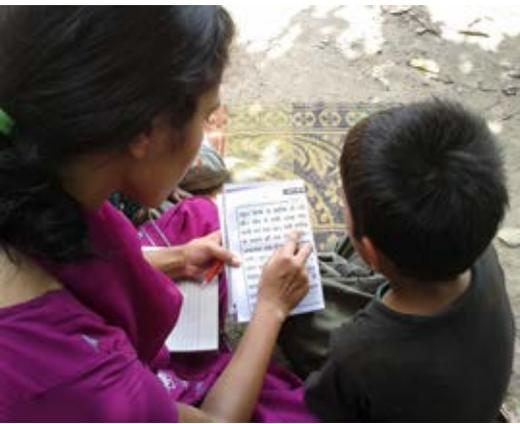




**XALAPA 2017**  
Poder Para la Gente

## INFORMATION BRIEF: SUB-THEME 4



## Strengthening Citizen Participation For Greater Accountability



**PAL NETWORK**  
People's Action for Learning



**MEDICIÓN  
INDEPENDIENTE  
Aprendizajes**

## Executive Summary

Over 80 participants from 19+ Global South countries attended PAL Network's 5th Annual meeting in Xalapa, Mexico to explore citizen participation in household-based learning assessments, under the meeting theme 'Power to the People'. Over the past 11 years, PAL Network member countries have recruited and trained more than half a million volunteers to conduct simple learning assessments in their communities. Every year, more than 68,000 citizens volunteer to traverse some of the most difficult and remote terrain in their countries, walking from house to house to find out if children are learning.

Conducting simple learning assessments in front of parents demystifies the learning process and allows conversations to start regarding whose responsibility it is to ensure children learn. When parents see their children struggling to read or do simple maths, they often want to know what they can do to help. During the meeting, participants broke out into sub-theme groups to share information and discuss the potential role of the PAL Network in consolidating and learning from members' attempts to equip parents, schools and local communities with pathways or tools to achieve better service delivery.

It was agreed by participants that experiences from members could inform the work of several other network countries when working with parents, schools and local communities. After much discussion, participants agreed on four key steps to be taken by the PAL Network over the coming year. The first step would be to document best practices of local community engagement across the network. Participants agreed that it would be important to include what hasn't worked so well, and why, to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Participants agreed that PAL Network should develop clear messages on what we want accountability for, in contexts where a) not all children are in school and b) classroom composition is extremely diverse when children are in school. If we are to achieve the ambitious global goals in education, then there needs to be accountability for learning, for all children. Participants agreed it is vital for the PAL Network to be speaking with one voice on these issues.

Taking advantage of the diversity of skills within the network, participants discussed the network exploring opportunities to facilitate 1-on-1 exchanges depending on the skillsets and expertise of an organization, and find ways to share that experience globally. Lastly, participants agreed that as a network, we should establish closer links with international networks of social accountability to integrate the experiences of the PAL Network, and to learn from other networks or organizations working within this space.

The 5th Annual PAL Network meeting was held in Xalapa, Mexico from 13th to 16th March 2017. The meeting was jointly hosted by Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes (MIA) and the PAL Network. The meeting provided structured opportunities for deep exploration of this year's theme: 'Power to the People'. The theme was critically explored by over 80 participants from more than 19 Global South countries in four different sub-theme groups. Each sub-theme focused on a different aspect of citizen participation in conducting household-based learning assessments with a focus on value, potential and next steps.

### Power To The People

The power of this movement lies in the fact that it is led by citizens themselves. Every year, more than 68,000 citizens volunteer to traverse some of the most difficult and remote terrain in their countries, walking from house to house to find out if children are learning. Citizen-led assessments are "owned" by ordinary people, local leaders, local NGOs and other partner organizations at local and national level.

The PAL Network philosophy is simple. You cannot begin to find a solution without first understanding the problem. Finding solutions is not just the responsibility of policymakers, government leaders, head teachers and others, but includes parents and local citizens. The citizen-led assessment model allows hundreds of thousands of citizens to experience and understand the problem first hand in their own communities.

## Citizen-Led Learning Assessments: What Do We Know?

More children than ever are attending school, and many parents believe that sending their children to school everyday means that they are learning

Conducting simple learning assessments in front of parents demystifies the learning process and allows conversations to start regarding whose responsibility it is to ensure children learn

When parents see their children struggling to read or do simple maths, they often want to know what they can do to help

If the overall system of education is to change, it must be accompanied by effective systems of accountability

Strengthening the ability of citizens to hold governments accountable can be challenging as they typically have few avenues to obtain information

When information is available, citizens may not know how to use it as the basis for effective engagement with public sector decision makers

## Assessing The Relationship Between Information And Accountability

Information is thought to be a key building block in empowering parents and communities to make better and more informed decisions about their children's learning. It is thought that parents and communities with accurate and reliable information about their children's learning are more likely to engage with school administrators and public officials to make changes to improve both learning, and learning environments.

