K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

National dialogues: lessons learned and success factors

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Question

What lessons have been learned about making national dialogue processes for peacebuilding most effective?

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1. Overview

National dialogues are: "nationally owned political processes aimed at generating consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war situations or during far-reaching political transitions" (Blunck et al., 2017, 21). They are typically accompanied by broader societal consultations, involving all sectors of society. Their objective can involve broad-based change processes (e.g. negotiating a new social contract) or more narrow objectives.

It has only been in the last couple of years that various guidance and case studies have been published on national dialogues. These emerged in acknowledgement that there are many open questions and uncertainties regarding the concept of national dialogue; and that there are limited resources that provide guidance and practical support for those who are exploring national dialogues (Blunck et al., 2017). While there is no blueprint for such dialogues, attention to lessons learned can help actors involved to identify factors contributing to the success and failure of national dialogues and to key challenges.

The political context in which a national dialogue takes place can affect the likelihood of success or failure. Key factors include:

- **Political will**: the greater the level of political will and elite agreement on the way forward, the greater the likelihood of successful outcomes and implementation.
- **Links to other transitional processes**: national dialogues need to be embedded in larger change processes in order to promote real structural change. If disconnected to other political processes, such as constitution-making, they are likely to be counter-productive.
- **Common ground among parties**: the absence of diametrically opposed political camps can make it more likely to arrive at a common view or shared objectives in dialogue, allowing for the process to move forward. In contrast, drastically different views can exacerbate distrust and stall the process.
- **Public buy-in**: public support or lack thereof can enable or constrain progress in the national dialogue process. The degree of buy-in is influenced by the availability of public information, good communication, and media engagement – all of which affect the level of transparency and understanding of the process.
- **Learning from past experience**: national dialogues have benefitted from dialogue expertise and learning from past national dialogues.
- **The role of external actors and national ownership**: support (e.g. political, financial and technical support) or resistance of external actors can influence the degree of success of national dialogues. It is important to strike a balance between external support and national ownership. The latter can increase the likelihood of public buy-in, perceptions of legitimacy – and chances of implementation.

Alongside political context factors, design or process factors can influence the likelihood of reaching sustainable agreements. Key process factors include:

- **The degree of inclusion and participation**: the vast majority of literature emphasises that the transformative potential of national dialogues can only be realised if they are genuinely inclusive of society. In order to be truly inclusive, it is necessary to help balance power asymmetries and ensure actual decision-making power. Highly inclusive and participatory national dialogues may render discussions unwieldly, however, and make it difficult to resolve key political questions. The success of national dialogues can depend in large part on finding the right equilibrium between efficiency and inclusiveness.

- **Representation and selection criteria**: established selection criteria and procedures for participants in national dialogues can support or hinder the broad representation of different social and political groups. Transparency in the criteria is significantly important.
- **Objective and scope-setting**: it is important to avoid overburdening mandates and agendas. It can be challenging to strike a balance between the breadth of the mandate, efficiency and independence. While a narrower mandate can be more manageable and efficient, it can limit the room for change and may contribute to the persistence of an elite-led process. Clarity and relevance to local populations are key characteristics to adopt in deriving a suitable mandate and agenda. Addressing development issues and peace dividends at the outset can be important to the success of national dialogues.
- **Institutional framework and support structures**: a comprehensive support structure of important actors close to competing parties can help participants to be prepared (with the necessary expertise and tools), to compromise and to build coalitions, allowing them time to agree on common positions. Such structures do not, however, necessarily improve the quality of participation or guarantee implementation.
- **Role of authority figures**: a credible, broadly accepted, independent, respected and charismatic convenor, mediator or facilitator can significantly affect the strength of the national dialogue, indicating seriousness and trust in the process.
- **Decision-making procedures**: these can enable or constrain the ability of national dialogues to reach an agreement and implement it. While consensus can help to expand agendas and to include often excluded voices, an inability to reach consensus can benefit the more established forces, as the absence of movement can mean preserving the status quo. Consensus-based decision-making needs to be complemented by other pragmatic mechanisms where deadlocks can be broken, such as the use of working groups.
- **Confidence-building measures**: national dialogues must be accompanied by a series of steps to attenuate tensions, in order to establish a level of "working trust" to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Trust-building is important throughout all phases in order to ensure that agreements are also implemented.
- **Provision for implementation**: it is necessary to ensure that sufficient funds for implementation, expertise and accountability mechanisms are in place, such that key actors may feel bound by what has been agreed. Transitional bodies and/or new institutions are often set up to implement the outcomes. Implementation can be tough if participants have made unrealistic decisions, if political will is absent, or if external actors fail to provide necessary support.

2. National dialogues: the concept

National dialogues are: "nationally owned political processes aimed at generating consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war situations or during far-reaching political transitions" (Blunck, et al., 2017, 21). They are typically convened when the fundamental nature or survival of a government is in question and are meant to resolve political crises, improve the legitimacy of institutions, and lead countries into political transitions (Paffenholz et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016).

National dialogues are a popular tool for structural reforms, as they provide access for parties and groups often excluded from or under-represented in political negotiations (Harlander, 2016). They are usually accompanied by broader, inclusive societal consultations aimed at channelling people's concerns and demands into the process; and enhancing legitimacy and ownership over the process and its outcomes (CEG, 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017; Papagianni, 2014).They are often attempted after exclusive elite-based negotiation formats have failed or are considered inadequate to prevent further instability (Harlander, 2016).

National dialogues can either replace or complement more exclusive talks (Harlander, 2016). They can also entail a combination of formal processes, informal discussions and ad hoc negotiations (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). Civil society leaders, and even external actors, can initiate informal dialogues between key actors, even if they have lesser mandates than one initiated by the state. These informal dialogues can entail trust-building meetings, negotiations and consultations that lay the groundwork for formal national dialogue (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015).

National dialogues have clear structures (often a mix of plenary sessions and working groups) and defined rules and procedures for dialogue and decision-making. Their size and composition can vary considerably and they can last from several days to several years. **Their objective can involve broad-based change processes** (e.g. negotiating a new social contract, redefining state-society relations, establishing new political institutions; and/or determining the process through which reforms will take place etc.) (Blunck et al., 2017; Kaplan and Freeman, 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). In Yemen, for example, dialogue led participants to agree on the need for the state to adopt a federal political system. Such cases of fundamental change usually involve large segments of society to generate widespread input and support (Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). National dialogues with shorter-term endeavours and/**or a more narrow set of objectives** (e.g. establishing security arrangements, constitutional amendments, truth commissions etc.; and/or geared specifically for resolving or preventing the outbreak of violence) are usually more limited in their mandates, smaller in size and shorter in duration. They also typically entail less inclusive structures, such as in Tunisia in 2013, which gathered only political parties with the goal of addressing outbreaks of violence (Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016).

