



A SNAPSHOT OF ISLAMIC RELIEF'S FAITH-SENSITIVE APPROACH TO PROTECTION AND INCLUSION

Creating community hope action teams:
Examples from Mali, Malawi, South Sudan and Ethiopia



ACRONYMS

CoH:	Channels of Hope
CHATs:	Community Hope Action Teams
GBV:	Gender Based Violence
FGD:	Focus Group Discussion
KII:	Key Informant Interview
PRFNP:	Poverty Reduction, Food and Nutrition Security and Protection
PROGRESS:	Promoting Gender Equality and Resilient Livelihoods - South Sudan
SCHEME:	Supporting Communities in Humanitarian Emergency - South Sudan
WASH:	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
CFASPEC:	Establishing Community and Faith-Based Approaches to Safeguarding and PSEAH in Emergency Contexts
PSEAH:	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SFP:	Safeguarding Focal Point
EFM:	Early and Forced Marriage



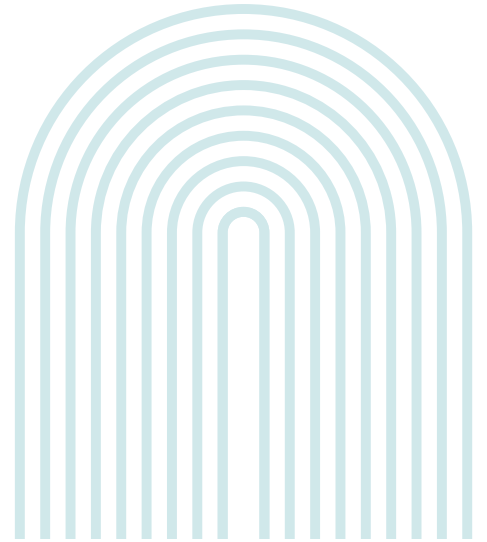
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Authors: **Najah Al Mugahed and Bushra Rehman**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper documents key lessons from Islamic Relief's experiences in establishing Community Hope Action Teams (CHATs). Derived from World Vision's Channels of Hope (CoH) methodology, the CHAT model integrates religious teachings and community engagement to address harmful social norms affecting children and gender equality. CoH was later adapted by Islamic Relief to reflect Muslim contexts, incorporating insights from Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and hadith. The primary goal is to influence community attitudes and behaviours by creating a safe space for discussion among community members. It focuses on addressing the underlying causes of issues related to child protection and gender equality, using religious principles to promote positive social change.

Not every CHAT is rooted in religious scripture, nor does every team precisely follow World Vision's methodology. The approach varies significantly across different contexts, reflecting local needs and community dynamics. Some CHATs operate independently of religious texts, choosing instead to focus on broader community norms and values. In these cases, the strategy is tailored based on community consultations, often without a consistent methodology across different regions. This adaptability allows CHATs to remain relevant, culturally sensitive and commensurate to country office's capacity and resources.

WHAT IS THE COH METHODOLOGY?

The CoH methodology is a structured approach aimed at mobilising faith leaders and communities to contribute to child wellbeing and gender equality. It creates a respectful and safe environment where participants can reflect on their religious texts and explore difficult topics. It also delivers technical knowledge in clear, accessible ways and empowers participants to actively address protection challenges.

CoH comprises four key phases:

1. **Design:** Develop partnerships, build capacity and adapt the CoH project to meet specific community needs.
2. **Catalyse:** Engage and inspire faith leaders to drive social change and address local protection concerns.
3. **Strategise:** Guide mobilised faith actors and CHATs in planning impactful actions.
4. **Empower:** Periodically reconnect with and support these faith leaders and action teams to sustain and expand their capacity, efforts and impact over time.

This methodology is designed to drive sustainable community-led change, ensuring long-term outcomes for child protection and gender equality.

Composition of CHAT groups

Regardless of religious grounding, CHATs are designed to be gender and age diverse. As recommended by CoH methodology, CHATs are typically composed of between six to 12 members, depending on the size of the community. Members are chosen based on their accessibility, trust within the community and sometimes their expertise in relevant areas such as healthcare, social work or law enforcement. Notably, they usually include respected faith leaders whose voices can contribute to positive behavioural change.

If existing groups are already active, creating a new CHAT may not be necessary; instead, the focus is on enhancing the group's capabilities. These teams collaborate with local faith leaders and leverage the community's unique cultural knowledge to design and raise awareness on key protection issues within the community. This community-driven approach ensures that interventions are not only relevant but also foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members to proactively protect at-risk populations.

BACKGROUND

Islamic Relief's commitment to social justice and the protection of all at-risk groups is rooted in our core values, policies and global strategy. This is reinforced by our international and humanitarian commitments to external initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Emergencies, and the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. Islamic Relief works on including faith-sensitive approaches that are embedded in community driven responses to ensure a contextualised understanding of protection needs and faith narratives.

From 2014 to 2016, Islamic Relief worked with World Vision to adapt the CoH, based on Christian principles, into an Islamic context. This adaptation and implementation was achieved by working closely with scholars to understand the Islamic response to child protection issues. Many of Islamic Relief's country offices, staff and community leaders were trained on the child protection module, and in turn trained and led workshops with community members. Countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan and Mali experienced a successful roll-out of this methodology that was embedded in their programmes.

