

Field Visit Report

Visit of the University of Notre Dame Research Team to ASPIRE Odisha

Introduction

From June 15th to 26th, 2025, a research team from the **University of Notre Dame, USA**, visited ASPIRE's intervention areas in Odisha as part of their global field study under the **I-Lab initiative**. This initiative is focused on understanding effective models that drive **universal school enrolment** and help build **Child Labor Free Zones (CLFZs)**.



What makes this collaboration unique is how it began: while exploring impactful education models across countries, the Notre Dame team **came across ASPIRE's work through our website**. Impressed by the scale, grassroots engagement, and child-rights centered approach highlighted online, they reached out to us for a potential

collaboration.

This not only reflects **the increasing reach and credibility of ASPIRE's digital presence**, but also underscores the importance of such international engagements in enhancing our learning and strengthening global solidarity in education and child protection efforts.



Objectives of the Visit

The visit was driven by a set of interconnected objectives that aimed to deepen understanding of ASPIRE's initiatives on the ground. The team sought to gain insight into the **field-level implementation of education and child rights interventions**, identifying both the enablers and challenges that shape universal school enrollment. By exploring how **Child Labor Free Zones are conceptualized** and operationalized across different geographies, the visit aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of **ASPIRE's impact and sustainability**. Through interactions with diverse stakeholders, the team gathered insights that would inform **evidence-based recommendations**, ultimately strengthening strategies and maximizing field impact. This multifaceted

approach allowed for a comprehensive assessment of ASPIRE's efforts and their effectiveness in driving meaningful change.



Research Team Members

The University of Notre Dame team included:

- **Prof. TJ D'Agostino** – Faculty Member and Senior Researcher
- **Clarice Silva** – Field Researcher
- **Fabiana Salas** – Field Researcher

In addition, virtual interviews were conducted by:

- **Omar Cham** and **Ousman Gaku** – Researchers from the Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame

Methodology



The research utilized a mixed-methods approach comprising the following components:

- Field visits to schools, communities, and Residential Bridge Course (RBC) centers
- In-person interviews with educators, government stakeholders, and community members
- Virtual consultations with ASPIRE staff at the block, district, and state levels

This comprehensive methodology enabled a deep, multi-dimensional understanding of both the operational context and the lived experiences of key stakeholders.

Coverage and Stakeholders Engaged

The team conducted field visits across three blocks in Keonjhar district—**Banspal, Telkoi, and Champua**—engaging with a diverse group of 57 stakeholders involved in education, local governance, and child rights protection. These interactions included headmasters, School Management Committee (SMC) members, Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators (CRCCs), and Child Rights Protection Forum (CRPF) members. They also spoke with community facilitators, learning facilitators, and Gram Panchayat mobilisers. Additional stakeholders included RBC teachers, volunteers, sarpanches, Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members, and government school teachers.

By engaging both institutional representatives and grassroots actors, the research captured a comprehensive, 360-degree perspective on the functioning of education and child protection systems at the local level.





Key Focus Areas of Inquiry

The Notre Dame team focused on the following thematic areas:

- **Enrolment & Retention:** What supports children to attend school regularly and what barriers exist?
- **CLFZ Functionality:** How are Child Labor Free Zones being built, maintained, and measured for success?
- **Community Participation:** How are local governance bodies, parents, and forums like CRPF contributing?
- **Role of Frontline Workers:** What motivates ASPIRE's field team, and what challenges do they face?

- **Systemic Gaps:** Where is convergence working or failing between ASPIRE, government departments, and policies?

Preliminary Observations

While the final research findings will be presented in a detailed report, the team shared several initial insights during debrief discussions. Notably, they observed **high levels of community engagement**, particularly in areas where School Management Committees (SMCs) and Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPFs) were actively involved. Outcomes varied significantly across blocks, underscoring the importance of localized strategies tailored to specific geographic and socio-economic contexts. **Frontline facilitators and volunteers emerged as critical enablers** in connecting out-of-school children to educational opportunities. The need for stronger government convergence was identified as a key area for enhancing the effectiveness of service delivery. Additionally, **gender-inclusive mobilization efforts**—especially those led by women—were found to be both **impactful and scalable**.

Way Forward

The University of Notre Dame research team will now prepare and submit a detailed analytical report to ASPIRE Odisha, which will include:

- Synthesized findings from the field
- Comparative insights from the three blocks
- Identification of key enablers and barriers

- Policy and programmatic recommendations

This collaboration marks a **valuable milestone** in ASPIRE's journey—showcasing our model on a global platform, drawing external insights, and **validating the effectiveness of our field-based approach** to universal education and child rights.

Such partnerships not only affirm the **growing visibility** of ASPIRE's work through platforms like our website, but also offer **tremendous opportunities for mutual learning and innovation**.

We look forward to deepening this engagement and exploring further collaborations in the near future.