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Sustaining Social Cohesion:

Community-Led Mediation by the Muqami Ittehad Committee in Toba Tek Singh

Case Study
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Introduction

The Aawaz II programme works across Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to address harmful social norms, promote inclusion and strengthen citizen–state engagement, particularly for marginalised groups including women, transgender persons, persons with disabilities and religious minorities. Through community-based platforms such as Special Interest Groups (SIGs), Village Forums (VFs) and Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), the programme creates safe spaces for dialogue, awareness and collective action while enabling individuals to engage with state institutions. Within Aawaz II's approach to social cohesion, there is a strong emphasis on building trust and harmony between and within faith communities, preventing exclusion and discrimination against religious minorities and equipping mixed-faith, locally-rooted platforms to identify and de-escalate tensions before they fracture communities.

Equally central is the programme's emphasis on sustainability: ensuring that the trust, capacities and relationships built through Aawaz II continue to deliver social cohesion outcomes after the programme has formally ended. In this spirit, Muqami (local) Ittehad Committees were established as village-level bodies to promote social cohesion, interfaith harmony and tolerance. Each committee brings together 5–6 active Muslim and non-Muslim community members, including women, youth, persons with disabilities and transgender persons alongside 2–3 faith leaders representing the different faiths and sects in the village. The committees meet monthly in a neutral, safe venue to review local tensions, respond to early warnings of disputes and prevent conflicts from escalating into violence. Their work is coordinated by four raabtakaars (focal persons: one male, two female and one faith leader), who, when needed, link the community to AAC Resource Persons, government officials, or Meesaq centres if in Punjab.

Against this backdrop, this case study highlights the experience of the Muqami (local) Ittehad Committee in Toba Tek Singh, a mixed-faith body drawn from Aawaz II Village Forum members, which mediated an escalating dispute among three Christian denominations. The case study reflects the core objectives of Aawaz II: promoting social cohesion, enabling behaviour change and embedding community-led conflict resolution that endures beyond the life of the programme. The committee's members first engaged with Aawaz II as Village Forum members and trained EWS-ERM focal persons, then carried that role forward through the Ittehad Committee, prepared to resolve disputes and serve their community after the programme's closure.

Background and context

Development literature broadly conceives of sustainability as the continuation of benefits and outcomes after external assistance has been withdrawn, a framing reflected in the OECD–DAC's inclusion of sustainability as one of its six core criteria for evaluating development interventions (OECD, 2021). A recurring finding across studies of community-based programming and donor exit is that sustainability is rarely an end-stage event but depends on choices made throughout an intervention (Scheirer, 2005). Scholarship on exit strategies distinguishes between phasing down, phasing out and phasing over, and consistently associates durable outcomes with the early transfer of ownership to local actors and existing institutions, rather than reliance on parallel, project-created structures that tend to collapse once funding ceases (Rogers & Coates, 2015). A complementary strand drawing on social capital theory, particularly the distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital, holds that collective action endures where programmes strengthen relationships across social divides and between communities and the state. (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) The persistence of behaviour change, similarly, is understood to rest on new practices becoming routinised in everyday life rather than dependent on external facilitation (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

Aawaz II's approach reflects these principles in practice. Recognising that social cohesion required a dedicated platform to endure beyond the programme, Aawaz II established the Muqami Ittehad Committee as a deliberately multi-faith body whose primary mandate is interfaith social cohesion, with mediation of other community disputes as a secondary function. Crucially, the Toba Tek Singh case shows how communities themselves evolved this design to best suit local sustainability needs, combining trained Village Forum members with wider village representatives and ensuring the committee retained its interfaith agenda at the centre of its work. By drawing on already trusted village members, embedding the committee within standing Aawaz II structures and grounding the platform in cross-faith relationships built over years of engagement, the programme institutionalised precisely the conditions the literature associates with sustained outcomes. As a result, the individuals who mediated the inter-denominational dispute are community members who will remain present to resolve new disputes and serve as the community's first point of contact after the programme's closure.

The Case

A Muqami Ittehad Committee was set up in Toba Tek Singh. The Programme Coordinator for Idara-e-Taleem-O-Aagahi (ITA), a District Partner in Toba Tek Singh, Mohsin (a Muslim) explained that the programme deliberately created the Muqami Ittehad Committee, a dedicated platform whose sole focus would be social cohesion, on the reasoning that minority issues receive less attention from government and the wider community than majority issues do.

