

Responsible and Sustainable Tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan: A Panel Discussion



Panelists: Dr Jawad Syed (Professor, LUMS, and Moderator), Ms Shehnaz Gul (Lecturer, KIU) and Mr Tajir Hussain (Lecturer, KIU)

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Synopsis

This panel discussion explores the opportunities and challenges associated with the rapid growth of tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, with particular emphasis on responsible and sustainable tourism. Featuring Dr Jawad Syed of LUMS and Ms Shehnaz Gul and Mr Tajir Hussain of Karakoram International University (KIU), the conversation examines the shared responsibilities of tourists, host communities, government institutions, civil society organisations, universities, and tourism businesses in protecting the region's distinctive natural, cultural, and social heritage.

The discussion highlights concerns arising from the rapid expansion of domestic tourism, including environmental pollution, plastic waste, reckless driving, disrespect for local cultures and religious diversity, harassment and privacy concerns, damage to historical sites, and pressure on fragile ecosystems and limited natural resources.

It also emphasises that responsibility does not rest with tourists alone. Local communities, businesses, and public institutions must address uncontrolled construction, inadequate infrastructure, weak tourism planning, land sales and long-term leases, and the risk that local communities may lose both ownership of their land and other resources and a fair share of tourism's economic benefits.

A central theme is the need to move beyond viewing tourism simply in terms of hotels, guest houses, and increasing visitor numbers. The panel advocates a broader and more sustainable model encompassing cultural and heritage tourism, local cuisine, orchard-based experiences, wildlife and medicinal plant tourism, adventure activities, and opportunities to learn about Gilgit-Baltistan's remarkable linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity.

The discussion also underlines the importance of effective legislation, destination carrying capacity, stronger visitor management, environmentally appropriate construction, renewable energy, local ownership, community-based enterprises, affordable financing for local entrepreneurs, and greater collaboration among government, civil society, industry, and educational institutions.

Finally, the panel identifies universities as important catalysts for sustainable development. By developing locally relevant curricula and case studies, fostering entrepreneurship, strengthening industry collaboration, and helping students create innovative tourism products and experiences, universities can contribute to a tourism model that generates economic opportunities while safeguarding the environment, culture, identity, and resources of Gilgit-Baltistan for future generations.

Keywords: Gilgit-Baltistan; Gilgit Baltistan Sustainable Tourism Initiative (GBSTI); Hunza; Land Leasing and Local Ownership; Religious Diversity; Responsible and Sustainable Tourism; Sustainability

Link to full video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihUXo8unh8o>

Duration: 48 minutes

Panel Discussion Transcript (English Translation)

Dr Jawad Syed

Assalamu Alaikum. Today we are joined by Ms Shehnaz Gul, Head of the Education Department at Karakoram International University (KIU). We are also joined by Mr Tajir Hussain, who is a Lecturer in Hospitality and Tourism Management at the same university.

We are recording this conversation at the Karakoram International University campus.

Earlier today, the three of us were discussing tourism, particularly the concept of Responsible Tourism. Since I have a longstanding academic interest in this region, as well as in Responsible Tourism, we thought it would be worthwhile to record our discussion.

Our objective is not merely to enhance our own understanding, but also to share this conversation with our students, colleagues, and the wider public so that they, too, may benefit from the experiences and perspectives we discuss today.

Ms Shehnaz, let me begin with you.

Drawing on your experience—you are originally from Gilgit, you are familiar with the whole of Gilgit-Baltistan, you have served on the faculty here, and you have extensive experience of different parts of the region.

Let us consider the various stakeholders in Responsible Tourism. One important stakeholder is the domestic tourist: people from different cities across Pakistan who visit Gilgit-Baltistan to experience and enjoy its extraordinary natural beauty.

In your view, what responsibilities do these domestic tourists have? At the same time, I would also like to ask about the responsibilities of the host community.

Later, when I turn to Mr Tajir Hussain, I would like to discuss the role of the government sector, civil society, and public institutions—such as the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly, local government, district administration, and other relevant agencies—in promoting Responsible Tourism.

But first, Ms Shehnaz, over the past few years the number of domestic tourists visiting Gilgit-Baltistan has increased dramatically.

If you had a message or a request for these visitors, what advice would you like to give them?

