

Aawaz II

Inclusion, Accountability, Reducing Exploitation

From Tokenism to Transformation

*Understanding the Aawaz II
Citizen-State Engagement Model*

Research Study

May 2026

www.britishcouncil.org

Acknowledgements:

This document is one of a series of research studies commissioned by Aawaz II, British Council. We acknowledge the efforts of Akademos, the research supplier for Aawaz II. The technical guidance and extensive support of the Aawaz II team throughout the process was invaluable. The research would not have been completed without the field support of Aawaz II district and provincial partners. Most of all, we acknowledge the insights, time and contributions of Aawaz II community members. Their spirit of volunteerism and commitment to social change are inspiring.

Disclaimer:

Aawaz II, managed by the British Council and funded by the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), produces programme reports, research, evidence and lessons learned documents. The views and opinions expressed in these documents do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the UK Government, British Council or Aawaz II. For further information, please contact Aawaz II

Contents

Acronyms	v
Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	7
1.1 Project Background	7
1.2 Research Rationale and Objectives	11
1.3 Methodology	12
2. Theoretical Framework and the Context of Governance	15
2.1 Core Analytical Frameworks	15
2.1.1 Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' (1969)	15
2.1.2 Gaventa's Power Cube: Mapping Spaces and Forms of Power	16
2.1.3 Social Accountability: Information as a Precondition for Voice	17
2.1.4 Supporting Theoretical Perspectives	18
2.2 Marginalisation and Intersectionality	19
2.2.1 Gender and Political Participation	19
2.2.2 Religious Minorities and Civic Engagement	20
2.2.3 Disability and Inclusive Participation	20
2.2.4 Transgender Inclusion	21
2.3 Governance Context and Entry Points	21
3. Findings and Analysis	24
3.1 Mechanisms for Meaningful Participation	23
3.2 Pathways and Barriers for Government Integration	31
3.3 Contextual Factors: Enablers and Barriers	36
3.4 Cross-Cutting Issues and Theoretical Implications	40

4. Recommendations	45
4.1 Integrating the Aawaz II ecosystem into government systems	45
4.2 Mechanisms which most effectively ensure meaningful participation.	46
4.3 Supporting the government to deliver results	48
4.4 Specific government entry points	48
5. Conclusion	50
References	52
Appendices	56
Appendix A: Thematic Codebook	56
Appendix B: Methodology and Research Tools	57
Appendix C: Data Collection Summary	61

Acronyms

AAC	Aawaz Aagahi Centre
ACA	Aawaz Change Agent
AC	Assistant Commissioner
ASI	Assistant Sub-Inspector
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
CCAP	Collective Community Action Plan
CEO	Chief Executive Officer (District Education)
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DF	District Forum
DPO	District Police Officer
EWS-ERM	Early Warning System–Early Response Mechanism
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices
KII	Key Informant Interview
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
NCHR	National Commission for Human Rights
PSER	Punjab Socio-Economic Registry
PSLM	Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement
PST	Primary School Teacher
PWD	Person with Disability (or Persons with Disabilities, depending on context)
RP	Resource Person
RTI	Right to Information
SIG	Special Interest Group
SMO	Social Mobilization Officer
VF	Village Forum
VSO	Volunteer Support Officer

Executive Summary

This study investigated how the multi-tiered Aawaz II citizen engagement ecosystem can be integrated into government systems to ensure meaningful participation of marginalized communities in governance processes beyond tokenistic representation. Conducted across 7 districts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in October 2025, the study examined the comprehensive Aawaz II model involving 226 Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), Village/Neighbourhood Forums (V/NFs), Aawaz Change Agents (ACAs) and collective community action plans (CCAPs) to understand both the mechanisms facilitating inclusion and the pathways for embedding these approaches within existing government structures.

It is important to note that Aawaz II is fundamentally a demand-side intervention focused on building informed and aware citizens who can raise collective demands. The programme's scope centres on citizen empowerment and voice rather than institutional reform on the supply side. This clarification is analytically important for interpreting findings against the theoretical framework, as outcomes should be assessed against the programme's mandate to strengthen rights-holders' capacity to engage with duty-bearers, not against expectations of direct institutional transformation.

A total of 78 individuals familiar with Aawaz II, either as volunteers, field staff or government stakeholders, were interviewed through 8 Focus Group Discussions (8- 12 participants each) and 10 Key Informant Interviews with government officials, AAC facilitators, youth change agents and community leaders.

Findings

The research suggests that the Aawaz II ecosystem is contributing to the transformation of citizen engagement from tokenistic consultation towards genuine empowerment through three interconnected mechanisms.

- 1. First, the multi-component model builds citizen capacity and confidence.** Across districts and participant categories, participants reported shifts from being unable to speak publicly to directly engaging Deputy Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners, gaining practical knowledge of government departments and developing collective advocacy skills. These represent important individual-level changes that form the foundation for collective action.
- 2. Second, Village/Neighbourhood Forums show evidence of evolving from programme-created 'invited spaces' into community-driven 'claimed spaces', spaces. In claimed spaces,** communities identify and act on issues that they define themselves, beyond the programme agenda and leverage their collective forum identity to negotiate with external actors. This collective-level transformation was evident when participants stated, *"when an individual goes, they are not heard, but when 4 to 5 people from the forum go, the work gets done."*
- 3. Third, the forums are fostering inter-community cohesion by creating inclusive platforms where Muslims, Christians, and other religious minority groups collaborate to address shared challenges.** The forums have also created space for transgender persons to participate alongside other stakeholders, strengthening their legitimacy, visibility, and social acceptance. As one transgender community leader explained, *"Through this forum, we got an identity... People who used to avoid us now call us to their events."* This process of inclusion emerged as a transformative outcome in its own right, rather than merely serving as a means to achieve other programme objectives.
- 4. Fourth, the programme's ability to translate community empowerment into sustained governance outcomes depends on the responsiveness of public institutions.** While Aawaz II has strengthened citizens' capacity to engage with government and created effective platforms for collective action, the research identifies a critical "Last Mile Problem": communities can articulate

their priorities and engage with district authorities, but these demands often fail to progress through formal planning, budgeting, and implementation processes. This institutional bottleneck limits the sustainability and scalability of community-led change and points to the need for stronger integration between citizen engagement mechanisms and government systems. Altogether, these findings suggest that Aawaz II has been successful in strengthening the demand side of local governance by building citizen capacity, collective agency, and inclusive community platforms. However, their long-term impact is constrained by structural limitations within the governance system. This gap must be understood within the governance context: elected local governments are currently non-functional in Punjab and Village Committees in KP have limited and uneven functionality. District planning mechanisms exist, but are not designed as regular, inclusive, citizen-facing spaces. While communities are successfully organizing and making demands, government officials, despite being individually responsive and appreciative of the Aawaz II role, operate within systems that lack formal mechanisms to incorporate citizen input into planning and budget allocation.

This means the programme has effectively empowered the demand side' of governance. However, the absence of institutionalised, inclusive and regular mechanisms on the supply side' means the gap remains unbridged, leaving community-identified priorities dependent on ad hoc lobbying rather than systematic integration. One government official acknowledged this limitation, noting, *"Our coordination is good... But it is on a case-by-case basis. There is no regular, formal meeting schedule where we discuss community plans."*

The data also revealed an observed pattern of person-dependency: successes were frequently attributed to specific supportive officials, creating vulnerability when those officials transfer. This suggests that an apparent "partnership" can be fragile where it rests on individual relationships rather than institutionalised mechanisms.

Recommendations

These findings suggest that the Aawaz II ecosystem's multi-component model appears effective at fostering meaningful participation within its demand-side mandate, but strategic attention to systemic integration with government structures emerges as important for sustainability. To address the Last Mile Problem¹ and support sustainability beyond the programme period, several areas of consideration emerge:

- 1. Strengthen Citizen Capacity and Inclusive Leadership:** First, systematising 'Information as Power' tools could strengthen citizen capacity for accountability demands. This could include developing standardised Citizens' Rights Toolkits in local languages covering key laws, service access procedures (social protection, civil registration, processes for registration and relief for vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities etc.) and updated referral directories for Union Councils, Village Councils and community-based information centres such as AACs. Programmes should also strengthen the leadership and advocacy capacity of women, persons with disabilities, religious minorities and transgender leaders to enable more effective use of these tools and strengthen community representation.
- 2. Integrate Community Priorities into Government Systems:** Second, where government interest exists, piloting a community-led integration mechanism with district administrations in two or three districts could establish processes for Village/District Forums to present consolidated priority plans to district planning committees for consideration in Annual Development Plans. Such a pilot could leverage existing entry points, including functional Village Councils, Memoranda of Understanding with government

¹ The Last Mile Problem reflects a systemic governance gap—the absence of institutionalized, inclusive, and regular mechanisms between the formal planning cycles of district and provincial government, such that citizen voice has no institutionalized pathway.

departments and *Khuli Kachehri*² mechanisms that already bring citizens and officials together. Future scaling should build on these existing government mechanisms, account for provincial differences in protection infrastructure and referral pathways (including where services available in one province are absent in another), and be informed by political economy analysis to identify realistic institutional entry points, power dynamics and structural barriers within district government systems.

3. Institutionalise Citizen Engagement for Sustainability: Third, the findings point to a need for government ownership of citizen engagement mechanisms. Where government is receptive, options could include regular Community-Government Interface Meetings co-chaired by district officials and forum representatives, inclusion of citizen representatives from marginalised groups on district-level planning committees and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with handover protocols that survive personnel changes. Inadequate district and provincial budgets often reduce citizen engagement to one-off events rather than sustained mechanisms; incorporating these mechanisms into departmental budgets and standard operating procedures could help institutionalise citizen engagement while supporting officials responsible for sustaining these processes. Where feasible, government-recognised certificates or identification mechanisms for community volunteers could strengthen their credibility, motivation and sustainability beyond the programme period.

4. Adapt Citizen Engagement to Local Contexts: Fourth, future citizen-state engagement programming could consider linking civic and economic empowerment, recognising that participants consistently associated their ability to participate with their economic security. Partnerships with vocational training programmes could create pathways from civic engagement to economic opportunity for marginalised groups. Programming should also remain adaptable to local contexts by using culturally

² Open forums held with citizens, usually presided over by a senior government official for redressal of complaints.

appropriate language, educational institutions, trusted community intermediaries (including retired teachers, religious leaders and other local influencers), while remaining alert to risks of elite capture, particularly in conservative settings where social norms may constrain participation.