National dialogues pass through **three successive phases: preparation, process and implementation** (Blunck et al., 2017). The preparation phase can be as long, or longer, than the official process, as it often entails a mini-negotiation processes in itself to establish key parameters and the institutional framework (i.e. mandate, agenda, participant selection, decision-making procedures, etc.). Some countries task a key institutional body with preparing the process. Once the key parameters are established, preferably by consensus, the process (or negotiation) phase - the most public phase of the national dialogue - begins. Once an outcome is reached, the implementation phase begins (Blunck et al., 2017). The success of national dialogues can be defined on two levels, first in terms of whether an agreement was reached or not; and second, the extent to which the agreement was actually implemented (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

A national dialogue's context and objectives have a significant impact on its development and outcome. There is no guarantee that any national dialogue will succeed; and many have failed (Harlander, 2016). Whether a national dialogue has actually succeeded is often a contentious question. The outcomes of national dialogues are sometimes intangible and difficult to measure. They may include: the strengthening of a culture of debate and free speech; the breaking of taboo issues; the entrenchment of certain norms of inclusion and representation of marginalised groups; and the ability to keep all the political actors inside the political process (Papagianni, 2014). In addition, dialogues may at first be considered successful, but then be followed by disastrous instability or even war. In 2013–2014, the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was praised for its inclusiveness and technical quality, but its recommendations were not implemented and the country went on to face a violent conflict and deep humanitarian crisis (Harlander, 2016). Participants' willingness and the technical quality of the process thus do not guarantee a positive outcome (Harlander, 2016).

3. Lessons learned: political context factors

The political context in which a national dialogue takes place can affect the likelihood of success or failure. Key factors include: political will; links to other transitional processes; common ground among parties; public buy-in; learning from past experience; and the role of external actors and national ownership.

Political will

Based on a comparative analysis of 17 cases of national dialogues held between 1990 and 2014, Paffenholz et al. (2017) find that the support or resistance of elites[1] to national dialogue is a crucial factor determining the chances of reaching and implementing agreements (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

The **motivations for engaging in dialogue are important**. In some cases, political actors may engage solely for instrumental or tactical reasons (e.g. to consolidate the power of the regime, to buy time while still aiming to achieve a military victory, or to gain amnesty for past crimes), without commitment to a peaceful outcome (Barnes, 2017; El-Battahani, 2014). In such situations, for example in Sudan, negotiations can be conducted in bad faith; with declared objectives of a national dialogue not necessarily reflecting the actual objectives of the parties (Harlander, 2016; El-Battahani, 2014).

In some cases, **dialogue may be imposed upon parties by external actors, without adequate internal commitment** to reach an agreement (see also the section on External actors and ownership), also as in the case of Sudan (El-Battahani, 2014). Where an elite agreement on the way forward is absent, it is difficult for the dialogue processes to independently alter existing power balances and promote peaceful transitions (Papagianni, 2014). In contrast, where political will is present, along with elite agreement on the way forward and clear dialogue outcomes, the chances of implementation are higher (El-Battahani, 2014; Papagianni, 2014).

Links to other transition processes

National dialogues must be embedded in larger change processes in order to stimulate real structural change (Blunck et al., 2017; Murray, 2017). A national dialogue's mandate should outline what powers it has and how it **relates to the rest of the political process and to existing institutions** (Pagagianni, 2014). If a national dialogue is designed to play a role in the writing of a new constitution or to reform problems with an existing document, for example, it needs to be linked to a process and set of institutions that achieves one of these objectives (Blunck et al., 2017). In Colombia, the peace process was integrated with a constituent assembly that produced the country's 1991 constitution. In South Africa, political dialogues determined the constitutional framework and the process for the establishment of a constitution-making body and holding of elections (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). In Yemen, the NDC process to develop a new social contract was connected to the existing political system; the government was to be bound by the NDC's outcomes and the new constitution if they were put into effect through a national referendum (Blunck et al., 2017).

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[1] Defined as groups which hold a disproportionate amount of political, social and economic power compared to the rest of society (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

In contrast, national dialogues that are disconnected from other political processes, such as those that run parallel to constitution-making processes, are likely to be counter-productive. In Libya, for example, the National Dialogue Preparatory Conference (NDPC) had no clear relationship to other key institutions in the transitional process (Van Lier, 2017). In particular, while past national dialogues in Libya have also concerned constitution making, there have been no mechanisms to coordinate with the Constitutional Drafting Authority, and to ensure that the processes were mutually reinforcing, without competing visions of the constitutional future (Murray, 2017; Van Lier, 2017). Coordination with other transitional processes within a comprehensive transitional framework could have been mutually beneficial, avoiding duplication of efforts and potentially adverse outcomes (Van Lier, 2017).

Common ground

Successful national dialogue processes have involved negotiating parties that had a strong support base and credible claim of legitimacy in representing their constituency, alongside the political will to implement what was agreed (El-Battahani, 2014). In addition, the **absence of polarisation between competing, diametrically opposed political and ideological camps** is also a success factor (El-Battahani, 2014). The different agendas of the key conflict actors in Sudan during 2005-2011 (El-Battahani, 2014), for example, and between conflicting factions in Yemen (alongside an externally driven agenda) undermined the development of a common view or shared objectives in dialogue. This, in turn, exacerbated distrust among conflicting actors (Elayah et al., 2018). In Venezuela, while there has been some consensus on economic issues, the Chavistas and the opposition group held diametrically opposed positions on the state of Venezuelan democracy, which undermined the ability to compromise or explore areas of convergence (Ellner, 2017). In Mali, there are differing views on development priorities between government and civil society, making it difficult to settle on what issues should be discussed in the national dialogue (Hartmann, 2017).

Public buy-in

Public support or lack thereof is another key element that either enables or constrains progress in the national dialogue process (Paffenholz et al., 2017). **Public information, good communication, and media engagement** are thus key elements, as they **influence the degree of public support** and perceptions of legitimacy. Public relations campaigns have contributed to generating more widespread popular support for the implementation of an agreement reached during a national dialogue (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

In Benin, for example, radio broadcasts of the national dialogue, published images of the sessions in print media, and the availability of videotapes of the debates, bolstered public support. This coverage enhanced transparency, allowed local populations, including rural populations, to remain informed about key developments in the process, and increased the perceived legitimacy of the dialogue (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Providing adequate information about national dialogues to all relevant segments of society is essential to ensure equal chances for broad-based representation (Blunck et al, 2017). In Poland, effective media and public consultation activities significantly supported the national dialogue process and contributed to a diversification of the political landscape and eventually a change in power relations (Blunck et al., 2017).

In contrast, if the public is unaware of the national dialogue, it will neither be able to provide input nor feel inclined to promote its results (Blunck et al., 2017). In Iraq, for example, the national dialogue proceeded without any sound public information campaign or public debate and with

minimal media attention. In addition, the agenda was set in a very short time, only days prior to the event. This lack of information sharing effectively hindered any meaningful participation by opposition groups and civil society, resulting in a narrow, politically one-sided process involving immediate political elite. All of this reinforced the alienating nature of the event (Blunck et al, 2017). In Sudan, high levels of media censorship means that the public has had very little understanding of the national dialogue and negotiation of peace agreements (El-Battahani, 2014). In Guatemala, there has been little dissemination of information on advances made in the negotiation of agreements, in the necessary languages. Improved, widespread dissemination could contribute to greater buy-in and ownership among the population (CEG, 2017).

Popular consultations can help with disseminating information and receiving input to feed back into the process. They are particularly important when a national dialogue seeks fundamental change (Blunck et al., 2017). Such consultations can take place throughout the whole process (e.g. South Africa), or prior to (e.g. Colombia), during and after (e.g. Mali) national dialogues (Blunck et al., 2017).

