

It is with great pleasure that the PAL Network releases the International Common Assessment of Numeracy, or simply ICAN. In many ways, ICAN is much more than an assessment.

ICAN is the fruition of a story that began in Pratham, in India, with a group who designed a large-scale household-based assessment to measure foundational learning outcomes in reading and math. These individuals must have been driven by the mantra that 'I CAN do something'. Their singular purpose led to the genesis of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and its citizen-led approach. This is an approach that Pratham willingly shared with many countries and in so doing bequeathed to other PAL Network members a novel yet practical approach suitable for measuring learning outcomes in similar contexts across Africa, America and Asia. The core tenets, that assessments are done in the households, one-on-one, using a simple-to-use tool, remain trademark features of ICAN.

ICAN demonstrates that organisations across continents and countries can forge meaningful connections to develop a common public good. PAL Network members are compelled to collectively respond to the global call articulated in SDG 4.1.1 that 'children and young people...achieve at least a minimum proficiency level in reading and math'. One of the key contributions we make is to generate evidence on learning outcomes using the citizen-led assessment approach. We recognised that it was not enough to do similar work across network members, we needed to take further steps that would allow the network to generate comparable data. A milestone that paved the way for this realisation was the creation of PAL Network's Data Quality Standards. These internal standards were developed in a participatory manner, informed by other global good practices. These standards guided the design and implementation of ICAN, enabling us to assemble robust evidence that can inform us, using the lens of numeracy, about the extent to which we are on course in ensuring that all children are learning the basics. Even as we release ICAN, its sister assessment of foundational reading is under development.

We release the ICAN report at a unique moment in history. Many school systems have been paralysed due to the effects of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19). While some households, schools and countries have been able to re-organise themselves, the usual regions and populations remain shut out of remote and blended learning options. It is a stark reminder of how inequitable society is. It is therefore essential that we seek to include those at risk of being left behind. The ICAN tools and processes are worth emulating for a variety of reasons: first, the tool is simple to use and inviting to non-specialists including parents; second, the approach is designed for scale as huge numbers of volunteers can easily be trained to conduct the assessment and provide the evidence we all need; third, by being implemented in the household, the process includes all children and does not discriminate according to schooling status or school type; and finally, earlier barriers like language of assessment have been partially resolved: ICAN was implemented across 11 languages. If we are to reach all children, we need to emulate inclusive processes like the ICAN approach.

Ultimately, ICAN communicates the aspiration we have for each child, who ought to be able to proudly state: 'I can do math' or 'I can read'. The evidence communicated in this report confirms the continued presence of children in many Global South communities who, despite many years of schooling, remain innumerate. As the clock ticks to 2030, the target year to ensure that all children have acquired at least the basics, we can use the evidence presented to reflect and energise our approaches to ensure that each child has a good foundation that can assure them meaningful learning outcomes.

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