5. Recognise and Scale Social Cohesion Outcomes: Finally, future citizen-state engagement programmes should explicitly recognise, monitor and document inter-community cohesion and marginalised group leadership as intended outcomes within monitoring and evaluation frameworks, reflecting the evidence that these are transformative outcomes in their own right rather than solely enabling conditions for improved governance. Documenting, showcasing and disseminating successful examples of inter-faith collaboration, inclusion of persons with disabilities and transgender leaders, and community-led action can support learning, replication and broader social norm change.



1. Introduction

1.1 Project Background

Pakistan faces a profound governance crisis characterised by the systematic exclusion of marginalised communities from decision-making processes and persistent failures in service delivery that particularly affect women, religious minorities, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and transgender persons. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality enshrined in Articles 8, 25, 26 and 27 of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) and numerous policy commitments, empirical evidence from multiple national surveys (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Ministry of Finance, 2025) reveals alarming representation gaps and participation barriers that demand urgent transformation in how citizen engagement is conceptualised and implemented.

Recent studies emphasise the importance of intermediary organizations and multi-level engagement systems in facilitating citizen-state engagement, particularly for marginalised communities who may lack the social capital and resources to engage directly with government institutions (Hossain et al., 2018). This body of scholarship provides a foundation for understanding the potential of the Aawaz II ecosystem and its relevance for broader government integration.

The Aawaz II citizen engagement ecosystem is built around community structures, including Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), Village/Neighbourhood Forums (V/NFs), District Forums (DFs) and Aawaz Change Agents (ACAs). These components work in a coordinated manner to promote behaviour change in communities by reducing the acceptance of harmful practices such as gender-based violence and child marriage. The programme encourages active participation from vulnerable groups, not just as beneficiaries but as key decision-makers. This is achieved by creating safe and inclusive spaces for dialogue and engagement, ultimately improving access to

opportunities and resources for the vulnerable. The ecosystem is designed to strengthen the link between citizens (rights-holders) and service providers (duty-bearers), enabling communities to collectively address inequality and advocate for the protection of their rights.

It is essential to recognize that Aawaz II operates primarily as a demand-side intervention. The programme's core mandate is to build the capacity of citizens, particularly those from marginalised communities, to become informed, aware and capable of raising collective demands. The programme does not have a mandate for direct institutional reform or restructuring of government systems on the supply side. This distinction is analytically important for interpreting findings against the theoretical framework: outcomes should be assessed against the programme's mandate to strengthen rights-holders' capacity to engage with duty-bearers, rather than against expectations of direct institutional transformation, which lies outside the programme's scope.

Against this backdrop, marginalised groups such as women, transgender individuals, PWDs and religious minorities in Pakistan face systematic barriers in meaningful participation in civic and public matters. The magnitude of women's exclusion from civic life is staggering and represents the most pressing challenge to democratic governance in Pakistan. Despite comprising 48.51% of the population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024), women face severe educational and participatory barriers that fundamentally limit their capacity for meaningful civic engagement. The Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25 reveals that female literacy remains at only 52.8% compared to 68% for males (Ministry of Finance, 2025). This educational gap is compounded by a severe digital divide, with the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) data showing mobile phone ownership at only 25% for women versus 65% for men (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This digital disparity has significant implications for civic participation, as digital platforms are increasingly used for government service access and citizen engagement.

Similarly, religious minorities, representing 3.65% of Pakistan's population (8.8 million people), including Christians (1.37%), Hindus

(1.61%) and other groups (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024), face systematic underrepresentation in governance structures that go far beyond their numerical proportion.

Likewise, PWDs experience extreme marginalisation, particularly women with disabilities who face intersectional discrimination. PWDs comprise 3.10% of the national population (7.45 million people) according to the 2023 Census, while an additional 9.64% of the population (23.17 million people) faces functional limitations that create daily activity challenges (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). These overlapping but distinct measures highlight the vast scale of disability-related barriers to civic participation and the urgent need for accessible participation mechanisms.

Transgender persons face the most extreme exclusion of all marginalized groups, with only 20,331 individuals formally recognised in the 2023 census (0.008% of the population). This figure has been widely contested by the transgender community and suggests widespread underreporting due to social stigma and highlights systematic barriers to their recognition and participation in civic life.

These exclusions are reinforced by system-wide governance failures that affect all marginalized communities but disproportionately impact women and religious minorities. Government data reveals significant service delivery gaps, with healthcare satisfaction rates varying dramatically from 86% nationally to only 40% in Balochistan for basic health units (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Human rights complaint systems demonstrate limited effectiveness, with government helplines achieving only a 36% service conversion rate despite receiving over 114,000 calls annually (Ministry of Human Rights, 2024).

Social protection programmes reveal significant gaps in reaching marginalized communities. Only 5.1% of Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) beneficiaries in Punjab and 5.8% in KP are persons with disabilities (Khalid & Yaseen, 2023), while nationally, only 221 transgender individuals receive assistance under the BISP Kafaalat

Programme³ (Pakistan Government, 2025). Employment quotas remain largely unfulfilled, with KP government departments employing only 0.673% PWDs against a 2% legal quota and 50% of minority quota posts remaining vacant (Arsh et al., 2019; NCHR, 2022). Microfinance access is similarly constrained, with less than 25% of women entrepreneurs accessing microfinance credit and 70% of loans nominally to women actually used by male relatives (Safavian & Haq, 2013). These findings demonstrate that existing citizen engagement mechanisms often operate as limited exercises that fail to address the fundamental barriers preventing Marginalised communities from accessing their rights and participating meaningfully in governance.

These national patterns are mirrored in evidence from Aawaz II programme areas. The Aawaz II KAP Baseline Survey 2024 in 15 districts of KP and Punjab provides important local context evidence that reinforces these national patterns of exclusion. The survey reveals catastrophic awareness gaps, with only 7.2% of citizens aware of child protection services, 95% unaware of GBV support helplines and only 2.1% believing the government takes strong action against child marriage (British Council, 2024). The survey demonstrates that 40% of women have no formal education compared to 24% of men, while revealing the depth of religious minority exclusion, with only 31.4% of citizens believing all people have equal rights under law regardless of religion and 46.1% acknowledging that intolerance towards religious minorities exists in their communities (British Council, 2024). The survey shows 52% of transgender persons have no formal education, creating multiple intersecting barriers to civic participation. Further the programme identified challenges in reaching the most marginalized groups, particularly women with disabilities, religious minorities and transgender persons, facilitating separate Special Interest Groups across all 15 districts due to their

³ The Benazir Kafaalat Programme is the primary unconditional cash transfer initiative under the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) in Pakistan, launched in 2008 to support the poorest households, particularly women. It provides quarterly financial assistance to over 9 million eligible families to help manage poverty, economic shocks and inflation, with payments increasing to PKR 13,500 per quarter in recent programme updates. (Benazir Income Support Programme [BISP], 2025.).

double marginalisation (British Council, 2025).

Taken together, these findings underscore the limitations of conventional approaches to citizen participation. Traditional citizen engagement mechanisms in Pakistan have consistently failed to achieve meaningful inclusion despite formal structures and tend to become dominated by bureaucrats and local elites rather than ordinary citizens, with many failing to channel funds effectively, reflecting elite capture (Sanaullah et al., 2021). Village and Union Councils, while featuring reserved seats for women and minorities, face similar challenges with minimal participation, women councillors being marginalized by male peers and community input rarely influencing official budgets or development plans. Project-level consultations, even for international development schemes, tend to be procedural rather than substantive. The result is that while local forums exist formally, they have not translated into real empowerment of marginalized groups, hence the characterization of many initiatives as tokenistic rather than substantive participation.

It is within this context that the present research is situated. It emerges from the recognition that traditional approaches to citizen engagement have failed to meaningfully include marginalized communities, particularly women who bear the heaviest burden of exclusion. The Aawaz II programme, through its comprehensive multi-component community engagement approach involving 226 Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), Village/Neighbourhood Forums (V/NFs) and 4000 community and youth volunteers called Aawaz Change Agents (ACAs), presents a unique opportunity to understand how a multi-component citizen engagement ecosystem can move beyond tokenistic consultation towards transformative inclusion that genuinely empowers marginalized voices in governance processes.

1.2 Research Rationale and Objectives

This study aims to investigate how the comprehensive Aawaz II citizen engagement ecosystem, including AACs, Village Forums, Change Agents and Community Action Plans, can be integrated into government systems to ensure meaningful participation of

marginalized communities, particularly women, religious minorities, persons with disabilities and transgender persons, in governance processes beyond tokenistic representation. The research seeks to understand both the mechanisms through which this multi-component system facilitates inclusion and the pathways through which these approaches can be embedded within existing government structures to create sustainable change.

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. How can the multi-tiered Aawaz II citizen engagement ecosystem be integrated into district and provincial government systems to move beyond tokenistic consultation towards meaningful inclusion and participation?
2. What specific mechanisms within the Aawaz II model (AACs, Village Forums, Aawaz Change Agents, Special Interest Groups and Community Action Plans) most effectively ensure meaningful participation of women, religious minorities, PWDs and transgender persons in local governance?

Secondary Questions:

1. How does the comprehensive Aawaz II citizen engagement approach help the government deliver on its results and development targets?
2. What are the specific government systems, entry points and processes where the Aawaz II engagement model can be embedded with links to Annual Development Programmes and budgets?
3. Which components of the Aawaz II ecosystem are considered most impactful by beneficiaries and facilitators and what are the pathways for scaling these approaches within government structures?

1.3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in constructivist epistemological principles, recognizing that marginalized communities possess valuable knowledge about their

own experiences and that understanding emerges through interaction between researchers and participants. It acknowledges that multiple realities exist based on different social positions and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data was collected in October 2025 across 7 districts in Punjab (Vehari, Toba Tek Singh, Sargodha, Hafizabad) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Nowshera, Abbottabad, Malakand). The study employed two primary methods: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to capture collective dynamics and community-level perspectives and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to provide an in-depth understanding from institutional actors and community leaders. A total of 8 FGDs were conducted (8 - 12 participants each) and 10 KIIs were completed with government officials, AAC facilitators, youth change agents and community leaders. Approximately 78 individuals participated overall. Purposive maximum variation sampling ensured diversity across districts, demographics, programme exposure levels and marginalized group representation (women, PWDs, religious minorities, transgender persons).

Method	Participants (#)
Focus Group Discussions (8)	68
Key Informant Interviews (10)	10
Total	78

Representation of Marginalised	Participants (#)	
	FGDs	KIIs
Women	40	2
Religious Minorities	15	2
Persons with Disabilities	10	1
Transgender Persons	3	3

Note: Categories overlap; individuals may belong to multiple marginalized groups.