Where public buy-in exists, support for the process can nonetheless decline over time if people become frustrated with delays, diminishing legitimacy, or a lack of progress (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Good communication and information sharing tends to be a key factor for maintaining support and should thus remain an important factor throughout - before, during and after the dialogue and negotiation (CEG, 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017). In Yemen, for example, a one year delay of the national dialogue process may not have necessarily resulted in a loss of public support had the responsible national actors adequately communicated their progress and deficiencies to the general population (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Despite the presence of an information sharing strategy, **it can be challenging to reach out to ordinary citizens**. In Yemen, for example, the NDC had a developed communication and media strategy and a designated body in charge of the strategy and all interaction with the media. This contributed to ensuring media coverage for certain events and developments within the NDC. There was, however, inadequate awareness-raising to get citizens to understand the NDC process and its significance, resulting in little effect on the average citizen, who remained distant from the process (Blunck et al., 2017). Subsequent efforts were made to communicate the processes and outcomes of the NDC to the public and to incorporate broader public consultation on key issues, through an updated NDC website, television and radio programming, scheduled outreach, dialogues and other public activities. Nonetheless, most people on the street still had little knowledge, understanding or ownership of the dialogue (Gaston, 2014). While the outreach component has been a way to try to increase the legitimacy of the NDC process, Hassan and Eshaq (2014) find that outreach consultations were carried in a shallow way, where the input and feedback gathered was not properly streamed into the deliberations of the NDC.

Past experience

National dialogues have benefitted from existing **dialogue expertise** in a country, such as experiences with local-level mediation. Experienced local facilitators have, for example, worked inside or outside of national dialogues to bring parties together to a position of consensus (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Prior experience with national dialogue negotiations has also helped in terms of learning from the country's own or from other country's successful and unsuccessful experiences and avoiding the repetition of prior mistakes (Paffenholz et al., 2017; Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). In South Sudan,

for example, seminars were organised in which experts offered expertise on how to conduct consultations and shared **lessons learned from other national dialogues** (Deng, 2017).

External actors and ownership

Although national dialogues are widely recognised as a nationally owned process, support or resistance of external actors can also influence the degree of success of national dialogues (Odigie, 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017). Relevant external actors can include **neighbouring countries, international support groups, or regional and international organisations**. Since regional actors may be more vested in national dialogue outcomes and may have pre-existing relationships with the key parties to the conflict, they may play a greater role in national dialogue outcomes (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

In Yemen, for example, regional conflicts have a significant effect on internal affairs. As such, regional involvement (i.e. the direct presence of regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia) in the national dialogue process may be necessary to resolve many of the disputes (Elayah et al., 2018). The support, interest and at times political pressure from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) influenced considerably the preparation and holding of the national dialogue, although the whole process unravelled a few months later (Harlander, 2016).

External actors can also be classified by function, including actors: seeking to influence the outcome of the process; building support for the process and encouraging parties to engage; providing technical expertise; observing the process, which may help to build confidence among parties; providing facilitation and expertise to overcome deadlocks; providing funding for various aspects of the national dialogue process; assisting in monitoring and implementing the outcomes of the dialogue process (Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). In particular, external actors can play a more effective role in national dialogue processes if they (Kestement, 2018):

- Develop a strong relationship with the country involved in a national dialogue, and considerable influence in the region, which can help to pressure conflict parties into participating in national dialogues in a fair and sustainable way.

- Deepen connections with civil society organisations and opposition parties, which can strengthen their facilitating role and bring various actors to the table.

- Provide financial support to help the national authorities ensure the provision of basic services to the population. Without attention to such services, national dialogue processes can lose legitimacy.

- Provide technical support and expertise in order to reduce power asymmetries and ensure participants with inadequate training and know-how can act on equal footing with other parties.

Ownership

Contrary to many other conflict transformation mechanisms, **national dialogues should be nationally facilitated processes**, **as this increases the likelihood of public buy-in, perceptions of legitimacy**; and the likelihood of achieving implementation and transformation (Barnes, 2017; Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). Internal mediators (e.g. individuals, civic institutions, religious institutions, or a group of societal institutions, as in Tunisia etc.) have often played a key role in national dialogue settings, convening and facilitating the process and holding

it together during its various phases (Blunck et al., 2017). It is thus important to strike a balance between external support and national ownership (POMEPS, 2013).

It can be challenging to navigate the involvement of various **external actors** as they **may have opposing objectives or views** in supporting the national dialogue (Harlander, 2016). External actors can, for example, encourage broad-based representation and the participation of marginalised segments of society, but they can also produce tension if their vision of inclusion differs from locally held ideas (Blunck et al., 2017).

In Yemen, there were concerns among the local population that the NDC was more of an externally driven process rather than a Yemeni national process (Kestement, 2017); and that external actors differed from local actors and each other in their interests and objectives. The US, for example, was considered largely interested in countering al Qaeda, whereas Saudi Arabia was focused on the distribution of power in Yemen. These were in opposition to internal Yemeni aspirations for change (POMEPS, 2013). At the same time, however, there was acknowledgement among the local population that only external pressure would move the process along in the face of weak local leadership (POMEPS, 2013).

In Libya, the UN intervened directly in the national dialogue after the vote of no-confidence in the prime minister in 2014, acting as a mediator itself rather than pursuing dialogue through a Libyan mediating broker. Moreover, the goals and mandate espoused by the UN, focused on forming a unity government and reaching certain agreements between rival factions, were considered by some to be contrary to the broader vision of internal actors (Van Lier, 2107). Alongside, the UN also advocated for a different selection process focused on key actors within the standoff, rather than a more inclusive selection process (Van Lier, 2017).

4. Lessons learned: process factors

Alongside political context factors, the design of a national dialogue shapes the level of representativeness and the distribution of power within the process. As such, design or process factors can influence the likelihood of reaching sustainable agreements (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Key process factors include: the degree of inclusion and participation; representation and selection criteria; objective and scope-setting; institutional framework and support structures; role of authority figures; decision-making procedures; confidence-building measures; and provision for implementation.

Inclusion and participation

The vast majority of literature on national dialogues emphasises that the transformative potential of such dialogues can only be realised if they are genuinely inclusive of society as whole (Barnes, 2017; Blunck et al., 2017). Inclusivity relates to 'process inclusivity' (the level of societal and political representation) in the preparatory and actual dialogue phases; and to 'outcome inclusivity' (the level of inclusiveness created by the national dialogue's outputs) in the post-national dialogue/implementation phase (Planta et al., 2015). The **degree of inclusiveness**, and extent to which different political actors and segments of society are included, **shapes significantly whether stakeholders view the national dialogue as a valid way in which to address their grievances and aspirations** (Blunck et al., 2017; CEG, 2017).

There is a growing interest in and recognition of the **importance of including women, young people and minorities** in transition processes, which has resulted in more representatives of such

groups appointed to delegations and the incorporation of their views and needs into the agenda (Blunck et al., 2017; Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). Strong ties to key political and religious groups, civil society actors and state institutions outside the formal process must also be maintained (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). In Yemen, women and youth were effectively included in the national dialogue process through a quota system; whereas Jordan did not establish a mechanism for including women or young people adequately, which discredited the overall process (Blunck et al., 2017).