Between 2017 and 2019, we also partnered with World Vision to adopt an Islamic version of the Channels of Hope for Gender. In comparison to child protection, gender equality issues were extremely difficult and context-specific, and required several

iterations of content for roll-out. There were two main Training of Trainers programmes held in South Africa and Indonesia, which also involved training faith leaders on gender-related issues. This was subsequently rolled out in some country offices including Mali, the Philippines, Ethiopia and Pakistan.

For some country offices, there were some notable challenges in implementing a standalone CoH gender module, as addressing gender equality through a faith-based lens was sometimes met with hesitancy. This approach was perceived by some as misaligned with traditional community values, necessitating a more nuanced and culturally sensitive engagement strategy.

In response, Islamic Relief developed a single, unified training package by integrating content from the CoH child protection and gender modules. This approach, introduced between 2020 and 2021, aimed to use child protection as a strategic entry point to engage communities on sensitive and contentious gender-related issues. As a result, country offices now have access to three comprehensive training packages designed to support the establishment of CHATs.

Safeguarding projects (2019-2024)

The CHAT methodology has also been used and integrated into several programmes, as part of their protection related activities. For example, between 2020 and 2024, Islamic Relief undertook projects titled Sustainable and Inclusive Approaches to Safeguarding Mechanisms and Establishing Community and Faith-Based Approaches to Safeguarding and PSEAH¹ in Emergency Contexts (CFASPEC), five countries in phase one and expanding to eight countries in phase two.³ The primary focus was on strengthening the capacity of country offices around safeguarding and protection practices. This involved intensive capacity-building initiatives and the establishment of CHATs, aimed at creating safer environments for vulnerable populations.

Through targeted sensitisation (raising awareness about safeguarding issues and how to respond to them) sessions, we sought to embed protection and safeguarding practices throughout all organisational functions, ensuring they are both accessible and effective for all stakeholders. CHATs were also established in six out of eight countries, further enhancing the project's reach and impact.

¹ Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

² Phase 1 countries: Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Jordan.

³ Phase 2: Mali, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Yemen, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

AIM

The purpose of this learning paper is to examine and document insights from Islamic Relief's experiences in implementing faith-sensitive approaches to protection and inclusion. It focuses on examples from Islamic Relief country offices that have adopted the CoH methodology, exploring the various approaches utilised, their integration into programmes and their long-term impacts. Drawing on examples from four countries, this paper seeks to establish a foundational understanding of how CHATs have been implemented and adapted to diverse cultural and social settings. These case studies illustrate the flexibility of the CHAT model and emphasise the critical role of community-driven protection initiatives.

METHODOLOGY OF PAPER

For this research we adopted two main approaches for data collection. The paper specifically selected four case studies, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Mali and Malawi, in order to provide an in-depth national narrative on the experience of CHATs. While the four main case studies form the foundation of the paper, the inclusion of survey results from 25 participants from 14 country offices⁴ ensures that the conclusions drawn are supported by a wider range of experiences. While this additional data does not receive the same level of detailed analysis as the primary case studies, it serves to provide additional context to reinforce its conclusions.

For the four case studies, targeted sampling (where the researcher specifically selects individuals who possess particular characteristics or knowledge that can provide insight on the research question) was selected as the most appropriate method to systematically choose participants with direct involvement in CHATs. This targeted sampling approach ensured that participants were well-versed in the relevant themes, thus facilitating the collection of more comprehensive and focused data.



Refresher training with a CHAT in Malawi in April 2024

In **South Sudan**, four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 24 participants across Warap and Wau. These were evenly split between 12 men and 12 women to ensure a gender-inclusive approach.

In **Ethiopia**, four FGDs were held in the Afar region, involving 29 participants, including 16 women, four religious leaders, four individuals with disabilities and representatives from women's associations, police and justice departments. This diverse composition aimed to capture a road range of community perspectives.

In **Malawi**, three FGDs were conducted within the areas of Mwichande, Chipeta and Mangochi. Each CHAT comprised between 10 and 12 members, typically including seven women and four men. Participants represented diverse groups such as faith leaders, youth, elders, people with disabilities, women's groups and members of the village development committee.

In **Mali**, three FGDs were conducted with CHATs. The first involved 20 participants (11 men and nine women), the second had 10 participants (five men and five women), and the third in Dognoumana included 15 participants (eight men and seven women). These groups were structured to be inclusive and representative, integrating diverse community demographics to gather a wide range of perspectives on health and community needs.

Additionally, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with three Islamic Relief staff members from Mali, two from Malawi, six from Ethiopia and three from South Sudan. These KIIs provided in-depth insights into the effectiveness of CHATs from the perspectives of staff directly engaged in project implementation. This approach added a nuanced layer to the research, enriching the analysis with evaluations of CHAT impact and operational challenges within these community-driven health initiatives. All responses from KIIs, the smart survey data and FGDs were systematically compiled and organised by common themes which are discussed below.

⁴ Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan (4), Jordan (3), Iraq (2), the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, Mali (3) South Africa, Albania and Chechnya.