The analytical framework is guided by three core theoretical lenses: Gaventa's (2006) 'power cube' to understand how different types of power operate across closed, invited and claimed spaces; Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation' to assess movement from tokenistic to substantive participation; and social accountability frameworks (Joshi, 2013; Fox, 2015) to examine citizen-state engagement dynamics. Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using both inductive and deductive coding approaches to identify patterns and themes emerging from participant experiences.

Limitations: The study faced several constraints, including compressed data collection timelines (9 days), security-related access limitations in certain districts, the challenges of discussing sensitive topics in group settings, language barriers requiring translation and potential social desirability bias. These limitations do not undermine the study's credibility but rather provide important context for interpreting findings and understanding the real-world complexities of conducting participatory research with marginalized communities in resource-constrained governance environments. The quality of discussion was assessed across sessions, with most rated high for participant engagement and thematic richness (4–5 out of 5), suggesting that adaptive strategies were largely successful in capturing meaningful insights.

Detailed sampling frames, FGD/KII guides, district-wise breakdowns of respondents and ethical protocols are provided in Annex B: Methodology and Research Tools.



2. Theoretical Framework and the Context of Governance

Pakistan's governance crisis is characterised by the systematic exclusion of marginalized communities. This makes a shift from tokenistic consultation towards transformative models of citizen engagement necessary. The Aawaz II programme, with its multi-tiered ecosystem, proposes a pathway for this transformation. This review provides a theoretical framework to analyse the programme's potential, grounding its mechanisms in established theories of democratic participation, power dynamics and social accountability.

2.1 Core Analytical Frameworks

This section focuses on three core analytical frameworks that will be used to interpret and critically assess the findings: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Gaventa's Power Cube, and Social Accountability theory. These frameworks were selected because they directly address the study's central questions about the quality of participation, the transformation of participatory spaces, and the mechanisms through which citizen voice produces government responsiveness.

2.1.1 Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' (1969)

Remains foundational for distinguishing tokenistic consultation from genuine citizen power. The ladder's upper rungs (partnership, delegated power, citizen control) represent spaces where decision-making is shared and accountability institutionalised, while lower rungs of informing, consultation and placation allow voice without influence. Arnstein's framework focuses on the institutional dimension: what degree of power are institutions granting to citizens?

This study uses the ladder while recognizing its limitations as a linear model.

Complementing Arnstein, Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization focuses on the internal dimension: are people developing critical awareness of their social conditions? Freire argues that marginalized communities must move through a process of reflection and action (praxis) to recognize and challenge the structures that constrain them. Where Arnstein describes the rungs communities must climb, Freire illuminates the internal transformation that enables that ascent. Together, these frameworks allow the analysis to examine both structural positioning and consciousness development.

Building on Arnstein, Carole Pateman's *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) provides an important rationale for why climbing the ladder matters for democracy itself. Pateman argues that participation has a vital educational function: it is through engagement in local decision-making that individuals develop the skills, confidence and 'democratic character' necessary for self-governance. For marginalized groups who have been systematically excluded, this process is particularly transformative. However, a question the analysis must address is whether the capacity-building observed produces genuine democratic capacity (ability to engage with institutions and hold them accountable) or primarily psychological benefits (self-worth, confidence) that may not translate into sustained political agency.

2.1.2 Gaventa's Power Cube: Mapping Spaces and Forms of Power

To operationalize participation theory, a deep understanding of power is required. John Gaventa's 'power cube' (2006) offers a multi-dimensional framework for analyzing how Aawaz II creates opportunities for change. The power cube distinguishes three dimensions:

- *Forms of power*: Visible power (formal rules, structures,

authorities), hidden power (agenda-setting that excludes certain issues or actors) and invisible power (internalized norms that shape what people believe is possible or legitimate).

- *Spaces of participation*: Closed spaces where decision-making is controlled by a set of actors with no citizen access; invited spaces where citizens participate by invitation from authorities; and claimed (or created) spaces that communities establish themselves, “from or against the power holders” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 6).
- *Levels*: Local, national and global arenas where power operates.

The power cube provides the primary analytical lens for understanding how the Aawaz II ecosystem functions. Specifically:

- AACs and Village Forums can be analysed as *invited spaces* initially created by the programme, which may, under certain conditions, transform into *claimed spaces* where communities set their own agendas independent of programme priorities.
- The programme’s awareness-raising work addresses *invisible power* (challenging internalized beliefs about who can participate) and *hidden power* (making citizens aware of their rights and government responsibilities).
- The study’s focus on government integration addresses the challenge of how claimed spaces at the local level can influence decision-making in closed spaces (district planning committees, budget allocation processes).

The Aawaz II KAP Baseline Survey in KP and Punjab provides stark local evidence of the invisible power that must be confronted: only 7.2% of citizens were aware of child protection services, 95% were unaware of GBV support helplines and only 31.4% believed all people have equal rights under law regardless of religion (Aawaz II KAP Survey, 2024). These findings illustrate the deep-seated normative barriers the programme seeks to address.

2.1.3 Social Accountability: Information as a Precondition for Voice

The concept of social accountability provides a framework for understanding how citizen engagement can improve government responsiveness and service delivery (Joshi, 2013; Fox, 2015). Social accountability mechanisms work by strengthening the capacity of citizens (rights-holders) to make demands and by creating channels through which these demands reach government officials (duty-bearers).

A central insight from this literature is that *information is a precondition for effective citizen action*. Fox (2015) distinguishes between ‘tactical’ approaches (information dissemination alone) and ‘strategic’ approaches that combine transparency with enabling collective action. He argues that citizen voice requires “teeth”, the capacity not just to speak but to trigger consequences when demands are ignored. This may include legal tools (Right to Information requests), collective mobilisation or access to responsive officials.

Social accountability theory illuminates the ‘Information as Power’ theme. The analysis will examine how access to information about rights, laws and procedures enables participants to make more effective demands. It will also critically assess whether the Aawaz II model provides adequate institutional leverage (“teeth”) for sustained accountability or whether responsiveness remains dependent on individual officials’ goodwill rather than institutionalised mechanisms.

2.1.4 Supporting Theoretical Perspectives

While the three frameworks above provide the primary analytical structure, several additional theoretical perspectives inform the analysis at specific points:

Habermas (1984; 1990) argues that the public sphere should facilitate a space where citizens engage in collective discourse, challenging existing power structures. This perspective helps explain the significance of deliberative spaces created by Village Forums. Arendt’s (1958; 1965) concept of ‘spaces of appearance’ complements

Gaventa's framework by emphasizing that public spaces for political action are not fixed but emerge through collective activity, the forums can be understood as such emergent spaces. Ostrom's (1990) research on collective action demonstrates that communities are capable of organizing themselves to solve collective problems and creating their own rules and institutions, providing theoretical grounding for the possibility that programme-initiated forums could become self-sustaining. Finally, scholarship on scaling (Hartmann & Linn, 2008; Binswanger & Aiyar, 2003) argues that scaling up is not merely about expansion but about creating space for new approaches within existing systems and defines "real participation" as communities having genuine influence over decisions that affect them.

2.2 Marginalisation and Intersectionality

2.2.1 Gender and Political Participation

Pakistan consistently ranks among the lowest countries in the world in terms of gender equality. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 by the World Economic Forum, Pakistan ranks 148th out of 148 countries. The overall female labour force participation rate stands at 21%, well below the global average of 39%.

Although the government has introduced gender quotas and reserved seats for women, the literature indicates that these measures alone rarely lead to meaningful empowerment. Cornwall and Goetz (2005) argue that gender quotas often result in tokenistic representation, where women's presence in political spaces does not translate into actual influence. However, Cornwall and Goetz (2005) also point to the transformative potential of new democratic spaces, such as civil society organizations and local governance mechanisms, which can serve as incubators of political leadership. They note that "new (democratic) spaces offer a variety of sites for learning and networking that might serve to generate new leadership and alternative entry routes into politics" (p. 786). This insight directly aligns with Aawaz II's approach of creating participatory spaces through Village Forums and Collective Community Action Plans.

Beckwith's (2007) distinction between descriptive (numerical) and substantive (influential) representation further clarifies the analytical task. The programme strengthens women's substantive participation by building skills, confidence and procedural knowledge through AACs and targeted training, enabling participants to move beyond attendance to actively engaging with officials.

2.2.2 Religious Minorities and Civic Engagement

The challenge of ensuring meaningful participation for religious minorities in Pakistan exists within a complex legal landscape defined by a significant gap between constitutional guarantees and practical implementation. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) ensures religious freedom (Article 20), equality for all citizens before the law (Article 25) and obligates the state to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities (Article 36). However, scholarly analysis consistently demonstrates that this formal legal architecture is frequently undermined by weak enforcement, societal intolerance and the misuse of certain laws. The Aawaz II KAP Baseline data illustrates the depth of this challenge, with only 31.4% of citizens believing all people have equal rights under law regardless of religion and 46.1% acknowledging that intolerance towards religious minorities exists in their communities (Aawaz II KAP Survey, 2024).

2.2.3 Disability and Inclusive Participation

Globally, disability scholarship has evolved from medical models, which view disability as individual pathology, towards social models that locate disability in societal barriers and disabling environments (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). The rallying cry "Nothing About Us Without Us" (Charlton, 1998) encapsulates the demand for persons with disabilities to be active participants in decisions affecting their lives. In Pakistan, PWDs face formidable barriers to participation, including physical inaccessibility of public spaces, lack of information in accessible formats and deeply entrenched stigma that often confines disabled individuals, particularly women, to domestic spheres. These effects are much worse for women with disabilities.

2.2.4 Transgender Inclusion

The inclusion of transgender persons (often referred to locally as Khawaja Sira) presents both unique challenges and opportunities. While the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 provides a progressive legal framework, implementation remains weak and social stigma profound. Transgender communities in Pakistan have historically developed parallel governance structures through the Guru-Chela system, which provides social support but can also be exploitative (Reddy, 2005; Khan, 2016). Meaningful inclusion requires engaging these existing structures while opening pathways to mainstream civic participation.

2.3 Governance Context and Entry Points

Understanding the formal government structures that exist at the district level is essential for identifying realistic entry points for citizen engagement. Critically, the governance context in both Punjab and KP is characterised by significant structural limitations that constrain the pathways available for citizen-government engagement:

- **Union Councils (Punjab) and Village Councils (KP):** The lowest tier of local government, with elected councillors including reserved seats for women and minorities. However, local government elections have not been held consistently, leaving many councils non-functional. In Punjab, elected local governments are currently absent. In KP, Village Committees exist formally but have limited and uneven functionality across districts. Resource allocations for Councils to function effectively and administrative support for their mandate have remained patchy.
- **District Planning Committees:** These bodies are responsible for consolidating development priorities and preparing Annual Development Plans (ADPs). Citizen representation on these committees is minimal and these are not designed as regular, inclusive, citizen-facing spaces.
- **Departmental Planning:** Social Welfare, Health, Education and

Police departments each have their own planning processes that operate largely in silos, with limited coordination and no systematic mechanisms for community input.