Young people and women may, however, feel firmly bound by party lines during internal party meetings. As such, it may be beneficial to include representatives of civil society organisations that work specifically on youth and women's issues (Blunck et al., 2017). It would also be helpful to **include other local influential actors that either instigated and/or support the change process but are not bound by party lines**, such well-known activists or members of social movements (Blunck et al., 2017). As they are not recognised as official parties, they have often been left out entirely out of the process, undermining the legitimacy of the process (Blunck et al., 2017).

Even if the difficult task of including a broad range of different constituencies is accomplished, those who finally participate at the national dialogue may not necessarily be representative of the group they have been selected for, as there are **vast differences among groups, labelled as "women" or "youth"**. This can, in turn, result in the exclusion of marginalised members of social groups (Planta et al., 2015). In order to counter this difficulty, some dialogue processes have tried to adopt participative methodologies of self-selection with clear-cut rules of eligibility for group members to **ensure vertical inclusivity**, as in the case of Yemen. Another strategy to overcome inclusivity gaps entails educating and training marginalised communities in issues related to national dialogue processes prior to the events themselves. This can contribute to their empowerment and improve their chances for informed participation, also as in the case of Yemen (Papagianni, 2014).

Inclusivity is important in all of the phases: preparatory, process/negotiation, and implementation (Barnes, 2017; Blunck et al., 2017). If an inclusive approach is not followed in the preparatory phase and in the composition of the preparatory body, the legitimacy of the process and a sense of ownership could be undermined from the outset (Blunck et al., 2017). The composition of delegates, their form of participation and the design of the decision-making process, decided in preparatory phases, are all essential to the level of inclusivity during the national dialogue itself (Planta et al., 2015). The degree of inclusiveness affects whether stakeholders accept the mandate and agenda or other decisions made (Blunck et al., 2017; CEG, 2017).

Mandate-setting: the process of arriving at a mandate can, in practice, be quite exclusive, in some cases only drafted by one group (Blunck et al., 2017). In some cases, the mandate is developed among the main political actors or leaders representing parties to a conflict, frequently with third-party mediation by insiders (e.g. the Quartet in Tunisia) or externals (the UN in Yemen) (Blunck et al., 2017). In other cases, it is negotiated by relatively inclusive committees tasked to prepare dialogues to build national consensus on key issues (e.g. in West Africa) (Papagianni, 2014). It is also possible and has been the case that the mandate is first negotiated by a narrow set of elites, but the dialogue itself is opened up to a wider set of actors, in particular minorities and representatives of civil society (e.g. in Yemen, where the mandate was established by the main political actors, but the national dialogue itself included representatives of youth, women's and other civil society organisations (Harlander, 2016; Papagianni, 2014). This raises questions, however, about the actual weight of parties that attend a national dialogue but were not included

in negotiations on the mandate and rules of procedure; and the view that inclusiveness is only a façade (Harlander, 2016). There is also the risk that the mandate may be disputed by those that had not initially been included in the negotiation process, and/or that the national dialogue itself may then be boycotted by important stakeholders or influential social and political groups from the very outset (Planta et al., 2015).

It is thus, advisable that a national dialogue mandate should emerge from a consensus among the main stakeholders who could potentially obstruct the process, while making sure that all participants, even those on the fringes, agree to the mandate (Blunck et al., 2017). While an inclusive preparatory committee does not guarantee an inclusive national dialogue, the chances of inclusivity at a later stage are greater if the committee moves beyond traditional power structures (Planta et al., 2015).

Agenda-setting: The process of agenda setting, if conducted inclusively and transparently, can provide further clarity on the nature of the national dialogue, generate a shared vision, commit parties to the process and serve as an exercise in trust-building (Blunck et al., 2017). It is possible for national dialogue agendas to develop from highly participatory processes of consultation within stakeholder groups and in the wider society. In Kenya, for example, one of the mediators encouraged women leaders and organisations to produce a common agenda of concerns to be addressed by the preparatory body for discussion at the national dialogue (Blunck et al., 2017). Similar to setting the mandate, the process of agreeing an agenda is also a 'mini' negotiation in itself, whereby the exclusion of certain actors may undermine their buy-in and the perceived legitimacy of the national dialogue (Blunck et al., 2017).

Size: Based on an analysis of 17 national dialogues, the number of participants in the national dialogue does not seem to diminish or increase the likelihood of reaching or implementing an agreement (Paffenholz et al., 2017). The number of participants has differed significantly between national dialogues (Harlander, 2016). There is no standard or ideal size: they can be small (e.g. 12–55 participants in the Eastern and Central European roundtables), medium sized, e.g. 565 participants in Yemen) or large, (e.g. 1,600 or more participants in Afghanistan's Emergency Loya Jirga) (Blunck et al., 2017, 81). The appropriate size depends on the specific characteristics of the country in which the national dialogue takes place and on the objective(s) of the dialogue. If the aim is limited to a single issue, only a few participants directly connected to the issue may be needed. Whereas, if the aim is to establish a new social contract, a larger number of participants representing a broader section of the society is necessary (Blunck et al., 2017).

Key challenges to inclusion

Balance of power issues: Efforts to include different segments of society will not necessarily create an environment conducive to successful dialogue, as persistent imbalances of power in the community often persist, with certain actors having overarching control over everything in society (Elayah et al., 2018). As such, the transformative potential of national dialogue processes may only be realised if they help to balance power asymmetries, enabling collective engagement and the generation of mutually agreed outcomes (Barnes, 2017).

Fair representation: It is important to distinguish between diversity (the presence of a variety of parties) and actual inclusiveness, whereby parties are allocated actual weight in decision-making (Harlander, 2016). The inclusion of women, young people and marginalised communities in the national dialogue process, for example, needs to extend beyond mere presence to enabling them to voice their concerns, engage in decision making, and influence the process. The absence of

such meaningful participation can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction; and may increase the possibility these actors becoming spoilers of the process instead (Blunck et al., 2017).

Decision-making power could be wielded through proportional representation (Harlander, 2016). In Bahrain, each opposition group invited to participate was allocated five seats, regardless of their size and influence in society. This resulted in the largest political party (Al Wefaq) pulling out of the national dialogue in 2011 as it considered that its 5 delegates out of 300 did not amount to sufficient weight in the process (Harlander, 2016). Similarly, in Jordan, there was no proportional representation of different political groups in the national dialogue, which meant the Islamic Action Front, the largest political opposition party was asked to send the same number of delegates as other smaller parties. There was also no quota system in place to ensure fair representation of women, young people, or minorities, resulting in their under-representation, or complete exclusion in the case of youth (Blunck et al., 2017). Further, the selection procedures was entirely led by the government. While those selected were of diverse backgrounds, there was no transparency in the selections and they were not considered as representative of the people (Blunck et al, 2017). As such, the national dialogue failed to generate broad-based legitimacy and continued to be perceived as a largely elite-driven process (Blunck et al., 2017).