> *"We formed the Muqami Ittehad Committee so that minority concerns would receive the same level of attention and facilitation that majority concerns usually get, making social cohesion a dedicated focus, not an afterthought."*
>
> — Mohsin, Programme Coordinator

In one village of Toba Tek Singh, the community chose to include the most active Village Forum participants to lead the Ittehad Committee. Eight core members were drawn from the most active Village Forum participants. The committee was led by female and male resource persons and included focal persons of Aawaz II's early warning and early response mechanism (EWS-ERM) as well. These EWS-ERM focal persons have now become full members of the Ittehad Committee, not a separate layer: they serve simultaneously as the committee's early warning nodes and as its link to government departments, drawing on the institutional relationships built through their participation in monthly citizen engagement meetings and thematic consultations with duty bearers during the programme. The committee ensured religious leaders from both Muslim and Christian communities were present, in line with the demographic makeup of the village.

> *"After Aawaz ended, the programme was no longer running, and the financial support was gone. So, we brought together the active people including religious leaders, focal persons, and active members of the village forum. The eight of us formed this committee so that if any problem arose, we could resolve it at the village level ourselves."*
>
> — Nimra Riaz, Resource Person

Members expressed their commitment to keep working for their community after Aawaz II ended, having seen first-hand how dialogue and interfaith engagement had transformed relationships in their village. They wanted social cohesion to remain a living practice in everyday community life. The committee was formed and held its first session in December 2025. While initially the committee met monthly, after the program closure, they have decided to meet on a case-by-case basis , convening whenever a dispute or community concern requires collective attention. This convening typically happens in the home of one of its members or at the local mosque, which has served

as a neutral shared venue. In the programme's last six months, the Programme Coordinator and the Resource Persons worked on developing the capacity of the members, specifically in how to approach government departments independently once external support was withdrawn. This was a skill they had learnt from their prior interactions with Aawaz II community platforms and referral systems. The programme had previously been facilitating 10–20 citizen engagement meetings each month, linking Village Forum members and focal persons directly with government departments and had helped in embedding community members into existing state structures such as the Child Protection and Social Welfare committees, the DPO office, Meesaq Centre and Tahaffuz Centre, in line with the Aawaz II mandate. Alongside these meetings, EWS-ERM focal persons, served as the committee's early warning nodes, participated in structured thematic consultations with duty bearers from departments including health, education and NADRA, building the direct institutional relationships that now allow the committee to escalate minority concerns independently. Continuing in the same spirit, the team focused specifically on sustainability during the formation of the Ittehad Committees, ensuring the members understood it a mechanism for carrying forward the infrastructure Aawaz II had built for social cohesion and tolerance.

The committee's credibility rested on a foundation of visible inter-faith trust built over years of Aawaz II engagement. Although the village has a Muslim majority,, for eighteen months, the Aawaz Aagahi Centre of the village had operated in a Christian household. Only in recent months has it relocated to a Muslim household, whose owner offered the baithak (drawing room space) free of charge despite the AAC being led by a Christian female Resource Person, thereby continuing the same spirit of the prior space, to continue the work. Through this embedding of the AAC in interfaith community settings, reciprocal Muslim–Christian visits had become ordinary, particularly meaningful during condolence or congratulatory occasions. This lived demonstration that people of different faiths could host, trust and support one another made it possible for the committee to mediate sensitive religious disputes.

> *"She is Muslim and I am Christian; she could have refused to let a Christian work in her home. Instead, she said we were like her own daughters, and gave the space without rent so the work would not stop."*
>
> — Nimra Riaz, Resource Person, Aagahi Centre

The Emerging Dispute

The village's three Christian groups, Roman Catholic, Church of Pakistan and the FG (Full Gospel) Church had long worshipped together in the village's single church, which is registered to the Church of Pakistan. While otherwise harmonious, differences in ritual had long created underlying laden frictions amongst them: Catholic and Church of Pakistan worshippers recited the 'Salami Maryam' and observed certain practices that the FG Church rejects.

Due to these differences, tension had surfaced previously during the church's construction over the church's legal ownership and naming rights. The construction to expand the church was to be funded through contributions from all combined Christian community members of the village, but funds raised fell short of what was needed. The FG Church members offered to cover the entire shortfall themselves, with the support of their ministry, on the condition that the church be transferred into their name. The wider Christian community did not agree with one denomination taking charge of the church. Instead, they arrived at a collective solution of increasing the per-household contribution so that the remaining funds could be raised from within the community itself, without altering the church's registration. While this disagreement was resolved at the time, it sowed the seeds of further conflict to come.