Ms Shehnaz Gul

First of all, thank you very much for initiating this discussion on such an important topic.

Whenever we talk about Hunza, we should recognise that Hunza is a brand in itself.

Historically, tourism has existed here since the days of the Silk Route. In other words, tourism in this region predates the creation of Pakistan.

As far as domestic tourism is concerned, the number of Pakistani visitors to Hunza—and to Gilgit-Baltistan more broadly—has increased tremendously since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Naturally, whenever something positive grows rapidly, it also brings new challenges.

Speaking specifically about Hunza, I have been living here for the past three years.

Based on my observations and personal experience, international tourists have been visiting this region for many years. However, many of the issues we are facing today as a host community simply did not arise during those earlier years. These challenges have become much more evident with the recent surge in domestic tourism.

The **first** issue I would like to highlight is **cultural respect**.

Hunza has its own unique identity. Gilgit-Baltistan has its own unique identity.

Whether you come from Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, or any other part of Pakistan, every region has its own culture, worldview, traditions, and way of life.

Similarly, we have our own culture, our own values, and our own social norms.

When you visit this region, it is important to respect those social norms and values, whether they relate to women or to religion.

Religiously, this region is also highly diverse. Across Gilgit-Baltistan you will find Sunni Muslims, [Isna Ashari] Shia Muslims, Ismaili [Shia Muslims], Noorbakhshis (Sufi Muslims), and members of the Christian community. We are a genuinely diverse society.

However, when visitors come here and begin asking questions such as, "Why do you pray in this way?" or "Why do you fold your hands or leave them by your sides during prayer?" or raise similar issues, I would like to make a sincere request to everyone listening—especially to domestic tourists who visit this region.

Please begin by accepting and respecting the diversity of this region, rather than forming negative judgements about it. You are, of course, entitled to your own views in your own communities. However, if you have come here to enjoy the breathtaking natural beauty and peaceful environment of Gilgit-Baltistan, then I urge you to respect the local people, the different communities that live here, their way of life, their social norms, and their values. Only then will you receive the same respect in return. Otherwise, you should not be surprised if your behaviour is met with an equally negative response.

The **second point** I would like to make is that if we compare Gilgit-Baltistan with the rest of Pakistan, the literacy rate here is approximately 99.9% [94-97% in Hunza]. Likewise, in terms of **gender** equality and equal opportunities, women in our region enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy.

Take my own example. I come from a middle-class family, yet my family has never questioned where I travel or why I travel.

While remaining within the framework of our own values, we encourage and support our women in every possible way.

Women here work as carpenters, run restaurants, operate businesses, and participate actively in diverse economic activities.

Whether it is agriculture or any other occupation, women contribute equally to economic production and financial activities.

However, this should never be interpreted to mean that if you see a woman working on the roadside or in a public place, she is somehow easily approachable, or that you have the right to photograph her without her consent or make personal comments about her.

These boundaries must be respected. If you cannot appreciate these aspects of our society, then at least refrain from criticising or misrepresenting them.

Women in our communities move about freely and confidently. Please do not create an environment that makes them feel threatened or unsafe. Our fathers, brothers, and the men in our communities have worked hard to create a safe environment for women.

If your own society has not succeeded in creating such an environment, that does not mean women here should be treated in the same way. Every society has its own upbringing and social values. Our society has been nurtured in a relatively open, trusting, and respectful environment.

The third point I would like to raise concerns **domestic tourism** (i.e., Pakistani tourists).

Since the rapid growth of domestic tourism, visitors have increasingly brought plastic waste into the region.

You may have noticed signboards across Hunza and Gilgit-Baltistan declaring the area to be **Plastic Free**. Yet many of the items visitors bring with them are made of plastic.

People drink bottled water and then throw the empty bottles beside rivers. They discard biscuit wrappers and other packaging indiscriminately. On many occasions, I have personally seen people throwing rubbish out of moving vehicles.

Compared with many other parts of Pakistan, you will notice that there is relatively little litter here. People in this region are highly conscious of cleanliness. Moreover, Islam teaches us the importance of cleanliness.

Therefore, when you are travelling by car, please keep your rubbish with you rather than throwing it onto the roads or into the natural environment.

Whether it is food packaging, plastic bottles, or any other form of waste, dispose of it responsibly.