Boycotting: Despite efforts to promote inclusion, if an important group decides to boycott the process, the process will lose its legitimacy (Harlander, 2016). As noted, in Bahrain, opposition party Al Wefaq walked out of the process, after being granted only five seats, which was the same number allocated smaller, less influential parties (Harlander, 2016). In Guatemala, the 1989 Grand National Dialogue was suspended due to increased safety concerns for its participants and the boycott of some key parties involved in the civil war (Harlander, 2016). In addition, the business sector, a key actor in negotiations, did not get involved in the national dialogue process. This undermined the process as the economic aspect is vital for the implementation of transformative changes (CEG, 2017).

Country cases

Yemen: The National Dialogue Conference 2013 in Yemen was successful in achieving inclusiveness in its dialogue process. It enabled a diverse group of political and social actors in Yemeni society (including smaller political parties, youth, women and other groups traditionally been excluded from political decision-making) to sit at the same table on an equal footing and to be involved in decision-making processes (Elayah et al., 2018; Hartmann, 2017; Gaston, 2014; Hassan and Eshaq, 2014). The conference allocated 20 per cent of seats to youth delegates and 30 per cent to women (Hartmann, 2017; Papagianni, 2014). They were able to engage in strong advocacy for civic freedoms, rarely considered by the political class alone, which, in turn, had the potential to shift the agenda and broaden the parameters of discussion. Many of the recommendations from the NDC included wider considerations of development, civil rights, female participation in government and security sectors (Hartmann, 2017; Gaston, 2014; Hassan and Eshaq, 2014).

Alongside these successes with inclusion, the NDC suffered from various setbacks and challenges. First, despite significant efforts to be inclusive and mandating that half of the delegates come from the South, important Southern leaders from al-Hiraak abstained from the NDC from the beginning, which jeopardised the legitimacy of the NDC's final agreement. Those who did join lacked the grassroots influence necessary to encourage buy-in for the outcomes of the NDC (Kestement, 2017; Gaston, 2014). Second, the process suffered from inefficiency and at times inadequate technical expertise (Kestement, 2017). Third, the all-inclusive nature of the NDC made

it challenging at times to engage in political negotiation. For example, some key political actors resisted entering into discussions with the presence of significant numbers of women and other civil society actors. As such, it is unclear whether the NDC framework was the right mechanisms for working through political deadlock (Gaston, 2014). At the same time, subsequent moves to begin working through issues outside the NDC were also controversial. The movement of decision-making to the Regional Committee, considered small and unrepresentative, and to other smaller committees and political groups handpicked by the president and dominated by major parties, undermined the value and perception of the NDC's inclusivity (Kestement, 2017; Gaston, 2014).

Despite these challenges and the move toward more exclusive decision-making, the efforts of the NDC to engage in inclusive representation and decision-making is still significant as it has set a precedent for the engagement of new and different actors in Yemeni political processes (Kestement, 2017; Gaston, 2014; Papagianni, 2014).

Lebanon: The Lebanese national dialogue was undermined by perceptions that it was an elite-driven process that preserved the system's status quo, instead of enabling genuine fundamental change. Whereas, national dialogues in other parts of the region have adopted quotas for the participation of women and civil society representatives, participation in Lebanon is based mainly on political and confessional inclusivity. This has resulted in widespread criticisms by civil society groups (Wählisch, 2017).

Libya: The National Dialogue Preparatory Commission (NDPC), created in August 2013, included representatives of all political factions and communities in Libya. It conducted several tours throughout the country in an effort to facilitate some sort of dialogue with local actors. Its leaders were well known and had much credibility. This engagement with a broad range of societal actors is considered to be one of the key successes of the Libyan national dialogue (Van Lier, 2017; Fetouri, 2015). Nonetheless, there were still limitations. The failure to include militias and heads of municipalities is considered to have undermined the national dialogue (Blunck et al., 2017). It is thus considered important to include real power-holders from informal and traditional sectors, alongside various civil society actors and marginalised groups (Blunck et al., 2017). The National Conference was undermined, however, by the absence of a clear inclusion strategy or guidelines on how to engage in the selection process. This could be due in part to the short planning period and limited role allotted to the NDPC (Van Lier, 2017).

The deterioration in the security situation, and the absence of inadequate readiness for dialogue and compromise among key political actors, also severely undermined the chances of success. The NDPC ceased its activities without being able to transform the public input from consultations into a meaningful and productive dialogue and for the government to be able to follow up on and enact its recommendations (Van Lier, 2017; Fetouri, 2015).

South Sudan: The 2017 National Dialogue initiative in South Sudan has been successful thus far in addressing issues of inclusivity. The aim of the dialogue is not only to end the violence but also to promote a culture of peaceful engagement through (Deng, 2017). In response to various criticism, the President has repeatedly revised the composition of the National Dialogue Steering Committee to ensure inclusivity, credibility and transparency (Deng, 2017). The Committee has also reached out to leaders of the opposition abroad, with the aim of allowing the process to include as many parties to the conflict as possible. Sub-committees of the national dialogue are also engaging in outreach consultations at the regional and grassroots level, in order to gather input to develop the agenda (Deng, 2017).

Mali: In Mali, National Conference proceedings were biased in favour of strong representation of the anti-government movements and political associations, to the exclusion of former dignitaries of the single party. Some Malians disapproved of this (Sy et al., 2016). In addition, Malians living outside of urban settings were also excluded to the extent that the process was initiated and directed by the capital Bamako. City-dwellers thus comprised the main representatives and the conclusions are generally preoccupied with urban concerns (Sy et al., 2016).

*Colombia***:** The preparatory commission for Colombia's National Constituent Assembly (ANC), set up in 1990, held public hearings in all regions of the country in order to collect comments, requests and suggestions and to engage a wide cross-section of the population in discussion about the agenda. These consultations were relied upon as a basis for discussion in the ANC (Blunck et al., 2017). Despite high participation rates and representation of the whole political and social spectrum of Colombian society, some analysts highlight the relative domination of intellectual elites and the marginalisation of ordinary people from the debate (Blunck et al., 2017).

Trade-offs? Inclusion, efficiency and implementation

The greater the inclusivity, the higher the chance of strong support from all stakeholders. However, bringing too many parties and interests to the negotiation table makes it harder to reach an agreement (Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). **It can be difficult to balance inclusion, efficiency and the implementation of national dialogue outcomes.** Large dialogues, with a substantial number of actors in the thousands, tend to have few decision-making powers; whereas, smaller dialogues of 100 to 200 people can allow for in-depth discussion (Papagianni, 2014). In Yemen, for example, the highly inclusive national dialogue produced 1,800 recommendations on a wide range of topics. The dialogue ultimately did not succeed, however, in working through the key political roadblocks facing the country. It has been suggested that the all-inclusive and public nature of the conference undermined the ability to resolve key political questions, which may have been better resolved through smaller groups with specific political actors (Hartmann, 2017; Gaston 2014). Nonetheless, the inclusive dialogue was necessary to initiate a shift in the country's governance and to create a norm of citizens' participation in the decision-making process on national issues (Kestement, 2018).

Experience with national dialogues also demonstrates that the more participatory and inclusive processes are, the more they tend to threaten the established power structures. Old elites may in turn have a vested interest in undermining implementation (Planta et al., 2015). The complexity in design, management and conduct of national dialogues with an extensive number of participants and agenda topics can also require the use of a large amount of material and technical resources. There may subsequently be inadequate resources left to facilitate implementation (Planta et al. 2015).

