

# What Makes or Breaks National Dialogues?

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### The Research Project

This Briefing Note is the summary of a longer report, commissioned by the United Nations Department of Political Affairs. It is based on IPTI's National Dialogues research project (2015 to 2017), which involved a comparative analysis of 17 cases of National Dialogues held between 1990 and 2014. The project aims to contribute to a better understanding of common features of National Dialogues, as well as the political and procedural factors and conditions that have enabled or constrained the negotiated outcomes of National Dialogues. It builds on previous case study research conducted in the framework of the Graduate Institute's multi-year project, "Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation", which began in 2011.

## Key Findings

- National Dialogues have been used as an instrument to resolve political crises and pave the way for political transitions and sustainable peace.
- While most National Dialogues reached an agreement, only half of these agreements were implemented.
- When National Dialogues resulted in sustainable transitions, there was generally a favorable consensus among power-holders, in addition to international support and public buy-in.
- National Dialogues have often been used by elites as a tool to gain or reclaim political legitimacy, which has limited their potential for transformative change.
- Procedures for preparing, conducting, and implementing National Dialogues, in particular selection and decision-making rules, play a decisive role in whether processes are perceived as representative and legitimate.
- In the short term, National Dialogues have reduced violence by transferring grievances voiced from the street into formalized processes.

## What are National Dialogues?

National Dialogues provide an inclusive, broad, and participatory official negotiation format, which can resolve political crises and lead countries into political transitions. They are convened to address issues of national concern, typically longstanding causes of conflict that have been brought to the fore by political protest or armed insurrection. National Dialogues therefore have mandates that include political reforms, constitution-making, and peacebuilding. There have been numerous National Dialogues over the last 25 years, in varying political contexts and environments, ranging from Benin to Yemen. However, the international mediation and peacebuilding communities are still struggling to fully comprehend the functioning of National Dialogues, but most of all the conditions under which National Dialogues can contribute to successful political transitions.

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National Dialogues have clear structures, usually with a mix of plenary and working groups, and have defined rules and procedures for dialogue and decision-making. They may last from several days to several years, and their size and composition can vary considerably, from a hundred participants to several thousand. National Dialogues are typically accompanied by broader societal consultations designed to communicate results of the negotiations and channel people's demands into the process. These may take the form of consultations, commissions, high-level problem-solving workshops, and/or referendums. One major rationale behind the inclusion of large segments of society within a National Dialogue is to generate buy-in for its outcomes.

## Who is Included in National Dialogues?

National Dialogues typically involve principal national elites, including the government and the largest (armed or unarmed) opposition parties, and occasionally the military. Other groups who participate include those representing wider constituencies such as civil society, women, youth, business, and religious or traditional actors. The wider population is often indirectly included through broader consultation processes. National Dialogues are inclusive throughout the entire negotiation process, meaning that participants are involved in discussions in all phases. Usually it also means that the decision-making procedures give, at least on paper, a voice and a vote to all included actors. Nevertheless, the equal participation of these wider constituencies, particularly women, has almost always been challenged by dominant elites.

## In Which Contexts do National Dialogues Take Place?

National Dialogues are typically convened at times when the fundamental nature or survival of a government in power is in question. Thus, they are usually intended as a means of redefining the relationship between the state, political actors, and society through the negotiation of a new social contract. In such historical moments, pro-change and anti-change forces emerge. The government – generally anti-change – often initiates National Dialogues with the aim of regaining legitimacy by controlling the negotiating process and outcomes. Pro-change forces on the other hand, envisage National Dialogues as an opportunity for redefining the future of the state. For these reasons, both pro-change and anti-change actors have often been able to agree on National Dialogues as a negotiation format. The decision to initiate National Dialogues was also significantly influenced by bottom-up pressures for change, typically in the form of protests and revolts, while international and regional actors have rarely initiated them.

## What Makes or Breaks National Dialogues?

The research revealed that while most of the National Dialogues studied reached agreements, half of the cases failed to implement those agreements or only implemented them to a limited degree. A set of factors related to the political context and to the process were found to be particularly important in enabling or constraining the outcomes of National Dialogues.

Five political context factors play a decisive role in influencing the outcomes of National Dialogues:

- 1 | **National elites' resistance or support.** The attitude and behavior of national elites was found to be the single most important factor influencing the chances of National Dialogues to reach and implement agreements. Elites can be for or against governance reforms. However, even actors and groups advocating for 'change' are not necessarily in favor of democratic reform, as they may co-opt the process for their own partisan interests.

Elites' support for or resistance to a National Dialogue can manifest during different phases, including preparation, negotiation, and implementation stages. Although the gains of National Dialogues have, at times, been reversed by elites after the agreement was signed, the implementation phase tends to be neglected by international actors.