However, there is a complicated and nuanced relationship between information and accountability. Even under the best of circumstances, information alone is rarely enough to activate collective action or get sufficient responses from service providers. Certain 'enabling conditions' are required to facilitate the meaningful engagement of citizens including: their interest in, and capacity to access, understand and act on information that is available and easy to understand. Information must be targeted in a way that is both usable and actionable.

When assessments remain the domain of a small, trained group of education experts, and results are only made available to policy makers and technocrats, the opportunity to bring parents into the conversation about learning is lost. PAL Network assessments are simple, and easy-to-understand for everyone – even those parents who cannot read themselves. Having a simple tool enables simple and straightforward communication of the results.

Citizen-led assessments fit comfortably into the social accountability movement of information-based initiatives that aim to empower citizens' voices to hold decision-makers accountable. Simple tools and simple communication of the results bring parents and local communities into a domain from which they were previously excluded, allowing them to think about their own solutions.





## Sharing Experiences Across The Network

### A Summary Of Group Discussions

During the sub-theme sessions in Xalapa, Mexico, the first part of the session focused on sharing experiences across the network. Network members were keen to learn more from each other and explored the following questions:

- 1 How do network members understand the link between conducting assessments and equipping parents and communities with pathways or tools to use this information to achieve better and more responsive service delivery?
- 2 How do network members identify target groups and communicate the findings from citizen-led assessments in a way that is useful and actionable for different audiences?

During the discussions, network members identified three key communities of focus with regards to empowering citizens' voices to hold decision-makers accountable: parents, teachers, and local communities.

### 1. Experience Working Directly With Parents

#### Experiences From ASER Centre In India

“ASER India explained that the biggest tool the assessment provides parents is the understanding that schooling does not equal learning. This is an assumption made by people all over the world, not just by parents. Firstly, parents should understand that sending children to school is not enough. The next step often involves discussing what parents can do. For example, telling stories to their children is a first step. If the parents are able to read, then reading to their children and encouraging children to read is important. Engaging in their child's school day; ensuring that they know who their teachers



are and where their school is; ensuring children have time to do homework; and ensuring that there are reading materials at home are all important ways of helping. ASER India explained that in their experience, the biggest tool they can offer parents is giving them the understanding that they can help their children!

## Experiences From Uwezo In East Africa

“ The experience of ASER India resonated with Uwezo in East Africa. Undertaking citizen-led assessments in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda for the last seven years has unearthed that many parents have never even visited their child’s school. This could be for a variety of reasons – many parents are working in the fields, live far from the school, have other children at home to care for, run small businesses or are afraid to come to the school in case they are asked for money. In Uwezo they decided to run some small pilot experiments taking parents on a tour of the school. They said “we have no idea if this will lead to an



upswell of something, but for parents – many don’t even know what their children’s school looks like! They’ve never been, never met the teachers, don’t know what their children are learning, etc. Just taking the parents on a tour seems to have some impact – particularly on mothers. This might help internalise the process that leads to parents being more involved in the learning journeys of their children”.

## Experiences From Medicion Independiente De Aprendizajes (MIA) In Mexico

“ MIA Partners from Veracruz State, Mexico agreed that government (local and regional as well as national) are not good at informing people about their individual responsibilities with regards to education. MIA partners talked specifically about the need for parental involvement in the running of the schools, particularly with regard to school councils. Posing the following question to the group, they wondered ‘how do we stop the blame game and turn confrontation into parents and teachers working together? Someone



needs to inform them that they have a common goal. But this is not talked about at the school level. It’s important to talk about the shared responsibility of helping children to learn better!” MIA partners agreed that taking parents on tours of the local school might be a way to help start that conversation.

## 2. Experience Working With Teachers And Schools

### Experiences From ASER In India

“ ASER India shared their experience of teachers often being the first group to be blamed for poor learning outcomes. “The problem lies not with teachers” they explained “but in the way the school system is structured. The assumption in nearly all schools is, that a child of age 8 should be in Grade ‘X’, and should already know ‘X’ amount of information and have ‘X’ number of skills. We know that these assumptions are not true, and are not realistic. Children of different ages can be learning at many different levels, and it depends on a really wide variety of things. If we want the system to focus



on the learning needs of the child, then organising children by age and grade simply doesn't work. Children need to be taught at the level they're at.” This is the basis of all the work that is currently undertaken by ASER Centre and Pratham. “Until that structuring at the policy and system level is structured towards the learning needs of children, we are not going to see any change.”