Less inclusive, smaller sized dialogues, while potentially easier to manage and implement may, however, differ little from elite-dominated negotiations (Papagianni, 2014). This could undermine perceptions of legitimacy and the transformative potential of national dialogues. In the case of Sudan, the consistent failure of past negotiations is attributed in part to the narrow involvement of the government and armed rebels. While an inclusive process will likely make the process slower and more complex, involving the "silent majority" (including victims of conflict such as refugees and internally displaced persons) could make any agreement and outcomes more durable (El-Battahani, 2014).

It is typically not possible for everyone to be at the centre of the dialogue. The success of national dialogues can depend in large part on finding the right equilibrium between efficiency and inclusiveness; consensus-building, short-term deadlock breaking mechanisms and long-term transformational aims (Kestement, 2018). It may be advisable to focus on an **"inclusive enough" composition**, which includes stakeholders necessary for legitimacy and future implementation (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). Further, rather than treating inclusivity as a burden that is too unwieldly to manage, it would be helpful to **focus on ways to reduce the complexity of the national dialogue through, for example, the creation of thematic working groups** (Planta et al., 2015). The establishment of parallel working groups linked to the main negotiation table, matching participation with the thematic focus at stake, is one of the most common methods of broadening participation during times of transition (Blunck et al., 2017).

Representation and selection criteria

The process for the selection of delegates is one of the most important steps in organising a national dialogue (Harlander, 2016). Experience shows that the **established selection criteria and procedures** for participants in national dialogues **can support or hinder the broad representation** of different social and political groups and thus, the inclusivity and legitimacy of a national dialogue process (Blunck et al., 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). In Tunisia, for example, the Quartet (a group of four civil society organisations) brought with it historically established societal ties and broad-based accepetance that benefitted the process at large (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Developing a selection method is challenging and political, involving the definition of constituencies, selection criteria and selection processes (Blunck et al., 2017). The selection of participants can take many forms: direct appointment by the president or the preparatory body; selection from within defined constituencies; or invitation with observer status (Blunck et al., 2017). In some cases, selection procedures have been co-opted by elites, who selected the participants most loyal to them to (Paffenholz et al., 2017). In Yemen, the introduction of a quota system and socio-demographic selection criteria allowed for fairer representation, alleviating a previous selection system that was perceived to be unfair (Blunck et al., 2017) [See the section on inclusion and participation]. However, the polarised environment in which many people have multiple identities intersecting with conflict dynamics can make it inherently difficult endeavour (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Transparency in the selection criteria is significantly important, such that the public can understand how and why people got selected and to see a fair chance in getting their candidates elected. In Jordan, the hand-picking of candidates gave the impression that the process is biased from the start. In Yemen, the allocation of the seats was contested and required transparent communication and clearly elaborated mechanisms (Blunck et al., 2017).

Objectives and scope: mandate and agenda

Mandate

The mandate of a national dialogue defines its prerogatives and overall objectives (Harlander, 2016). Each potential party to a national dialogue has a strong interest in influencing the drafting of the mandate as it will determine what can be discussed and decided upon during the dialogue. **Consultations are essential to assess the expectations of the main stakeholders** (Harlander, 2016).

Mandates of national dialogues have been **extremely diverse**, including forming a new social contract, establishing transitional authorities, addressing past injustices and crimes, drafting a new constitution or addressing specific regional or thematic issues (Harlander, 2016). In Yemen, the NDC mandate was broad, to produce a new social contract, reflecting a range of expectations and irreconcilable objectives among various groups (Blunck et al., 2017). In contrast, Kenya's National Dialogue and Reconciliation process was more limited in aim and scope, addressing specifically the issue of electoral violence and deep cleavages between the main parties (Blunck et al., 2017).

It can be **challenging to strike a balance between the breadth of the mandate, efficiency and independence**. It is important to avoid overburdening the process (Blunck et al., 2017). While broad mandates can be successfully narrowed by participants during the actual process, such mandates risk triggering lengthy debates to redefine the exact terms of the mandate and disputes over the goal of the dialogue (Van Lier, 2017; Harlander, 2016). In Libya, the Prime Minister gave the NDPC a very broad mandate, in order to guarantee the NDPC's independence by reducing the government's influence in the process. This caused critical delays, however, as the NDPC had to spend several months developing a plan for the dialogue process. In addition, the dialogue's ultimate goal and its role in the country's transition remained vague, leading to confusion among international donors and the local population. This is turn further limited the NDPC's impact (Van Lier, 2017). A narrower, more manageable mandate can be an efficient way to avoid these problems (Papagianni, 2014). It may be that the success of the Tunisian national dialogue was the limitation of its mandate to the key issues that had led to a political deadlock constraining the transition (Van Lier, 2017). However, a narrow mandate might greatly limit the room for change and may contribute to the persistence of an elite-led process (Harlander, 2016).

While there is no one-size-fits-all mandate, a review of past national dialogues finds that **clarity and relevance to local populations are key characteristics to adopt in deriving a suitable mandate** (Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016; Papagianni, 2014). The mandate should clearly state the purpose of the process, as this will influence the process design and people's expectations (Blunck et al., 2017). It is typically easier to mobilise the public and civil society around a dialogue process which has a clear, understandable, mandate and is expected to reach concrete outputs; whereas, unclear mandates can cause confusion during a dialogue, resulting in a loss of focus and to delays a participants dispute the goal itself (Papagianni, 2014). The mandate should also reflect the main concerns of the stakeholders and not be imposed by outsiders to the process and/or an external actor. It could, however, be supported by UN Security Council Resolutions, as was the case in Yemen (Blunck et al., 2017). The public will be more prone to invest their time in a dialogue process which they perceive as worthwhile and designed to address their needs (Papagianni, 2014).

Agenda

Similar to setting a mandate for the national dialogue, a key consideration for agenda-setting is to avoid overburdening agendas. While it often the case that during times of transition, a whole range of topics pertaining to state reform seem important, tabling all items for discussion would raise expectations that cannot be met by a time-bound national dialogue. Rather agenda items should be **feasible and doable in the limited time frame** (Blunck et al., 2017). This can allow for greater focus, follow-through and success within the national dialogue (Gaston, 2014). Experiences with the national dialogue in Yemen indicate that the agenda should be streamlined to the extent possible, weighing carefully which political issues do or do not lend

themselves to a large-scale public forum, and ensuring the right balance between national dialogue and other transitional processes (Gaston, 2014). Condensing the number of issues that the NDC addressed to those more suited for that particular forum may not have prevented it from getting stuck in political roadblocks, but may have freed more time and resources to generate buy-in (Gaston, 2014).

It can also be useful to **sequence agenda items such that the process begins with "soft topics"**. This can allow for participants to see that there are commonalities and can help to build confidence and trust, forming a foundation for further success (Blunck et al., 2017). At the same time, it is **essential that "hot topics" are not ignored** and that they are given sufficient space and time to be discussed in detail and to develop a roadmap on how to address those issues. In some national dialogues, the process was rushed through without adequate time to discuss and agree on the contested items (Blunck et al., 2017). Agenda items also need to **reflect the concerns of the general public**. A study of the 1991 national conference in Mali finds that the agenda items were at times very far removed from the priorities of the actors at the grassroots level. Despite the wide range of subjects tackled in the dialogue, many actors still felt that some questions relating to their various priorities were not sufficiently taken into account (Sy et al., 2016).