This governance context is essential for grounding the later findings and recommendations. The gap identified by this research reflects what is commonly described in governance literature as the “**last-mile problem**”: citizens may develop the capacity to articulate collective demands, yet public institutions lack institutionalised, inclusive mechanisms to respond effectively. This governance context is essential for grounding later findings and recommendations. The gap identified by this research, what is often termed as the ‘Last Mile Problem’, reflects not merely programme limitations but a fundamental absence of institutionalised, inclusive government systems for engaging citizens. Government spaces for engagement with citizens are not as organised or inclusive as required. This structural reality means community demands generated through programmes like Aawaz II have no institutionalised pathway to feed into formal planning and budgets, a constraint the findings section will examine in detail.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the conceptual and empirical foundations for analysing the Aawaz II citizen engagement ecosystem. Together, Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation, Gaventa’s Power Cube, and Social Accountability theory provide a complementary lens for assessing whether the programme moves beyond tokenistic participation to strengthen citizen voice, transform participatory spaces, and foster government responsiveness. The literature further demonstrates that meaningful participation for women, religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and transgender persons requires addressing both structural barriers to inclusion and the broader governance context within which citizen engagement occurs. While existing scholarship identifies the conditions necessary for effective participation and accountability, there remains limited empirical evidence on how

multi-component citizen engagement programmes operationalise these principles in practice, particularly in fragile governance contexts such as Pakistan. The following chapter addresses this gap by analysing evidence from focus group discussions and key informant interviews to examine how the Aawaz II model functions in practice, the extent to which its mechanisms align with the theoretical frameworks outlined here, and where opportunities and constraints for institutional integration emerge.



3. Findings and Analysis

The analysis is structured thematically around the study's core research questions, exploring the ***mechanisms for meaningful citizen participation and the pathways for integrating these mechanisms with government structures***. The integration of KIIs provides critical perspectives from institutional actors and community leaders, which both corroborate and add nuance to the findings from community-level FGDs.

The findings are organised to demonstrate how empirical evidence substantiates, challenges or adds nuance to the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 3.2. For each major theme, the analysis distinguishes between three levels of change: (a) *individual-level change* (confidence, knowledge, voice); (b) *collective-level change* (forums as bargaining actors, community mobilisation); and (c) *institutional-level change* (integration into formal systems, policy influence). This distinction is essential for assessing claims about empowerment and governance impact: individual transformation, while valuable, does not automatically translate into collective power or institutional change. Additionally, it is important to recall that Aawaz II operates as a community (demand-side) intervention; the findings are interpreted against this mandate rather than against expectations of government (supply-side) institutional reform.

3.1 Mechanisms for Meaningful Participation

The data suggests that Aawaz II platforms, particularly Village/Neighbourhood Forums (V/NFs) and Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), are functioning as effective mechanisms for moving citizen engagement beyond tokenism. This is achieved primarily by building the capacity of community members and creating new, inclusive spaces for collective action that foster social cohesion. This section addresses the primary research question: *What specific mechanisms within the Aawaz II model most effectively ensure meaningful*

participation of women, religious minorities, PWDs and transgender persons in local governance?

Theme 1: Building Citizen Capacity and Confidence (Individual-Level Change)

Across all districts and participant categories, a consistent theme is that participation in Aawaz II forums has increased citizens' confidence, knowledge of their rights and practical skills for civic engagement. Participants from diverse backgrounds, women, youth, PWDs, religious minorities and transgender persons, report feeling empowered to speak in public, engage directly with government officials and articulate their needs collectively. These outcomes represent important individual-level changes, the first step in what Pateman (1970) describes as the "educational function" of participation that develops 'democratic character'.

The transformation in confidence was particularly evident among youth participants across multiple FGDs. One Aawaz Change Agent (ACA) attributed this directly to the programme's training:

"Before, I couldn't even talk to my father... Now, after getting this training, I can talk to the DC (Deputy Commissioner) and AC (Assistant Commissioner)." — Aawaz, Change Agent, Male, Abbottabad, FGD.

The transformation was particularly profound for persons with disabilities, who often described moving from internalized stigma to recognition of their capacity. One PWD participant explained:

"Main apne aap nu khud bekar samajhda sa... Us to baad main apne aap nu mazoor nahi samajhda... main samajhda ke main theek aan." ("I used to consider myself useless... After that (the training) I don't consider myself disabled... I consider that I am fine." — Community Member (PWD), Male, Hafizabad, FGD

Women participants across districts described fundamental shifts in their ability to articulate their views:

"Pehle to hamein baat karne ka tareeqa bhi nahi aata tha, dar lagta tha... Lekin alhamdulillah ab to hamein itna shoor aa gaya hai ke hum

apni baat khul ke agle bande ko bata sakte hain." ("Before we didn't even know how to talk, we were afraid... But Alhamdulillah now we have so much awareness that we can openly convey our point to the next person." — Community, Community Member, Woman, Vehari, FGD.

This newfound capacity is not just about confidence but also about practical knowledge. Across both Punjab and KP, a frequently mentioned outcome was learning about different government departments and how to navigate them. One AAC volunteer noted:

"The biggest change is that people now have an understanding of the departments... Before, they didn't know where to go for a specific problem."

— AAC Volunteer, Male, Vehari, KII.

Access to the referral directory emerged as a concrete tool enabling this knowledge. One Christian Community Leader described the shift from ignorance to knowledge of government systems:

"Pehle pehle sabse pehle toh humein dafatir ka hi nahi pata tha... Ab inhone humein yeh faida humein yeh hua hai ki humein dafatir saara pata chal gaya." ("First of all, earlier we didn't even know about the offices... Now the benefit is that we know all the offices." — Christian Community Leader, Male, Hafizabad, KII

Analytical Significance: These findings provide evidence of individual-level empowerment consistent with Pateman's (1970) educational function of participation. The transformation of the PWD participant from feeling "useless" to recognizing himself as "fine" exemplifies what Freire (1970) terms conscientisation: the development of critical awareness that challenges internalized oppression and enables individuals to see themselves as capable actors rather than passive recipients. However, the question of whether participation produces democratic capacity or only self-worth requires careful consideration. The evidence suggests both: participants gain confidence and self-esteem (psychological

empowerment) and acquire practical knowledge and skills (civic capacity). The transformation of the PWD participant from feeling “useless” to feeling “fine” represents psychological change, while learning to navigate government departments represents practical capacity. Whether these translate into sustained political agency that survives beyond programme facilitation is addressed later in the discussion of sustainability.

Theme 2: Creating ‘Claimed Spaces’ for Collective Action (Collective-Level Change)

Across districts, the research reveals evidence of evolution from programme-created ‘invited spaces’ to community-owned ‘claimed spaces,’ aligning with Gaventa’s (2006) ‘power cube’ framework. For this analysis, a space is operationalized as “claimed” when communities use it to identify and act on issues, they define themselves, beyond the programme agenda, and leverage their collective forum identity to negotiate with external actors. Participants in both Punjab and KP provided examples of identifying a local issue and working collectively through the forum to solve it. This process often involves leveraging the forum’s collective identity to increase its bargaining power with officials.

“We identify the issues, make a resolution and send it to the relevant department... Many issues have been solved by going as a group. When an individual goes, they are not heard, but when 4 to 5 people from the forum go, the work gets done.” , Village Forum Member, Male, Abbottabad, FGD

Women participants similarly described the power of collective action:

“People are becoming aware. They say, ‘This is our issue, we have to solve it ourselves.’ People contribute money... and when the community comes together, the government also listens.”

— Community Member, Woman, Toba Tek Singh, FGD

The transition to claimed spaces was evident in how communities began organizing around shared issues beyond the Aawaz II agenda (such as fixing sewerage lines or lobbying for street pavement), effectively transforming programme-initiated platforms into spaces where citizens exercise genuine agency (Cornwall, 2004)

Analytical Significance: The evidence suggests that forums are functioning as spaces for collective action on issues that communities identify themselves with. This represents movement towards ‘claimed spaces’ as defined by Gaventa (2006). However, the analysis must be precise about what kind of space transformation is occurring:

- Forums remain *locally claimed* but have not achieved *institutionally recognised* status. The programme strategy was to let the forums evolve organically, rather than to plan for institutionalization within government structures; to this end, some local organisations have pursued district government to notify District Forums as formal government-civil society committees. Communities have claimed these spaces for their own purposes, but the spaces remain informal rather than formally recognised in government structures.
- The transformation addresses *invisible power* (changing beliefs about who can participate) but has not fundamentally altered *visible power* structures (formal decision-making processes remain unchanged) The claimed spaces operate at the *local level* but have limited traction at higher levels where budget and planning decisions are made. For this, the local forums are linked with the Aawaz Provincial Forum, which has raised its concerns with the relevant stakeholders. Budget advocacy has resulted in allocations in successive provincial budgets to meet the demands of the vulnerable groups. In the absence of an elected local government, the need for such mechanisms to link communities with provincial policy makers will remain.

Theme 3: Social Cohesion and Inter-Community Collaboration

Across multiple districts in both Punjab and KP, a powerful and

perhaps underappreciated outcome is the degree to which Aawaz II forums are fostering inter-community cohesion. The process of bringing together Muslims, Christians and other groups to collaborate on shared problems has had a profound impact on breaking down long-standing social barriers.

One minority community member described a transformation in daily interactions:

“Wahan muslim log minority walon ko paani bharne nahi dete the... Ab Alhamdulillah jo minority hai woh bhi aate jaate hain Muslims ke ghar mein aur Muslims bhi unke ghar jaate hain.” (“Earlier Muslim people wouldn’t let minorities fill water [from the communal sources]. Now, by the grace of God, the minorities come and go to Muslims’ houses and Muslims also go to their houses.” — Minority Community Member, Woman, Nowshera, FGD

One participant described unprecedented collaboration among religious leaders:

“The maulvi, the church leader and the Hindu pandit sit together in the same meeting. This has never happened before in our area.”

— Community Member, Male, Sargodha, FGD.

For transgender communities, inclusion in forums has meant gaining legitimacy and respect that challenges deeply entrenched social stigma. One transgender community leader explained:

“Is forum ki wajah se humein aik pehchaan mili... Jo log pehle hamein dekh ke ignore karte the ab woh humein apne functions mein bulaate hain.” (“Through this forum, we got an identity... People who used to avoid us now call us to their events.” — Transgender Community Leader, Toba Tek Singh, KII

Analytical Significance: This finding represents a transformative outcome that is valuable, not merely as instrumental to other

programme goals. The forums are addressing invisible power, the internalized norms that define who belong and who can participate, in ways that have lasting social significance beyond service delivery outcomes. The process of inclusive engagement is itself a transformative outcome with implications for how such achievements are valued in programme monitoring and evaluation.