FUNCTION AND FORMATION OF CHATS IN MALI, MALAWI, ETHIOPIA AND SOUTH SUDAN

ISLAMIC RELIEF MALAWI

Islamic Relief Malawi, with financial support from Islamic Relief USA, is implementing the Poverty Reduction, Food and Nutrition, Security and Protection (PRFNP) project in the Mangochi district. Central to the PRFNP project is the CHAT, which comprises influential community figures, including village chiefs, faith leaders, women's group representatives, youth and older people. These committees are integral to raising awareness and facilitating discussions about protection and GBV within their communities. CHAT members are trained collaboratively by government personnel such as gender and social welfare officers alongside Islamic Relief staff, ensuring that they gain sustainable skills linked with government support.

Islamic Relief Mali collaborates closely with faith leaders, including pastors and imams, to spread scripture-based messages related to protection issues. These leaders play a crucial role in reinforcing these messages within their religious communities, including in churches and mosques. Furthermore, Islamic Relief partners with local government authorities, particularly regarding the national gender policy, which has its own training modules on protection, advocacy, and coordination. This collaboration blends the government's training methodologies with Islamic Relief's approach to collectively train the CHAT members.

The process begins with identifying specific protection issues through evidence-based research and community mapping (identifying service providers⁵ and key stakeholders). Once an issue is identified, the team collaborates with faith leaders to source relevant scriptures, using these teachings as a foundation to transform community norms and attitudes. The CHAT members consist of influential community leaders, including village representatives (the chief, the development committee, the civil protection committee and the natural resource management committee) as well as youth, the elderly, women's groups and individuals with disabilities. In Malawi, chiefs play a key role as part of the referral system for handling protection and gender-related issues.

This approach allows community leaders to disseminate protection and GBV messages during various community gatherings and meetings, thereby maximising outreach. By integrating these messages into existing community interactions, the approach enhances community commitment and builds capacity to challenge harmful social and gender norms effectively. The CHAT committee has proven instrumental in managing protection and GBV cases.

In Malawi, CHAT members meet monthly or on a needs basis. During these meetings, they discuss the progress made in their protection efforts, challenges encountered and share effective practices. Islamic Relief staff participate in these meetings to document key discussions, challenges and accomplishments which are then included in monthly reports.

ISLAMIC RELIEF MALI

The formation of CHATs in Islamic Relief Mali mirrors the process used in Malawi, with Malawi possessing a history of integrating the CHAT methodology across all programmes in both the northern and southern regions of the country.

The process begins with training key community members, including religious leaders, youth, women representatives and protection activists. These training sessions incorporate references to religious scriptures to ensure alignment with cultural and faith-based values. Following the training, teams visit remote communities to inform members and raise awareness about protection issues, fostering awareness and inspiring community action. CHATs are then formally established to lead ongoing awareness and protection campaigns, serving as a central mechanism for mobilising communities around these critical issues.

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of CHATs, ongoing support is provided, including additional training and mentoring to reinforce their capacities. In Mali, CHAT members meet monthly to discuss progress, address challenges and develop action plans. Previously, meetings occurred twice a month, but then shifted to a monthly schedule due to time and budget constraints. These sessions play a vital role in identifying current community events and leveraging them as opportunities to conduct awareness campaigns and directly engage with community members.



Awareness raising of Goro Women on Child Protection in Mali, October 22

⁵ An organisation that delivers services aimed at addressing the needs and rights of affected populations such as medical support, shelter, legal aid, etc.

ISLAMIC RELIEF SOUTH SUDAN

The South Sudan office has adopted a strategic approach to incorporate faith-sensitive elements into its programme design. This approach is primarily integrated within the protection component of various programmes, with a strong emphasis on utilising religious influence to promote community well-being. Central to this strategy is the formation of CHATs, which include faith leaders who receive specialised training to disseminate key protection messages within their communities. Furthermore, staff open each meeting and training session with prayers or Qur'anic verses, acknowledging and connecting with the community's religious identity to foster trust and engagement.

Under the CFASPEC project funded by Islamic Relief Canada, two CHAT groups were set up in the city of Yei but the country office has adopted this approach across other field sites (areas Islamic Relief works in), including the cities of Warrap, Wau and Kapoeta. Each CHAT comprises 15-20 members and is designed to be inclusive, with diverse representation across age, gender and abilities. Faith leaders play a central role, along with other community influencers such as schoolteachers, church leaders and chiefs. The gender composition of CHATs varies by region. In some areas, particularly more progressive regions, female representation is balanced at about 50 per cent often including women leaders. However, in patriarchal communities like Wau and Warrap, faith leadership is predominantly male, with women traditionally holding domestic roles. In such settings, male faith leaders are more visible within CHATs and carry significant influence. Faith leaders are essential to CHATs operations, with some integrating directly into local protection committees while others operate independently. CHAT members typically gather biweekly or monthly, depending on local arrangements. Their consistent and respected presence has earned them considerable authority within their communities, making them instrumental in shifting perceptions and fostering behavioural change on protection-related matters.

