children assessed	6,479	4,694	9,202
Assessment language(s)	Bangla	Nepali	Urdu, Sindhi
Partner CSOs	8	3	5
Citizen volunteers	356	285	208

3. South Asia Hub Findings from ICAN-ICAR 2025

A. Math & Reading MPLs

To count as MPL-aligned, in Reading, a child must recognise common words and pull explicit information from a simple Grade-2-level text. In Math, a child must count and compare whole numbers, represent them in equivalent ways, solve basic operations, and solve simple real-world number problems. ICAN-ICAR reports MPL results at two points:

- Age 10, a grade-neutral benchmark covering enrolled and out-of-school children, and
- Grade 4, the official SDG 4.1.1(a) reporting point, since grade structures vary too much across countries to apply “Grades 2/3” consistently and Grade 4 is when children should have reached end-of-lower-primary MPLs.

1. MPLs at Age 10:

Within the South Asia Hub, Pakistan has the highest percentages on both math and reading at age 10, closely followed by Nepal, then Bangladesh, all three sitting in the middle of the global range, above the countries with lowest-percentages (Mali, Mozambique) and below the highest percentages (Mexico). The hub also follows the pattern of reading consistently trailing math across the findings with the exception of Nicaragua, globally, with gaps of 15.2pp (Pakistan), 17.1pp (Bangladesh), and 20.8pp (Nepal).

2. MPLs at Grade 4:

Grade 4 proficiency tends to run higher than age-10 proficiency for Bangladesh and Pakistan, but not for Nepal. Bangladesh shows the clearest gain, with math rising from 54% to 67% and reading from 37% to 48% between age 10 and Grade 4. Pakistan also edges up on math (63% to 65%) with reading holding roughly steady (48% to 47%). Nepal doesn't follow this trend and moves in the opposite direction, declining on both measures (61% to 54% in Math, and 40% to 35% in Reading).

