

National Dialogues



The Research Project

This Briefing Note is based on results from the ongoing “Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation” research project, led by Dr. Thania Paffenholz at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland since 2011. This project analyses how and under what conditions various actors in addition to the main negotiating parties have participated in and influenced peace processes and political transitions, by comparing more than 40 in-depth qualitative case studies of peace and constitution-making multi-stakeholder negotiations, and the implementation of negotiated agreements, ranging from 1989 to the present.

What are National Dialogues all about?

National Dialogues are inclusive, multi-party negotiations in which large segments of society are represented, such as elites, political parties, organized civil society, women, youth, business, religious or traditional actors, and other relevant groups. National Dialogues have recently been held in Tunisia and Yemen, but have previously appeared in different contexts under different names, such as the Round Table Negotiations (in Central Europe after 1989) or National Conferences (in West Africa in the early 1990s), where they have been used to find common ground on the future direction of the country.

Typically, National Dialogues are formally-mandated public forums with a clear structure establishing rules and procedures for dialogue and decision-making. They are convened over the course of several days, weeks, or even months. National Dialogues address a broad range of social, political, or economic issues concerning the entire country. The size and composition of a forum can considerably vary. National Dialogues can be either elite-based or broad-based, and can range from as few as 100 delegates to as many as several thousand. In terms of logistics and organization, National Dialogues are typically supported by a secretariat and discuss key issues within thematic working groups involving subsets of the total participants.

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What is the Purpose of National Dialogues?

National Dialogues can serve different purposes and be convened under different mandates aiming at one or multiple objectives. National Dialogues are typically initiated to facilitate political reforms, to draft constitutions, or to promote peace-making.

Though normative reasons for implementing National Dialogues are often put forward (i.e. democratic decision-making, etc.), the “Broadening Participation” project has found that inclusive negotiations also have pragmatic benefits in terms of both reaching and sustaining agreements. This research found that, when included actors were able to influence the quality of agreements (defined as to what extent the causes of conflict are addressed) and/or their eventual implementation, the rate of peace agreements being successfully reached and implemented was much higher. The inclusive nature of National Dialogues also promotes public buy-in, and their representative delegations from society increase the perceived legitimacy of both the negotiations and agreements. They may also have long-term effects such as generating a democratic culture of participation – even in cases where the negotiations failed.

Who to Include in National Dialogues?

Who to include in National Dialogues is a crucial dimension. Actors to consider include political parties, organized civil society, women, business, representatives of minority groups, traditional and religious actors, eminent persons, communities, armed groups, and the public at large. Inclusion should encompass all relevant actors that matter for reaching and implementing an agreement in a sustainable manner, as well as those actors with the power to block agreements or their implementation. Moreover, the benefits of a national dialogue in terms of democratic credibility and public buy-in are hard to realize without substantial representation of women.

How to Design a National Dialogue?

Mandate and goal: The first step in designing a national dialogue is to establish a clear goal. The mandate follows from this goal, and refers to the objective of the dialogue process as well as the legal powers delegated.

Selection: Who is included or excluded follows from the goal of the dialogue. Quotas and transparent selection criteria and procedures have proven important. But the individuals designated to speak on behalf of included groups also need to be broadly perceived as representative and legitimate for dialogue processes to succeed.

Decision-making: Poorly designed rules and procedures can negate the benefits of National Dialogues. Included actors need to have decision-making power, either by vote or by representation in the decision-making bodies of the National Dialogue; or else they may find their contributions marginalized or overruled, at the cost of the credibility of the Dialogue.

Transfer and linkages: If there are other processes taking place in a country (formal and non-formal), it is essential that the National Dialogue be linked to them and results transferred between them. It is important to map those processes existing at the national level, and those that exist on a local or regional level. If the transfer strategies are well-established, they can bolster legitimacy by including multiple actors and voices.

Role of facilitator: National Dialogues are almost always facilitated by a chairperson or facilitator. Facilitators are typically persons with a high degree of political legitimacy in society. They are most effective when they are perceived to be unbiased, flexible, and open to inclusion; and when facilitators find direct ways to feed the voices of included actors.

Coalition-building: Constituencies within National Dialogues, such as civil society groups, can increase their influence if they manage to overcome their own divisions through coalition-building and joint positioning.

Technical support structures for included actors prior to and during National Dialogues can substantially enhance the quality of their influence on the negotiations. Support structures can include access to expert support, assistance in drafting contributions to agreements, or other forms of preparedness.

Communication strategy: Visibility and transparency are important in National Dialogues, and successful processes typically involve a strong media campaign. Securing public support and ensuring the legitimacy of final agreements requires more than the inclusion of selected representatives of all major groups.

Why does Political Support Matter?

Political support is essential in order to begin, conduct, and sustain the results of a National Dialogue process. Political support can be internal or external, and either elite-based or public.

Support from economic, political, and social elites: Where elites oppose a particular political agenda or the Dialogue as such, they are often content to bide their time during the negotiations and instead focus on undermining the results of the Dialogue during the implementation stage. For example, in Egypt in 2011 the military leadership of the country at that time did not take the process seriously. Even though an agreement was reached, it had no impact on the political reform process of the country. On the other hand, the National Dialogue in South Africa in the early 1990s had the support of the key opponents, Nelson Mandela and Frederik Willem de Klerk.

Public buy-in for a National Dialogue (and its eventual results) is also important, and is influenced by the prevailing political climate in the country and the attitudes of powerful actors. The case of Northern Ireland shows that public buy-in can also be created. In this case, ahead of the referendum to approve the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement (an elite-based National Dialogue comprised of all political parties) a massive civil society campaign managed to push for a positive referendum outcome.

Powerful regional actors and organisations often have important national interests at stake, and are prepared to exert substantial political pressure in support of or against a process. Hence, the interests of regional actors need to be understood and addressed in one way or another.

International actors: Powerful (non-regional) international actors generally have less important interests at stake, but where they are engaged they may have substantial diplomatic, economic, and military power to bring to bear in favour of or against a process.

The Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (IPTI) is dedicated to evidence-based research and its transfer to policy and practice. The objective of the initiative is to support sustainable peace by providing expertise and information on the inclusion of diverse actors in peace and transition processes. This expertise is drawn from a collection of research projects that have been conducted for nearly a decade at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva under the lead of Dr. Thania Paffenholz.

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