Given the varied representation in CHATs, multiple outreach strategies are employed to maximise community engagement and impact. Community meetings and awareness campaigns are organised by CHATs to discuss protection and GBV issues. Religious leaders often address these topics within churches, while other CHAT members focus on schools and local gatherings to reach broader audiences. Women's groups within CHATs often use art, songs and plays as creative tools to raise awareness on GBV, while men's groups tend to use radio broadcasts to reach as many people as possible. Through these diverse methods, CHATs aim to engage the community comprehensively, using both traditional and innovative outreach strategies to promote protection and well-being.

ISLAMIC RELIEF ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, many projects integrate community committees across different regions. The latest project in the Afar office has established CHATs in four districts since April 2024. The composition of these CHATs is inclusive of various social groups, featuring close to 50 per cent female representation and involving religious leaders, representatives from women's associations and individuals with disabilities. CHAT membership also includes key project stakeholders, with coordination efforts involving federal government bodies and institutions to help identify suitable members. Special care is taken in selecting religious leaders, relying on their community networks and trust; however, selection processes for CHAT members are not always clear. Some staff have indicated that the selection of faith leaders involves the Islamic Affairs Council Office⁶ or government input, while others reported that community members are left to select their own representatives.

In Ethiopia, CHAT members reportedly meet monthly. The primary functions of CHATs involve raising awareness and advocating against harmful traditional practices within the community, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage. They also focus on community mobilisation around education, engaging with educational centres and families, and providing referral linkages to GBV service providers.

Faith leaders hold significant influence in the Afar region, where they are highly respected and often play key roles in conflict resolution and mediation. Evaluation reports from project assessments highlight that these leaders have positively impacted community perceptions, particularly in reducing support for FGM. They are instrumental in helping community members distinguish between religious and cultural practices, thus driving meaningful behavioural change. Community feedback also mentioned prioritising people with disabilities for certain services, although there remain gaps in infrastructure and specialised services to fully meet their needs.

The smart survey provided additional insights into how CHATs are engaged across different Islamic Relief country offices, revealing a variety of approaches and levels of integration.

60 per cent of respondents indicated that protection components, such as awareness campaigns and advocacy, are fully integrated into programmes, while 40 per cent reported partial integration. Nearly all respondents highlighted community awareness on GBV and child protection as key CHAT functions. 80 per cent of survey respondents acknowledged the inclusion of faith leaders in community committees. Their roles range from raising awareness and leading community groups to providing psychosocial support and advocating for gender equality. Countries that completed the survey showed varying degrees of CHAT alignment with existing community structures. This integration ensures sustainability, with CHATs often continuing beyond project timelines, particularly where they are linked with pre-existing committees.

⁶ Offices that represent regional Islamic Affairs Councils, which in turn represent the national Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council.

THE FAITH ELEMENT IN CHATS

In Mali and Malawi, the CHATs consist of respected faith leaders, including imams, pastors and religious representatives, as well as other community advocates such as teachers and town hall officials, who use faith-based messages to raise awareness on GBV and child protection. The integration of faith leaders in these teams is central to Islamic Relief's CoH methodology, as they bring both moral authority and credibility to discussions on sensitive issues such as GBV and child protection. This faith-sensitive approach allows CHATs to tackle deeply rooted cultural and social issues in ways that resonate with community members, enhancing acceptance and engagement. In areas with mixed faith representation, depending on the context CHATs often incorporate leaders from different faiths including both Islam and Christianity, fostering an inclusive approach to faith-sensitive advocacy. For instance, in Christian-majority areas in Mali, CHATs may include or be exclusively composed of Christian leaders to ensure cultural sensitivity.

Islamic Relief Malawi's Safeguarding Focal Point (SFP)⁷ has also set up interfaith CHAT groups to promote awareness around safeguarding generally, as well as gender justice and child protection. Malawi's communities are composed of various religious groups, primarily Christians and Muslims. Interfaith CHATs reflect this diversity, ensuring that safeguarding efforts are inclusive and representative of the entire community. This enhances their credibility and trust

within the community and enables a unified approach to safeguarding, in which Christian and Muslim leaders can jointly advocate for the protection of children and vulnerable individuals. For example, Christian pastors in Malawi may use scripture to address issues of physical abuse or to support the rights of women and children within the family unit, lending credibility to their advocacy.

ENGAGING WITH FAITH LEADERS IN MALI

Bourama, an imam from Ouelessebouyou, Mali, is a dedicated religious leader deeply committed to his community. He participated in child safeguarding training delivered by Islamic Relief Mali on 5 May 2023.

"The child safeguarding training provided by Islamic Relief equipped me with essential knowledge, tools and strategies to protect children from harm, abuse and exploitation. Through interactive sessions, case studies, and practical exercises, I gained a deeper understanding of child rights, signs of abuse, reporting mechanisms and preventive measures. I actively engaged in discussions, shared my insights and collaborated with fellow participants to develop action plans tailored to our respective communities."

The impact of this training on the community has been profound and far-reaching. As a respected imam, Bourama has used his newfound knowledge and skills to raise awareness about child protection among community members, fellow religious leaders and parents. He has integrated child safeguarding principles into his sermons, emphasising Islamic teachings on compassion, justice, and the sanctity of children's rights.