Fig 1. Percentage of children 10-year-olds achieving MPLs

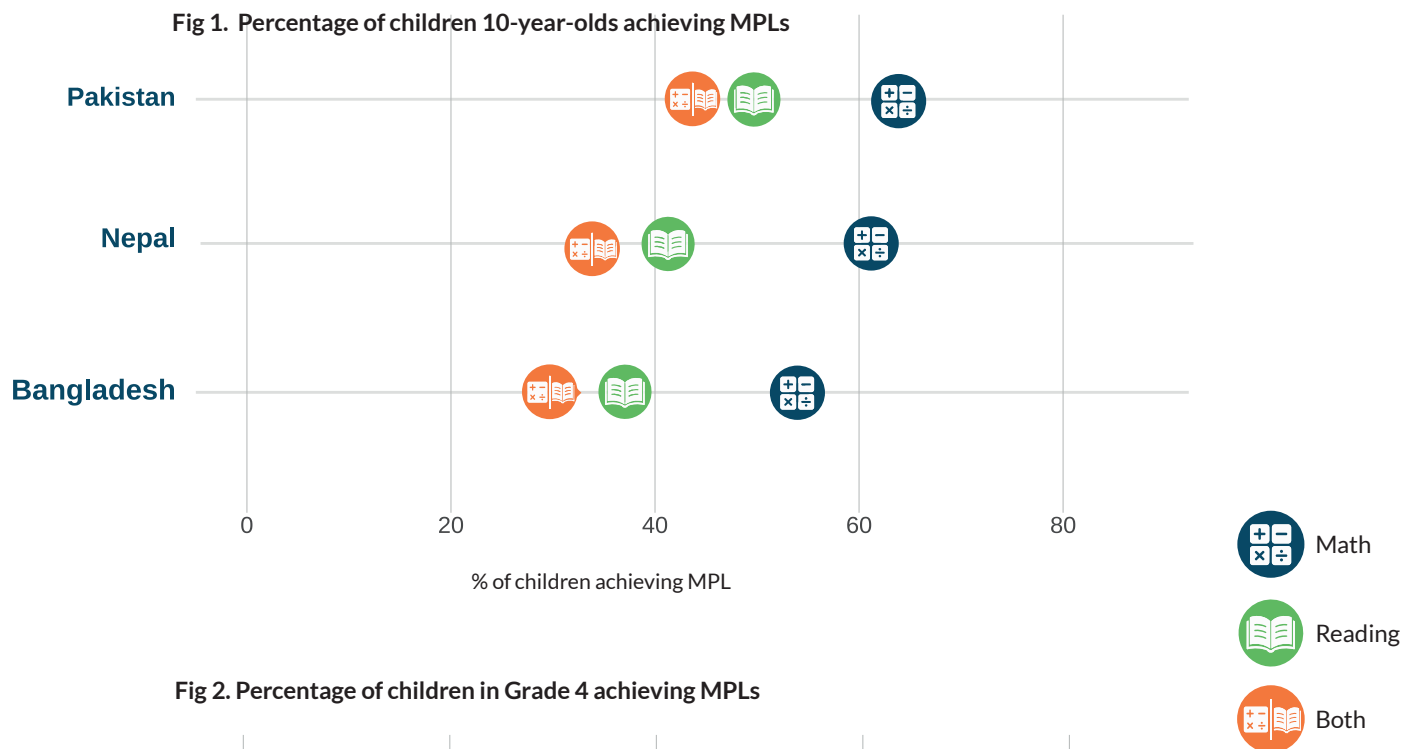
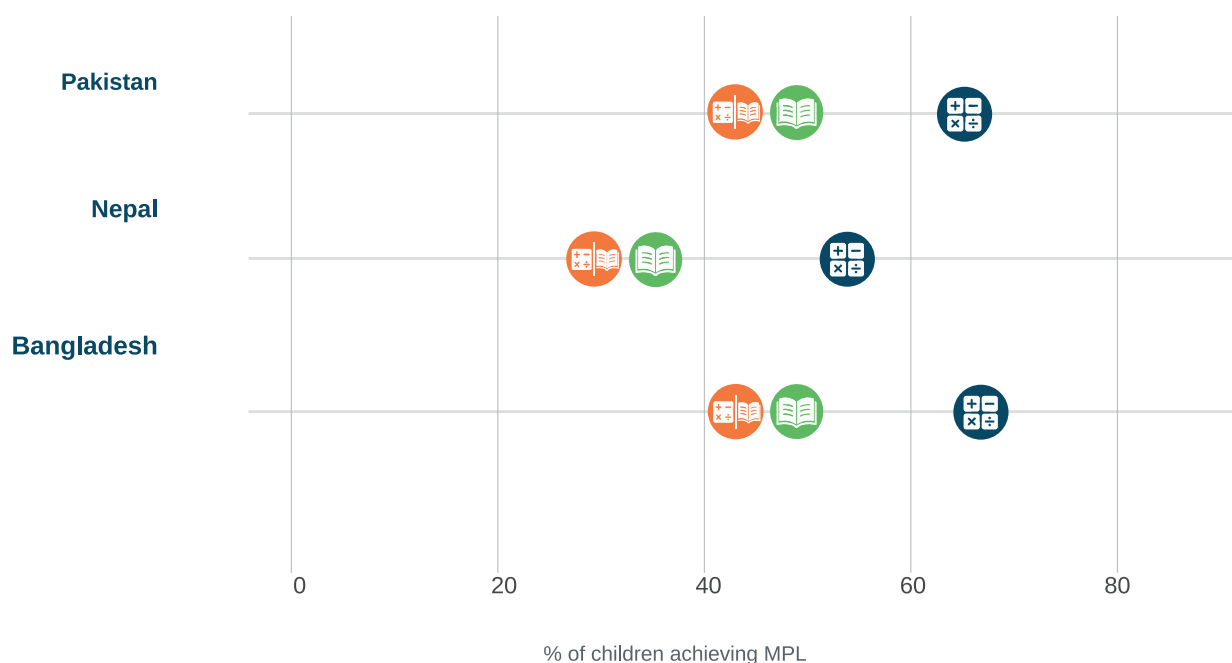