Theme 4: Assessing Movement on Arnstein’s Ladder

The evidence suggests that participants have moved from lower rungs of Arnstein’s ladder (where they were either unaware of engagement opportunities or passively received information) towards higher rungs where they actively participate in collective problem-solving and negotiate with officials. When forums present consolidated demands to district officials and achieve tangible outcomes (computerized marriage certificates for Christians, disability certificates, dedicated hospital wards for transgender persons), this represents movement towards ‘partnership.’

Analytical Significance:

Reversibility and fragility: The findings reveal significant vulnerability to reversal. Success is repeatedly attributed to specific supportive officials rather than institutional mechanisms. When these officials transfer, progress can collapse. One transgender community leader described this dependency:

“Miss F. ke daur mein hum khule aam aam, aam hi, hum ne kahin jana aana hota tha to hum easily chale jate the... Ke agar kisi ne kuch kaha to hello, aap ye dekh lo Miss F. hain.” (“In Miss F’s era [as VSO], we used to go out openly... If anyone said anything, [we’d say] look, Miss F. is here.”) — Transgender Community Leader, Toba Tek Singh, KII

This person-dependency means that an apparent “partnership” can revert to lower rungs when supportive individuals are no longer present.

Ceiling effects: The data suggests a ceiling at the boundary between informal and formal institutional engagement. Communities have

achieved significant success through ad-hoc lobbying and case-by-case responsiveness. The programme strategy was to let forums evolve organically and local forums linked with the Aawaz Provincial Forum have engaged provincial stakeholders through channels, including annual pre-budget consultations. However, from the qualitative data collected, no evidence emerged of community forums having a formal, recognised role in Annual Development Plan preparation or budget allocation.

Symbolic versus institutionalised partnership: The instances of government responsiveness documented in the data, responsive officials, tangible service improvements, participation in Khuli Kacheri (open courts), represent real achievements. However, they largely remain informal and discretionary rather than institutionalised.

3.2 Pathways and Barriers for Government Integration

This section addresses the secondary research questions about specific entry points for integrating the Aawaz II model with government systems. It is essential to acknowledge at the outset that elected local government is currently absent in Punjab and Village Committees in KP have limited and uneven functionality. District planning mechanisms exist, but these are not designed as regular, inclusive, citizen-facing spaces. This governance context fundamentally shapes what integration pathways are realistically available.

Theme 5: The ‘Last Mile Problem’ as a Structural Barrier

Across both provinces, the most significant finding regarding government integration is the ‘Last Mile Problem’ i.e. the systematic disconnect between community demands generated through forums and the formal planning cycles of district and provincial government, such that citizen voice has no institutionalised pathway into Annual Development Plans or budgets. (World Bank, 2016)

While communities are successfully identifying needs and even securing small victories through ad-hoc lobbying, there is no institutionalised pathway for their collective demands to feed into the district’s Annual Development Plan (ADP) or budget. One government official confirmed this gap:

The most striking acknowledgment of this institutional gap came from a government Social Needs Officer in Sargodha. The Himmat Card is a Punjab government disability benefit card that provides persons with disabilities with financial assistance and access to services (Punjab Social Protection Authority, n.d.). The officer described how Aawaz II identified and registered a person with disability in a remote village that the Social Welfare Department had not reached in over four decades:

“44 saal mein woh [Social Welfare Dept] Chak 53 mein nahi ja saka. Aur aapka idara do saalon mein wahan tak pohanch gaya aur usne wahan se bande ko uthaya... aur uska Himmat card ban gaya.” (“In 44 years, it [Social Welfare Dept] couldn’t reach Chak 53. And your organization reached there in two years, identified a person [with disability] ... and his Himmat Card was made.” — Social Needs Officer, Male, Punjab, KII

This admission that a government department with four decades of operation could not achieve what a community-based programme accomplished in two years validates the programme’s value proposition while highlighting the structural disconnection between the state and citizens. It demonstrates both the potential of community-based outreach and the depth of the supply-side gap that must be addressed for sustainability.

The same official diagnosed a deeper structural problem using a vivid metaphor:

“Ab ye paanch department, ek baitha hua hai shehar ke doosre kone mein, doosra baitha hua hai shehar ke teesre kone mein... Har banda wo dedh inch ki masjid le ke baitha hua hai.” (“Now these five departments, one is sitting in one corner of the city, the other in the third corner... Everyone is sitting with their own ‘one-and-a-half-inch

mosque’ [isolated domain].”) — Social Needs Officer, Male, Punjab, KII

This metaphor illustrates not merely departmental silos, lack of coordination, but also turf protection, where departments guard their specific mandates and associated resources. Each department operates within its own bounded territory, reluctant to engage with issues that fall outside its defined scope or to share resources for cross-cutting concerns affecting marginalised communities. This dynamic means that even when individual officials are willing to collaborate, inter-departmental coordination on complex issues, which often require multiple departments to act together, remains structurally constrained. For marginalized communities whose needs rarely fit neatly within a single department’s mandate, this turf protection creates systematic barriers to accessing services.

While communities are successfully identifying needs and even securing small victories through ad-hoc lobbying, there is no institutionalised pathway for their collective demands to feed into the district’s Annual Development Plan (ADP) or budget. One government official confirmed this gap:

“Our coordination is good. Our engagement with the community is very good and of quality... But it is on a case-by-case basis. There is no regular, formal meeting schedule where we discuss community plans.”

— Meesaq Centre In-charge, Male, Punjab, KII.

Concerns about post-programme sustainability were expressed by participants across districts, reflecting awareness that without resources allocated for community engagement and outreach by government departments, issues raised may not be systematically addressed:

“If Aawaz II is not there, then who will raise these issues?” — Minority Focal Person, Male, Nowshera, FGD

Analytical Significance: The Aawaz II mandate is demand-side

empowerment, not supply-side institutional reform. This finding does not represent a programme failure. The Last Mile Problem reflects a systemic governance gap, the absence of institutionalised, inclusive and regular mechanisms on the supply side, that the programme alone cannot address. However, acknowledging this gap is essential for realistic recommendations about sustainability and scaling.

Theme 6: Government Responsiveness and Information as Power

Across participant categories, community members, volunteers and government officials, access to information emerged as a key enabler for successful government engagement. Participants who have learned about their legal rights and departmental responsibilities are more effective at demanding accountability, consistent with social accountability theory (Fox, 2015). One government official acknowledged this shift:

“The women who are referred to us by Aawaz II have more awareness. They know their rights... It makes our job easier because they can explain their problem clearly.” — Meesaq Centre In-charge, Male, Punjab, KII

Where government departments have been responsive, the changes are tangible. One respondent described how NADRA has adapted its procedures for persons with disabilities in his district:

“Now NADRA has given the facility that they send someone on a bike to deliver the ID card for disabled persons at their home.” — Social Worker, Male, Punjab, FGD

One Christian Community Leader described the resolution of a specific bureaucratic hurdle through the District Forum:

“Yeh na humare computerized nikah naamey, yeh nahi mil rahe the... Humne District Forum mein yeh baat ki udhar unhone CEO ko bulaya... Woh humara hal ho gaya.” (“We weren’t getting computerized marriage certificates... We raised this in the District Forum; they called the CEO there... That issue was resolved.” — Christian Community Leader, Male, Hafizabad, KII.

Several participants across districts described using information strategically:

“When we go to a department with a written application and refer to the law, the officer knows that these people are aware and cannot be fooled. Then they listen to us.” — Community Member, Male, Sargodha, FGD.

One minority community leader in Nowshera described using the Right to Information laws to ensure government action:

“Maine through to RTI District Education se iska data lena chaha... Aap yaqeen karein ke is chhoti si koshish se na, hamari jo zilla Nowshera ki 21 PST [primary school teacher] postein thi na, woh re-advertise hui.” (“I sought data through RTI from District Education... Believe me, due to this small effort, the 21 PST posts for District Nowshera were re-advertised.” — Minority Leader, Male, Nowshera, KII

The same respondent reported escalating the matter when his initial request was ignored, engaging with the Supreme Court’s One-Man Commission for Minorities’ Rights, which was headed at the time by Dr. Shoaib Suddle (appointed 2019). This sophisticated legal strategy represents exactly the kind of “teeth” that Fox (2015) argues is necessary for citizen voice to produce change, combining information (RTI), legal tools and escalation pathways to create consequences for non-responsiveness.

One transgender community leader in KP described how advocacy through the programme led to the allocation of a dedicated hospital ward in that district:

“Due to Aawaz II, it became possible that a dedicated ward has been allocated for us in the District Hospital.”

— Transgender Community Leader, Abbottabad, KII

The same leader identified a functioning government mechanism, the Khuli Kacheri:

Every month there is an open court (Khuli Kachehri) for us where the DPO [District Police Officer] and officers of all departments sit and listen to us.” — Transgender Community Leader, Abbottabad, KII

One respondent described how citizen demand led to a district-wide executive order for accessibility:

“We said there should be ramps for the disabled... the DC then made a code of conduct... and ramps were built in public and private buildings.” — Social Needs Officer, Male, Punjab, KII.

Analytical Significance: These examples suggest that social accountability mechanisms can produce tangible results when citizens have information, collective organization and access to responsive officials or legal tools. However, several qualifications are necessary. First, sophisticated legal strategies (RTI, escalation to commissions) were largely confined to KP and to community leaders with relatively high education and familiarity with bureaucratic processes, this points to uneven capacity across participants. Second, most successes remain ad-hoc and ‘person-dependent’ rather than institutionalised. Third, these achievements, while important as exemplars of what is possible, do not represent integration into formal planning cycles, they are wins secured through lobbying and advocacy rather than through systematic citizen input into budget allocation.

3.3 Contextual Factors: Enablers and Barriers

Across districts, the data reveals barriers that are as much internal to communities as external. While bureaucratic obstacles are well documented, the research uncovered significant internal barriers that constrain participation.

Enablers of Engagement

- **Cultural Intermediaries:** Across districts, using trusted local figures proved more effective than legal arguments for reaching resistant communities. Retired teachers and religious leaders

served as credible intermediaries who could communicate programme messages in culturally acceptable ways.

- **Safe Spaces:** The Village Forums function as temporary “safe spaces” that suspend societal norms, creating environments where cross-community dialogue becomes possible.
- **Youth as Change Agents:** Youth emerged as primary drivers of change across multiple FGDs. Their energy, fewer entrenched positions and openness to new ideas made them effective advocates within their communities.

