

OUTREACH ACTIVITY REPORT--

Youth Engagement on Issues of Merged Districts

(Third Pillar of ASPIRE-KP's Structured Engagement Framework)

Theme: Peshawar University and the Merged Districts – Recollecting Yesterday, Imagining Tomorrow

Organized by: Advocacy for Sustainable Policy and Implementation Reforms – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (ASPIRE-KP)

Venue: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), University of Peshawar

Date: February 9, 2025

1. Context, Continuity, and Engagement Framework

ASPIRE-KP has consciously adopted a **three-tier engagement model** for each thematic intervention, comprising:

1. **Seminar / Symposium** – to frame the issue, document commitments, and identify systemic gaps;
2. **Roundtable(s)** – to explore legal, policy, and institutional pathways with domain experts; and
3. **Outreach Activity** – to engage youth, academia, and grassroots stakeholders, particularly those directly affected.

In pursuance of this framework, the Outreach Activity at the University of Peshawar constituted the **logical and necessary culmination** of earlier deliberations on the Merged Districts, following:

- The **ASPIRE-KP Symposium on Merged Districts**
Symposium, which highlighted governance, financial, security, and development gaps; and
- Two **Roundtable sessions with the legal fraternity and elected representatives**, which examined constitutional obligations, judicial remedies, and advocacy strategies.

While the Symposium and Roundtables largely reflected **expert and practitioner perspectives**, the Outreach Activity was deliberately designed to move from expert-driven analysis to youth-defined narratives —placing **youth voices, lived experiences, and academic reflection** at the center of discourse.

2. Conceptual Basis of the Outreach Activity

The Outreach Activity drew its conceptual foundation from ASPIRE-KP's prior analytical work, which framed the engagement around a coherent progression across time linking the past, present, and future of the Merged Districts. The theme of the discussion—“**Peshawar University and the Merged Districts: Recollecting Yesterday, Imagining Tomorrow**”—was intentionally broad and thought-provoking, inviting participants to reflect not only on historical experience and future aspirations, but also on the present realities that connect the two.

While the theme explicitly references both *yesterday* and *tomorrow*, the present remains an integral part of the narrative, serving as the bridge between historical legacies and future possibilities. In this sense, the engagement naturally evolved into three interlinked temporal dimensions:

- **Recollecting Yesterday** – encompassing historical neglect, prolonged conflict, and governance exclusion;
- **Living Today** – reflecting an incomplete transition marked by insecurity, institutional gaps, and unmet expectations; and
- **Imagining Tomorrow** – exploring the possibilities of peace, inclusion, opportunity, and meaningful integration.

This conceptual framing enabled participants to situate their lived experiences within a broader historical and policy context, while also encouraging forward-looking reflection. It provided a coherent lens through which students and faculty alike could examine continuity and change in the Merged Districts, ensuring that the discussion remained grounded, reflective, and oriented toward constructive engagement.

The activity was not conceived as a problem-solving forum; instead, it was deliberately structured as a platform for problem articulation, awareness building, and intellectual ownership, particularly among students from the Merged Districts, so that these concerns could be coherently documented, amplified, and flagged to relevant authorities for timely consideration and resolution.

3. Participation Profile

The Outreach Activity was attended by **approximately fifty-five (55) students**, drawn from multiple departments of the University of Peshawar, including:

- Political Science
- Economics
- Law
- Peace and Conflict Studies
- Islamic Studies and related disciplines

A **predominant number of participants belonged to the Merged Districts**, lending authenticity, emotional depth, and experiential credibility to the discussions. Faculty members and senior academics were present primarily as facilitators and listeners, ensuring that student voices remained central.

4. Opening Remarks and Framing

In his opening remarks, the Chairman of ASPIRE-KP emphasized:

- The **strategic importance of engaging youth** in conversations on the Merged Districts;
- The responsibility of academic institutions to serve as spaces for **critical reflection and civic dialogue**; and
- The need to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward **meaningful participation and ownership** by students from historically marginalized regions.

He underlined that the Outreach Activity was **not an isolated event**, but part of ASPIRE-KP's sustained advocacy and engagement trajectory.

5. Issues Raised by Students: Thematic Articulation of Concerns

The student discourse was marked by **clarity, restraint, and analytical maturity**. Rather than emotive rhetoric, students articulated **structural and systemic concerns**, many of which echoed, but also deepened, the findings of earlier ASPIRE-KP engagements.

5.1 Education–Employment Mismatch

Students repeatedly questioned the **instrumental value of education** in the absence of economic absorption:

- Degrees were described as **symbolic credentials** rather than pathways to employment.
- Public sector induction avenues were perceived as shrinking, opaque, or inaccessible.
- The private sector was largely absent from the Merged Districts, compelling educated youth to migrate or remain unemployed.

This disconnect was seen as a major contributor to **disillusionment, frustration, and loss of motivation**.

5.2 Restricted Mobility and Security Fatigue

Students highlighted the **persistent securitization of daily life**, even years after the merger:

- Excessive check posts, identity checks, and movement restrictions were described as **dehumanizing**.
- Travel to and from home districts during academic breaks was reported as stressful and unpredictable.
- Students expressed concern that such practices reinforce a **permanent sense of suspicion** rather than integration.