Fig 2. Percentage of children in Grade 4 achieving MPLs

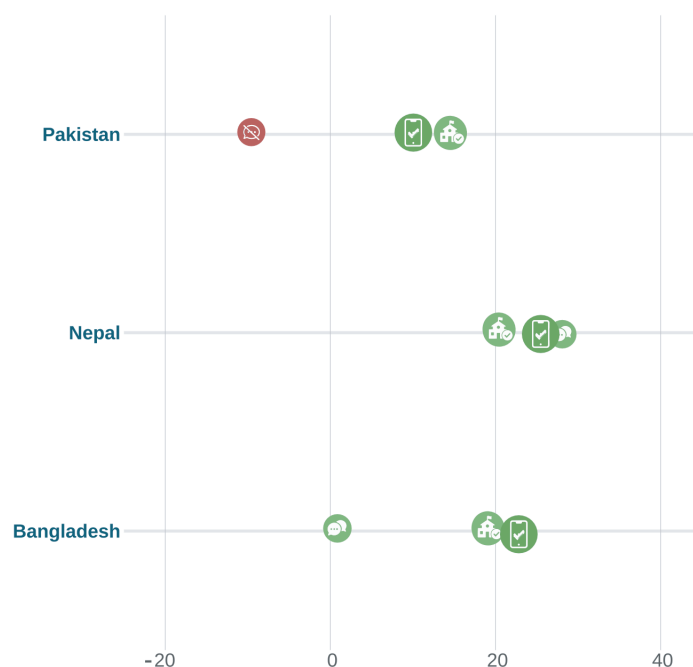


B. Relation of Contextual Information and MPLs (Both)(Age 10-14)

1. MPL achievement by Parental Education Levels: Within the SA Hub, children with at least one parent who completed primary education achieve MPL (both) at a higher rate than those without. Nepal shows the largest gap, at 15pp (48% vs. 33%), followed by Bangladesh at 13pp (45% vs. 32%). Pakistan shows the narrowest gap, at 7pp (57% vs. 50%), consistent with it being one of the two countries (with Mexico) where this difference is not statistically significant.

2. MPL Achievement by Home Language-Test Language Correspondence: Within the SA Hub, this pattern splits three ways. Nepal follows the general trend clearly, children whose home language matches the assessment language reach 54% MPL (Both), versus 27% for those who don't, a 27pp gap, and one of the larger, statistically significant differences in the study. Pakistan is one of the three countries (with Senegal and Mali) where the trend flips. Children whose home language doesn't match the assessment score higher (64%) than those whose home language does match (54%). Bangladesh has no reported figure because of a small sample in the given age range.

3. Digital Devices and MPL Achievement: Within the SA Hub, children with digital devices at home consistently outperform those without, in line with the report's finding that these gaps are statistically significant everywhere. Nepal shows the largest gap at 23pp (68% vs. 45%), followed closely by Bangladesh at 21pp (67% vs. 46%), and Pakistan at 12pp (68% vs. 56%), the narrowest of the three, though still well within the report's global range of 7pp (Mali) to 30pp (Mozambique). As the report cautions, this shouldn't be read as evidence that the devices themselves drive the difference, it more likely reflects broader socioeconomic gaps between households with and without access to that kind of technology.



Learning Advantage (percentage-point difference in MPL achievement)



Parent completed primary school



Speaks test language at home



Household has digital device

Parental education and digital access are consistently associated with higher learning outcomes across Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Language effects vary considerably, ranging from a 28-point advantage in Nepal to a 10-point disadvantage in Pakistan.

4. Looking Ahead

This convening is where we align on the 2025 findings and shape them into a shared agenda. Three open questions can anchor the discussion:



What does this evidence suggest for South Asia's foundational learning trajectory?



What should the Hub prioritise with its limited time and resources?



What would it take to expand ICAN-ICAR's reach across the SA Hub going forward?

The limited timing raises the stakes of this convening. 2030 is the deadline for SDG 4.1.1(a), and the 2027-28 cycle is realistically the Hub's next full round of comparable data ahead of this timeline, which is the clearest opportunity to track progress toward that goal. What's decided at this convening will shape the planning for the next cycle.

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