Internal Barriers to Participation

- **Social norms and community-level constraints:** A cross-cutting barrier affecting multiple marginalized groups is the power of social disapproval and community norms to prevent individuals from seeking help or participating in outside forums. Fear of exclusion, loss of community standing or violation of group expectations can keep individuals bound to existing structures even when more inclusive civic spaces become available. This dynamic operates differently across groups but shares a common logic: the cost of breaking with community norms can outweigh the perceived benefits of external engagement. For transgender communities specifically, the traditional Guru-Chela system presents a complex barrier. This parallel social structure provides support and protection but can also constrain members’ engagement with outside forums. The system operates through strong social bonds, disciples who break with a Guru face exclusion from the broader community. One transgender community leader explained:

“The biggest barrier is this Guru-Chela system. If I have a conflict with a Guru, all the Chelas under him won’t come to me.” — Transgender Community Leader, Toba Tek Singh, KII

- Similar dynamics affect other groups: women who fear family or community backlash for engaging with outside organizations,

religious minorities who risk social isolation for raising issues publicly and persons with disabilities whose families may discourage visible participation due to stigma.

- **Religious and Cultural Resistance:** In conservative areas, certain terminology itself can generate resistance if seen as challenging religion or culture. One ACA in Malakand described how the term “early age marriage” is likely to trigger religious resistance in communities that perceive it as conflicting with religious teachings. Finding culturally appropriate framing is essential in such contexts.
- **Stigma Around Government Services:** One Dar-ul-Aman in-charge described how negative social perceptions of protection services prevent women from accessing them:

“People think that only bad women come to Dar-ul-Aman... Because of this, many women don’t want to come.” — Dar-ul-Aman In-charge, Female, KP, KII

- Police presence can compound rather than alleviate barriers to accessing protection services. When police officers conduct follow-up visits to homes of women involved in protection cases, whether as survivors of violence or as complainants, the visibility of uniformed officials triggers neighbourhood surveillance and gossip. The ASI/Focal Person for Women Protection in KP described this dynamic:

“Sometimes it happens that uniformed police have gone to her house, the neighbourhood people start talking, those around start talking, then people step back (retreat) from there.” — ASI/Focal Person Women Protection, Female, Abbottabad, KII.

- This illustrates a tension between visible power (formal state mechanisms intended to protect) and invisible power (social norms around respectability and family honour). The very act of seeking state protection can expose women to social stigma, creating a deterrent effect that undermines the accessibility of formal protection mechanisms. At the same time, police presence

can serve an important deterrent function, sending a message that action can be taken against perpetrators. Deterrence as a last resort is effective, but it needs to be carefully deployed. This has implications for programme design: a focus on community policing and normalizing friendly police presence in communities is needed for people to develop trust in formal protection mechanisms, so that referral pathways involving state intervention do not inadvertently create new barriers for women in conservative communities.

- **Economic Constraints:** Participants consistently linked civic participation to economic security. Employment and income are pertinent issues for all groups in Pakistan, given high poverty rates and economic precarity creates barriers to sustained civic engagement. One transgender community leader articulated this:

“Actually, what is most common among our transgenders is drug addiction... And skill centers should be opened... so transgenders can live a good life.” — Transgender Community Leader, Toba Tek Singh, KII

- Without economic stability, the capacity for sustained participation in forums and advocacy activities remains constrained. This points to the importance of linking civic empowerment with livelihood support.
- **Infrastructure and Provincial Differences:** A significant structural gap emerged regarding protection infrastructure. KP lacks Tahaffuz Centres (protection centres), which are available in Punjab. One transgender community leader noted:

“And in our district Abbottabad, actually not just Abbottabad, inside the whole of KP, there are no Tahaffuz Centres anywhere.” — Transgender Community Leader, Abbottabad, KII
- This reflects different provincial policy configurations rather than a simple “disparity.” However, the practical effect is that referral pathways available in Punjab do not exist in KP, fundamentally altering what government integration can look like in each context.

- **Observations on Provincial Context:** Some differences in engagement patterns emerged between Punjab and KP, though these should be understood as observations from limited data rather than definitive characterizations. In Punjab, the engagement model appears more relational, relying on strong individual officers and negotiated settlements with internal community leaders. Inter-faith harmony between Muslim and Christian communities dominates the narrative, with domestic sphere interventions featuring prominently.
- In KP, the absence of Tahaffuz Centres fundamentally alters referral pathways. Cultural barriers are more explicit, with certain terminology (e.g., “child marriage”) likely to trigger religious resistance. Some respondents in KP demonstrated familiarity with formal legal channels such as Right to Information requests, though this reflected individual capacity rather than a widespread pattern.

Analytical Significance: This is the flexibility of the Aawaz model, the programme can adapt its approach to the local context. The relational model, effective in Punjab or the one in KP, where citizens expect and use formal legal mechanisms, is both important. Conversely, the legalistic approach valued in KP may be less accessible to communities with lower literacy and familiarity with bureaucratic processes.

3.4 Cross-Cutting Issues and Theoretical Implications

- **The Power of Inclusive Spaces as a Foundational Outcome**

A powerful outcome emerging from the analysis is the degree to which Aawaz II forums are fostering inter-community cohesion. The process of inclusion itself, rather than being merely a means to an end, has emerged as a transformative outcome. When Muslims and Christians hold meetings in churches and mosques, when the Muslim call to prayer is recited in a church for the first time, when the maulvi, the church leader and the Hindu pandit sit together, the very fabric of

community relations is being rewoven.

Similarly, the inclusion of transgender leaders on these platforms has not only given them a voice but has also begun to change community perceptions, granting them a new level of respect and legitimacy. This suggests that the process of inclusive engagement is a transformative outcome, with implications for how such achievements are valued in programme monitoring and evaluation.

- **Implications for Sustainability: Community-Owned vs. Programme-Dependent**

A critical question for sustainability is whether observed outcomes are community-owned and likely to endure or remain dependent on programme facilitation. The evidence is mixed:

Evidence of community ownership: Communities have begun using forums for their own purposes (claimed spaces), contributing their own resources to collective projects and taking initiative beyond programme agendas.

Evidence of programme dependency: Sustainability concerns were explicitly raised by participants across districts. The absence of formal recognition for volunteers, lack of volunteer identification cards from the programme and limited uptake of initiatives by the government and inadequacy of citizen engagement budgets all suggest fragility. District and provincial budgets often reduce citizen engagement to one-off events (sports, mela, interfaith harmony event) rather than sustained mechanisms beyond committees with existing community forums and individuals. If budgeted and included as part of the department SOPs, it will support the duty bearers who give of their time, as the next example shows.

While individual commitment has sustained volunteer engagement, the data reveal structural vulnerabilities in this model. In charge of a district, Dar-ul-Aman, reflecting on the volunteer support committee that assists her facility, described the challenges:

“It was difficult for [Forum] members to find time... You aren’t getting

anything from here, you are coming to serve... it comes down to your passion I.” — Dar-ul-Aman In-charge, Female, KP District, KII

This observation points to a fundamental tension in volunteer-dependent models. While individual passion (“jazba”) can sustain engagement in the short term, relying on commitment alone does not address the structural constraints, time, mobility, competing economic demands that limit sustained participation. The literature on volunteer sustainability suggests that programmes dependent on unpaid labour face inherent fragility, particularly among marginalised populations who face the greatest economic pressures (Wilson, 2012). This has implications for the Aawaz II model: without formal recognition, modest incentives or integration into government systems where community engagement becomes part of institutional mandates rather than dependent on individual volunteerism, the sustainability of volunteer-driven outreach remains uncertain.

These findings suggest that while the ecosystem has achieved significant community-level success, sustainability beyond the programme period would benefit from formalizing linkages with government systems. This is essential context for realistic considerations of sustainability pathways.

- **Participation: Building Democratic Capacity and Self-Worth**

The evidence demonstrates that participation produces psychological empowerment: increased confidence, reduced internalized stigma and enhanced sense of agency. The PWD who moved from considering himself “useless” to “fine” exemplifies this transformation.

The evidence also demonstrates practical capacity-building: knowledge of rights, understanding of government systems, skills in collective advocacy and ability to use tools like RTI.

Whether these translate into sustained democratic capacity (the ability to hold institutions accountable over time) is harder to assess within the timeframe of this study. The distinction matters: Freire (1970) argued that conscientisation must lead to praxis, the integration of reflection and action that challenges oppressive

structures, not merely to improved self-perception. What can be said with confidence is that the forums are creating the *preconditions* for democratic capacity: awareness of rights, collective identity, practice in deliberation and connections with officials. Whether these preconditions translate into durable political agency will depend on continued engagement and, critically, on whether government systems develop the capacity to respond to citizen voice systematically rather than ad hoc.

Analytical Significance

These findings have several analytical implications:

1. **The Ecosystem Model Shows Effectiveness Within Scope:** The multi-component ecosystem, combining capacity building, community organization, information provision, behaviour change communication and linkages to the state, appears effective at fostering meaningful participation and achieving tangible local outcomes. The combination of AACs (information and referral), Village Forums (collective voice) and ACAs (youth energy and community reach) creates mutually reinforcing mechanisms that address different dimensions of exclusion simultaneously.
2. **Sustainability is Linked to Systemic Integration:** The programme has successfully empowered the 'demand side' of governance, building citizen capacity to articulate and pursue collective priorities. However, sustainability beyond the programme period depends on whether government systems develop regularized mechanisms to receive and respond to citizen input. The current pattern of ad-hoc responsiveness, dependent on individual officials, creates fragility. District and provincial budgets often reduce citizen engagement to one-off events rather than sustained mechanisms. If budgeted and included as part of departmental SOPs, this would support the duty bearers who give of their time.
3. **Inclusion Functions as a Foundational Outcome:** The findings point to inter-community cohesion and the inclusion of

marginalized leaders as transformative outcomes in their own right and not merely as instrumental to service delivery goals. Programme monitoring and evaluation frameworks should recognize and measure these outcomes explicitly.

4. **Person-Dependent to System-Dependent:** Many instances of responsiveness as described by participants appear to be person-dependent on the government side, i.e., linked to the presence of particular supportive officers rather than embedded institutional procedures. This pattern was evident across multiple districts and marginalized groups. When supportive personnel transfer or change roles, access and responsiveness may weaken. Addressing this fragility requires government departments to develop regularized community outreach and engagement mechanisms that survive personnel changes.
5. **Uneven Capacity Across Participants:** The data suggests significant variation in participants' capacity to leverage programme resources for accountability demands. Community leaders with higher education and familiarity with bureaucratic processes demonstrated more sophisticated engagement strategies (written applications, RTI requests, escalation to commissions), while others relied more heavily on programme facilitation. This points to the importance of continued capacity strengthening, particularly for the most marginalized participants.