## 3. Experience Working With Local Communities

In all PAL Network countries, the citizen-led assessment is not directly executed from the central office – which is often located in a large (often capital) city. Within regions, states, and districts of each country, citizen-led assessments are managed by local partner organizations. Participants

agreed that rarely is the power of organized citizens ‘untapped’ at local levels, so working with organizations who are able to work with grassroots groups that are already established and active in the local community is a crucial component to the success of the citizen-led assessment model.

### Experiences From Uwezo In Uganda

“ In Uganda, Uwezo have helped local partner organizations facilitate meetings at sub-county levels to discuss learning outcomes amongst all stakeholders who attend. Each person in attendance publicly commits to an action which they are going to take to tackle the problem of low learning levels. There are then follow-up meetings to talk about progress.



Any issues that cannot be solved at the sub-county level are pushed up to the District level meetings for discussion.

## Experiences From Learnigeria In Nigeria

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LEARNigeria are taking a similar inclusive approach to involving community members. Their community engagement planning started with thinking about what it means to be a citizen – whether you are a parent, a teacher, a policymaker, a Minister – you are still a citizen of Nigeria. What are your civic responsibilities? “If you are to begin with the end in mind, then you must bring together all the people who are going to help you get there into one room, and talk about your vision” they said. At pilot community meetings in Nigeria they invited everyone – youth groups, political leaders, parents and local authorities. In a similar approach to that of

LEARNigeria

Uwezo Uganda, LEARNigeria presented the pilot data from the first assessment and said – “here is the data. What are we each able to do about it within our own communities or spheres of influence?”. “When we work with state and federal partners, we ask them to take off their official hat, and put on their parents’ hat. We say ‘Let’s engage on that basis. How can we help our children?’”



## What Is The Role Of The PAL Network?

After network members had discussed the links between citizen-led assessments and equipping parents, schools and local communities with pathways or tools to achieve better service delivery, they focused on exploring what the role of the network might be in consolidating and learning from these different experiences. Some of the following questions were explored:

- 1** What more can we do to better understand and document the different pathways to taking actions towards achieving greater accountability in education, with a strong focus on improving learning outcomes?
- 2** What is the role of PAL Network and member countries in collecting, translating and communicating findings from citizen-led assessments to strengthen citizens' participation in improving accountability?
- 3** How can we learn from lessons from other social accountability interventions to improve our impact?
- 4** Is there something we can do at a network-level to learn more / share more about the links between providing information on learning levels to citizens and holding decision-makers accountable?



## What Might The Future Look Like?

### Next Steps For The PAL Network

From the rich and interesting discussions within this sub-theme group, it was agreed by participants that there is a wealth of experience and expertise within the network that could benefit and inspire inform our work with parents, schools and local

communities. After much discussion, participants agreed on four key steps to be taken by the PAL Network over the coming year, to ensure that we are sharing our experiences across the network.

#### 1. Document Best Practices Of Local Community Engagement



PAL Network countries are committed to communicating findings in easy-to-understand and accessible formats, and most importantly – discussing them. This is happening not just at policy level, but with people who can make a real difference locally. It was agreed

by participants that the first step would be to document best practices of local community engagement across the network. Participants agreed that it would be important to include what hasn't worked so well, and why, to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

#### 2. Draft Clear Common Messages On Accountability For Learning



Participants agreed that PAL Network should develop clear messages on what we want accountability for, in contexts where a) not all children are in school and b) classroom composition is extremely diverse when children are in school. Unlike in Western countries, our schools and classrooms are not all homogeneous. In our context – how do we reach the ambitious global goals?

They will only be reached by a) getting the hardest to reach children into school and b) changing what's currently happening inside classrooms. Our message is plain and simple: What's happening inside the classroom needs to respond to the needs of the children that are inside those classrooms. We need to be speaking with one voice on these matters globally.

### 3. Facilitating More Learning Exchanges Across Network Countries



One of the key challenges identified by participants in the sub-theme group was that of resources to visit and learn from other network members – in much the same way that the assessments first started. Taking advantage of the diversity of skills

within the network, participants discussed the network exploring opportunities to facilitate 1-on-1 exchanges depending on the skillsets and expertise of an organization, and find ways to share that experience globally.

### 4. Establish Links With International Networks Of Social Accountability



As a network, participants agreed that we should establish closer links with international networks of social accountability to integrate

the experiences of the PAL Network, and to learn from other networks or organizations working within this space.



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