Imam Bourama delivering a sermon in Mali

⁷ A designated individual within Islamic Relief who serves as the primary contact for reporting safeguarding concerns and is responsible for ensuring compliance with safeguarding policies.



Islamic Relief staff training CHAT Members in the Commune of Bambara Maoude in Mali, February 2025

One of the key strengths of this approach lies in the faith-based messaging used by CHAT members. By incorporating scripture-based references into discussions about protection, faith leaders can frame these conversations within a familiar religious and cultural context. This framing is instrumental in building trust and addressing misconceptions, as messages delivered by these leaders align with values held deeply within the community. When an imam in Mali speaks out against child marriage, referencing teachings that prioritise the protection and well-being of children, it adds a moral weight to the message, making it more compelling and acceptable.

In Mali, during the targeted FGDs, a significant issue identified in the community was the lack of emotional support provided by husbands to their wives during pregnancy and after childbirth. Traditionally, husbands were largely absent during these critical periods, leaving women to navigate the physical and emotional challenges of pregnancy and postpartum care on their own. This absence was reflective of deeply ingrained cultural norms that often overlooked the importance of emotional support and shared responsibilities within marriage. The CHAT reported that they addressed this issue through targeted awareness-raising sessions that drew on faith-based teachings of treating one's wife with kindness, care and compassion, especially during vulnerable times such as pregnancy and postpartum recovery.

Beyond advocacy, the involvement of faith leaders in CHATs helps to normalise conversations around protection issues that might otherwise be stigmatised or overlooked. As figures of authority who are respected and trusted, faith leaders help to dispel taboos associated with topics such as domestic violence or child exploitation. Their support in community gatherings, sermons and public events provides community members with a safe space to engage in dialogue, ask questions and seek guidance on these complex issues. Faith leaders serve as both advocates and educators, bridging the gap between religious principles and human rights advocacy in a way that respects and reinforces the cultural fabric of the community.

In South Sudan, faith-sensitive approaches have also been articulated through community engagement. Notable examples include the Supporting Communities in Humanitarian Emergency - South Sudan (SCHEME) and Promoting Gender Equality and Resilient Livelihoods-South Sudan (PROGRESS) projects, which were implemented as multi-year initiatives spanning two to three years. The extended timeframe of

these projects allowed for meaningful engagement with communities and the ability to track changes in behaviours and attitudes throughout the project's duration.

Under the CFASPEC project, two CHATs were established in Yei, South Sudan. These groups demonstrated exceptional success in influencing behavioural change, particularly among young people. Through creative expressions such as drama, songs and dance, combined with spiritual support, the CHATs in Yei fostered unity and promoted reconciliation across different denominations. This blend of faith-based and cultural approaches enabled the CHATs to bridge divides and address pressing community issues through relatable and impactful methods.

The impact of CHATs has been particularly notable in addressing GBV, child protection and education. Women's groups expressed the significant role CHATs play in raising awareness about GBV, passing knowledge to community members on issues such as child abuse and early and forced marriage (EFM). They highlighted how CHATs, with teachers as active members, have further cascaded these benefits into educational settings. Teachers integrated GBV awareness into their educational programmes, which not only informed children but also sensitised parents, contributing to a reduction in child abuse and EFM rates. Similarly, men's groups acknowledged the substantial impact of CHATs in reducing GBV cases within their communities. They credited CHATs for promoting awareness and understanding of the consequences of forced and EFM, leading to a decline in such practices. The CHATs also serve as vital referral points, directing individuals in need of support to relevant services, thereby reinforcing community trust in safeguarding mechanisms.

In other contexts, however, the faith-based approach is more elusive. For example, in the case of Islamic Relief Ethiopia, while they do place an emphasis on community-based approaches, they do not have a formal framework labelled as 'faith-sensitive programming.' Despite this, community members frequently rely on faith leaders to advocate for gender equality, raise awareness on protection issues, and facilitate peacebuilding and community mobilisation efforts. The awareness-raising and capacity-building activities carried out within these initiatives are often regarded as community-based protection efforts, showcasing Islamic Relief's commitment to grassroots engagement. Several Islamic Relief projects demonstrate this methodology in action.

- Under CFASPEC, a capacity-building intervention funded by Islamic Relief Canada in Ethiopia and 4 other countries, the SFP began the process of establishing CHATs with the objective of promoting a community-based approach towards safeguarding. The strengthening community resilience and economic empowerment programme for example, includes a mainstream component with plans to train CHATs on protection and safeguarding over the project's three - year duration.
- A project focused on women's economic empowerment incorporated peacebuilding components to resolve conflicts between two communities. In this initiative, community conversations were used as a method to address tensions, encourage dialogue and foster mutual understanding. CHATs were directly linked to these community conversations, bringing together different groups to facilitate discussions on challenging issues, leading to shifts in attitudes and beliefs.
- The Afar reconstruction and rehabilitation project funded by Islamic Relief UK, four CHAT groups were established, comprising a total of 40 members (21 female and 19 male). These groups were trained and have since taken on critical roles in advocating against harmful practices such as FGM and EFM. In this predominantly Muslim community, the involvement of CHAT members, particularly faith leaders, has been instrumental in raising awareness and driving change on these sensitive issues.
- The gender equality project (2021-2023), funded by Islamic Relief Canada, targeted harmful practices such as FGM/C and EFM in Dekasuftu Woreda of Liben Zone. The project's endline evaluation showed significant behavioural changes, with a 37 per cent reduction in child marriage and a 25 per cent reduction in FGM/C from baseline levels. Under this project, faith leaders, particularly imams, played a central role by speaking against FGM/C and EFM during Friday sermons, challenging cultural norms through Islamic teachings. Community committees empowered women to report abuse and participate in decision-making, while traditional mechanisms such as Meblo⁸ provided a culturally accepted framework for conflict resolution and survivor protection.