Against this backdrop, from around October 2025, these underlying tensions began to escalate into a new dispute. The FG Church, the

smallest of the three groups, comprising roughly seven or eight households, pressed to break away, worship separately and build its own church.,It also held one separate service in the period before Christmas. With Christmas approaching and new attendees expected, religious leaders feared a visible split, a fracturing of the congregation and the possible escalation of the dispute, including police involvement, if the matter were left unresolved.

The Response: Community-Led Mediation

The issue first reached Mohsin through the programme's early warning system. Nimra, the Resource Person, was approached by several community members, particularly women women in the village, who expressed concerns that the congregation was beginning to divide.. After verifying the information through multiple meetings with community members, she raised the matter with her Community Facilitator (CF), who in turn brought it to Mohsin's attention. To better understand the situaion, Mohsin called Nimra to the office and held a detailed meeting with her, also attended by the CF. Nimra emphasised the importance of maintaining a cohesive singular service to Mohsin and underlined the community's need for dialogue to handle the strife.

The first attempt to resolve the dispute came through the Village Forum, with help from the Community Facilitator and the Resource Persons. The team decided that the best way to address the dispute was to take it back to the village itself. They invited members of the Christian community from all denominations to sit together and talk through what was happening, and a dialogue was convened.

Rather than opening with the dispute itself, the CF first led a session on social cohesion, what it means, and what communities stand to gain from living together in samaji ham-aahangi (social harmony). Only after establishing this shared foundation did the discussion turn to the issue at hand. Each person present was invited to share their perspective, and one by one, they explained how the dispute appeared from where they stood.

The team did not impose a solution from the outside. They turned the question back to the community itself: what, in their view, should the resolution look like? It was the community members' suggestion that there should be no separate church, that ultimately shaped the way forward, and through that process, the dispute was resolved.

> *"We first held a session on social cohesion, what it is, and its benefits. Then we said there is an issue in our community. Everyone gave their view, and then we asked them to tell us the solution. Through their own suggestion, we resolved it."*
>
> — Mohsin, Programme Coordinator (ITA)

The solution that came out of the dialogue was both practical and meaningful: the three Christian denominations agreed to pray together in one church again. For a religious minority community in Toba Tek Singh, this decision mattered far beyond the dispute itself. When a minority group is divided from within, it becomes weaker, its voice gets smaller, its unity breaks down and it becomes more vulnerable to pressures from outside. By choosing to share one church, the three groups turned a point of conflict into a sign of unity. They showed that being part of one Christian community mattered more than the differences between their denominations.

However, the agreement proved short-lived. The plan worked for only a week or two before the tensions came back. The initial dialogue had produced a surface agreement, but had not addressed the deeper source of the push for separation. An influential figure within the FG Church (referred to here as the FG influential figure) continued to drive the call for a separate church, and with the backing of a small number within the congregation, pursued formal steps to establish one. While the majority of FG households, including the family that led the FG mission in the village, had not fundamentally opposed worshipping together, this influential figure's persistent pressure kept

the dispute alive. In response, the Church of Pakistan, in whose name the existing church is registered, went to the district court and obtained a stay order, blocking the construction of any new church in the village.

At this point, the Muqami Ittehad Committee stepped in and took a different approach. The Committee brought in Muslim religious leaders alongside Christian pastors and the village elders, and grounded the conversation in faith itself. They sat together, opened the Bible and used scripture to remind everyone that unity mattered more than division. The Committee also made a careful choice: rather than leaving out the people who were stirring up the conflict, or those who didn't want peace, they invited them in. They sat them down in the dialogue and talked to them directly, explaining how the dispute would only grow if it wasn't settled, how outside actors like the police might get involved and how the whole Christian community in the village would suffer because of it. After this conversation, the three denominations agreed on the final solution: they would keep praying together in one church, as they had for generations.