Peace dividends

The transformative potential of national dialogue processes can only be realised if they result in agreements which promote outcomes that make a significant difference in the lives of different segments of society (Barnes, 2017). If national dialogue processes adopt a limited definition of peace, such as in the case of Sudan (where the focus was perceived to be on the welfare of South Sudan rather than all of Sudan), it can preclude the realisation of sustainable peace and democratic transformation (El-Battahani, 2014). It is now widely recognised that there is a need for a comprehensive approach that addresses Sudan's multiple conflicts and governance crises in concert, rather than piece by piece (El-Battahani, 2014). In Yemen, the population became frustrated with the national dialogue process, believing that it was overlooking issues important to the regular citizens (Kestement, 2018). While the NDC process adopted decision-making by consensus, which meant that decisions enjoyed broad support, there was no focus on the common issues in the future and on a long-term vision for the country (Elayah et al., 2018).

How the transition is perceived depends to a large extent on tangible signs of progress at the local level. **Quick impacts and visible peace dividends are thus important to the success of national dialogues** (Hartmann, 2017). The inclusion of development issues in national dialogues can open up opportunities to discuss long-term perspectives and peace dividends, which can enhance the legitimacy of national dialogues for the wider population. The quality of development outcomes that are associated with national dialogues can produce the eventual tipping points for the success or failure of such processes. In Yemen, for example, the transitional government decided in 2014 to lift existing fuel subsidies, in an effort to reduce the budget deficit. This decision had an adverse effect on socio-economic conditions and contributed to mobilisation against the transitional government, to violence – and to the eventual collapse of the agreements reached at the NDC (Hartmann, 2017).

Development issues and outcomes should thus be considered early in national dialogue processes (Hartmann, 2017). Given the time pressures of such processes, however, inclusion of development issues is often compromised by pragmatic considerations (Hartmann, 2017). In addition, discussion about socio-economic issues in national dialogues can be sensitive because they touch upon strategic interests of participant groups (Hartmann, 2017). In Lebanon, critics of

the national dialogue process noted that the national dialogue was selective in the issues it addressed (Wählisch, 2017). It is important to distinguish between real genuine dialogues that address key issues and root causes of conflict and superficial solutions that avoid them (Saeid, 2016).

Institutional framework and support structures

Once the objectives of the national dialogue have been agreed upon, they need to be translated into corresponding institutions and procedures (Blunck et al., 2017). Each national dialogue will have its unique structure corresponding to the context-specific needs and aim of each process. There are, however, some similarities (Blunck et al., 2017). The structure tends to respond to a key set of functions: preparing the process, overseeing the process, providing technical support and research, facilitating broad-based/representative decision-making and generating thematic input, often organised around working groups and subcommittees (Blunck et al., 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017).

A **comprehensive support structure of important actors close to competing parties can help participants to compromise and to build coalitions**, allowing them time to agree on common positions (Paffenholz et al., 2017; Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). Deadlock-breaking mechanisms can be built into the overall support structure (Blunck et al., 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017). In Lebanon for example, the Common Space Initiative, established in 2010, served as a support structure and safety-net for the national dialogue. In addition to providing general support and expertise, it facilitated structured informal dialogues and collaboration among wide segments of society (including policy makers, intellectuals, experts, civil society actors), in order to break deadlock and create an environment conducive to progress. The Initiative gained much support from key officials across party lines (Wählisch, 2017). Coalition building among included actors can be a powerful strategy for actors to make their voices heard in national dialogues, by allowing them to come together to negotiate as a unified cluster out of concern for a specific issue or strategic interest. This occurred, for example, among women of different delegations or between non-armed and armed groups (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

A review of 17 national dialogues finds, however, that **support structures for involved actors were not directly an enabling or constraining factor in the ability to reach and implement agreements** (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Others find that the absence of formal support structures has been a contributing factor to the breakdown of dialogues in the Middle East, for example, including in Yemen (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015).

Nonetheless, an analysis of the structures finds that particular aspects and features of a support structure can influence negotiations (Paffenholz et al., 2017). The **preparedness of the actors through workshops and consultations, for example, can facilitate sustainable outcomes**, **by providing the necessary expertise and tools to make a genuine contribution** (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Development actors can provide external expertise to enhance evidence-based policy-making in the context of national dialogues. This can enable participants to the dialogue to make informed choices and to foster realistic expectations among the wider population about development prospects and peace dividends. In Yemen and Libya, for example, the World Bank and regional development banks provided stakeholders with relevant economic data (e.g. public expenditure reviews, poverty data etc.) to make informed policy choices (Hartmann, 2017).

In Somalia, UNIFEM funded a women's resource centre for information and dialogue, where women had access to advocacy materials and information on quotas and political processes. Such

support from UNIFEM and other NGOs enabled women's organisations to select five of their members to represent the women's agenda in the national dialogue. They were successful in establishing a 12 percent quota of women in the Transitional Federal Parliament and in inserting gender-sensitive language into the agreement (Paffenholz et al., 2017). While support structures from external actors can enable the influence of participants, this does not, however, necessarily lead to the signing of an agreement or its implementation. The agreement in Somalia stemming from the national dialogue was ultimately never implemented (Paffenholz et al., 2017). **Support structures also do not necessarily improve the quality of participation**. Again in Somalia, while international experts were present to advise members of technical committees, this expertise did not increase the influence of civil society representatives as negotiations remained heavily dominated by faction leaders (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Authority figures

National dialogues are generally convened under the authority of a central figure or body (Blunck et al., 2017). Choosing a **credible and broadly accepted convener can significantly affect the strength of the national dialogue**. A convenor, mediator or facilitator should be **independent**, with significant leeway to act in accordance to what they consider best for the process, and thus not perceived as merely a puppet of the president or party in power (Blunck et al., 2017). They should also have the personal qualities of a **charismatic, respected and credible leader** who can capture people's minds and aspirations. Convenors, mediators and facilitators with **political clout** and a high degree of political legitimacy **can indicate seriousness and increase trust in the process and its eventual outcome** (Blunck et al., 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017).

A skilled facilitator that all parties accept and feel comfortable with is often essential to developing trust and ensuring the process produces the maximum amount of give and take (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). Their capacity can thus significantly shape the process of national dialogues, particularly with respect to how they deal with elites. Facilitators have in the past persuaded elites to keep negotiating in moments of deadlock (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Decision-making procedures

Decision-making procedures **can enable or constrain the ability of national dialogues to reach an agreement and implement it** (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Decision-making rules, if carelessly drafted, could result in locking a dialogue in lengthy debates, or in vetoes or boycotts due to the frustration of some participants (Harlander, 2016). Similarly to the selection of participants, **decision-making rules should be made transparent** (Blunck et al., 2017).