Otherwise, you are damaging the very natural environment that you have come here to enjoy.

Another issue that has emerged recently is that some domestic tourists seem to believe that simply because they spend money in Hunza or Gilgit-Baltistan, they somehow own the place.

With due respect, I would say that if someone comes here with that mindset, it would be better for them to stay in their own city.

Only a few days ago, there was a very unfortunate incident in which some domestic tourists drew firearms and opened fire, frightening fellow tourists, local residents, and even children.

People do not come here to witness hooliganism. If someone wishes to behave aggressively, they should do so elsewhere—not here. When you visit this region, come as a civilised tourist.

The very fact that people bring weapons into a tourist destination raises serious questions.

In my opinion, the government, the Tourist Police, and the relevant authorities need to give this issue much greater attention. The registration system should also be strengthened so that authorities know what visitors are bringing into the region.

Similarly, some people bring drugs with them while on holiday. They leave cigarette butts scattered everywhere.

Some consume alcohol.

Others even ask local people where they can obtain alcohol or other prohibited substances, assuming that because some local communities are not Muslim, or because of misconceptions about local religious identities, such items must be readily available.

All such behaviour should be avoided.

In the past, families used to visit these places comfortably, and many still do. However, according to my own observations, a number of families have stopped visiting certain destinations because they no longer feel as safe there as they once did, particularly for women.

Large groups of young men often arrive on motorcycles or in convoys of vehicles.

They show little consideration for others or for basic public etiquette.

They harass families.

As a result, not only local residents but other tourists also suffer.

Many of us have seen videos circulating on social media in which tourists harass fellow visitors, leading to arguments, fights, and unnecessary conflicts.

Another very important **point** concerns **road safety**.

Whenever you travel by car or motorcycle in this region, please observe the traffic rules and regulations.

Although our roads have improved considerably over the years, they are not meant for racing.

Dangerous overtaking, driving with high beams at night, and reckless driving are responsible for accidents almost every other day.

The main reason is that many people simply do not follow traffic rules.

If you do not consider yourself a careful and responsible driver, then please do not take unnecessary risks.

These are not the wide, straight roads of your cities. These are mountain roads with sharp bends, many of which run alongside rivers. In many places, the roads have literally been carved into the mountainsides.

There is simply no room for reckless driving here. If you come as a responsible tourist, you will always be welcomed. Otherwise, ten years from now, this region may no longer remain as beautiful or as peaceful—for either visitors or those who live here.

Another issue I would like to mention is the way some tourists treat our **historical sites and public infrastructure**.

Some visitors write their names, love messages, or other graffiti on historical monuments and bridges.

For example, we have a very beautiful and historic bridge, yet people write their names and personal messages all over it.

Please do not do this.

Across the world, countries invest enormous effort in preserving their historical heritage.

We, too, have mountains that contain rock carvings and inscriptions dating back thousands of years.

From an archaeological perspective, we have sites with ancient inscriptions in Sanskrit and several other languages.

If people continue writing on these monuments, chemicals have to be used to remove the graffiti, which in turn damages the original historical remains. People do not come here to read your love stories. They come here to experience and appreciate our historical and cultural heritage. Please leave these places preserved for future visitors.

Another issue that frequently appears on social media concerns **fruit orchards**.

Some visitors walk into orchards and begin picking fruit without permission.

Local people have never suggested that visitors should not enjoy our fruit.

However, it is important to understand that these trees take many years to grow, mature, and produce fruit.

They require years of care, hard work, and dedication. When you break a branch, you are not simply taking one piece of fruit—you are damaging the tree itself. So if you wish to enjoy local fruit, please do so respectfully.

Another problem is that some **tourists stop their vehicles** wherever they like.

Groups of people stand in the middle of the road simply to take photographs.

This disrupts traffic, inconveniences local residents, and creates difficulties for both domestic and international visitors.

Often people do not realise how many others are affected by their actions.

At any moment an emergency could arise, or an accident could occur.

That is why it is important to act responsibly, even in seemingly small matters.

One final point. Some domestic tourists arrive here with the impression that **local people themselves are a tourist attraction.**

They ask, "Show us your house. Take us inside. Let us see how you live."