PROMISING PRACTISES

Hajji Ousman, a religious leader in Ethiopia, has highlighted the need to eradicate FGM, calling it a harmful cultural practice unsupported by the Qur'an or hadith. He emphasised targeting traditional birth attendants and mothers, who often drive the practice, as critical for sustainable change. The project demonstrated the effectiveness of faith-sensitive, community-driven approaches in reducing harmful practices and fostering gender equality. By empowering women, leveraging religious leaders and integrating local traditions, there was meaningful progress in transforming societal attitudes.

From the smart survey findings, there was a distinction between committees that incorporate a faith-based approach to protection and those that do not. While 20 per cent of participants had not involved faith leaders in their community committees, 80 per cent (55% consistently, 25% occasionally) ensured the participation of faith leaders. The role of these leaders primarily revolves around raising awareness on protection issues (72 per cent) and leading community groups (60 per cent). Additionally, 20-30% of respondents cited faith leaders' involvement in providing psychosocial support, responding to GBV cases, mediating between different groups and facilitating staff outreach. Despite these contributions, nearly 50 per cent of participants indicated that the faith-based approach is only sometimes, rarely, or never utilised in committee responses.

Overall, the establishment of CHATs under these faith-sensitive projects illustrates the transformative potential of long-term, community-focused interventions. By addressing critical issues such as GBV, child protection, education and peacebuilding, CHATs serve as a model for promoting sustainable change, fostering community cohesion and empowering vulnerable groups through culturally and faith-relevant strategies.

⁸ A traditional community-based conflict resolution mechanism specifically practiced in the Afar region of Somalia.

COMMUNITY COORDINATION: LEVERAGING LOCAL STRUCTURES

CHATs are deeply integrated within local community structures in Malawi, Mali, South Sudan and Ethiopia, enhancing their reach and sustainability through collaboration with established institutions and social networks. This interconnected approach allows CHATs to extend their influence and capitalise on existing community frameworks.

In Mali, town halls serve as central meeting points for the community and are instrumental in gathering diverse groups for public discussions. CHAT members often partner with local government officials and town hall staff to gain permission and support for events. By leveraging town halls, CHATs can reach a broad audience and invite key stakeholders, such as local leaders, parents and youth to participate in awareness sessions. Regular town hall meetings also provide a structured platform where CHATs can address community concerns and advocate for policy-level changes.



A town hall in Mali, which are often used by CHATs to address community concerns

In Mali, health clinics are a natural ally for CHATs due to their role in family and community wellbeing. CHATs collaborate with health workers to address GBV and child protection cases that often come to light within healthcare settings. For example, healthcare professionals may refer cases of suspected child abuse or domestic violence to CHAT members, who then work with the affected families to provide support, resources, and, where needed, advocacy for legal intervention. Joint sessions at clinics or health fairs allow CHATs to provide information on the health risks of issues such as EFM and FGM, reinforcing the medical perspective on why these practices are harmful. In addition, a CHAT member in Mali reported that being an employee of the local health clinic has meant that she is able to propose the subsidising of costs for the most at-risk referrals.

Regular events at mosques and churches provide a trusted setting for CHATs to disseminate messages on sensitive topics, which may include the risks of child labour, the importance of education for girls and the prevention of GBV. Religious centres are also used as a base for CHAT members to coordinate, especially in the presence of faith leaders as members of CHATs. "The change we see is what motivates us, not financial gain," says an imam and CHAT member in Dougnonama, Mali.

In both Mali and Malawi, CHAT members included schoolteachers. By collaborating with teachers and school staff, CHATs address issues such as bullying and school-based violence, as well as raising awareness about Islamic Relief's safeguarding mechanism. Teachers, as part of CHATs, play a dual role: they serve as both educators and protectors, who can identify signs of abuse and provide a support system within schools. In July 2023, Islamic Relief Malawi conducted a CHAT-based training in Chinupule focusing on case management, referral pathways and child protection. The training brought together teachers, faith leaders, and police officers to strengthen their capacity in addressing and responding to child protection issues effectively.