> *"We seated all three pastors together and held the meeting inside the church, and we brought in the elders who had built the church before us. All three pastors spoke, and we agreed: one day is theirs, one day is ours. But we will all pray in the same church"*
>
> — Gul Zaman, Church Committee member and Ittehad Committee focal person

The dialogue also made clear that the conflict had been driven principally by one individual: the FG influential figure whose sustained pressure for separation had restarted the dispute after the first dialogue. The committee collectively decided that this person's transfer from the village was the appropriate resolution. Crucially, this decision was not driven from outside: ordinary FG households, including those who led the FG mission, had not fundamentally supported the push for a separate church and were willing to accept the outcome. Once the influential figure was transferred, the situation stabilised and the congregation returned to worshipping together.

Farhan Javed, the FG Church representative, attributed the resolution to the sustained effort of two people in particular: Nimra and Gul Zaman. "They held many meetings in our village," he observed, "they guided everyone — that this is right, this is not right." The Programme Coordinator corroborated this, pointing to the committee's composition as the first decisive factor: it brought together the actual leaders of each denomination, Christian pastors and Muslim community figures alike, rather than relying on outsiders. These individuals were trusted and respected by the community. The second factor was the communication skill of the Resource Person trained under Aawaz II, who carried the dialogue between parties who were initially unwilling to speak to one another. From the beginning, Nimra held small-group meetings with women to understand the issue and encouraged them to hold discussions with the men. She also held meetings with different denominations to address misunderstandings.

> *"The committee's role was tremendous, because it contained all the leaders themselves of the Christian community and the Muslim community. That, and the resource person Nimra's communication skill and a proactive stance, were key to resolving the dispute."*
>
> — Mohsin, Programme Coordinator (ITA)

Outcome: A Peaceful Christmas and Sustained Cohesion

The dispute was resolved within December, before Christmas. Although the FG Church had held one separate service in the pre-Christmas period, the Christmas service itself, the most significant of the year, was conducted jointly, and the congregation has continued to worship together on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. As of May 2026, no recurrence has been reported. In the words of focal person Gul Zaman, the three groups "are living together, in agreement"; Resource Person Nimra confirms that "so far, everything is running smoothly."

> *"Now almost the whole matter is resolved. Everyone worships in one church, on Sunday from 10 to 1. Everything is completely fine now."*
>
> — Farhan Javed, FG Church representative

Resolving the dispute before Christmas prevented a visible public split within an already small religious minority community at its most significant religious observance of the year. It also preserved the sense of collective identity that community members had repeatedly described as essential to maintaining their voice and resilience within the wider village.

Sustaining the Gains: The Ittehad Committee Beyond Aawaz II

The Toba Tek Singh experience demonstrates that the committee's work did not end with the close of Aawaz II.. The people who resolved the dispute were Aawaz II Village Forum members, operating through the Muqami Ittehad Committee, and they have continued this work after the programme's formal close. Since then, the committee has continued to handle new issues that have arisen within the community, since the programme ended:

- A water-supply quarrel between two women was mediated by focal persons Nimra and Village Forum member Mubeena into a shared-access arrangement, after the dispute had drawn a crowd and risked widening.
- A systemic birth-registration crisis: Union Councils no longer accept church birth records, leaving many children, particularly those from Catholic families, without B-forms and unable to enrol in school. The committee now helps families register using the date of birth recorded on church papers and accompanies them through the lambardar (village-level administrative official) and Union Council. The committee had earlier raised the issue at the District Forum, where the Union Council chairman agreed to assist.
- Registration for government schemes and the screening of fraudulent ones (minority card and Himmat Card), where committee members guide women through verification and application process.

Trust is the engine of this continuity. Community members now come to verify information with focal persons before acting, because they know the committee's links to government departments. Women approach focal persons at their homes on their own initiative, a notable shift from before Aawaz II's engagement in the community.

> *"If someone has had a good experience with you, if their difficulty has been eased in a hard moment, they come back to you again, because they trust you.. That is why people keep coming to the Ittehad Committee and the Resource Person Nimra; they know their concerns will be heard and addressed."*
>
> — Mubeena Kausar, Village Forum Member

The continuity has been reinforced institutionally: members have been embedded into standing government committees (including child protection and social welfare) and linked to the Tahaffuz Centre, the district police office and NADRA, BISP and Union Council services, allowing the regularrhythm of engagement carries on independently of Aawaz II.

Why This Case Matters: Learning for Future Programming

The case study emphasises how locally-rooted, community-owned mechanisms can sustain behaviour change, prevent conflict and continue to function after the formal close of the programme.