I would simply ask: how many times have you invited people from Gilgit-Baltistan into your own homes in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, or wherever you live? How often have you extended the same hospitality to them? So why should you expect such access when you come here?

If someone invites you into their home, then by all means accept the invitation.

But do not make people feel uncomfortable or insecure. Please respect people's privacy.

Do not enter neighbourhoods or private homes simply because you are a tourist. Nor should you ask deeply personal questions of people you have only just met.

As a nation, I believe we all need to reflect more carefully on our public etiquette and our conduct towards others.

Dr Jawad Syed

Everything you have said is both insightful and extremely sensible.

I believe these are important messages for all of us, particularly for those who visit Gilgit-Baltistan as domestic tourists.

If the growing number of domestic tourists is causing inconvenience and distress to local communities, then I, along with every other responsible tourist, must recognise and acknowledge that.

We certainly do not want Gilgit-Baltistan to suffer the same fate as some of Pakistan's other tourist destinations.

There was a time when families visited those places with great enthusiasm because they were exceptionally beautiful. There were crystal-clear rivers, magnificent mountains rising behind them, and lush green meadows. Today, however, many of those places are characterised by unattractive buildings, pollution, and polluted rivers.

As you rightly said, God forbid that Gilgit-Baltistan should experience the same future. In that context, I would like to ask whether the local community also has a role to play.

Do local people themselves also have responsibilities?

Ms Shehnaz Gul

Yes, absolutely.

There are several points I would like to make in this regard. One of the major changes occurred after the COVID-19 pandemic.

If I compare the situation with the period before 2015, there were relatively few hotels in the region, but those that existed generally maintained good standards.

They employed professional staff. They had trained tour guides.

These guides not only introduced visitors to the region but also informed them about local customs, regulations, and cultural sensitivities.

However, after 2015, local people also began constructing large numbers of small hotels and guest houses.

Today, you can find everything from a single-room guest house to hotels with hundreds or even thousands of rooms [across many small hotels in this region].

Construction has expanded at such a rapid pace that **concrete buildings are now appearing everywhere.**

This raises an important question. Are so many concrete buildings really suitable for our climate and natural environment? Every new hotel also increases the demand for resources.

It requires water. It requires drainage systems. It requires sanitation services.

If a particular destination has the capacity to accommodate only one hundred tourists per day, then we should remain within that limit.

If, purely in pursuit of greater profit, we attempt to bring one thousand tourists into the same area, the pressure on local resources will inevitably become unsustainable.

In that respect, I believe the local community also shares part of the responsibility.

We need to strengthen our capacity before encouraging unlimited tourism.

We need to improve our infrastructure and resources.

We need proper planning to determine how many visitors a destination can realistically accommodate during a tourism season.

Every visitor requires water. Every visitor requires sanitation services. Every visitor consumes energy. Every visitor also generates waste and pollution that must be managed. All of these issues require careful planning well in advance.

Dr Jawad Syed

If I have understood you correctly, you are suggesting that the uncontrolled construction of hotels also needs to be regulated.

Ms Shehnaz Gul

Yes, construction itself has become a major issue. The land belongs to local people, but they are either leasing it out or selling it. People from outside the region then come and build hotels. Their primary objective is to do business.

They are generally not concerned about what happens to the local culture, what happens to the land, or what long-term consequences their activities may have for this region.

They come here, invest, earn profits, and eventually leave.

One solution is to ensure the effective enforcement of existing laws, according to which **people from outside Gilgit-Baltistan are not permitted to purchase land here.**

Similarly, there should be much stricter controls over long-term lease arrangements.

Whenever an unfortunate situation arises, it is ultimately the local community that bears the consequences.

Gradually, people from outside acquire control over land through various means. First one kanal, then another, then another.

Over time, most of the land in an entire neighbourhood may come under their control.

Another issue I would like to raise openly is **money laundering through land transactions.**

As a result, land prices have increased artificially.

At first, local people believe they are benefiting because land that was once worth a few million rupees is now selling for tens of millions.

However, the long-term consequence is that when a local resident later wishes to build a house in their own area, they can no longer afford to buy land there because prices have become prohibitively expensive.

These artificially inflated land prices have become a major challenge for local communities.