In South Sudan, the establishment of CHATs is also often built on existing community structures and networks, leveraging their established presence and trust within the community to enhance the effectiveness of safeguarding and protection initiatives. At the payam level,⁹ peace committees play a critical role in conflict resolution and fostering intercommunal harmony. These committees are instrumental in reducing tensions and addressing disputes within and between communities. By incorporating peace committee members into CHATs, the teams gain access to local knowledge, mediation skills and a network of relationships that are invaluable for addressing protection issues such as GBV, EFM and other community conflicts. Similarly, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) committees offer an organisational framework that is closely aligned with community wellbeing. These committees are often well-versed in community mobilisation and awareness-raising, making them a valuable resource for CHATs aiming to advocate for child protection and safeguarding practices. The involvement of WASH committee members also allows CHATs to address overlapping issues such as hygiene-related child health concerns, critical to South Sudan's context. Disability union committees further enrich CHATs by ensuring that the rights and needs of persons with disabilities are prioritised. These committees bring expertise in advocating for disability inclusion and accessibility, allowing CHATs to adopt a more holistic approach to protection.

In Ethiopia, CHATs incorporate key figures such as religious leaders, representatives from women's associations, and advocates for persons with disabilities. This diverse composition ensures that the perspectives and needs of different segments of the community are recognised and addressed. The process of forming CHATs is highly coordinated and involves active collaboration with various project stakeholders and institutions. Local government authorities play a critical role in identifying potential members, leveraging their knowledge of community dynamics and existing networks. This careful selection process ensures that CHATs are composed of trusted individuals who have established credibility and influence within their communities.

In all countries, women and youth groups are crucial in extending the CHATs message to more targeted community segments. Women's groups are valuable allies in advocacy for issues such as FGM, domestic violence and EFM. In these groups, CHAT members facilitate conversations on women's rights, child protection, resources for support and ways to advocate for safer community practices (for example, ensuring children are not left alone in homes during farming seasons by setting up community childcare creches). Youth groups, similarly, provide a space for discussing age-relevant issues, such as child labour and education.

By embedding their work within existing structures, CHATs maximise resource efficiency, utilise familiar community settings for sensitive discussions and ensure continuity. Furthermore, each member contributes unique resources and expertise that make CHAT-led interventions more comprehensive and sustainable. The integration of CHATs within community structures not only facilitates protection and GBV awareness but also supports Islamic Relief in applying a socio-ecological approach to its programming.

The smart survey findings indicate that all country offices have community committees integrated within their projects, with 45 per cent confirming full coverage and 50 per cent indicating partial coverage. Only 5 per cent reported the absence of such committees. These committees, though inspired by the CHATs model, often adapt their approach to local contexts and do not strictly follow the methodology associated with World Vision's original framework.

The committees primarily focus on raising awareness and mobilising community action on protection issues, with 86 per cent of respondents identifying this as a core function. Additionally, 60 per cent stated that the committees facilitate responses to GBV and establish referral pathways, while nearly 50 per cent reported that these committees play a role in coordinating with local actors and mediating community conflicts. 36 per cent of committees also participate in sector-specific activities such as WASH, even when these are not directly related to protection.

⁹ The second-lowest administrative division below counties.

SUSTAINABILITY

CHATs play a vital role in fostering community awareness on critical issues such as child protection and GBV. However, because CHAT members typically operate on a voluntary basis, maintaining their motivation and consistent engagement over time is challenging, especially in resource-limited environments where funding is tight. Regular support, refreshers and incentives become essential in these contexts to help keep members engaged and effective in their roles.

CHATs face significant financial constraints that impact their post-project sustainability. Members have noted that without continued funding, sustaining the CHATs awareness and support efforts will be difficult, potentially diminishing community trust if members can no longer provide practical support. To mitigate these challenges, CHAT members have suggested establishing emergency funds for essential needs such as health referrals and transportation costs, as well as income-generating activities, such as renting chairs during events to sustain CHAT operations. In all countries, the long-term commitment required from CHAT members, combined with the lack of financial incentives, could potentially constrain the activities of CHATs. This is a particular risk in pastoralist communities, where frequent movement from one location to another complicates member retention and engagement, especially within the short-term duration of project interventions (typically between one and three years).

In some cases, limited resources restrict ongoing training opportunities and support for CHAT members, which can lead to a gradual decline in both morale and the ability to effectively advocate. According to a CHAT member in Mali, refresher sessions and targeted training on evolving community needs not only renew their knowledge but also reinforce their commitment and credibility within the community. Practical incentives such as transport stipends, communication resources and occasionally support with materials such as mobile phones or bicycles can also empower CHAT members to carry out their duties, particularly in hard-to-reach areas.

Islamic Relief South Sudan and Islamic Relief Ethiopia shared some challenges which the CHATs suggested would threaten their sustainability. The lack of communication devices and transportation, combined with long travel distances, significantly impedes the ability of CHAT members to perform their roles effectively. In Ethiopia, particularly in the Afar region, poor infrastructure and inadequate roads exacerbate these challenges, especially in pastoralist communities. Women in these areas face additional hurdles in accessing health services, such as clinics during childbirth, and participating in programme activities due to the physical remoteness and mobility patterns of the community. Furthermore, the scarcity of external and dedicated GBV services, such as health and psychosocial support, creates a gap in comprehensive response systems, limiting CHATs ability to refer survivors to appropriate care.