Decisions can be taken by a plenary, a decision-making body, or within the working groups. Final decisions in national dialogues are usually taken by consensus (or by simple majority) in the plenary, however, elites may take decisions outside the plenary, consequently excluding other participants (Blunck et al., 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017). In Somaliland, decisions were taken in the plenary, where the chairs of the proceedings were chosen on a daily rotating basis. This was considered to be an effective mechanism. However, other national dialogues with a similar decision-making procedure did not produce inclusive decision-making systems. In Nepal, for example, senior political leaders used the disagreement in the plenary to justify dominating the decision-making in meetings, often kept secret even from fellow party members. The Somali National Dialogue included a large number of delegates, however a decision-making body comprised of a small group of elites dominated the decision-making process. Civil society groups were not consulted on whether the Somali state should be a federal or centralised entity and were

often sidelined in discussions over power-sharing and representation. In Yemen, on the other hand, the decision-making procedure (a mix of plenary and working groups, each with its own rules) enabled effective decision-making, largely by consensus (90 per cent) (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

Elite decision-making is advocated in some cases. In the case of hard negotiations during key political moments, crucial decisions may be taken behind closed doors, often through majority voting or elite consensus (Blunck et al., 2017). This can be seen as facilitating substantial headway or as undermining the legitimacy of the process as elitist and exclusive (Blunck et al., 2017). **While consensus can help to develop shared and expanded agendas beyond the key stakeholders and to include often excluded voices, consensus can also undermine national dialogue processes**. In Lebanon, for example, the principle of consensus, the primary form of decision-making in the country, has been a positive feature - ensuring that decisions of national concern are supported by the political leadership across party lines. However, the **inability to reach consensus, in some cases, benefitted the more established forces, as the absence of movement meant preserving the status quo** (Blunck et al, 2017; Wählisch, 2017).

Consensus-based decision-making thus needs to be complemented by other pragmatic mechanisms where deadlocks can be broken (El-Battahani, 2014). Where participants cannot reach consensus and the national dialogue is deadlocked, sufficient or qualified consensus can serve as a deadlock-breaking mechanism. Sufficient consensus is reached if the main stakeholders on both sides of the conflict and/or with primary interests, agree with the decision, as was the case in South Africa (Blunck et al., 2017, 104; Hartmann, 2017). Qualified consensus means that it is enough for a decision to be adopted if a certain number of participants agree (Blunck et al, 2017, 104). In Yemen, if consensus in the NDC was not reached, the decision was passed to the Consensus Committee, which fulfilled a deadlock-breaking function by attempting to make adjustments to decisions and returning them to the working groups for another vote (requiring a 75 percent majority). If there was still no agreement, the decision would be passed to the President and a final decision made in consultation with other members of the NDC presidency. Such final decision making resulted, however, in some tensions and the discrediting of some decisions (Blunck et al., 2017).

The use of **working groups and subcommittees** is a key mechanism for breaking deadlocks. While it is important for the most contentious issues to be discussed at the main table, it can be effective to break a contentious issue into manageable portions and task a working group to work out options for they could be managed or discussed at the main table (Blunck et al., 2017). In the case of Yemen, the unwieldiness of the large NDC plenary resulted in a movement to smaller groups of certain key political actors for some issues. These actors should have traction within their parties or constituencies to be able to negotiate and enforce political compromises. There is a risk, however, of shifting the balance too far this way (Gaston, 2014).

Confidence-building measures

National dialogues must also be accompanied by a series of steps to attenuate tensions, such as confidence-building measures or providing relief to the civilian population through humanitarian or development programmes. It important to make some concessions or arrangements, which highlight the goodwill of the various factions. This is necessary in order to **establish a level of "working trust", enabling parties to engage in a meaningful dialogue** (Elayah et al., 2018; Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). The preparatory phase, in particular, tends to be characterized by low levels of trust, much tension, and a divisive atmosphere (Blunck

et al., 2017). When trust is already low, simply announcing a change is insufficient to convince parties that the changes are real. If confidence-building measures are built into national dialogue processes, they can serve as unique opportunities for relationship- and trust-building, providing an indication of intentions in advance (Blunck et al., 2017).

In Yemen, the selection of some opposition figures to join the Technical Preparatory Committee and the formation of a list of "20 points" of pressing grievances and concerns, pending the start of the dialogue, sent a powerful signal and fostered confidence in the process. While the President was sensitive to most of the points, and some steps were taken, there was however insufficient action on the points. This undermined the credibility of the process and failed to ensure more comprehensive participation by the Southern movement (Blunck et al., 2017; Murray, 2017; POMEPS, 2013). The general impression is that the NDC suffered from the absence of trust among the conflict parties, with various factions unable or unwilling to provide real guarantees that would in turn provide for an environment of trust-building prior to embarking on a dialogue. Ultimately, each party began working according to a private agenda that different form the public aims of the dialogue (Elayah et al., 2018).

Trust-building is important throughout all phases of the national dialogue process, including the implementation phase – in order to ensure that actors trust the commitment of others to uphold the agreement forged between them (Hartmann, 2017).

Implementation

The success of national dialogues can be defined on two levels, first in terms of whether an agreement is reached; and second, the extent to which the agreement is implemented (Paffenholz et al., 2017). National dialogues thus do not end with the conclusion of the formal process, but continues with implementation (Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). In a review of 17 national dialogues, while most reached an agreement, only half of them were implemented (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

The implementation phase requires careful planning and designing. It is important to adopt an inclusive and participatory approach in the implementation phase, similar to early phases of the dialogue (Blunck et al., 2017; Harlander, 2016). In order to faciliate implementation, it is necessary to **ensure that sufficient funds for implementation, expertise and accountability mechanisms are in place** (Blunck et al., 2017). This phase is facilitated by various infrastructure and mechanisms. **Transitional bodies and/or new institutions are often set up to implement the outcomes.** It is important to consider guarantees and monitoring mechanisms, such as civil society monitoring arrangements, early on in the national dialogue process, such that key actors may feel bound by what has been agreed (Blunck et al, 2017; Harlander, 2016; Kaplan and Freeman, 2015). It can also be necessary to give the national dialogue an official status from the outset. In Yemen, for example, the Presidential Decree setting up the preparatory committee of the NDC specified that outcomes of the Dialogue were to be reflected in a constitution drafted after the dialogue (Murray, 2017).

In Mali, the failure to create a monitoring and evaluation mechanism contributed to inadequate implementation of recommendations from the national dialogue. The government elected subsequent to the dialogue conference did not respect the recommendations (Blunck et al., 2017; Sy et al., 2016). In Yemen, there was also no agreed upon mechanism for the implementation of outcomes (Elayah et al., 2018). In addition, Yemenis serving on the Constitution Drafting Committee did not have adequate expertise in federalism or familiarity with the technical nature of transitioning from a unitary to federal system, which undermined the implementation of national

dialogue outcomes (Williams et al., 2017). **Implementation of outcomes from the national dialogue can also be tough if participants have made unrealistic decisions**, if the process is overburdened by provisions to implement and or/the provisions do not have sufficient underlying elite or social consensus. **Political will to implement dialogue agreements is crucial** for implementation (Murray, 2017). In Yemen, the agreements concerning federalism and a 30 percent quota for women in the legislature did not have sufficient support by influential elites, also contributing to their lack of implementation (Murray, 2017).

External actors can either constrain or enable the implementation of an agreement, for example by providing financial and technical contributions to the implementation process (Hartmann, 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2017). The implementation phase tends, however, to be neglected by external actors (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

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About this report

This report is based on five and a half days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

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