In my opinion, the simplest solution is to **tighten the regulations governing land registration and sale.**

Personally, I believe that people from outside Hunza should not be permitted to purchase land here.

Similarly, if land is leased, then instead of granting leases for twenty, fifty, or even one hundred years, the entire leasing framework should be reviewed.

Dr Jawad Syed

So, if I understand you correctly, you are making two recommendations. First, there should be effective restrictions on the sale of land. Second, where leases are granted, they should be limited—perhaps to a maximum of five years. Furthermore, local ownership or participation should remain at no less than eighty per cent.

The objective would be to avoid a situation in which, in the future, the indigenous people of Hunza, Gilgit, or Ghizer become minorities in their own homeland, as has happened in some parts of the world where local populations have gradually lost control over their own resources.

In other words, we do not want a situation where people eventually say, "This used to be our land; this used to be our valley; yet today we no longer have access to it."

Is that essentially the situation you are seeking to prevent?

Ms Shehnaz Gul

Yes, exactly.

Another important point is that we already have a **Community Conservation Programme**.

Through this programme, approximately eighty per cent of the revenue generated from trophy hunting is returned to the local community. If we look at the broader picture, tourism is one of the most important sectors of the Gilgit-Baltistan economy.

However, if the businesses generated by tourism are no longer owned by local people, and only outsiders benefit financially, then Gilgit-Baltistan will be left with nothing except waste, pollution, the impacts of climate change, increasing pressure on glaciers, and rising carbon dioxide emissions.

The real economic benefits will simply flow elsewhere. As we discussed earlier, uncontrolled commercialisation—particularly in the name of hospitality—needs to be managed.

Similarly, instead of constructing buildings primarily from cement and concrete, we should promote local architectural styles and locally available building materials.

Construction that requires the destruction of forests should be avoided. If you stand here and look around, it becomes immediately apparent that buildings in this region should be designed to suit the local climate.

Unfortunately, many buildings are being constructed purely for commercial reasons, even though they require far greater heating and consume much more energy.

Even at this moment, if you listen carefully, you can hear generators running at almost every hotel.

That, in itself, is a source of pollution.

We should also ask ourselves whether generators are really the only solution.

If the money currently being spent every day on fuel for generators were instead invested in alternative sources of energy, we could achieve far more sustainable outcomes.

Another point I would like to highlight relates to **Sustainable Tourism**.

If we take the example of Switzerland, there was a time when tourism grew very rapidly.

Eventually, its negative consequences began to emerge. They learned from those mistakes. For a period, they imposed restrictions on tourism.

During that time, they focused on planning, improved their infrastructure, and strengthened their capacity.

We, too, need to learn from such successful examples.

Local stakeholders should not simply appeal to the government; they should actively demand legislation for Sustainable Tourism.

Once such laws and regulations are in place, local communities should also play an active role in their implementation.

Many people here convert parts of their homes into small guest houses.

However, there is often no formal registration of their guests. No one knows who the visitors are. No one verifies their identity.

A guest could potentially be a criminal. They could pose a threat to the host family.

They might even be carrying illegal items. For that reason, local communities should work together with the government to ensure proper registration procedures and effective implementation of the relevant regulations.

Unless local communities cooperate with the government, effective enforcement of these laws will remain difficult.

Dr Jawad Syed

Would you also suggest that there should be limits on the number of hotels, guest houses, and tourists?

Ms Shehnaz Gul

Yes, absolutely.

Every destination has a maximum carrying capacity. If people consume water, energy, and other natural resources beyond that capacity, then there should be additional taxes or penalties.

Those who consume more resources should also bear the additional costs. Every destination has limits to what it can sustainably accommodate.

Dr Jawad Syed

For example, in Latin America there are historical sites that are regarded as sacred because of their civilisational significance.

When I visited some years ago, I was told that only a fixed number of visitors are allowed to enter each day. The reason is that exceeding that limit would damage both the local ecosystem and the cultural heritage.

Hunza is also a relatively small destination.

Do you think a similar limit should be placed on the number of tourists entering the area each day?

Ms Shehnaz Gul

Fundamentally, there is only one main entry route into Hunza. Everyone enters through that point.

That makes it possible to monitor incoming visitors. It is at that point that authorities can check who is bringing plastic into the region.

