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Inclusion, Accountability, Reducing Exploitation

Pathways to Tolerance: Lessons from Aawaz II Interfaith Engagement and Community Cohesion

Key Findings

Research Study

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Disclaimer:

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Introduction

The Aawaz II model of social cohesion offered important learnings with respect to interfaith engagement experience in selected districts of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This document is an abbreviated version of the longer study that explores the connection between this experience and broader dynamics of community cohesion and conflict pre-emption at the local level.



The Aawaz II Model:

Aawaz II works to address social and behavioural change within communities while strengthening citizen-state engagement on issues such as child marriage, gender-based violence, social cohesion and the inclusion of marginalised groups. It operates through community platforms including Village, District and Provincial Forums, supported by volunteers and local facilitators. Through community dialogues, interfaith visits and the Early Warning System and Early Response Mechanism (EWS-ERM), which enables early identification of tensions and supports timely community and institutional responses, the model promotes tolerance, mutual respect and constructive engagement across religious and social groups, while creating spaces for communities to raise concerns with relevant authorities. Aawaz II operated in 37 districts of KP and Punjab (January 2020–June 2026), in partnership with local organisations. The programme is managed by the British Council and funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Purpose

The study reviews the experience of the Aawaz II interfaith engagement initiatives and analyse its impact on community cohesion. Specifically, the study focused on interfaith relations, and examined how the changes, if any, took place (as an isolated phenomenon or in conjunction with other factors) and the lessons that it offers.

The methodology for this research study comprised an analysis of programme documents, learning tools, monitoring data and case studies from all districts involved in Aawaz II and existing literature and learnings.

Working Definitions of Interfaith Engagement and Community Cohesion

Interfaith engagement is defined as the processes of interaction, communication, relationship-building, myth-busting and issue-driven cooperation between people and organisations belonging to different faiths. This may involve dialogue, relationship-building with religious leaders, and initiatives that build bridges across faith lines.

Community cohesion is a concept that will be taken in a practical sense in terms of the ability of different groups (sectarian, religious or social) to coexist and cooperate, resolve differences, communicate and share space without causing any problems. Community cohesion is relevant not only to relationships within and across communities, but also to the ways in which citizens are able to engage institutions and access responsive local authorities when tensions arise. In addition, the issue of community cohesion is relevant in terms of the ability of marginalised groups, including women, to be able to speak out and participate.

The Context of Social Cohesion in Pakistan

Evidence collected during the implementation of Aawaz II programme in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reveals that interfaith and sectarian relationships are influenced by various other dynamics

such as inequality, exclusion, poor resource access, rumours, politicisation of identity and gender restrictions for participation. Minority religious groups find themselves marginalised in local decision-making processes and vulnerable, in which local conflicts can be politicised through religion. Similarly, sectarian conflicts, particularly during Muharram, can escalate from local disputes to confrontations involving large numbers of people. Thus, interfaith interactions are meaningful when embedded in larger community structures and methods of conflict management.















Key Findings

1. Interfaith Relationships and Community Cohesion

There is no evidence suggesting any straightforward and linear approach to the development of interfaith relations and community cohesion. Notwithstanding this, however, there seem to be clear indications of change in the ways in which communities interact with one another across their differences, notably in terms of the establishment of regular lines of communication, the visibility of minority views, the prevalence of dialogue prior to escalations and an increased inclination to handle tensions by engaging them rather than escalating. There also seems to be some indication of greater trust and cooperation, increased interactions across religious and sectarian lines and a growing comfort level with shared spaces and community processes.

2. Patterns in Interfaith and Sectarian Relations

The programme record suggests visible patterns of change in both majority–minority relations and cross-sectarian engagement. In some settings, religious minorities appear to have gained more channels through which to raise grievances and participate in local processes, while some majority actors became more willing to support minority concerns and advocate restraint during moments of tension. In sectarian contexts, Aawaz II appears to have helped create spaces in which practical issues such as processions, timings, public statements and codes of conduct could be discussed before they became flashpoints. Women's participation also appears to have widened who speaks in community processes and what kinds of concerns enter local

agendas. These shifts do not remove structural inequalities, but they do suggest movement toward more participatory, communicative and less exclusionary forms of local coexistence.

The study suggests that, in several cases, Aawaz II interfaith and community-based mechanisms contributed to conflict pre-emption rather than only post-crisis response. Early warning and early response mechanisms, local mediation and preventive engagement around periods of known sensitivity appear to have helped identify risks, respond to rumours and manage sensitive incidents before they were communalised or politicised. In some of these cases, preventive action appears to have depended not only on community mediation, but also on the ability of local actors to engage administrative authorities for timely coordination or follow-through.

The study does not claim that all conflicts were prevented or that gains were always durable. Its argument is more limited: that interfaith engagement, when linked to preventive local mechanisms, can contribute to practical local capacities for preventing tension from hardening into wider conflict.