4. Recommendations

The analytical implications identified in Section 3 provide the foundation for the recommendations that follow. Specifically, the findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the Aawaz II ecosystem within its demand-side mandate, while also highlighting five interrelated considerations: the need for stronger systemic integration to support sustainability; recognition of inclusion and social cohesion as outcomes in their own right; reducing reliance on person-dependent rather than institutionalised government responsiveness; and addressing uneven citizen capacity for sustained accountability. Building on these implications, the following evidence-informed recommendations identify opportunities to strengthen the citizen engagement model while addressing the systemic barriers identified through the research.

These recommendations are structured around the primary and secondary research questions and distinguish between actions within the programme's mandate and actions that would depend on government interest and prioritisation. Given that the "last-mile problem" reflects a supply-side governance gap, considerations related to sustainability focus primarily on strengthening government ownership of community engagement and outreach systems.

4.1 Integrating the Aawaz II ecosystem into government systems

Considerations for Government and Policy Engagement:

- 1. The findings point to a need for institutionalised citizen engagement mechanisms:** The core finding is that the government lacks community engagement and outreach systems. Where government interest exists, options could include formal notification of community committees, regular (quarterly)

Community-Government Interface Meetings co-chaired by district officials and citizen forum representatives and inclusion of citizen representatives from Marginalised groups on district-level planning committees. The programme could support such efforts where invited, but ownership and institutionalization would rest with the government.

- 2. Pilot a community-led integration mechanism in select districts:** Government-led efforts in 2-3 pilot districts should establish a process for Village/District Forums to present consolidated priority plans to district planning committees for consideration in Annual Development Plans. Such a pilot could leverage existing entry points: KP's Village/Neighbourhood Councils where functional, existing Memoranda of Understanding between the programme and government departments and mechanisms such as Khuli Katcheri (ensuring inclusion of women and vulnerable groups) that already provide spaces for citizen-official engagement.
- 3. Strengthen MOUs with handover protocols where possible:** Programmes should seek to establish or strengthen Memoranda of Understanding with key departments (Social Welfare, NADRA, Police) at the district level, where departmental interest exists. Such MOUs could usefully include handover protocols specifying how commitments transfer when officials are posted elsewhere. This responds to an observed pattern in the data where progress appeared vulnerable to personnel changes, agreements that bind departments rather than individuals could mitigate this fragility.
- 4. Explore formal volunteer recognition through government channels:** Where government is receptive, the programme could explore formal recognition of Resource Persons and Aawaz Change Agents through identification cards or certificates recognised by government departments. This would address participants expressed need to establish credentials when engaging officials and could create recognition that survives programme transitions and personnel changes.

4.2 Mechanisms which most effectively ensure meaningful participation.

Considerations for Programmes:

5. **Systematise ‘Information as Power’ tools:** Access to information emerged as a key enabler of effective accountability demands. The analysis suggests scope for systematising access to information through standardised Citizens’ Rights Toolkits in local languages covering key laws (particularly RTI), service access procedures (BISP registration, PWD certification, NADRA processes) and updated referral directories. These could serve as core resources for community centers (such as AACs) and, where feasible, be made available through Union Council/Village Council information points.
6. **Strengthen the capacity of marginalized group leaders:** Programmes should invest in leadership and advocacy training for leaders of marginalised groups (women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities) who are active or have emerged through community forums. This would build on identified success while addressing the uneven capacity observed across community members, particularly the gap between community leaders who can deploy sophisticated legal strategies and those who cannot.
7. **Document and showcase cohesion outcomes:** Programmes should create materials highlighting the successes of inter-faith collaboration and inclusion of transgender and PWD leaders. These could be used to model positive social cohesion and challenge exclusionary norms in new areas. This reflects the finding that cohesion is a foundational outcome deserving explicit programme attention, not merely an instrumental means to other goals.
8. **Adapt approaches for conservative areas:** Programmes should develop culturally appropriate terminology and leveraging educational institutions and trusted community intermediaries

(retired teachers, religious leaders) as entry points for sensitive topics. The experience of ACAs in conservative areas demonstrates that framing matters significantly, approaches effective in one context may trigger resistance in another. Flexibility to identify local informal or formal influencers as per context is key to mitigating elite capture and to programming success.

4.3 Supporting the government to deliver results

9. **Link civic and economic empowerment:** Programmes should explore integrating skills training and livelihood components within the citizen engagement model, recognizing that economic agency is inseparable from civic participation for marginalized communities. This could include partnerships with District Youth Officers and vocational training programmes, where feasible, to create pathways from civic engagement to economic opportunity. Participants consistently linked their ability to participate to their economic security.

4.4 Specific government entry points

10. **Build on existing functional mechanisms:** The Khuli Kacheri (open court) in KP and Punjab represents an existing mechanism where communities already engage officials. Government and programmes could support inclusion of marginalized groups, systematic participation of community forum representatives in these mechanisms where appropriate and explore whether similar institutionalised spaces might be feasible in all districts, especially where elected local government is not functional or absent. Where Village Committees in KP are functional, linking forums to these structures could be explored.
11. **The study identifies provincial infrastructure differences as a structural constraint:** The absence of Tahaffuz Centres in KP

emerged as a structural factor limiting referral pathways for transgender persons and survivors of violence. This creates a constraint on what government integration can achieve in that province. Subject to government prioritization, addressing this infrastructure gap would expand the range of services to which communities could be connected.

12. Commission political economy analysis: To better understand the Last Mile Problem and identify realistic scaling pathways, programmes should commission focused political economy analysis mapping formal and informal power structures, budget allocation processes and decision-making dynamics within district governments. Such analysis could identify which officials and processes are most amenable to citizen input and where structural barriers are most entrenched.

Further Research

Future research could usefully examine three areas that this study could not fully address: (a) comparative analysis of barriers and enablers across different Marginalised groups to inform more targeted inclusion strategies; (b) tracer studies tracking specific cases where communities used legal tools (RTI, written applications, escalation to commissions) to measure success rates over time and identify institutional bottlenecks; and (c) longitudinal follow-up to assess whether participation produces durable democratic capacity, the ability to hold institutions accountable, or whether gains are contingent on continued programme support.



5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the Aawaz II citizen engagement ecosystem can move beyond tokenistic participation and contribute to more meaningful inclusion of women, religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and transgender persons within local governance. The findings demonstrate that the programme has been successful in creating participatory spaces that build citizens' confidence, awareness of rights, and capacity for collective action. Through the complementary functions of Aawaz Aagahi Centres, Village/ Neighbourhood Forums, Aawaz Change Agents, and Community Action Plans, the ecosystem has enabled participants to move from passive recipients of services towards more active engagement with government institutions. The evidence further shows that these mechanisms strengthen not only individual agency but also collective bargaining power, while fostering social cohesion by creating inclusive spaces where communities that have historically remained separated collaborate around shared concerns. In this respect, the Aawaz II model provides an effective demand-side approach for promoting meaningful participation beyond tokenistic consultation.

However, the study also finds that the long-term sustainability and scaling of these outcomes depend less on further strengthening citizen capacity and more on addressing institutional constraints within government systems. While communities increasingly possess the knowledge, organisation, and confidence to articulate collective priorities, these demands continue to rely on informal relationships, supportive officials, and ad hoc advocacy rather than institutionalised pathways into planning, budgeting, and service delivery. The research therefore identifies what governance literature describes as the "last-mile problem": a disconnect between empowered citizens and government systems that lack regular, inclusive mechanisms to receive and act upon citizen voice. Consequently, the most promising pathways for integration lie not in replacing existing government

structures but in embedding community engagement within them through regular citizen-government interface mechanisms, strengthened departmental mandates for outreach, formal recognition of community forums, and institutional links to district planning and budgeting processes.

Overall, the study concludes that the Aawaz II ecosystem demonstrates considerable potential as a model for strengthening participatory governance in Pakistan. Its greatest contribution lies not only in improving access to services or increasing citizen voice, but in demonstrating how community-based platforms can transform relationships between citizens and the state while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion among historically excluded groups. Sustaining these gains, however, will require a complementary supply-side commitment from government to institutionalise citizen engagement as a routine function of governance. Without such reforms, programmes such as Aawaz II can successfully generate demand for accountability, but their transformative potential will remain constrained by the limited capacity of government systems to respond consistently and at scale.



6. References

- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (1965). *On revolution*. Penguin Books.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Beckwith, K. (2007). Numbers and newness: The descriptive and substantive representation of women. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 40(1), 27-49.
- Binswanger, H. P., & Aiyar, S. S. (2003). *Scaling up community-driven development*. (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3039)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- British Council. (2024). *Aawaz II KAP Baseline Survey*. British Council Pakistan.
- British Council. (2025). *Aawaz II annual progress report July 2024–March 2025*. British Council Pakistan.
- Cash, D. W., et al. (2006). Scale and cross-scale dynamics: Governance and information in a multilevel world. *Ecology and Society*, 11(2).
- Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press.
- Cheema, A., Khwaja, A. I., & Qadir, A. (2005). *Decentralization in Pakistan: Context, content, and causes*. (KSG Faculty Research Working Paper RWP05-034). Harvard University

- Cornwall, A. (2002). Making spaces, changing places: Situating participation in development. IDS Working Paper 170.
- Cornwall, A. (2004). Introduction: New democratic spaces? The politics and dynamics of institutionalised participation. IDS Bulletin, 35(2), 1-10.
- Cornwall, A., & Goetz, A. M. (2005). Democratizing democracy: Feminist perspectives. Democratization, 12(5), 783-800.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Faguet, J. P. (2014). Decentralization and governance. World Development, 53, 2-13.
- Folke, C., et al. (2010). Resilience thinking: Integrating resilience, adaptability, and transformability. Ecology and Society, 15(4).
- Fox, J. A. (2015). Social accountability: What does the evidence really say? World Development, 72, 346-361.
- Fung, A. (2006). Varieties of participation in complex governance. Public Administration Review, 66(Special Issue), 66-75.
- Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding spaces for change: A power analysis. IDS Bulletin, 37(6), 23-33.
- Government of Pakistan. (2019). Annual statistical bulletin of federal government employees 2018-19. Establishment Division.
- Government of Pakistan. (2023). Status of women in Pakistan, 2023. Ministry of Human Rights.
- Habermas, J. (1984). The theory of communicative action, Volume 1. Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1990). Moral consciousness and communicative action. MIT Press.
- Hartmann, A., & Linn, J. F. (2008). Scaling up: A framework and lessons for development effectiveness. (Wolfensohn Center for Development Working Paper No. 5)

- Hossain, N., et al. (2018). What does closing civic space mean for development? IDS Working Paper 515.
- Joshi, A. (2013). Do they work? Assessing the impact of transparency and accountability initiatives in service delivery. Development Policy Review, 31(S1), s29-s48.
- Khan, F. A. (2016). Khwaja Sira activism: The politics of gender ambiguity in Pakistan. TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly, 3 (1-2), 158-164.
- Kymlicka, W. (1995). Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights. Oxford University Press.
- Kymlicka, W., & Norman, W. (2000). Citizenship in diverse societies. Oxford University Press.
- Malik, I. H. (2002). Religious minorities in Pakistan. Minority Rights Group International.
- Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2013). Localizing development: Does participation work? World Bank Policy Research Report.
- McGee, R., & Gaventa, J. (2013). The impact of transparency and accountability initiatives. Development Policy Review, 31(S1), s3-s28.
- Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan. (2025). Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25.
- Miroftab, F. (2004). Invited and invented spaces of participation: Neoliberal citizenship and feminists' expanded notion of politics. Wagadu, 1, 1-7.
- Molyneux, M. & Thomson, M. (2011). Cash transfers, gender equity, and women's empowerment in Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Gender and Development, 19(2), 195-212.
- Oliver, M., & Barnes, C. (2012). The new politics of disablement. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action. Cambridge University Press.
- Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2021). PSLM Survey District Level

2019-20.

- Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2024). 7th Population and Housing Census 2023.
- Palinkas, L. A., et al. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 42(5), 533-544.
- Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Reddy, G. (2005). *With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sanaullah, et al. (2021). Local government in Pakistan: A critical review. *Journal of Political Studies*, 28(1).
- Shakespeare, T. (2014). *Disability rights and wrongs revisited* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Uvin, P., & Miller, D. (1996). Paths to scaling up: Alternative strategies for local NGOs. *Human Organization*, 55(3), 344-354.
- World Bank. 2016. *Making Politics Work for Development: Harnessing Transparency and Citizen Engagement*. Policy Research Report. Washington, DC
- World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global gender gap report 2025*. Geneva.
- World Health Organization. (2011). *World report on disability*.
- Young, I. M. (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

7. Appendices

Appendix A: Thematic Codebook

The following codebook guided the analysis of FGD and KII transcripts:

A. Meaningful Participation

- A1. Attitudinal Change (From Tokenism to Transformation): Evidence of shifting from passive recipients to active agents of change.
- A2. Creating 'Claimed Spaces': Examples of communities setting their own agendas.
- A3. Building Citizen Capacity: Participants are gaining skills, confidence and knowledge of rights.
- A4. Inclusion of Marginalised Groups: Specific mentions of women, PWDs and minorities participating more effectively.
- A5. Information as Power: Access to information as a key tool for empowerment and accountability.

B. Government Integration

- B1. Identifying Entry Points: Specific government departments or processes identified for integration.
- B2. Government Responsiveness: Accounts of officials responding (or not responding) to community demands.
- B3. Formalizing Linkages: Discussion of making informal engagement more formal and sustainable.
- B4. The 'Last Mile' Problem: Gap between community demands and formal government planning cycles.

C. Contextual Factors

- C1. Barriers to Engagement: Obstacles hindering participation (power dynamics, bureaucracy, fear).
- C2. Enablers of Engagement: Factors facilitating participation (supportive leaders, collective identity).

- C3. Inter-Community Cohesion: Forums fostering unity and bridging divides between religious and social groups.

Appendix B: Methodology and Research Tools

B.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in constructivist epistemological principles, recognizing that Marginalised communities possess valuable knowledge about their own experiences and that understanding emerges through interaction between researchers and participants. The study acknowledges that multiple realities exist based on different social positions and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture the nuanced, context-specific dynamics of citizen engagement that quantitative methods might miss. Given the study's focus on understanding mechanisms and pathways, the "how" and "why" of participation, in-depth exploration of participant experiences was essential.

B.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposive maximum variation sampling was employed to ensure diversity across multiple dimensions:

- **Geographic diversity:** 7 districts across two provinces (Punjab: Vehari, Toba Tek Singh, Sargodha, Hafizabad; KP: Nowshera, Abbottabad, Malakand)
- **Demographic diversity:** Representation of women, men, persons with disabilities, religious minorities and transgender persons
- **Programme exposure:** Participants with varying levels and types of engagement with Aawaz II components
- **Role diversity:** Community members, Village Forum members, Resource Persons, Aawaz Change Agents and government officials

- Participants were identified through programme records and snowball sampling, with deliberate efforts to include voices from the most Marginalised subgroups within each category.

B.3 Data Collection Methods

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Eight FGDs were conducted with 8–12 participants each. FGDs were chosen for their ability to capture collective norms and group dynamics that influence individual behaviour and community-level change processes. The interactive nature of FGDs allows participants to build on each other's responses, revealing shared understandings and areas of disagreement.

FGD composition was determined by context:

- Women-only groups were convened where cultural context required separate spaces for women to speak freely about sensitive issues
- Mixed-gender groups were used where appropriate to capture community-level dynamics
- All-male groups were convened in contexts where this was culturally indicated

Each FGD was facilitated by a trained researcher with a note-taker present. Sessions were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi or Pashto as appropriate, lasted approximately 90–120 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Ten KIIs were conducted with individuals selected for their specific knowledge and institutional positions:

- Government officials from relevant departments (Social Welfare, Police, NADRA, district administration)
- AAC facilitators and Resource Persons
- Community leaders from Marginalised groups

- Aawaz Change Agents (youth volunteers)

KIIs provided an in-depth understanding of individual experiences, institutional perspectives and contextual factors that shape programme implementation. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting 45–75 minutes and conducted in the participant's preferred language.

B.4 Analytical Framework

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures (Braun and Clarke, 2006), combining deductive and inductive approaches:

Deductive coding was guided by three core theoretical frameworks:

- Gaventa's (2006) 'power cube', examining forms of power (visible, hidden, invisible) and spaces of participation (closed, invited, claimed)
- Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation', assessing movement from tokenistic to substantive participation
- Social accountability frameworks (Joshi, 2013; Fox, 2015), examining citizen-state engagement and the role of information

Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from the data that were not anticipated by the theoretical framework, including the significance of inter-community cohesion and the internal barriers within Marginalised communities.

Analysis proceeded through the following stages:

1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts
2. Initial coding using the thematic codebook (Annex A)
3. Collation of codes into potential themes
4. Review of themes against coded extracts and full dataset
5. Definition and naming of themes
6. Selection of illustrative quotes and production of the report

B.5 Ethical Protocols

The study adhered to established ethical research principles:

Informed consent: All participants received a verbal explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, risks and benefits in their preferred language. Written consent was obtained where feasible; verbal consent was documented where literacy or cultural factors made written consent inappropriate.

Confidentiality: Participants were assured that their identities would be protected in all reports. Quotes are attributed by role, gender and district only, not by name. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored securely with access limited to the research team.

Do no harm: Particular care was taken with vulnerable participants. Researchers were trained to recognize signs of distress and to pause or terminate sessions if needed. Referral information for support services was available.

B.6 Quality Assurance

Several measures were implemented to ensure data quality:

- **Facilitator training:** All facilitators received training on the research instruments, ethical protocols and techniques for engaging Marginalised participants
- **Debriefing sessions:** Daily debriefs allowed the research team to discuss emerging themes and refine approaches
- **Triangulation:** Findings were triangulated across FGDs, KIIs, field notes, across districts and across participant categories

Appendix C: Data Collection Summary

C.1 Overview

Method	Number	Total Participants
Focus Group Discussions	8	68
Key Informant Interviews	10	10
Total		78 participants

Marginalised Group Representation

Group	FGD Participants	KII Participants
Women	40	2
Religious Minorities	15	2
Persons with Disabilities	10	1
Transgender Persons	3	3

Note: Categories overlap; individuals may belong to multiple Marginalised groups.

C.2 Provincial Distribution

Punjab (4 Districts: Vehari, Toba Tek Singh, Sargodha, Hafizabad)

- FGDs: 5 total (2 all-women, 3 mixed gender)
- KIIs: 5 total (4 males, 1 transgender)
- KII Roles: Resource Person, Meesaq Centre In-charge, Social Needs Officer, Peace Committee Member, Transgender Community Leader

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (3 Districts: Nowshera, Abbottabad, Malakand)

- FGDs: 3 total (1 all-men, 2 all-women)

- KIIs: 5 total (2 males, 2 females, 1 transgender)
- KII Roles: Religious Minority Leader/DF Member, Dar-ul-Aman In-charge, ASI/Focal Person Women Protection, ACA, Transgender Community President

C.3 District-Level Participant Details

Hafizabad (Punjab)

FGD: 6 participants (3 males, 3 females), including 2 Christians and 1 PWD. Roles: 1 Focal Person, 1 RP, 1 VF member, 1 ASI, 1 SMO, 1 community member (PWD).

KII: Male, Christian, community leader.

Sargodha (Punjab)

FGD: 10 participants (5 males, 5 females); all Christian, no PWDs. Roles: 2 students (male), 1 pastor, 3 community members (male), 1 PSER (female), 3 community members (female).

KII: Male, Muslim, PWD, employment-related stakeholder.

Toba Tek Singh (Punjab)

FGD: All-female group, 16 participants, including 1 PWD. Roles: 9 community members, 6 VF members.

KII: Muslim transgender participant, Resource Person.

Vehari (Punjab)

FGD 1: All female, all Muslim, 7 participants, including 2 PWDs; all community members.

FGD 2 (Mixed): 15 participants (9 females, 6 males), including 1 PWD. Roles: 2 LHWs, 1 pastor, 9 community members, 3 students.

KII 1: RP, male, Muslim.

KII 2: Male, Meesaq Centre In-charge.

Abbottabad (KP)

FGD: All male group, including 1 PWD. Roles: 1 Resource Person, 2 VF members, 2 ACAs, 7 community members.

KII 1: Transgender community leader.

KII 2: Female, Police Officer (ASI/Focal Person Women Protection).

KII 3: Female, Dar-ul-Aman In-charge.

Malakand (KP)

FGD: All female group, including 3 from religious minority groups; no PWDs. Roles: 1 DF member, 8 VF members, 2 Focal Persons, 1 EWS representative.

KII: Male, religious minority, ACA.

Nowshera (KP)

FGD: Mixed gender, 13 participants (6 males, 6 females, 1 transgender), including 4 PWDs. Roles: 2 VF members, 3 SIG Members, 1 DF member, 1 RP, 6 community members.

KII: Male, religious minority, DF member.

www.britishcouncil.org