They can also check what kinds of waste people are carrying. A modest entry tax could also be collected there. Likewise, it would be entirely feasible to establish a maximum number of visitors permitted to enter the region each day.

I believe such a system is entirely achievable.

Dr Jawad Syed

You have presented a very comprehensive perspective.

You have explained not only the responsibilities of tourists, but also those of the local community.

Now I would like to turn to **Mr Tajir Hussain**.

Mr Tajir, thank you for your patience.

Building on what Ms Shehnaz has just discussed, she has argued that the local community also has important responsibilities.

However, from my perspective, the key question is: who will actually carry out these responsibilities, and how should they be implemented in practice?

What role should be played by the local community, local government, local administration, opinion leaders, non-governmental organisations, and development agencies in making Responsible Tourism a reality?

Mr Tajir Hussain

Thank you very much.

First of all, I would like to thank both of you for organising this discussion on such an important subject.

When we talk about **Sustainable Tourism** or **Responsible Tourism**, we are referring to a process that involves all stakeholders.

These include the host community, tourists, government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and all other relevant institutions.

However, the fundamental question is: who is going to bell the cat?

If we consider Hunza specifically, we are faced with numerous challenges.

Looking at the current situation, I believe there are five or six fundamental steps that could immediately improve the tourism sector in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Whenever I conduct research on tourism and obtain data from the Department of Tourism, I am told that there are approximately fifteen thousand tourists in Hunza on a given day.

Yet the department itself cannot say with certainty whether Hunza even has accommodation capacity for fifteen thousand visitors.

That reflects the current state of our tourism administration. Interestingly, since 2004, we have not had a truly effective system of local government.

What exists is the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly. In 2014, a number of Pakistan's leading tourism experts came together to prepare a draft Tourism Policy.

Around forty-five experts contributed to that exercise.

Yet, despite the passage of more than a decade, the policy has still not been implemented.

In practical terms, we still do not have a functioning tourism policy. The government's first responsibility is to enact legislation. The second is to implement that legislation. The third is to monitor and evaluate its implementation.

However, when there is no policy in the first place, there is very little that can be implemented or monitored.

Dr Syed, a few moments ago you made a very important observation.

You suggested that Responsible Tourism can only succeed if every tourist entering Gilgit-Baltistan is informed beforehand about what they should and should not do.

In other words, visitors should be provided with clear guidance on the **dos and don'ts**.

They should be informed that this is a culturally diverse region. They should learn about its cultural heritage. They should understand the sensitivity of its ecosystem.

They should also know what kinds of behaviour are expected of them. At present, tourists generally arrive without any such information. They simply behave as they wish.

While I agree with many of the concerns that Ms Shehnaz has raised, I do not believe that tourists alone should be blamed. The reason is that, throughout the world, tourism is generally associated with leisure.

When people travel for leisure, they often assume that they are free to do whatever they like.

That is why providing information and creating awareness is fundamentally the responsibility of government.

Visitors should be informed in advance that Gilgit-Baltistan is a culturally diverse region, that it possesses a rich cultural heritage, and that its ecosystem deserves respect and protection.

Last year, a **Plastic-Free** campaign was launched here.

Similar campaigns had also been conducted during the preceding two years.

The Home Department, along with other government agencies, even carried out inspections and raids on shops in Gilgit. Nevertheless, the campaign was not successful.

The reason was straightforward. Unless you provide people with an affordable alternative, simply banning plastic will not solve the problem.

Whenever a programme is introduced, a practical alternative must also be made available.

This is why I repeatedly argue that we lack proper planning. Ms Shehnaz has just referred to the construction of unattractive buildings. There is virtually no effective monitoring of such developments.

Before approving any new building, the authorities should assess its feasibility.

They should determine whether it is compatible with the local ecology. If the present trend continues, Hunza may no longer be recognised as a destination for nature-based tourism within the next five years.

People have already seen large concrete buildings in Lahore, Karachi, and other major cities.

They do not travel all the way to Hunza to see the same kind of architecture. Unfortunately, however, that is exactly what we are building here.

To date, there has been no effective urban planning. If we are genuinely committed to making tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan sustainable, then comprehensive planning is indispensable.

We need systematic planning. Whenever a new building is proposed, the relevant authorities should inspect it and determine whether it is environmentally sustainable.

