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National Dialogues

A Tool for Conflict Transformation?

Summary

- National dialogues are becoming an increasingly popular tool for conflict resolution and political transformation. In the past several years, national dialogues have been proposed or carried out in a diverse group of countries and circumstances.
- In broadening the debate about a country's trajectory beyond the usual group of elite decision makers, national dialogues offer the potential for meaningful conversation about the underlying drivers of conflict and ways to holistically address these issues. There is a risk, however, that national dialogues can be deliberately misused by leaders seeking to further consolidate their grip on power.
- There is no one-size-fits-all model, but we hypothesize that national dialogues will have a higher likelihood of success if they incorporate the following principles: inclusion, transparency and public participation, a far-reaching agenda, a credible convener, appropriate and clear rules of procedure, and an implementation plan.
- It is important to temper the current enthusiasm for national dialogues with a critical analysis of the necessary conditions for a successful national dialogue. There are many circumstances under which a national dialogue is likely to be inappropriate and where another conflict resolution tool may be more suitable.

“ Even in the most successful instances, national dialogue is but one step along the long and arduous path of building a peaceful society.”

Introduction

Widely publicized national dialogue experiences in Tunisia and Yemen in 2013–14 brought national dialogues to the fore as a tool for breaking political deadlock and transforming complex conflicts. Although the 2015 conflict in Yemen has called into question the effectiveness of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), national dialogues have continued to gain traction.

These processes, initiated through political pacts, civil society activism, internationally-brokered peace agreements, or other mechanisms, have been used to address a wide variety of issues. As the concept of an inclusive and holistic national conversation has gained popularity, the term national dialogue has been used to describe an increasingly heterogeneous set of processes. Consequently, it is challenging to define national dialogues or to assess their individual or cumulative impact.

USIP's research on national dialogues focuses on processes that: 1) are convened to address a broad set of issues or problems (e.g., not single-issue dialogues), 2) operate outside of the permanent institutions of governance and under their own rules and procedures, and 3) have buy-in from a coalition of key stakeholders that are positioned to implement the recommendations that emerge from the dialogue. Although USIP's research is still underway, the project has already resulted in some hypotheses on the principles and considerations for a successful national dialogue.

Key Principles for National Dialogues

Bearing in mind that these recommendations must be adapted to national contexts and changing conflict dynamics, a national dialogue should incorporate the following principles in order to contribute meaningfully to political transformation and peace:

Inclusion. An effective national dialogue convenes a broad set of stakeholders for a deliberative process. To maximize the dialogue's potential to address the real drivers of conflict, all key interest groups should be invited to participate, including women, youth, and other traditionally excluded groups. Before the process begins, an inclusive, transparent, and consultative preparatory phase sets the foundation for a genuine national dialogue. The initial decisions on the shape and structure of a national dialogue—and in particular, who is invited to participate—can be as intensely political as the dialogue itself. It is important that these preparations are undertaken carefully and transparently by a preparatory committee that is inclusive of all major groups. Yemen's 2013–14 NDC, mandated by the 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council agreement that brokered President Ali Abdullah Saleh's removal from power, was noteworthy for its inclusion of a broad set of stakeholder groups. By including women and youth alongside traditional leaders and political elite, the NDC represented a significant departure from typical Yemeni political processes. Although the interactions between these groups were strained at the outset of the NDC, the inclusion of non-traditional elites allowed for a more representative conversation and also may have contributed to opening the political space for future participation of women, civil society, and youth.¹ While Tunisia's national dialogue is generally heralded as a success, it is important to note that it was not inclusive of all stakeholder groups and did not provide opportunities for public participation. This may have compromised the public legitimacy of the dialogue; focus groups outside of Tunis indicate that some citizens regard the dialogue as merely an exercise in political positioning.²

Transparency and public participation. Even a dialogue that includes all major interest groups risks losing legitimacy if there are not sufficient opportunities for the public to remain informed about and feed into the dialogue. Beyond the delegates who are in the room, a national dialogue should also have mechanisms to include the broader population. This broad participation can be achieved by linking local dialogue processes to the national dialogue, as well as through public consultations, regular outreach, and coverage in the media. Delegates can be mandated to hold consultations with the groups that they represent, as was the case during Kenya's 2004 Bomas conference on constitutional reform. During Senegal's 2008–09 Assises Nationales (national dialogue), outreach teams conducted consultations in each of Senegal's governorates and also engaged the diaspora in France, the United States, and Canada. For public consultations, it is also important that the members of the national dialogue (or the secretariat that supports them) have the capacity to analyze the resulting information.