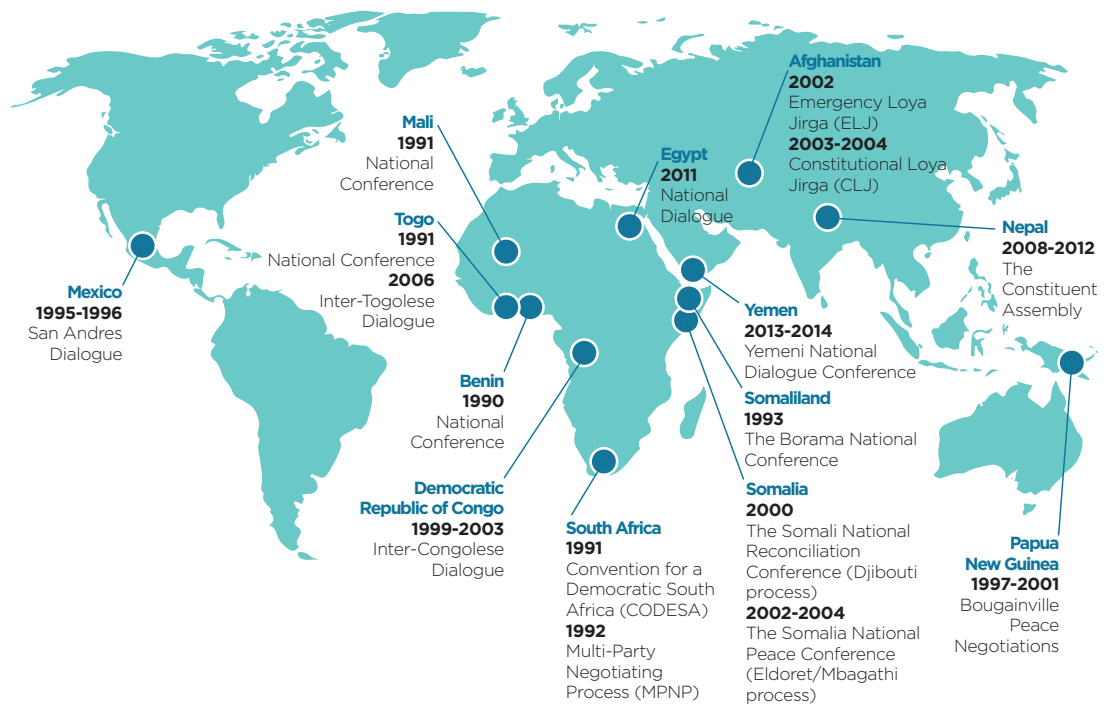
- 2 | **Public support or frustration.** Public buy-in is crucial to ensure progress in the negotiation and implementation of agreements. Yet, support for the process can decline over time if people become frustrated with delays, diminishing legitimacy, or a lack of progress.
- 3 | **Support or resistance of regional and international actors.** Various external actors are often involved in National Dialogues (either directly or by proxy) including neighboring countries, international support groups, or regional and international organizations. Because regional actors usually have more acute interests at stake, their influence has proved more decisive on the outcomes of National Dialogues. They may also benefit from pre-existing relationships with the main protagonists.
- 4 | **Local dialogue expertise.** National Dialogues have benefitted, both in the pre-negotiation and the negotiation phases, from existing dialogue expertise in a country, such as experiences of local-level mediation. Experienced local facilitators have worked inside or outside of National Dialogues to bring parties together to a position of consensus.
- 5 | **Experiences from prior negotiations.** Capitalizing on previous negotiations in order to avoid the repetition of mistakes has helped to prevent situations of deadlock in National Dialogues.

Parallel to context factors, the design of a National Dialogue shapes the level of representativeness and the distribution of power within the process, among other aspects. As such, design or process factors influence the likelihood of reaching sustainable agreements. Five process factors were particularly influential on the outcomes of National Dialogues:

- 1 | **Representation of actors and selection process.** Selection criteria and procedures can support or hinder the broad representation of different social and political groups and therefore the legitimacy of a negotiation process. Selection procedures have been co-opted by elites, who have selected participants most loyal to them to participate in a National Dialogue.
- 2 | **Decision-making procedures.** Procedures for decision-making determine, at least on paper, which actors have decision-making power in the National Dialogue and how decisions are validated throughout negotiations. These decision-making procedures are crucial to reaching legitimate outcomes. Most often decisions are taken by simple majority, where each delegate receives one vote. However, decision-making practice can diverge from formal procedures, most commonly when elites take decisions outside the plenary, in doing so excluding other participants.
- 3 | **Support structures for involved actors.** Support structures have been established by international, regional, or non-governmental organizations with the aim of strengthening the role and influence of certain participants in a National Dialogue. Support structures can assist participants to build coalitions, allowing them time to agree on common positions. They also provide assistance with the technical requirements of participating in a National Dialogue, such as understanding legal language, preparing and publishing materials, and conducting research. This enables groups to better advocate for their respective interests, which has translated into the inclusion of specific provisions in the final agreement.

- 4 | **Coalition building among included actors.** Coalition building was found to be a powerful strategy for actors to make their voices heard in National Dialogues. Actors and groups involved in a National Dialogue have sometimes come together to negotiate as a unified cluster out of concern for a specific issue or strategic interest. This has occurred for example among women of different delegations or between non-armed and armed groups.
- 5 | **Choice of facilitator(s).** National Dialogues are almost always facilitated by a neutral party to the negotiations. Facilitators are typically persons with a high degree of political legitimacy within the country or internationally. They have usually played an important role in launching the process and reducing tensions during negotiations. The capacity of facilitators or mediators can significantly shape the process of National Dialogues particularly with respect to how they deal with elites. Facilitators have persuaded elites to keep negotiating in moments of deadlock or designed a process that reflects the composition and traditions of a society.

CASE STUDIES ANALYZED AS PART OF THE NATIONAL DIALOGUES RESEARCH PROJECT



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