Several participants noted that insecurity was not merely physical, but **psychological and emotional**.

5.3 Unfulfilled Merger Commitments

A dominant theme was the **gap between promises and ground realities**:

- Financial commitments, development packages, and institutional reforms were widely perceived as **unrealized or diluted**.
- Students expressed disappointment that the merger had not translated into **tangible equality** in service delivery or opportunity.
- There was concern that prolonged delays were eroding trust in state institutions.

5.4 Weak Local Governance and Representation

Students raised concerns regarding **ineffective local governance structures**, including:

- Absence or weakness of empowered local governments.
- Limited responsiveness of district administrations.
- Lack of mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making at the district level.

This governance vacuum was seen as contributing to both **service delivery failures and political alienation**.

5.5 Poor Quality of Public Services

Participants highlighted deficiencies in:

- **Healthcare**: understaffed facilities, poor infrastructure, and lack of specialists.
- **Education**: inadequate schools and colleges at the district level, forcing migration.
- **Basic amenities**: electricity, water supply, and digital connectivity.

These gaps were described as reinforcing cycles of deprivation and inequality.

5.6 Identity, Dignity, and Stigmatization

Students expressed concern over **persistent stereotyping** of people from the Merged Districts:

- Being viewed through a security lens rather than as equal citizens.
- Social and institutional bias in urban centers and employment markets.
- A lingering perception of being “outsiders” despite constitutional integration.

This sense of marginalization was described as deeply corrosive to self-confidence and belonging.

5.7 Youth Exclusion and Absence of Platforms

Participants noted the **lack of structured platforms** for youth engagement:

- Absence of regular forums for dialogue with policymakers.
- Limited access to internships, mentorship, or leadership development opportunities.
- Minimal exposure to policy processes affecting their own regions.

Students emphasized that **exclusion from dialogue** was as damaging as exclusion from resources.

6. Observations and Reflections from ASPIRE-KP Members

ASPIRE-KP members, while largely listening, offered selective reflections:

- One senior member noted that the **clarity and articulation of students**, particularly those from the Merged Districts, was striking and encouraging.
- Another observed that such engagements are **not about offering solutions**, but about **defining problems honestly and collectively**.
- The concluding reflections were described as **inspirational**, reinforcing confidence in youth potential.

Internally, members acknowledged that ASPIRE-KP's role is evolving—from advocacy alone toward **facilitating societal introspection and youth empowerment**.

7. Key Takeaways

- Youth from the Merged Districts are **aware, articulate, and deeply invested** in their future.
- The prevailing sentiment is not radicalization but **fatigue, frustration, and uncertainty**.
- Awareness-building and issue-definition are critical precursors to reform.
- Universities are uniquely positioned to serve as **bridges between policy, society, and the state**.

8. Strategic Significance of the Outreach Activity

This Outreach Activity represents a **qualitative shift** in ASPIRE-KP's engagement approach:

- From elite-centric discourse to **youth-centric reflection**;
- From policy prescription to **listening and amplification**
- From external critique alone to internal introspection, particularly among youth and local stakeholders.

It reaffirmed that sustainable reform in the Merged Districts is inconceivable **without the intellectual and civic participation of youth**.

9. Conclusion

The Outreach Activity at the University of Peshawar marked the successful culmination of ASPIRE-KP's structured engagement cycle on the issue of the Merged Districts, complementing the earlier Symposium and Roundtable deliberations. By engaging directly with university youth—particularly students belonging to the Merged Districts—the activity amplified voices that are often under-represented in formal policy discourse. It provided valuable insight into how constitutional reforms, governance arrangements, and development commitments are experienced at the individual and community levels.

The Outreach not only enriched institutional understanding of ground realities but also reaffirmed ASPIRE-KP's core commitment to inclusive, reflective, and evidence-based advocacy. The clarity, restraint, and maturity with which students articulated their concerns demonstrated that the youth of the Merged Districts are neither disengaged nor indifferent; rather, they are acutely aware of their circumstances and eager for meaningful participation in shaping their future. Their interventions underscored the urgency of aligning policy intent with lived outcomes, particularly in the areas of education, employment, security, governance, and service delivery.

Importantly, the Outreach Activity was not designed to produce immediate solutions or prescriptive recommendations. Instead, it achieved something more enduring and foundational: it facilitated problem articulation, cultivated awareness, and fostered intellectual ownership among participants. By asking the right questions and encouraging honest reflection, the activity restored confidence in dialogue as a legitimate and constructive instrument for change. It also served to coherently flag these concerns to persons in authority, with the expectation that informed institutional response and remedial action will follow.

Building on this momentum, ASPIRE-KP intends to continue its engagement with universities and academic institutions across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Such outreach will remain an integral component of its advocacy strategy, ensuring that youth perspectives inform ongoing policy debates and that the aspirations of the Merged Districts are articulated not only *about* them, but increasingly *by* those who belong to them.