A credible convener. To secure the participation of a wide variety of stakeholder groups and to avoid perceptions of bias, a credible convener is of the utmost importance. This convener may take the form of a single person, a group of people, an organization, or a coalition of organizations.

The convener should be respected by the majority of citizens and should not have any political aspirations or goals that would present an obvious conflict of interest. Recent processes in Tunisia and Senegal owe much of their success to the credibility of the conveners. In Tunisia's 2013–14 national dialogue, four civil society organizations—the general workers union (UGTT)³, the employers union (UTICA), the Tunisian Bar Association, and the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH)—served as the convening entities. With long-standing moral authority and broad constituent bases, this coalition of organizations was seen as credible by a significant proportion of the Tunisian population. In Senegal, former UNESCO director general and respected Senegalese citizen Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow chaired the 2008–09 Assises Nationales. At eighty-seven years of age, M'Bow had earned his compatriots' respect as a public servant, and his leadership lent significant legitimacy to the process. The floundering national dialogue process in Sudan offers a striking counterexample. Since the national dialogue was first proposed in January 2014, President Omar al-Bashir has played an outsized role in the preparations, which raised doubts that the process would allow for open and frank participation by all parties.

Agenda that addresses the root causes of conflict. A national dialogue seeks to reach agreement on key issues facing a country. Often, months or even years of pre-negotiation or consultation need to take place to identify and agree upon these issues, which could include any number of conflict-fueling themes: national identity, the role of religion in government, political rights, basic freedoms, institutional reform, election procedures, and the structure of government (often the debate about federalism). A national dialogue's agenda should provide for substantive conversation around the major grievances of all key interest groups but not get mired in details, which are often better resolved by technical bodies or future governments. Although Yemen's NDC had a far-reaching agenda, it failed to produce agreement on the highly contentious issue of federalism. Continuing disagreement over the financial and political mechanisms for federalism is a principal grievance fueling the current civil conflict in Yemen that erupted less than fifteen months after the NDC's conclusion.

Clear mandate and appropriately tailored structure, rules, and procedures. National dialogues take place outside of the existing institutions of government. In fact, national dialogues are often convened because the sitting government and existing institutions are unable to resolve the major issues at hand, either because they are seen as neither legitimate nor credible, or because they are unwilling to challenge the status quo. A national dialogue will have its own set of procedures and rules for making decisions, which should be transparent and carefully tailored to the composition of the group and the nature of the issues. These procedures should also include mechanisms to break deadlocks if an agreement cannot be reached. (Some form of consensus decision making is often applied to ensure meaningful participation of all groups.) Furthermore, a clear mandate lends purpose and authority to a national dialogue, whether it has been established through a peace agreement, law, presidential decree, or some other manner. The clear mandate of Tunisia's national dialogue allowed delegates to make steady progress toward four goals: selecting a caretaker government, approving a new constitution, establishing an electoral management body, and setting a timetable for elections.

Agreed mechanism for implementation of outcomes. National dialogues should feature an agreed upon plan to ensure that the resulting recommendations are implemented through a new constitution, law, policy, or other programs. Because national dialogues take place within a broader transition, they often have formal or informal relationships to transitional justice, constitution making, and elections. Without a clear implementation plan, a national dialogue risks consuming extensive time and resources without producing any tangible results. The recent Bangui Forum

in the Central African Republic (CAR), held in May 2015, risks following this pattern. Although the Bangui Forum represented an important milestone in CAR's political transition and a rare opportunity for citizens to voice their perspectives, the forum was hastily organized and its legal mandate was unclear. The Bangui Forum Implementation Committee was formed at the conclusion of the weeklong dialogue, but it is not clear that the committee has the capacity or the legal authority to implement the recommendations that emerged from the forum.