We have institutions such as the House Building Finance Corporation that provide loans for construction. People obtain these loans and construct buildings, yet many of these structures fail to meet basic safety standards.

They often lack proper safety measures, emergency exits, and other essential requirements.

Another important issue that has been mentioned is **land leasing and land ownership**.

If we look at the historical context of Gilgit-Baltistan, the **State Subject Rule** once existed here.

Under that law, people from other parts of Pakistan were not permitted to purchase land in the region. However, when the former state system was abolished in 1974, this protection also came to an end.

Dr Syed, you mentioned the example of Australia. If you visit Hunza or some parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, particularly Ghizer, you will notice that many local families now constitute a much smaller proportion of the population than they once did.

Over the past several years, a large number of people from outside the region have settled here.

Whenever I have the opportunity, I draw people's attention to this issue.

Many politically influential families from other parts of Pakistan have acquired long-term leases on land in Gilgit-Baltistan. Who knows? One day a law might be introduced declaring that anyone holding a thirty-year lease is effectively the owner of the land. For that reason, the entire leasing framework needs to be reviewed.

The government has a critical role to play in this regard. If it genuinely wants Gilgit-Baltistan to remain a leading tourism destination, it must introduce appropriate legislation.

We have discussed this issue on many different platforms. We have raised it repeatedly through civil society forums. Considerable effort has been made.

However, until the government introduces appropriate legislation, our efforts will inevitably remain limited.

If we turn to the role of civil society, particularly in Hunza, much of the region's development since 1982 has been driven by non-governmental organisations.

Institutions such as the **Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP)** and other development agencies have made remarkable contributions.

As you know, the reach of the federal government has historically been limited in this part of Pakistan.

We are located in the country's extreme north. Consequently, many of the development achievements we see today owe a great deal to the work of NGOs.

These organisations have played an especially important role in women's empowerment and broader social development.

However, I believe the time has now come for them to become more actively involved in the tourism sector as well.

The most effective contribution they can make is through awareness-building. For example, Ms Shehnaz spoke earlier about the role of host families.

People need to be educated about tourism.

Why do local people sell their land? Because they often do not fully understand the long-term implications for their future.

Every year we welcome millions of tourists, yet we do not fully appreciate the long-term impacts this will have.

We do not know what effects it will have on our culture. We do not know how future generations will be affected.

There is a pressing need for greater knowledge and public awareness on these issues.

That is why education and awareness must become central components of any strategy for sustainable tourism development.

Dr Jawad Syed

Ms Shehnaz argued that the local community also bears some responsibility because local people themselves are selling or leasing their land rather freely. It seems to me that the underlying driver is commercial interest. People naturally want to accumulate more capital.

They want to earn more money in a shorter period of time. For many, the easiest way to do that is by selling or leasing their land. You suggested that the government should regulate this process, perhaps by imposing restrictions such as limiting leases to five years.

But could the government or non-governmental organisations also create alternative opportunities so that people can generate income without having to sell their land? After all, everyone needs a livelihood.

What role can the government and NGOs play in providing such alternatives?

Mr Tajir Hussain

That is a very important question.

Why do people sell their land? As you rightly pointed out, they need capital.

They want to improve their standard of living. That is precisely why I have been emphasising the importance of awareness. Suppose I own a piece of land, and Ms Shehnaz also owns a piece of land.

Instead of selling them, we could establish a partnership. That, too, is a viable business model.

Secondly, the government should provide soft loans. The land already belongs to local people.

The government could accept that land as collateral and provide loans on favourable terms. This would enable local people to establish businesses on their own land rather than selling it.

For example, if I own one kanal of land in Karimabad, the government could provide me with an appropriate loan.

At the same time, it could offer technical guidance on how to develop a project that is environmentally compatible and consistent with the local ecosystem.

Tourism development should not be confined to hotel construction alone. For example, projects related to fruit conservation, fruit-based enterprises and orchard management could also become valuable tourism enterprises.

Unfortunately, we have reduced tourism almost entirely to hotels and guest houses.

Whenever I conduct research here, people assume that anyone who owns a hotel is automatically part of the tourism industry.

That is simply not true. Tourism products also include local cuisine. They include local traditions and cultural practices.

All of these form an integral part of the tourism experience.