The findings show that inclusiveness is not only an ethical value but also a practical condition for effective community engagement. There seems to be an increase in women's participation, both quantitatively and qualitatively, thus widening the social base of community and interfaith interaction. Religious minorities also appear to have gained more avenues for active participation in local community affairs. This matters, since the ability to speak out, the kind of issues raised and whether the community is considered to be inclusive and legitimate, all play a part.

As is acknowledged in the report, several factors beyond the scope of the project could contribute to the changes witnessed by the programme. Political and security changes at the macro level and other civil society programmes and initiatives can also play a role in this context. For this reason, no attribution claim is made in the report. Rather, a bounded contribution claim is put forward.

3. Factors Influencing Change

One of the central insights of this study is that the factors contributing to the development of interfaith relations and community cohesion operate in mutually reinforcing ways rather than as isolated elements. Dialogue alone is insufficient. Its impact appears to be strengthened when combined with participatory processes, trusted local leadership, repeated contact through community activities, collective action and early warning and response mechanisms (EWS-ERM). Participatory spaces create opportunities for interaction, while dialogue and exchange help address misunderstandings and establish communication. Local leaders and connectors provide legitimacy and continuity and collective action transforms interaction into practical cooperation. The EWS-ERM further supports these processes by enabling tensions to be identified and resolved before they escalate.

In some cases, these dynamics were also strengthened when community actors were able to engage relevant local authorities in a timely manner, linking citizen voice with administrative responsiveness and supporting conflict pre-emption.

Taken together, these findings suggest that ***interfaith relations should be understood as part of an interconnected framework in which dialogue, exchange, inclusivity, leadership, collective action and early intervention function as mutually reinforcing components***. These interactions operate not only through relationships within communities but also through community-institution linkages that allow local concerns to reach responsive authorities before tensions escalate. In this framework, community cohesion is strengthened through the combined effects of inclusivity, sustained contact, trusted local connectors, collaboration on shared issues and mechanisms for the early identification and resolution of emerging conflicts.

From Exclusion to Unity: An Interfaith Response to a Burial Crisis

In a village in Okara, the Christian graveyard had no space left. The request of a Christian family to bury their deceased daughter in the nearby Muslim graveyard was refused.

When the Muslim participants of an Interfaith Exposure Visit heard about this, they visited different members of the community and held discussions to mitigate the rising tensions. An agreement was reached and the girl was buried with the dignity she deserved.

The community, both Muslims and Christians, took the matter up with the relevant district and provincial department, requesting dedicated graveyards in all districts of Punjab that have minority populations.

Lessons Learned

The study identifies several practical lessons from Aawaz II's experience of interfaith engagement, particularly in relation to how community-based processes can support social cohesion and local conflict prevention.



Figure 1: Interfaith Exposure Visit – Sialkot (2026)

- **Interfaith engagement is most effective when connected to community systems:** Each community has its informal and formal forums, committees and leadership structures. When interfaith efforts are embedded within the normal framework of the communities, it seems to have been much more effective, legitimate and relevant to their conflict-prevention efforts.
- **Importance of Inclusion:** The study indicates that inclusion of marginalised groups, like women and minorities, ensured that community engagement processes were equitable and fair, and much more legitimate and effective. Inclusivity of various groups in community engagement process ensured that the process was representative enough to address a wide array of concerns.
- **Importance of Regular Contact:** Evidence suggests that repeated contact was more effective compared to any kind of one-off dialogue event. Where interfaith efforts involve repeated contact, it helps in dispelling misconceptions and mistrust.
- **Practical Cooperation Enhances Relational Change:** The degree to which communities cooperated on common issues enabled dialogue and future collaboration. Joint efforts were

effective at promoting trust, reciprocity and coexistence by embedding them into the daily lives of community members.

- **Ability to Respond Early Protects Interfaith Results:** Those advances would seem to be more sustainable where there was a capacity for early warning and intervention through the prevention of rumours and resolution of tensions prior to their escalation. What this indicates is that the most effective interfaith approach goes beyond dialogue alone to involve local systems of prevention.
- **Citizen-State Engagement Strengthens Conflict Pre-emption:** Citizen-state engagement also appears to matter for conflict pre-emption, particularly where community actors can translate local grievances into timely administrative attention, coordination and practical resolution.
- .**Significance of Local Connectors and Local Influencers:** Local figures of influence and trust were instrumental in facilitating the communication process and enabling early warning and rapid intervention when tensions arose. Their involvement would seem to have been particularly significant where they could connect community issues with wider resources.



Figure 2: Interfaith Harmony – Sargodha (2025)

Conclusion

This study concludes that the value of interfaith relations lies in their ability to be part of community institutions and structures and to be relevant to community issues. Its value does not lie in claiming that interfaith efforts alone produce these changes. Rather, the value of interfaith work is in its capacity to create synergy between processes of dialogue, inclusion, trusted local leadership, cooperation, community-institution linkages and early responses to strengthen community trust, communication and management of difference. The case of Aawaz II is instructive in terms of future interfaith programming in Pakistan and similar settings.

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