In Ethiopia, there are also logistical difficulties in the selection of CHAT members. Islamic Relief does not have the capacity to thoroughly vet CHAT members and instead relies on nominations from government entities or other groups. This means CHATs consist of individuals with varying backgrounds, which can result in disagreements. Moreover, the absence of a designated facilitator to guide meetings, track progress and ensure discussions remain productive often limits the efficiency of CHAT operations. Ambiguity in roles and responsibilities further compounds these issues, making it difficult for CHATs to prioritise sensitive topics such as GBV or child protection in communities where these issues are deeply ingrained and culturally sensitive.

Nevertheless, the intrinsic motivation of CHAT members often emerges as a powerful sustaining force. Many are driven by a strong sense of purpose and a commitment to the positive changes they witness because of their work. As a CHAT member from Mali highlighted, despite the practical challenges they face, the tangible impact of their efforts on community wellbeing serves as a core source of motivation. This sense of responsibility to protect vulnerable community members and to drive progress on issues of safety, health and rights appears to resonate deeply among CHAT members, fuelling a resilience that compensates for the lack of material support.

In Malawi, the sustainability of CHATs is reinforced through their continuous linkage and training provided by government personnel. The district gender and social welfare officers play a critical role in this training, working alongside Islamic Relief staff to ensure that CHAT members are equipped with relevant skills and knowledge. The collaborative approach also integrates the government's expertise into the training for faith leaders, ensuring that the teachings are both culturally appropriate and impactful. Overall, the PRFNP project under which the CHATs are set up exemplifies a coordinated, community-centred approach to reducing protection risks and promoting sustainable change through the combined efforts of local leaders, religious figures, community groups and government bodies.



A joint meeting between a FGD and CHAT in Mali in September 2024

The smart survey data indicated sustainability is a key feature, with 90 per cent of respondents noting that community committees often continue their activities beyond the project's timeline. However, the level of long-term effectiveness varies depending on the degree of support and integration into community systems. Inclusivity remains a challenge, with only 35 per cent of respondents reporting that the committees are fully inclusive, involving diverse groups such as men, women, youth, older adults, people with disabilities and other minority groups. Most committees ensure basic gender balance but fall short in representing broader inclusivity criteria such as age, disability, and minority representation. A minority of respondents (15 per cent) highlighted that their committees were not inclusive and were dominated by men or influential community figures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance protection efforts and sustain CHAT impact, focus group participants, as well as the findings from the smart survey data emphasised the need for a dedicated support system. Recommended measures include:

- **Ongoing capacity building:** Continued training in literacy, advocacy, and community engagement is essential to equip CHAT members to address protection issues effectively. In addition, CHATs should be equipped with comprehensive training materials, such as posters and visual aids, that effectively communicate protection and GBV issues to the communities they serve. These materials can enhance awareness-raising activities and improve community engagement.
- **Resource mobilisation:** Funding for essential resources, such as transportation, communication tools and materials is crucial to maintaining CHAT operations post-project. Additionally, income-generating activities could provide an alternative funding stream to support CHAT efforts.
- **Community and faith leader involvement:** Leveraging the influential roles of faith leaders and chiefs in disseminating protection messages can expand CHATs reach and acceptance within the community.

To ensure the financial sustainability of CHAT activities, securing funding from diverse sources such as international donors, NGOs and government agencies is crucial. Diversifying funding streams can mitigate reliance on a single source. Additionally, local fundraising opportunities, such as organising community events or partnering with local businesses, can supplement external funding and reinforce community involvement.

Inclusivity should be a priority in the composition and operation of CHATs. This includes ensuring that people with disabilities are actively involved in all stages of programme design and implementation. Provision of assistive devices such as wheelchairs and hearing aids can enable their full participation. For lactating mothers, establishing childcare centres and dedicated spaces for breastfeeding can remove barriers to their involvement. Regularly scheduled meetings, planned to accommodate the diverse needs of all community members, can further enhance inclusivity and ensure broader representation within CHAT groups.

Targeting the younger generation through tailored awareness-raising sessions is crucial for fostering long-term change, particularly in addressing harmful traditional practices. Leveraging social media platforms is an effective way to extend the reach of these messages.



CONCLUSION

This paper has found that the CHATs across Mali, Malawi, South Sudan, and Ethiopia has demonstrated the transformative potential of community-driven, faith-sensitive approaches to protection and inclusion. CHATs have succeeded in raising awareness on critical issues such as GBV, child protection and harmful traditional practices by leveraging local structures, engaging faith leaders and fostering community ownership. The findings indicate that CHATs have achieved meaningful changes in community behaviours and norms despite logistical and financial challenges, showcasing the importance

of culturally contextualised interventions. However, sustainability remains a key concern, requiring consistent capacity building, resource mobilisation and strengthened partnerships with local organisations and government bodies. Finally, this learning paper is based on data collected from a limited number of FGDs and smart survey responses. While these provide a snapshot of CHAT activities, they may not fully capture the complexities of community dynamics or the broader contextual factors affecting CHAT operations.



Islamic Relief Worldwide

19 Rea Street South
Birmingham
B5 6LB
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 121 605 5555
Fax: +44 121 622 5003

irw@irworldwide.org
www.islamic-relief.org

Registered Charity No. 328158
Registered Company No. 02365572