Cautions for International Support to National Dialogue

National dialogue deserves our attention as a tool with the potential to facilitate peaceful political transformation, but it is no magic bullet. Even in the most successful instances, national dialogue is but one step along the long and arduous path of building a peaceful society. These processes consume enormous resources and political energy, sometimes resulting in the government neglecting its basic responsibility to govern and deliver services. National dialogues can also veer off course or produce recommendations that are never implemented.

National dialogue has also been used to refer to processes that are the antithesis of political transformation and peace. They have been used to stall democratic processes and postpone elections, bolster political elites' efforts to maintain the status quo, and assuage the citizenry's grievances without any real intention to act on concerns expressed. In several instances, the international community has been complicit in the misuse of national dialogues, offering support or approval to national dialogues that were essentially tools intended to delay real change and buy more support for repressive regimes. As international actors decide whether to support a national dialogue, it is important to verify that the national dialogue is backed by sincere intentions on the part of national leaders.

In addition to sincere intentions, local ownership is crucial for success. Without a strong, respected national facilitator and buy-in from a sufficient coalition of the country's groups, a national dialogue is unlikely to produce any meaningful change. National authorities should bear the primary responsibility for envisioning, organizing, facilitating, and financing the national dialogue. Although international assistance can fill important gaps, assistance providers must take great care to leave the fundamental responsibilities in the hands of national authorities.

While national ownership is fundamental, there are points at which the international community can provide important assistance. On the diplomatic side, concerned countries or multilateral organizations can help to negotiate the initial agreement that establishes a national dialogue and make public statements encouraging an inclusive and participatory process. The international community should take care not to back a particular group, though, as this can compromise the dialogue's integrity in the eyes of other groups or the general public. In terms of technical assistance, international actors can work to build the capacity of delegates to participate effectively, particularly those who have less experience in deliberative processes.

International actors can offer important support on the follow-up to national dialogues, while ensuring that the main responsibility and decision making remains in the hands of national actors. This support can take the form of donor commitment to provide funding to implement the policy priorities that emerge from a national dialogue. International actors can also fill a gap by providing technical guidance to assist national authorities in reaching agreement on contentious issues that remained unresolved at the dialogue's conclusion, although this must be undertaken cautiously to avoid perceptions of bias. Civil society may also benefit from international support to monitor the implementation of agreements reached through the national dialogue.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Drawing on recent examples, this brief explores how national dialogues can be most effectively used for conflict resolution and political transformation and concludes by discussing possible roles for the international community. Susan Stigant is the director of USIP's Africa Program and Elizabeth Murray is a senior program officer on the Africa Program.

Conclusion

It is likely that national dialogues will continue to be a prevalent tool in the coming years. As such, they merit further study and consideration. Of particular importance for future analysis is the relationship of national dialogues to other governance processes, including elections and constitution making. In recent national dialogue processes, the interplay between the dialogue and other governance institutions has ranged from mutually reinforcing to ambiguous or even counterproductive. In identifying best practices for the timing of national dialogues vis-à-vis other processes and the relationships between national dialogues and permanent institutions, we will increase the likelihood that a dialogue can achieve meaningful conflict transformation and strengthen existing institutions.

A related question for future inquiry is whether and how national dialogues may contribute to enshrining dialogue as an integral part of political culture. In some recent national dialogues, including Tunisia and Senegal, the conclusion of the national process led to the creation of ongoing dialogues on specific issues or to participatory mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the dialogue's outcomes. These follow-on processes can further participatory and inclusive governance, and provide an example of the ways that a national dialogue process may make indirect contributions to the foundations of a sustainable peace.

Notes

1. Erica Gaston, *Process Lessons Learned in Yemen's National Dialogue*, Special Report no. 342 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014).
2. Hatem M'rad in collaboration with M. Ben Salem, K. Merji, B. Ennouri, M. Zgarni, and M. Charfeddine, *National Dialogue in Tunisia* (Tunis: Tunisian Association of Political Studies [ATEP], 2015).
3. With over six hundred thousand members, the Tunisian General Labor Union is a powerful political force, especially given that Tunisia's population is estimated at 10.9 million.



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