Dr Jawad Syed

Let me now move towards the concluding part of our discussion. Both of you are affiliated with Karakoram International University, while I am from LUMS.

This suggests that universities also have an important responsibility. If we want to empower local communities—particularly our graduates—how can we equip them to create employment and business opportunities for themselves?

And those opportunities need not be confined to the hotel sector alone. Are there other sectors that could both generate better economic opportunities and promote sustainability, rather than undermine it?

What are your thoughts on that?

Mr Tajir Hussain

That is a very important question. I have been teaching at the university for the past five years. In my opinion, the greatest need is to review what we are currently teaching our students.

At present, we teach tourism models and destination management. However, these concepts have very little connection with our local context.

Our curriculum contains very little local content and very few local case studies. That is a significant gap. One of our students initiated a very interesting project.

He would take tourists directly into orchards and invite them to pick fresh fruit from the trees themselves.

It was a wonderful experience. If one kilogram of fruit sells for two hundred rupees in the market, that does not necessarily mean that the fruit itself is the product.

The real product is the experience that the visitor enjoys. I think that is an excellent example of value creation.

In my opinion, universities should develop much stronger collaboration with the tourism industry.

We should teach our students how to develop new tourism products at the local level that promote Sustainable Tourism.

Dr Jawad Syed

Your region possesses extraordinary cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity—something that is rarely found elsewhere in Pakistan in quite the same way.

For example, one may find people from different Islamic schools of thought praying together in the same mosque.

Although there are occasionally divisive forces that seek to undermine this harmony, the local community, by and large, continues to uphold a culture of mutual respect.

I have often wondered whether visitors could be invited not only to see the landscape but also to understand this remarkable diversity. For example, they could learn about the Noorbakhshi tradition. They could learn about the Ismaili tradition. They could learn about the Twelver Shia tradition. They could learn about the Sunni tradition.

Similarly, they could be introduced to the region's different languages—Burushaski, Shina, and Wakhi. They could explore how these languages differ from one another and what they have in common.

I believe that this, in itself, could become a fascinating learning experience. People could spend two or three days here simply exploring these aspects of the region.

As a result, they would gain a much deeper appreciation of the society instead of forming quick judgements or making superficial comments. They would better understand how local people live, what their culture represents, and what traditions they cherish.

Could this also become the basis for new entrepreneurial ventures?

For example, some of our students and alumni in Lahore have developed initiatives that offer guided walking tours through the Old City. They introduce visitors to Muharram rituals. They explain Mughal architecture and heritage. In other words, they promote cultural tourism.

Similarly, Gilgit-Baltistan could develop cultural tourism. It could also develop tourism centred on medicinal plants. Wildlife tourism presents another important opportunity.

Mr Tajir Hussain

Absolutely. As long as we continue to equate tourism solely with hotels and hospitality, we will continue moving in the wrong direction.

Tourism is far more than hotels. Only when we take into account all the dimensions of Responsible Tourism and Sustainable Tourism will we be able to realise their full potential.

God has blessed this region with extraordinary natural resources. We have magnificent rivers. We have immense opportunities for adventure tourism. There is potential for rafting. There is potential for rock climbing. There is potential for trekking.

Dr Jawad Syed

Thank you both very much for giving us your valuable time. I know that you have another engagement shortly. You have both shared thoughtful and highly valuable insights. I am sincerely grateful to both of you.

Indicative Discussion Questions

1. What are the key concerns and challenges related to tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan highlighted by the panelists? Which of these appear most urgent, and why?
2. What responsibilities do tourists and local communities respectively have in making tourism more responsible and sustainable?
3. What steps should the government and local administration take to better regulate tourism, infrastructure, construction, waste, land use, and visitor numbers?
4. Should Gilgit-Baltistan restrict tourist numbers, hotel construction, land sales, or long-term leases to outside investors? What are the potential benefits, risks, and unintended consequences of such restrictions?
5. How can tourism move beyond hotels and guest houses to create innovative local enterprises and experiences based on culture, religious and linguistic diversity, orchards, cuisine, wildlife, medicinal plants, and adventure tourism?
6. What role should universities, schools, and colleges play in promoting responsible and sustainable tourism through curricula, local case studies, research, entrepreneurship education, and community engagement?