> *"Even now they are working. In my view, the exit has not really happened, because those people are still part of the committee and working on these very issues."*
>
> — Mohsin, Programme Coordinator (ITA)

The case demonstrates thata local committee comprising people the community already trusted allowed conflict-prevention and behaviour-change work to persist beyond donor funding.

It also shows that the model can handle a dispute within a single faith community, not just between Muslims and non-Muslims. This kind of tension is often overlooked, since people usually expect conflicts to happen between different religions rather than within one. The fact that the Committee was able to step in here shows how flexible and adaptable the approach is.

It also shows that real, visible interfaith support at the local level, such as a Muslim community member offering his space to host the Aagahi Centre free of charge is exactly what builds the trust needed to handle sensitive religious matters. When people see different faiths standing together in everyday ways, they are more likely to accept the Committee as a fair and credible space to bring their disputes to.

Drawing on these lessons, the recommendations for future programming focus deliberately on marginalised groups who receive less state attention and fewer platforms to raise their concerns. These recommendations include:

- Strengthen community–government linkages by embedding community representatives within existing government committees and referral mechanisms so engagement continues independently of external facilitation.
- Establish locally owned, representative community structures early in programme implementation and invest in their capacity throughout the programme so they are able to sustain social cohesion and conflict-resolution efforts after donor support ends.
- Select committee members based on demonstrated community trust, ensuring meaningful representation of women, religious leaders, and other respected local actors capable of convening dialogue across social divides.
- Adopt participatory dialogue approaches that prioritise locally generated solutions and actively engage those resistant to reconciliation, rather than excluding them from mediation processes.
- Where feasible, support implementing partners to maintain a sustained presence within programme districts so that community trust, institutional relationships, and locally owned mechanisms are preserved across funding cycles.

Key Lessons Learnt

The Toba Tek Singh case offers important lessons for designing and sustaining community-led social cohesion initiatives, particularly in settings where minority communities have limited opportunities to raise their concerns. Drawing on the evidence presented in this case study, five transferable lessons emerge for programme designers, implementing partners, and donors:Drawing on the evidence presented in this case study, five transferable lessons emerge for programme designers, implementing partners, and donors:

1. **Social cohesion endures after programme closure when ownership is genuinely community-led.** The Ittehad Committee continues to mediate disputes after Aawaz II's closure because its members were already trusted figures in the village. The Village Forum participants, EWS-ERM focal persons and religious leaders who chose to continue the work did so because they had themselves seen what dialogue and interfaith engagement had changed in their community. Sustainability is most durable when ownership is transferred to local actors during the programme, not at its end.

2. **Behaviour change persists when new practices become part of everyday life.** Women now approach focal persons at their homes on their own initiative; families verify information with committee members before acting; communities turn to the committee first rather than to outside actors. These small, routine shifts are the clearest sign that change has taken hold. As a Village Forum member Mubeena observed, once someone's difficulty has been eased, "they come back again and again."

3. **Dialogue, especially with those who oppose reconciliation, is powerful.** The Committee deliberately brought instigators and resisters into the dialogue rather than working around them. They grounded the conversation in faith, opening the Bible together and drawing on the moral authority of elders. Mediation is strongest when no one is sidelined; the dialogue itself becomes the vehicle for changing the behaviour of those who once obstructed it.

4. **Democratic and participatory processes generate solutions that communities are willing to uphold.** The resolution that all three denominations would keep praying together in one church was not imposed. It emerged from a process in which each person was heard, and the community itself proposed the way forward. The same principle was visible earlier, in the church-expansion funding dispute. Solutions owned by those who must live with them are far more likely to hold than those handed down from outside.

5. **Sustainability should be treated as a core design principle, particularly in behaviour change programming.** The Toba Tek Singh experience underlines that behaviour change and social cohesion outcomes take time to embed, and the structures meant to carry them forward are strongest when they are part of the programme's design from the outset. Building mechanisms like the Ittehad Committee into the programme's architecture allows capacities, relationships and community trust the time they need to mature, so that by the time external support is withdrawn, the work is already being led, owned and sustained by the community itself.

Ultimately, the Toba Tek Singh experience illustrates that investing in trusted, community-led structures can enable social cohesion to outlast programme funding. By embedding local ownership, strengthening community–state linkages and fostering inclusive dialogue, Aawaz II has demonstrated an approach that offers valuable lessons for designing sustainable social cohesion and behaviour change programmes in similarly diverse and conflict-sensitive contexts.

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